



THE ENIGMATIC PARABLES OF A CONTROVERSIAL RABBI

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short stories by jesus



Short Stories by Jesus

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A CONTROVERSIAL RABBI

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Dedication

For Jay, Sarah Elizabeth, and Alexander David

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How We Domesticate Jesus's Provocative Stories

Parables, stories some only a sentence or two long, are often seen as the hallmark of Jesus's teaching. As Mark 4.33–34 puts it: “With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.” Few of these private explanations have been preserved. The crowds then needed to find their own understandings, and we too must find ours.

It is a very good thing that the interpretations, if indeed Jesus did provide them, have not come down to us. The Gospel writers, in their wisdom, left most of the parables as open narratives in order to invite us into engagement with them. Each reader will hear a distinct message and may find that the same parable leaves multiple impressions over time. Different audiences inevitably hear different messages, just as today a listener who is poor or in ill health may form a different interpretation of the Rich Man and Lazarus than a person with a seat on the stock exchange or extended credit from Neiman Marcus. The parable of the Lost Son will convey different nuances to parents than to children, to the irresponsible and indulged (if such children pay attention at all) than to the faithful and overlooked. Reducing parables to a single meaning destroys their aesthetic as well as ethical potential. This surplus of meaning is how poetry and storytelling work, and it is all to the good.

It may also be a good thing that we do not have the explanations that Mark's disciples heard and remembered. The Twelve, despite their commission by Jesus, consistently misunderstand him. They do not understand the parable of the Sower, and Jesus despairs of their understanding any of the other parables: “And he said to them, ‘Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables?’” (Mark 4.13). Their lack of understanding shows when Jesus tells them to feed the crowds and they sarcastically respond, “Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?” (6.37). Following the feeding miracles, Jesus cautions them, “Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod” (8.15). The disciples then say to one another, “It is because we have no bread.” Not only have they forgotten that Jesus can cater; they have also missed the implications of Jesus's metaphorical message. No doubt when they heard the parable of the yeast they worried about whether the dough was gluten-free.

Although Peter, Andrew, James, and John are seasoned fishermen, they are afraid of being shipwrecked in a storm, and Jesus—who had been asleep in the boat—has to rebuke them for their lack of faith (Mark 4.40). They doubt his awareness of his healing powers (5.31); they don't understand his argument that “there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile” (7.15); Peter questions his mission, and Jesus responds by calling him “Satan,” which is not a compliment (8.33); they seek to prevent parents and caregivers from bringing their children to Jesus (10.13–16) despite his telling them to welcome children (9.37); Judas betrays him (14.45); Peter, James, and John fall asleep when he is in agony in Gethsemane (14.37); Peter then denies him (14.68); and they all flee from the cross.

Nor, alas, are the named women followers much better when it comes to understanding him. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome go to the tomb on Sunday morning to “anoint” the

body (Mark 16.1). Not only do they ask, too late to suggest any advance planning, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” (16.3); they are too late with their ointments: at the first supper of Jesus’s final week, an unnamed woman had already anointed him (14.8).

Mark’s disciples are not the best candidates for accurately preserving explanations of parables. Whether they were as clueless as Mark portrays them, or whether the evangelist has deliberately portrayed them as in need of remedial instruction, the literary effect of their descriptions is the same. Mark is telling readers, “Go beyond the disciples, be open to the mystery and the challenge, interpret for yourselves.” And we readers should be reassured that if Peter, James, and John, even after failing, can find rehabilitation and stay with the program, there’s hope for the rest of us.

Granted, we should not be too hard on the disciples. They were looking for something within the comfort zone and, like many, resisted what the parables might convey. Moreover, Jesus was requiring that they do more than listen; he was asking them to think as well. He tells the Twelve, “To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that ‘they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand’” (Mark 4.11–12; see also Matt. 13.11–13). “Mystery” is here not indicative of something arcane or in need of a special key to unlock a singular meaning. What makes the parables mysterious, or difficult, is that they challenge us to look into the hidden aspects of our own values, our own lives. They bring to the surface unasked questions, and they reveal the answers we have always known, but refuse to acknowledge. Our reaction to them should be one of resistance rather than acceptance. For our own comfort, we may want to foreclose the meaning rather than allow the parable to open into multiple interpretations. We are probably more comfortable proclaiming a creed than prompting a conversation or pursuing a call.

Religion has been defined as designed to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. We do well to think of the parables of Jesus as doing the afflicting. Therefore, if we hear a parable and think, “I really like that” or, worse, fail to take any challenge, we are not listening well enough.

Such listening is not only a challenge; it is also an art, and this art has become lost. Down through the centuries, starting with the Gospel writers themselves, the parables have been allegorized, moralized, christologized, and otherwise tamed into either platitudes such as “God loves us” or “Be nice” or, worse, assurances that all is right with the world as long as we believe in Jesus. Too often we settle for easy interpretations: we should be nice like the good Samaritan; we will be forgiven, as with the prodigal son; we should pray and not lose heart like the importuning widow. When we seek universal morals from a genre that is designed to surprise, challenge, shake up, or indict and look for a single meaning in a form that opens to multiple interpretations, we are necessarily limiting the parables and, so, ourselves.

If we stop with the easy lessons, good though they may be, we lose the way Jesus’s first followers would have heard the parables, and we lose the genius of Jesus’s teaching. Those followers, like Jesus himself, were Jews, and Jews knew that parables were more than children’s stories or restatements of common knowledge. They knew that parables and the tellers of parables were there to prompt them to see the world in a different way, to challenge, and at times to indict.

We might be better off thinking less about what they “mean” and more about what they can “do” — remind, provoke, refine, confront, disturb. . . .

The Parables in Israel’s Scriptures

The origins of this provocative genre, with its personal, social, and moral barbs, appear in the scriptures of Israel, the books that comprise what the church traditionally calls the Old Testament and the synagogue calls the Tanakh (an acronym for *Torah*, or Pentateuch; *Nevi'im*, or Prophets; and *Ketuvim*, or Writings). The book of Judges records how a fellow named Abimelech slaughters all but one of his brothers in his attempt to secure rule over the city of Shechem. The youngest brother, Jotham, hides and survives. Following Abimelech's royal investiture, the surviving brother stands on Mt. Gerizim (the site of what will be the Samaritan temple, where the woman at the well in John 4 will worship) and tells the following parable to the leading men of the city:

The trees once went out to anoint [Heb. *limshoach*, Gk. *chrisai*, the same root from which "Messiah" and "Christ" derive] a king over themselves. So they said to the olive tree, "Reign over us." The olive tree answered them, "Shall I stop producing my rich oil by which gods and mortals are honored, and go to sway over the trees?" Then the trees said to the fig tree, "You come and reign over us." But the fig tree answered them, "Shall I stop producing my sweetness and my delicious fruit, and go to sway over the trees?" Then the trees said to the vine, "You come and reign over us." But the vine said to them, "Shall I stop producing my wine that cheers gods and mortals, and go to sway over the trees?" So all the trees said to the bramble, "You come and reign over us." And the bramble said to the trees, "If in good faith you are anointing me king over you, then come and take refuge in my shade; but if not, let fire come out of the bramble and devour the cedars of Lebanon." (9.8–15)

In this parable, members of society with something of value to contribute neither seek nor want political office; only the bramble, which has nothing to offer, accepts the job, and he does so with the threat that he will destroy those who oppose him. The point, hardly subtle, is a challenge to any who might seek to rule and to any who are in positions of authority. Candidates for office—especially those who have not proven themselves in any way save for good family connections (Abimelech's name means, in Hebrew, "My father is king"; his dad, Gideon the judge, was not known for his refinement) and generous coffers (Abimelech has access to the treasury at the temple of Baal Berith)—may still hear a warning today, even as their opponents might both chuckle and, if they are wise, take the same warning.

