PONDERING PROVERBS: A REVIEW ESSAY

By James D. Kline*

The late September winds race down the concrete canyons of downtown Chicago, whipping yesterday's sports section from the Tribune two stories skyward to float past a silent observer in Room 203, Crowell Hall, Moody Bible Institute. Called back to attention by an abrupt crescendo in his hermeneutics professor's otherwise monotone lecture, the student dutifully transcribes the teacher's outline from the glaring overhead to a virgin sheet of notebook paper. Under the heading "Special Literary Methods: Parables," he scribbles that one must look for the **one main idea** in each parable which serves as an interpretive key, integrating all the significant specifics of the story. The student unquestioningly adopts this hermeneutical principle for parable interpretation due either to his implicit trust in the orthodoxy of his professor's position or to the mind-lulling influence of the overly generous radiator which sits beside him.

When an interpretive principle originally proposed by a 19th century German liberal such as Adolf Julicher becomes the hermeneutical dogma of a bastion of conservative Fundamentalism like Moody Bible Institute, one may be assured that it has thoroughly pervaded the scholarly community. With this in mind, one must admire the bravado of Craig Blomberg for openly challenging the established consensus in his book *Interpreting the Parables* (InterVarsity, 1990). Blomberg candidly admits that his position is virtually unknown across a broad theological spectrum of pastors, layfolk and even among many academics, but nevertheless plunges headlong into an extended polemic against the prevailing view of parable interpretation.

The parables are not limited to only one main point each, according to Blomberg, but rather tend to make three main points, each associated with a main character in the parable. To defend his thesis, he carefully critiques the hermeneutical and literary presuppositions upon which the majority position is founded, demonstrating the inherent weaknesses of such a position as well as the solutions provided by the minority view in the first half of the book. In the second half, he applies his thesis to the interpretation of all the major parables found in the Synoptics.

In the preface to this work Blomberg confesses, "This book has led a checkered life." Research done for a doctoral dissertation on the tradition history of the parables in the central part of Luke's Gospel has been combined with the findings of an unpublished manuscript on parables and modern literary criticism, and admixed with discoveries from his book *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*. Occasionally the disparate origins of the material show through. The sharp break between a lengthy section on literary criticism (Part I) and

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the author's own explanation of actual parables (Part II) is one such instance.

Demonstrating sensitivity for his audience, Blomberg advises readers who wish to avoid the theoretical details in Part I to turn immediately to Part II (although he does qualify this by asserting that the somewhat technical discussion in Part I was necessary for proving the minority position he upholds). Perhaps the reader would have been better served if Blomberg had directed her to first take in the summary of his stance in the "Conclusions to Part One," especially the section on interpretation. Filling less than a page, this is easily digestible by the busy pastor, who can use the detailed table of contents to focus on areas of interest for further study as his hectic schedule allows.

The author carefully charts a middle course between traditional "over-allegorization" (e.g. Augustine's elaborate interpretation of the parable of the Prodigal Son) and the anti-allegorical reaction of 20th century biblical scholarship, beginning with his introduction. In it, he concisely (yet fairly) elucidates the key tenets of the majority view on parable interpretation, then offers a summary of the opposing view, and finally highlights the challenge presented to both views by new methodologies in hermeneutics and literary theory. These various topics serve as structuring principles for the remainder of the book. This reviewer appreciated the author's upfront commitment to the authenticity of the whole Biblical texts of Jesus' parables; he is loath to simply dismiss a segment of each parable (e.g. Jesus' own interpretations at the conclusion of many of his parables) as later additions by the early Church on the basis of literary or historical presuppositions such as a general disdain for allegory or skepticism about the historical reliability of the Synoptics.

At the very heart of the controversy over parable interpretation lies the issue of allegory, which Blomberg addresses in chapter two. How allegorical are the parables? From Blomberg's treatment of the subject it seems that the answer to this question depends on one's definition of allegory. Unfortunately, he never gives as clear an answer to the problem as the question itself calls for.

He starts off well enough, admitting that the problem with previous generations of commentators was not allegorical interpretation itself, but the extent of allegorizing and the specific meanings given to certain details. The reader expects a plain explanation of how the author would correct this past error. What s/he gets is a somewhat obscure discussion of current literary criticism. The reader is confronted with esoteric concepts like Hough's allegorical circle, Boucher's arguments for seeing allegory as a device of meaning (which she generously employs rather remote terms like "tropes," "syhecdoche," "metonymy," etc.), and Klauck's distinction between allegory, allegorization and allegorizing. Some of this material is comprehensible when Blomberg gives illustrative examples from the parables themselves, but regretably not all of these terms are thus explained