The setting of the parable, Shechem, later called Samaria, and the notice of Mt. Gerizim should not go unremarked in a study of the parables of Jesus. Judges 9, as we will see, provides one of the subtexts for the famous parable of the Good Samaritan.

Second Samuel 12.1–7 records the prophet Nathan's famous parable of the Ewe Lamb. Nathan was King David's court prophet (think of Billy Graham to Richard Nixon, or perhaps Joel Hunter to Barack Obama), the figure who spoke to the conscience of the king. Following David's adultery with Bathsheba and then his arranging the murder of Bathsheba's husband, Uriah (imagine, a politician who has an affair and then attempts to cover it up!), Nathan tells the king about "two men in a certain city, one rich and the other poor." The rich man had large flocks, but the poor man had only one little ewe lamb—let's call her Fluffy—who was "like a daughter to him." When a visitor came to the rich man and it was time for dinner, the rich man took little Fluffy, butchered her, and served her for dinner.

That's the parable, and David, who takes it as an actual story, is incensed: "Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, 'As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die'" (2 Sam. 12.5). It gives most readers no small degree of satisfaction when Nathan

then proclaims, “You are the man!” David hears the parable and indicts himself.

This parable too should echo in the ears of anyone hearing Jesus’s parables that begin, “There was a rich man who. . . .” His first-century audience was already primed to hear that the rich man did something oppressive to the poor man. The shock of Nathan’s parable is that the one condemned is the parable’s intended target, David himself; he was able to recognize, finally, the gravity of his sin.

Abimelech and his supporters recognized Jotham’s challenge; David recognized Nathan’s critique. They were able to listen; they heard their indictment. Words can wound, and stories can condemn, challenge, or provoke. We readers can hear those challenges from Judges and 2 Samuel, because we have the broader narrative context in which the parables were told.

The scriptures of Israel offer a number of such parables, and in each case we readers, like the people to whom the tales were originally addressed, are forced to make a choice. What would we do? Second Samuel 14.5–8 offers a parable that raises the question of capital punishment in the case in which one brother kills another. Should the execution be carried out and so leave a mother childless and a widow’s “husband neither name nor remnant on the face of the earth”? The idea of losing both children is not a new story. It reminds us of the first fratricide, of Cain’s killing his brother, Abel, and it anticipates additional stories of lost sons, including the famous parable of the Prodigal Son.

Parables are not restricted to those found in what the church calls the Old Testament and the synagogue the Tanakh. They would have been told at home in the evening after dinner or in the workshops and the fields and the synagogues. Stories are part of culture, and parables are a major part of Jewish culture.

Rabbinic texts—Jewish texts compiled after Jesus’s time but containing materials that may well date from years before his birth—record numerous parables. The rabbinic parables frequently take the form, “I will tell (*emshal*) you a parable (*mashal*). To what can the thing be compared?” Likewise, Jesus frequently introduces parables with the expression, “The kingdom of heaven is like. . . .” To grasp the implications of the comparison—the term “parable” comes from the Greek *para*, “alongside, together with,” as in “parallel” or “paradox,” and *balo*, “to cast,” “to throw”—we need to understand the nuances of each side of the equation. We immediately realize that, with such comparisons, no single meaning can ever be determined, just as no single metaphor or simile can be restricted.

Robert Burns’s famous poem, “O my Luve’s like a red, red rose, / That’s newly sprung in June” offers a good test case. The simile comparing love to a rose blossoms into multiple interpretations, but some are better than others. Perhaps his love is better by the dozen, or fresher if kept in water, or prickly with thorns. Or perhaps his love will fade as quickly as the flower wilts in the summer heat. Like a poem (another simile), a parable will evoke numerous interpretations; it is our job to sort through them.

The “kingdom of heaven” will convey different specific ideas to different people. For some it is the time when all pain will cease, and Jesus “will wipe every tear from their eyes” (Rev. 21.4). For others it’s a place with pearly gates and golden slippers. The Gospels give some hints, aside from parables, as to what this heavenly realm looks like. Ironically, it may not be what many of us would want. I often wonder, do all those who pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done,” really want a change in the status quo, or are they pretty satisfied with the “kingdom” we have in the here and now? Do they really want the time when, as Jesus promises, the first will be last and the last first (Matt. 19.30) when a final judgment occurs, or when we are assessed not by whether we said, “Lord, Lord” (Matt. 7.21–22; 25.11; Luke 6.46), but whether we loved our enemy and fed the hungry? The challenge has already begun, and we’re barely through with the Introduction.

The importance of parables in Jewish thought is indicated by a comment found in an early commentary on the Song of Songs. By the way, study of Song of Songs, also known as Canticles or Song of Solomon, provides a very good example of how to distinguish parable from allegory. A parable requires no external key to explain what its elements mean; an allegory does. Song of Songs is generally understood, by the communities that hold it sacred, to be an allegory, not a parable. For Jews, the poem is traditionally understood as the love song between God and Israel. Catholic teaching traditionally sees the text as the love song between Christ and the church. For many Protestants, it is the love song between God and the individual soul. Then again, for biblical scholars it is (also) a love song between a man and a woman who have the hots for each other, and so it is in its original context neither allegory nor parable.

Here's what a Jewish text called *Song of Songs Rabbah*, a commentary on the Song of Songs, says about the parable: "Do not let the parable (*mashal*) appear of little worth to you. Through a parable, a person can fathom words of Torah." Then the text offers a parable: "Consider the king who has lost a gold coin or a precious pearl in his house. May he not find it by the light of a wick worth no more than an *issar* [a penny]?" The commentary then reinforces the point: "Likewise, do not let the parable appear of little worth to you. By its light, a person may fathom words of Torah" (I, 1, 8). Just as the rabbinic text notes that parables are a means for understanding Torah—not just the Pentateuch, but all Jewish teachings and the traditions—so Jesus the Jew uses parables to help his followers understand the kingdom of heaven.

The commentary hints at an additional aspect of parables, that is, their humor. In Jesus's parable of the Lost Coin, a woman lights her lamps and sweeps her house to find her missing money. A king would not do this; he has staff for such annoyances. To picture the king on his hands and knees searching for one coin or one pearl out of an entire treasury box, is to picture something foolish or something humorous. It is also to picture something potentially desirable, or challenging: a ruler who gets off his throne and down into the dirt, like the rest of us, to find what he needs. There is a touch of the absurd in the rabbinic parable, as there is in many of the parables Jesus told.

Context Matters

There's an old saying in biblical studies (I first heard it from Ben Witherington III) that a text without a context is just a pretext for making it say anything one wants. But the more we know about the original contexts, the richer our understanding becomes, and the greater our appreciation for the artists and composers who created the works initially.

In order better to hear the parables in their original contexts and so to determine what is normal and what is absurd, what is conventional and what is unexpected, we need to do the history. We need to determine how Samaritans and Jews related to each other; what the cultural expectations of fathers and sons were; how day laborers and vineyard owners established their contractual obligations; which social roles were open to women; and who went to the Temple to pray and why. If we get the context wrong, we'll get Jesus wrong as well. The parables are open-ended in that interpretation will take place in every act of reading, but they are also historically specific. When the historical context goes missing or we get it wrong, the parables become open to problematic and sometimes abusive readings.

The best modern example I have for explaining the importance of the context for understanding stories is *The Rocky and Bullwinkle Show*, which aired on U.S. television from 1959 to 1964. Dudley Do-Right gave me my initial fascination with all things Canadian; the WABAC (i.e., "way back

machine belonging to Peabody the dog and his “pet boy” Sherman prompted my interest in history and both “Fractured Fairy Tales” and “Aesop and Son” taught me to question all stories with morals as well as to appreciate the pun. Then there was Rocket J. Squirrel, who, together with his companion Bullwinkle J. Moose, saved the world, often. For children, the show was funny—what’s not to like about moose and squirrel?

What we children missed was the social satire. I had no clue why the bad guys had the Russian-sounding names of Boris Badenov and Natasha Fatale. Then again, I thought Wossamotta U was an institute of higher education in Frostbite Falls, Minnesota (part of my early interest in academics). I had not heard of Boris Godunov the czar, let alone Pushkin’s play or Mussorgsky’s opera. I did not know what a “femme fatale” was, so Natasha’s last name simply sounded exotic. What I also missed and why cultural context is so important, were the references to the Cold War. Along with the puns on names (regarding which I would be remiss not to mention J. Robert Oppendowner, Bermuda Schwartz, and the Ruby Yacht of Omar Khayyam), the cartoon was engaging in social commentary. I could appreciate Moose and Squirrel, but I could not appreciate them fully, because I missed the context.

In listening to parables and appreciating them within their initial context, we also do well to listen for echoes of Israel’s scriptures, since the parables evoke earlier stories and then comment on them. “There was a man who had two sons . . .” (Luke 15.11) is the beginning of what is traditionally called the parable of the Prodigal Son. Jesus’s Jewish audience would be reminded of other men and their two sons: Cain and Abel, the sons of Adam; Ishmael and Isaac, the sons of Abraham; Jacob and Esau, the sons of Isaac; and so on. Reading the parable in light of the antecedent narratives creates surprise and challenge; in turn, reading the antecedent narrative in light of the parable opens a host of new insights.

Another maxim that frequently holds for biblical studies is that the world of the people who wrote and first heard the texts is different from our world. We cannot map onto their cultures and contexts our own values or expectations. What seems odd to us might be perfectly normal to them: fathers divided their property via bequests prior to their death; judges were not always expected to act according to strict standards of justice; vineyard owners did their own hiring; kings destroyed enemy countries rather than determining how best to exploit the resources of the conquered areas.

On the other hand, these distinctions can be taken to extremes. Sometimes what seems odd to us really *is* odd. A woman does not “hide” yeast in dough, yet this is the verb that both Matthew and Luke use to describe the activity. Here we are already misled by most English translations, which render the Greek verb for “hide” as “mix” and so obscure the subversive nature of the parable. Mustard seeds do not yield giant trees; vineyard owners do not typically provoke their workers by setting up false expectations. The trick is to determine what is surprising in the parable, and what is not. And there is much in Jesus’s parables that surprises.

The Parables of Jesus

When we turn to Jesus’s parables, we do well to hear them as the people who first heard them, Jews of the Galilee and Judea, did and thus to recover as best as we can the original provocation. To do so requires several leaps of faith.

The first leap concerns what Jesus himself said, for we do not know with certainty if Jesus actually told the parables recorded in the Gospels. Second, even if he did tell them, we know with certainty neither the composition of the audience nor their reaction. Third, it is unlikely, were he to have

composed these parables, that he only used them on one occasion or told them exactly the same way each time.

The concern for the “authenticity” of the parables relates to the broader issue of what is known as “historical Jesus studies.” We do not have access to Jesus directly; he leaves us no writing, no autobiography, no sanctioned biography. To be blunt, he leaves us neither a physical body nor a body of writing. If the only Gospel we had were that traditionally attributed to John, we would have no parables; nor would we have accounts of Jesus’s baptism by John, his exorcisms, or his famous saying, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Matt. 22.21; Mark 12.17; Luke 20.25). The parables appear only in the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), although a few are repeated and a few distinct ones are presented in the noncanonical Coptic *Gospel of Thomas*.

Instead of having an unmediated Jesus, all we have are the memories preserved and filtered through the concerns and confessions of those who proclaimed him Lord or Savior. Moreover, those filters included linguistic ones. Jesus, raised in lower Galilee, would have spoken Aramaic and probably some Hebrew; if he knew Greek, it would have been the Greek needed by an artisan who might take a contract from a Greek speaker in the larger Galilean cities of Sepphoris and Tiberias. Thus when we attempt to interpret his parables, we are interpreting them in their Greek version. As with any translation, something is always lost and something is always added. We do the best we can with what we have.

I do think Jesus spoke in parables despite their absence from John; he would have been at home in the genre. There are several other reasons for thinking he told many, if not most or even all, of the parables recorded in the Gospels.

For example, the parables often express concerns that appear elsewhere in the Jesus tradition; they echo themes heard in his teachings and debates. Jesus is concerned about economics: about giving to those who beg, about the blessings that will come to the poor, about mutual dependence rather than top-down brokerage, about what can be summarized as “kingdom economics,” in which the prayer “Forgive us our debts” meant more than sins and included monetary loans. His focus is on laying up treasure in heaven, not on accumulating bank accounts on earth. The parables, with their attention to wealth management, debts, daily wages, land ownership, and lost coins, speak to the same concerns. Luke retains several parables that begin “There was a rich man who . . .”; none is likely to be well loved by owners of Fortune 500 companies. One could claim that Luke invented all these parables, but this would be an overstatement. Rather, the parables sit uneasily in his Gospel. The Rich Man and Lazarus presumes a judgment of heaven and hell already in place prior to Jesus’s death and so complicates the role of the cross in salvation; the lines following the parable of the Dishonest Manager show Luke attempting to bring order to a story with no clear morality.

Jesus is also concerned about relationships: between parents and children, siblings, neighbors, and leaders and followers; he emphasizes caring for the other, mutual reciprocity, servant leadership, and humility. The parables sound all these themes. The Sheep and the Goats (Matt. 25.31–46) insists that it is not religious confession, but caring for others—feeding the hungry, visiting people in prison, clothing the naked—that will bring entrance into the heavenly kingdom (if you are unfamiliar with the parable and you find yourself at the pearly gates, where there are lines marked “Sheep” and “Goats,” get into the sheep line). Again, the parable runs contrary to church’s (later) focus that it is belief in Jesus, Jesus’s own fidelity, or the cross and resurrection that conveys eschatological blessing, so despite the parable’s presence only in Matthew’s Gospel, it most likely comes from Jesus himself.

Next, Jesus is concerned about prioritizing. Expecting the kingdom of heaven to break in, indeed

seeing it already as present in his actions, he demands a reaction: choose life, choose to live the way God wants us to live. His message echoes the warning of his former teacher, John the Baptist: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news” (Matt. 3.15; cf. Matt. 4.17). Given this urgency, new forms of living are required: we need to determine what is necessary and what is not (so the Pearl of Great Price); we need to determine when practicality should give way to generosity (so the Laborers in the Vineyard); and we need to be assured that the kingdom is coming, both with our help (the Yeast) and without it (the Mustard Seed).

With regard to Jesus’s own presentation, the parables fit his comments about himself and the kingdom he proclaims. In his teachings and his actions, Jesus displays such respect for the people he encounters that he does not spoon-feed them what can only be understood in the heart, not the head. Yes, he makes direct statements—“You shall not murder,” “Love your enemies”—but he also teaches through challenge.

For example, he refers to himself as the “son of man,” and in so doing he forces his listeners to make a decision. Is he speaking of himself as one human being among others, one who does not know the mysteries of heaven, as in, for example, God’s address to Ezekiel, “Son of man, can these bones live?” (37.3, KJV)? Is he recalling humanity’s almost divine nature and so almost limitless potential, as in Psalm 8.4–5: “What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him? For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour” (KJV; cf. Heb. 2.7, 9). Or is he alluding to the “Son of man” in Daniel 7.13–14, to whom was given “dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed” (KJV)? Or again, is he simply using the Galilean Aramaic idiom for “I”? Any hearing him would need to ask: Is he making messianic claims about himself? Is he speaking of another? Is he talking about all of humanity? Who is this man?

Another reason to see Jesus as speaking not only in parables, but in these parables that have come down to us from the Gospels is their frequent motif of celebration. What is infectiously appealing about Jesus is that he likes to celebrate. He is consistently meeting people not at the altar but at table, whether as host, guest, or the body and blood to be consumed (as in John 6 and the synoptic Last Supper accounts). He is indiscriminate in his dining companions, who include Pharisees, tax collectors, sinners, and even an upscale family consisting of two sisters and a formerly dead brother. The Feeding of the Five Thousand is the one miracle story recounted in all four Gospels. To be in his presence is not only to be challenged and comforted; it is to celebrate at table. There is feasting at the end of the parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin, and a fatted calf awaits the Lost Son.

Such images are not arbitrary. One dominant Jewish view of the *olam ha-ba*, the “world to come,” was of a banquet, a great feast at which one “reclined at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (see Matt. 8.11). In his dining, Jesus is providing a foretaste of that messianic age. These images add depth to the parable of the Leaven in particular and to the various stories about banquets. Jesus’s parables, with their frequent theme of celebration and their warnings to those who fail to share this joy, unsettle and at the same time the more we chew on them, the greater the smile that will cross our lips, the more food for thought we have, and the more we want to taste.

In addition to the presence of parables in Jesus’s own cultural context and their numerous thematic consistencies with the rest of his teaching, there are other very good reasons for thinking that Jesus taught in parables. For example, not only do we today often think of the parables as a genre especially associated with Jesus; so did the majority of his followers. The non-canonical Gospels and Acts, stemming from the second century and later tend not to recapitulate parables as a genre. Most of the

so-called Gnostic texts move instead into esoteric teaching, teaching that could not be comprehended by bakers, textile workers, or folks in the Galilean fishing industry.

A fourth reason to think that he spoke the parables is that we see the evangelists wrestling with an attempt to control their meaning. We've already noted Luke's concern for domesticating the parable beginning, "There was a rich man who . . ."; Luke's wrestling continues with other unruly stories that defy easy moralization. As we'll see when we turn to the Widow and the Judge, Luke attempts to domesticate the parable by turning it into a lesson about constant prayer. That's not the message a first-century Jewish audience would have heard; nor, as I found in my multiple test readings with both Jewish groups and Christian groups unfamiliar with the parable, is it an interpretation today's listeners come up with either. The same domestication occurs with many of the other parables: the Lost Sheep and Lost Coin were not, *pace* Luke, originally heard as stories of repentance and forgiveness. Nor do I think the Prodigal Son is about repenting or forgiving or even, ultimately, about the prodigal.

Asserting that Jesus taught in parables is not the same thing as saying, however, that the parables as we have them today are exactly the words that Jesus originally spoke. We should also consider the role of the storyteller, for good storytellers adapt their tales to the needs and interests of their audiences. The idea of Jesus having a set of three-by-five note cards or an iPad (for Jesus, better an "am-pad") on which were inscribed the Good Samaritan or the Pearl of Great Price and from which he would read the same story, verbatim, under different circumstances is unlikely; rather, good teacher that Jesus was—that we can be certain of, or stories by him and of him would not continue to be told—he would have adapted his stories for the needs of each new audience. He also likely honed them, as storytellers, social critics, and, yes, even lecturers do, until he knew what words worked best in which contexts.

A good storyteller repeats material, and the parables, as good stories, are certainly worth repeating. At one time, he might have said, "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took . . ." (Matt. 13.33; Luke 13.21); another time he might have begun the parable, "The kingdom of the father is like a woman who took a little leaven . . ." (*Thomas* 96). I am not here arguing that the *Gospel of Thomas* is fully independent of the Synoptics; the jury is still out on that question. I do think, however, that *Thomas's* formulations, a few of which we'll see in the chapters to come, may recognize the multiple ways that Jesus himself may have spoken his parables.

New Testament scholars sometimes evoke the discipline known as "form criticism" in order to explain these textual variations. The concept, which comes from studies of folklore, suggests that each story has a structural outline, and the variants can tell us something about the agenda of those who told the tale. A basic modern analogy is "Cinderella" as told in its several forms, first by the Charles Perrault and then the Brothers Grimm (*Aschenputtel*), which are much grimmer than the Disney version and much more serious than the Jerry Lewis variant *Cinderfella* (despite Dame Judi Dench as Anderson in the role of the stepmother).

If evocations of form criticism remind readers who have taken New Testament courses of an incomprehensible lecture that seemed to contain more jargon than information, we might make things easier by comparing form criticism to a toy invented about a decade before Rocky and Bullwinkle: the still popular "Mr. Potato Head." The substantive aspect of this toy is the plastic potato; the eyes, ears, nose, and collar are interchangeable, but each choice a child makes for accessorizing the potato opens up the possibility of a new image. For the parables, then, we need to locate the potato, because, to continue this already unfortunate metaphor (parable?), that's where the nutrition is. For the parables, despite the variants and the translation from Aramaic to Greek, we can be relatively sanguine that certain elements, like that potato, remain consistent: the pearl remains a pearl, yeast is yeast, and

tenacious widow is exactly that.

Matthew accessorizes his parables with favorite terms, such as the “kingdom of heaven” rather than the “kingdom of God.” The phrasing may reflect the Jewish tradition of avoiding using the divine name but since Matthew uses the term “God” often, it is more likely Matthew thought of the “kingdom of heaven” as an actual place. Matthew also has a tendency to increase the violence of the parables, as a quick comparison of his Wedding Banquet (22.2–14) with Luke’s Great Dinner (14.16–24) reveals. The Matthean addition, “The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed the murderers, and burned their city” (22.7) is a reflection of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman troops in 70 CE; the point is Matthean, for the first Gospel regards the city’s destruction as precipitated by the people’s failure to accept Jesus as their king (see 27.25, where “the people as a whole” responding to Pilate’s question about what to do with Jesus, issue the ironically prophetic and ultimately tragic cry, “His blood be on us and on our children”). But the main dish of the parable—the rejected invitation by the first invited and the feasting by those who never expected the invitation—remains in place.

That the evangelists adapted these short stories by Jesus is also evident from the parables’ literal placement. Luke places the Good Samaritan (10.25–37) just before both the story of Martha and Mary (10.38–42) and the instructions concerning the prayer known as the “Our Father” (11.2–4). The two stories speak of the one who chooses the appropriate action: Mary listens to Jesus’s teaching rather than helping Martha serve, and the Samaritan helps the injured man rather than passing by. The prayer asks, “Do not bring us to the time of trial” or, more literally from the Greek, “Do not bring us to the test” (*peirasmos*). As the parable of the Good Samaritan opens, a lawyer stands up to “test Jesus” with his question.

Finally, the evangelists are our first known interpreters of the parables. By adapting the language and providing a setting they have already foreclosed some meanings; by providing explications they foreclose others. For example, Luke 18.2–5 is a parable concerning a widow and a judge. Luke tells us that the parable was told to the disciples about “their need to pray always and not to lose heart” (18.1) and that the parable is informative about God’s providing swift justice to those who remain faithful, and that the judge is a negative allegorical image for God. Luke’s opening contextualization and concluding lesson are not necessary, or even necessarily logical, readings of the parable. For Luke’s readers in antiquity or for readers today, a tenacious widow who threatens to give a judge a black eye is not an image of fervent prayer; divine justice has not been swift, for we are still waiting for the kingdom come; and the judge is in no way an image for the divine. Luke turns the parable into an allegory, and so platitude replaces provocation.

From these examples, we learn yet another way of understanding the parables in their first-century context: they needed to have made sense within that context. Thus parables are not completely allegorical; there is no one-to-one correspondence between the details of a parable and the details of the outside world. 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. Jesus’s first-century audience would not think, as some of his later Christian interpreters did, that the good Samaritan who rescues the fellow wounded by robbers is Jesus who saves us from death, or that the prodigal son is Jesus who leaves his home to live in a sinful world and then returns to God the Father. The parables in that first-century context need to make sense without any knowledge of how Jesus’s followers came to understand him after the Romans crucified him. They need to make sense not only to those who chose to follow him, but to those who found him just a wise teacher, a neighbor in Nazareth, or a fellow Jew.

The Parables Today

For today's Christians, or indeed anyone interested in what ideas the parables convey, interpretation should not be limited to this historical context. If that were the case, we'd all have to be living in first-century Bibleland, and we'd have to conclude that the Gospels offer a one-size-fits-all model that has not yielded any new inspiration over the past two millennia. The texts must speak to each generation and each individual anew, or they cease to be either scripture or literature and become only markings on a page.

For people who claim to follow Jesus today, whether they regard him as the divine Son or as a rabbi with superb things to say, the parables cannot remain historical artifacts. We should ask, as we should with any literature: How do the messages an original audience would have heard translate over the centuries to the person in the pew, the Bible study, or the classroom? We do not restrict the meaning of *Hamlet* to Elizabethan England; we continue to ask new questions of the *Iliad* and *Huckleberry Finn*. Each generation looks for new meanings, reads with new sensitivity, and projects onto the text new issues. Good literature continues to yield those new meanings, and the parables are no exceptions. Thus this volume asks two main questions: How do we hear the parables through an imagined set of first-century Jewish ears, and then how do we translate them so that they can be heard still speaking?

The former question is based on the study of Jesus, a Galilean Jew interacting with fellow Jews in the late Second Temple period. This is a study of both Jewish history and Christian history; it is a place where today Jews and Christians might find some common bonds, or at least common challenges. In asking this historical question, I am not seeking to replace the readings that Matthew, Mark, and Luke, or Augustine, or John Wesley, or the local homilist proclaims. I am, rather, seeking to add one more layer, a layer that should prove of import, or at least of interest, to anyone concerned about understanding why anyone would have listened to this Galilean teacher in the first place, let alone bothered to remember his stories. More, in hearing the parables without their millennia of domestication—in hearing them in their rawness—we might hear a new message not only of the kingdom of heaven, but of how to find it on earth.

The latter question is primarily, but not entirely a Christian issue. The parables will continue to be preached from church pulpits and studied in confessional settings, and that is all to the good. Christians will, and should, seek new meanings in the ancient texts; otherwise, to use theological language, they will be putting the Holy Spirit out of business. But there are times when the contemporary study goes awry, when Jesus's Jewish context is mischaracterized, and parables intended to provoke instead become parables that teach prejudice. Thus the chapters in this volume also serve as a corrective, or in some cases a prophylactic (perhaps the only time that term will be used in a study of the historical Jesus), not only for preventing the disease of anti-Judaism from infecting the body of his parables, but also for avoiding the other less toxic but equally distressing moves that turn parables into platitudes.

Auditory Atrophy and Aids to Hearing

When it comes to parables and to ancient texts in general, our listening skills are not as developed as they should be. Not only do we frequently miss the original provocation, and not only do we frequently default to simplistic interpretations; we also often import ahistorical and anachronistic

readings that deform the good news of the gospel into something Jesus would neither recognize nor condone.

The reasons for this auditory atrophy are easy to locate. Here are six, among the many.

First, in a number of churches, the parables function as children's stories. That is because children can understand those simple messages. We don't need to know who a Samaritan is or what the term connotes in order to know that the traveler in the parable helps someone who is injured and that helping someone is a good thing. Therefore, parables provide excellent "children's sermons" or "events for all ages"—that part of many liberal Protestant or Unitarian services where the children come forward, usually after the first hymn and before the congregant in charge of the next Habitat for Humanity project or the mission trip makes a pitch for donations.

The youth minister, Sunday school teacher, or pastor (for the smaller churches with limited staff) then provides a show-and-tell: the parable of the Leaven means playing with dough and eating freshly baked bread; the parable of the Mustard Seed means looking at mustard seeds and perhaps tasting them (providing the always delightful opportunity to see children go "yuck"); the parable of the Prodigal Son allows the children to tell stories about how their mommies and daddies love them. Once we come to associate the parables with children's stories, it becomes difficult to see them as anything but. If the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector is then followed by a rousing chorus of "Don't wanna be a Pharisee . . . cause they're not fair, you see; don't wanna be a Pharisee, I just wanna be a sheep, Baa, baa, baa, baa,"¹ then the message goes from the simplistic to the, well, baaad.

A second reason we settle for easy interpretations is that many clergy do not take the time to develop the challenge of the parable. Many priests and pastors are reluctant to challenge congregations about matters of social policy, family dysfunction, or how to love the enemy. Sunday morning has become in far too many settings the occasion for a pep talk rather than provocation; the service is designed to comfort rather than to challenge, to assure congregants that despite the changes in the culture, the economy, or the law, something—not just the role of the Christ, but the teaching of the church—remains "the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb. 13.8). If the congregation already expects the folksy joke or humorous anecdote, a point about current issues, or the speaker's statement of personal orthodoxy, there's even less opportunity to develop the challenge.

It's much safer, in many congregations, to assure the faithful how our souls are saved through divine grace rather than to suggest that our societies are saved through personal and corporate aid to the poor. It's much more comforting to hear that God is a loving father who welcomes us home no matter how much we stray than it is to hear an exhortation to reconcile with the brother, sister, or fellow congregant with whom we have not spoken in twenty years. This approach is a deformation of the biblical text; it is not listening to Jesus with ears to hear.

A third reason for auditory atrophy is the expectation of congregations, who have come to believe that the sermon is monologue, not motivation, that it is designed for entertainment. The service becomes less an opportunity for reconciliation, restoration, and renewal and more a Sunday morning version of what Johnny Carson, Jay Leno, and now Jimmy Fallon provide on weekday nights: a monologue to make us laugh, music to amuse or bemuse us (having paid singers in the choir doesn't hurt, nor does an organ that cost more than most of the congregants will make in their lifetimes), something heartwarming (a children's handbell group, good news about the mission trip), and a commercial or two for the upcoming pancake supper, men's club outing, or program on flower arranging. When church becomes a club, parables become pedestrian. At times then, the problem rests with the person in the pulpit; just as often, the problem rests with the person in the pew.

There is yet a fourth reason why the easy answers work, in addition to their familiarity and

comfort value, clergy fear, and congregational resistance. This reason is more pernicious, and it is one that I think few clergy have considered. The clergy actually do think that they are presenting a challenging message when in fact they are, unintentionally, repeating anti-Jewish stereotypes. If the interpreter knows nothing about Jesus's Jewish context other than the stereotype of "Jesus came to fulfill Judaism, so therefore Judaism—whatever it was—must have been bad," then the parables will be interpreted in a deformed way.

One very common way parables are interpreted is by drawing a contrast between what Jesus taught and what "the Jews" generally understood. Thus, the Prodigal Son teaches that God loves sinners when "the Jews" thought God only loved the righteous and didn't give a damn about sinners. Such a reading should make no sense to anyone who has read in the scriptures of Israel the stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and David, and indeed the nation of Israel. God does not give up on sinners; to the contrary, God is always waiting for us to repent and return. Whereas humanity may violate God's covenant, God remains faithful. Jews knew that God cared about the sinful; were that not the case there'd be no reason to send prophets to Israel, or Jonah to Ninevah. For other Christian readers ill-informed about early Judaism, the parable of the Yeast and the parable of the Mustard Seed become teachings that reject Jewish purity laws and even Jewish identity, as if Jews somehow eschewed baked bread and spices, and we should therefore thank Jesus for allowing us to have a hot dog, on a bun, with mustard. These parables have nothing to do with purity laws, and to read yeast and mustard as impure is to misunderstand Judaism even as it is to miss out on some excellent food (for thought).

The parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus is understood, again by some misinformed interpreters, as confronting the Jewish view that the rich are necessarily righteous and the poor necessarily sinful—despite the very Jewish view that God is particularly concerned about the poor, widows, orphans, and strangers. The parable of the Lost Coin, with its prominent female protagonist, is seen to challenge Jewish misogyny, as if Jews never told stories with female protagonists (Ruth, Esther, and Judith would be among those surprised at this claim). Such views make Judaism look hard-hearted and exclusivist. They make Jewish practice look superstitious and xenophobic, Jewish morality tantamount to the worship of Mammon, and Jewish views of gender indicate the height of misogyny. Such teachings not only get Jesus wrong, and they not only get Judaism wrong; they inculcate and reinforce bigotry.

These stereotypes are not restricted to the lay pastor who was born again at twelve, who received the call to preach at sixteen, and who regards formal theological education as a waste of time, since the Holy Spirit tells him what to say (I do think such preachers would be doing the Spirit a favor by giving it something to work with). Nor are they restricted to the various Internet sites where sermons can be downloaded and biblical passages explained by anyone with a computer. The fault lies in part in the academy as well.

Here is our fifth reason we misread the parables. The study of homiletics, the art of giving sermons, is moving increasingly away from a historical-critical focus on the biblical text and moving toward communication theory, toward what is known as "practical theology," or toward readings from one's own subject position or social location, such as a focus on African American hermeneutics or disability studies. My concern is not the opening of new areas of study; in fact, I find of enormous help the move to claim particular voices that address specific issues. My concern is that attention on these areas, without attention to Jesus's own cultural context, opens the door not just to anachronism, but to stereotype. The more time we take in finding our own context and so our own voice, the less attention gets paid to Jesus's own context and voice.

Finally, the sixth problem: for some on the more liberal side of the theological scale, students

the Bible are also pulled away from history by the allure of newer approaches—including pretty much anything beginning with “post,” as in “postmodern,” “postcolonial,” “postcritical,” and so on. The various approaches arose in part as a response to earlier forms of historical work, in which the historian claimed to be doing objective work, when instead he (it usually was a “he”) was projecting his own cultural values and theological views on the ancient materials. However, some of today’s generation have tossed out all of historical work; they prefer to find meanings from their own perspective. What the text might have meant to Jesus or to his first followers becomes either an impossible or irrelevant question. The more the parables become detached from their own setting, the more the demons of anti-Jewish readings easily enter.

I am not suggesting that preachers who deliver anti-Jewish messages from the pulpit or academics who wind up inculcating them in the classrooms are bigots. Lack of education is not the same thing as hatred; misinformation is not the same thing as slander. In the numerous cases where I’ve written about people whose depictions of Judaism are incorrect, I’ve found the responses almost always gracious and thankful.

The message of Jesus and the meaning of the parables need to be heard in their original context and that context cannot serve as an artificial and negative foil to make Jesus look original and countercultural in cases where he is not. Yes, today we like what is “countercultural” or “radical” or “unique”—but those are our values and are not necessarily what the parables are conveying. Instead, the parables more often tease us into recognizing what we’ve already always known, and they do so by reframing our vision. The point is less that they reveal something new than that they tap into our memories, our values, and our deepest longings, and so they resurrect what is very old, and very wise and very precious. And often, very unsettling.

The following studies of a dozen or so of Jesus’s parables are thus works of history and imagination, of critical analysis and playful speculation. The more I study the parables, the more challenged I am by them. One need not have to believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior in order to realize that he had some extraordinary things to say. If I can find such genius in his parables, how much more so should those who worship him be able to listen with more finely attuned ears to hear.

Thus, each chapter begins with my fairly literal translation of a short story by Jesus; if the literalness makes the parable seem unfamiliar, good. Once we can defamiliarize ourselves of our tried-and-true readings, we are in a better position to hear the parable anew. The chapter next locates that story in its historical and literary context and sweeps away the interpretations that distort Jesus’s own context. It concludes by offering fresh readings of what the parable might have suggested to its earliest and original listeners and then what we might do with that impression today.

I have chosen the parables here on the basis of what I have to say that is original and in recognition that there is a law of diminishing returns. There is no reason to produce a twenty-page discussion of what one can find in numerous other books on parables. As Martin Bresler said while chairing a meeting of a major Jewish organization and despairing of its ever ending: “Everything that needed to be said was said, but not everyone had said it.” This book is not a volume at which well-known interpretations are repeated. To repeat what is already known would be a waste of my time, and yours.

This book is an act of listening anew, of imagining what the parables would have sounded like to people who have no idea that Jesus will be proclaimed Son of God by millions, no idea even that he will be crucified by Rome. What would they hear a Jewish storyteller telling them? And why, two thousand years later, are these questions not only relevant, but perhaps more pressing than ever?

Lost Sheep, Lost Coin, Lost Son

Which person among you, having a hundred sheep and losing one out of them, will not leave behind the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the lost until he finds it? And finding, he puts it up on his shoulders; rejoicing. And coming into the house he calls together the friends and the neighbors, saying to them, "Rejoice together with me, because I have found my sheep, the lost one." I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven at one sinner repenting than at ninety-nine righteous, those who have no need of repentance.

Luke 15.4–7

Or what woman, having ten drachmas, if she would lose one drachma, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek resolutely until she finds? And when she finds, she calls together (female) friends and (female) neighbors, saying, "Rejoice with me, because I have found the drachma, the one I had lost." Likewise, I say to you, there will be rejoicing before the angels of God at one sinner repenting.

Luke 15.8–10

Some man had two sons. And said the younger of them to the father, "Father, give to me the portion of the property that is falling to me." And he divided between them the life.

And after not many days, gathering together all, the younger son took a journey into a far region, and there he scattered the property through excessive living. And having spent all, there was a strong famine in that region, and he himself began to be in need. And going, he became joined to one of the citizens of that region, and he sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was desiring to be filled from the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one was giving to him.

And coming to himself, he said, "How many hired laborers of my father are abounding of bread, but I by famine here am lost? Getting up, I shall go to my father and I shall say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; not still am I worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired laborers.'"

And rising up, he went toward his father. And yet when he was far off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and running, fell upon his neck and continually kissed him.

And said the son to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; not still am I worthy to be called your son."

And said the father to his slaves, "Quickly carry out a robe, the first, and put it on him, and give the ring to his hand and sandals to the feet. And bring the calf, the grain-fed one, sacrifice and, eating, we may rejoice. Because this, my son, was dead, and he came back to life; he had been lost, and was found." And they began to rejoice.

And his son, the elder, was in the field, and as he, coming, drew near to the house, he heard symphony and chorus. And calling over one of the servants he inquired what these things might be. And he said to him, "Your brother has come, and your father has sacrificed the grain-fed calf, because he received him healthy."

And he became angry, and he did not want to go in. And his father, going out, comforted/urged him.

And answering, he said to his father, “Look, all these years I am slaving for you, and not one commandment of yours have I passed by, and for me not one young goat did you give so that with my friends I might rejoice. But when your son, this one, the one who ate up your life with whores came, you sacrificed for him the grain-fed calf.

And he said to him, “Child, you always with me are, and everything that is mine is yours. But it remains necessary to cheer and to rejoice, because your brother, this one, was dead, and lived to life, and being lost, even he was found.”

Luke 15.11–32

According to Luke, the narratives traditionally called the parable of the Lost Sheep, the parable of the Lost Coin, and the parable of the Prodigal Son are about sinners repenting and God graciously offering forgiveness and reconciliation. Luke misleads by turning the parables into allegories. It is unlikely a first-century Jewish listener would hear the first two parables and conclude that they have something to do with sheep repenting or coins confessing. Sheep eat, sleep, poop, produce wool, and give milk—but an awareness of sin or a sense of eschatological salvation is not part of ovine nature. Although one could adduce Psalm 119.176—“I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek out your servant, for I do not forget your commandments”—the parable offers no angora angst or merino *metanoia* (Gk., “repentance”). Neither sheep nor coins have the capability to repent, and I doubt the younger brother does either.

If any blame is to be assigned in the first two parables, then the shepherd and the woman are at fault, for they “lost,” respectively, the sheep and the coin. Were the parables called “The Shepherd Who Lost His Sheep” and “The Woman Who Lost Her Coin,” we might be closer to an earlier meaning. Regarding the issue of fault in the third parable, were the prodigal son a sinner for demanding his inheritance—which is unlikely to be the case, as we’ll see—he had help; his father, instead of disciplining him, abetted his request by complying with it. Thus this parable too might be renamed: “The Father Who Lost His Son(s).”

Not only do many of Luke’s readers, as numerous sermons and studies attest, regard the three parables as about sinning and repenting; they also see the parables as correcting an artificial, constructed, pernicious Judaism—and at this point a harmless allegory becomes a dangerous stereotype. Common is the claim that the parables, especially the third, reveal an extravagant, earth-shattering image of a God the Father who forgives, as if Jews had no notion of a divinity who seeks relationship and reconciliation. Common is the view that the older son is an allegorical representation of the Jews, who slavishly serve God the Father in order to earn a reward, while Jesus proclaims salvation by grace. And common is the interpretation that the prodigal, given his connection to pig farming, represents gentile Christians, whereas the older brother, the stereotypical Jew, resents God the Father’s outreach beyond the so-called chosen people, with their elitist, nationalistic attitudes.

In these readings and more, the younger son is the repentant Christian, the older son is the Pharisee or the Jewish people, and the father is God. Such interpretations not only yank the parable out of its historical context; they lessen the message of Jesus and bear false witness against Jews and Judaism.

In its original context, the parable of the Prodigal Son would not have been heard as a story of repentance or forgiveness, a story of works-righteousness and grace, or a story of Jewish xenophobia and Christian universalism. Instead, the parable’s messages of finding the lost, of reclaiming children

Titles Matter

The term “prodigal son” does not appear in the parable most often known by that name. The earliest reference is from the church father Jerome (347–420), who speaks of having written “on the prudent and the prodigal sons.”¹ Nevertheless, the label “Prodigal Son” necessarily influences both what messages we take from the parable and what lessons we fail to hear.

On the simplest level, far too many people think the term “prodigal” has a partially positive connotation, such as “adventurous” or “daring” or “ambitious.” A few students who did not do well on their SATs hear “prodigal” and think “prodigy.” The word “prodigal” indicates wasteful spending and financial recklessness. Aristotle wrote, “. . . [W]e call prodigal those who lack self-restraint and who, in their licentiousness, spend lavishly. Hence the prodigal are held to be very base people, since they have many vices simultaneously.”² Contrary to today’s appropriations of the term, such as *Prodigal Magazine*, a Christian “online publication that is passionate about helping people live and tell good stories,”³ or Prodigal, a global hedge fund that promotes “innovation in financial services,”⁴ or the various claims that speak of God’s interest in “reckless,” “radical,” or “extreme” love, there is nothing complimentary about being prodigal, that is, in wasting resources for personal gratification.

Despite the connotations of prodigality, the traditional interpretation of the parable actually forecloses rather than opens it up to broader meaning. The prodigal disappears from the second half of the narrative; therefore, when readers focus only on the prodigal, it is a prodigal act. It wastes the rest of the story, and it tosses aside the several profound challenges it offers.

Better is “The Prodigal and the Prudent,” as Jerome had it. Also plausible is “The Lost Son,” which is how the parable is known in Egyptian Christian sources; this title has the added value of opening the question: “Which son is lost?” Lebanese Christians refer to “The Clever (Arabic *shatteh* Son,” a title that plays on the similar term *shatr*, meaning “divide” or “separate.”⁵ Thus the younger son is “the clever and separated.” In Germany, *Der verlorene Sohn*, “The Lost Son,” is the common title, although ironically the traditional German reading sees the title as applying only to the younger son. At least with this designation, the younger son’s ambiguous character is open for discussion.

On my more cynical days, I am inclined to call the story the parable of “The Absent Mother.” “The Symphony and Chorus,” “The Grain-Fed Calf,” and “Dissolute Living” are also possibilities, although not in this volume.

The main reason that the name Prodigal Son caught on was Christian focus on the younger son’s character. In the early years of the church, some patristic readers, who never met an allegory they didn’t like, saw the younger son as Jesus himself. This Beloved Son left the paradise of his heavenly father, went to dwell in the world of sin, engaged in a gentile mission indicated by his becoming a servant to a pig farmer (by definition, a gentile), and then returned home to be welcomed with rince and robe and feasting. In a number of such appropriations, the elder brother goes missing entirely. This reading, which requires a decoder key (e.g., the Christ hymn in Phil. 2.6–11) to explain the allegorical connections, is not something Jesus’s Jewish audience would have heard.

Although the idea that the prodigal is Jesus has become less popular, from antiquity to the present, the view that the father is God the Father has prevailed. As early as the second century, the North African church father Tertullian made the connection: “Who is that father to be understood by us

God, surely; no one *is* so truly a Father, no one so rich in paternal love.”⁷ I do wonder about Tertullian’s own parenting, for surely other dads have been generous to a fault (literally) with the younger children.

This allegorical connection is then exploited by more recent commentators who insist that the father’s welcoming of the prodigal not only surprises, but transgresses cultural standards of honor. Here is a standard trope that misrepresents Judaism. According to this reading, Jesus creates a new image of the divine to replace the demanding, stern, and punishing God of Judaism. Swiss theologian Eduard Schweizer goes as far as to claim that “those who nailed [Jesus] to the cross because they found blasphemy in his parables—which proclaimed such scandalous conduct on the part of God—understood his parables better than those who saw in them nothing but the obvious message, which should be self-evident to all, of the fatherhood and kindness of God, meant to replace a superstitious belief in a God of wrath.”⁸ Perhaps he missed such Jewish texts as Psalm 23, which states, “The Lord is my shepherd,” not “The Lord is my sadist.”

Just as the father is today usually seen as a cipher for God and the prodigal as the Christian who repents of his sin and is welcomed back by the gracious God, so also that older brother, out in the field, remains the Jew or, in a variation on that theme, the “Pharisaic Christian” (in such settings, the label “Pharisee” is never a compliment), who obeys the Father out of a sense of duty rather than love, who mistakenly thinks that one must earn God’s grace, and who refuses to welcome the marginal, outcasts, gentiles, or whatever group Christian readers see themselves as welcoming and the Jews, conversely, as rejecting. Or, as New Testament scholar Klyne Snodgrass puts it, “At least [Luke ch. 15, if not the whole of 14.1–17.10, is focused on the gospel for the outcasts.”⁹

As early as around 383, Jerome claimed that the elder brother represented unrepentant Israel; in the field, he is “far from the grace of the Holy Spirit, banished from his father’s counsel.” Apparently Jerome did not quite make it to the end of the parable, where the father attempts to reconcile with his older son and states, “Everything I have is yours.” Augustine similarly reads the elder brother as “the people of Israel following the flesh . . . toiling with reference to earthly things.” Calvin rejects limiting the elder brother to the Jews and extends the reference to “hypocrites with intolerable pride”;¹² the move still condemns the older son by attributing to him motives that the parable leaves unmentioned. Yet another variant, albeit out of the mainstream, is the present-day identification of the unforgiving elder brother with Simon Wiesenthal, the Jewish American Nazi hunter.¹³ Underlying this unfortunate reading is the view that Nazi hunters should let bygones be bygones. The comparison of the personal spending of one’s fortune in dissolute living with genocide strikes me as a tad overstated.

Such positive readings of the father and the prodigal and negative readings of the older brother are prompted substantially by Luke’s contextualization, to which we now turn. Luke places the three parables after these words:

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” (Luke 15.1–2)

We can see Luke’s hand at work by comparing Luke 15 with Matthew’s version of the first of those three stories.¹⁴ Matthew 18.10–14 offers more or less the same first parable, but with a much different context:

Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven. What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.

Speaking neither to sinners and tax collectors nor to Pharisees and scribes, but to his own disciples, Matthew offers in the two center sentences of that passage a parable that can legitimately be called the Lost Sheep (vv. 12–13). The NRSV, however, cleans up the language by describing the sheep as having “gone astray,” whereas the Greek (*plano*) has the main connotation of “deceive/deception.” A better translation would be: “If a person has a hundred sheep and one of them is deceived, does he not leave the ninety-nine upon the mountain and going, seek the deceived? And if he comes to find it—amen, I say to you—that he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine who were not deceived.” The opening (v. 10) and concluding (v. 14) verses—the context—appear to be from the hand of the evangelist, who favors designations such as “little ones” and “Father in heaven.”

For Matthew, the parable is about the church’s responsibility to care, doctrinally, for its members who may be deceived by false claims. The allegory is stronger here: it is the sheep who is “deceived.” For Luke, the parable is about repenting and forgiving. Both evangelists had the story, and each recontextualized it to make a point consistent with the rest of the Gospel. Detached from either context, the parable may well have had quite a different message.

For Luke, the three parables are designed to show the different concerns of two groups of people: those with whom the Gospel readers are to identify (sinners and tax collectors) and those whom the readers are to reject (Pharisees and scribes). Luke’s Gospel gives us numerous negative portraits of Pharisees and several darling images of tax collectors. In Luke, some of those who come to John the Baptist in repentance are tax collectors (3.12), as is one of Jesus’s disciples (5.27). Tax collectors acknowledge divine justice (7.29), and one of them finds reconciliation in the Jerusalem Temple (18.14). And of course there’s Zacchaeus (whose name basically means “Mr. Righteous”), the chief tax collector and richest guy in town, who, because he is short, climbs a sycamore tree to see Jesus as he enters Jericho (19.1–10).

The Pharisees and scribes, for Luke’s readers, tend to remain coded as Jews, and thus a number of readers go even further than Luke in applying stereotypes. For example, in some commentaries, the “sinners and tax collectors” are understood to be people who “abandoned the law and for all practical purposes had denied God’s covenant with Israel.”¹⁵ Then, with amazing sleight of hand, these tax collectors and sinners become “outcasts,” and the parable is understood to be about “the Pharisees’ refusal out of envy and resentment to accept this good news extended to the outcast. . . . They, like the elder son, had stayed within the covenant, . . . they had never broken any of the commandments. But (the story suggests) they regarded themselves not as sons so much as slaves. And they resented other people being allowed into the people without cost.”¹⁶

For a first-century Jew, and even for Luke’s Gospel, the tax collectors and sinners are not those who have “abandoned the law” or “denied the covenant.” That Jesus tells a parable in which a tax collector prays in the Jerusalem Temple does suggest some investment in that covenant. The problem with “tax collectors” is not that they denied the covenant; it is that they work for Rome and so would

be seen by many within the Jewish community as traitors to their own people.

Sinners are not “outcasts”; they are not cast out of synagogues or out of the Jerusalem Temple. To the contrary, they are welcome in such places, since such places encourage repentance. The Gospels generally present sinners as wealthy people who have not attended to the poor. That is a dangerous definition of the term. Thus, in a first-century context, sinners, like tax collectors, are individuals who have removed themselves from the common welfare, who look to themselves rather than to the community.

The problem is that many of us today hear “sinner” and think only in religious categories. The sinner is the one who “breaks the Law,” but the “Law” becomes understood not in terms of “Love your neighbor as yourself” or “Leave the corners of your field for the poor,” but in terms of earning one’s way into heaven, legalism, or works-righteousness. Many Christian readers, already primed to think of the Law as the antithesis of grace and as a “burden,” come to identify with the “sinner” who is freed from this dreadful legalism. Again, this is not what first-century (or twenty-first-century) Jews would hear.

Similarly, there are no “outcasts” in any of the three parables in Luke 15. The shepherd did not expel the sheep for bleating a blasphemy or grazing on nonkosher grass. The sheep did not sin. Rather, the shepherd lost the sheep. Similarly, the coin was not cast out; the woman was looking for her money, not divesting from it. Nor was the prodigal cast out; he walked out on his own two feet, or perhaps on a horse he bought with his inheritance. Once the term “outcast” is used in reference to Jesus’s Jewish context, dualistic models are in place, negative stereotypes of Judaism are implied, and the Christian apologetic is well under way.

We need not have negative views of Pharisees in order to understand the parables. To the contrary, such readings reverse general Jewish views. The Pharisees were the ones respected by the people at large. Paul, the only self-identified Pharisee from whom we have written records, trots out his Pharisaic origins as something worthy of admiration (although heaven forbid he would boast; see Phil 3.5). As for sinners—that is, those who think about themselves and not of others—Paul provides the standard instruction. In 1 Corinthians 5.11, Paul advises his fledging church, “But now I am writing you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother or sister who is sexually immoral or greedy, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or robber. Do not even eat with such a one.” They are the ancient drug pushers, insider traders, arms dealers, and, especially, colonial collaborationists. And yes, Jesus eats with them—that’s part of his genius, that he recognizes that they are part of the community and he goes out to get them.

Both Matthew and Luke have provided our parables with a context, and in so doing they have begun the process of interpretation. We do well to see what the parables might have meant prior to their reception as Matthew’s “instruction for church leaders” and Luke’s “we love tax collectors, but we love Pharisees not so much.”

Lost Sheep

Traditional interpretations see the sheep as the believer who has strayed from the fold; the one in search is Jesus or one of his representatives, who makes every effort to save this lost sheep from destruction; and the friends who join in feasting at the end are the church. This is an encouraging message; it is certainly good news. What has gotten lost, however, is any provocation, any challenge. A second listen is in order.

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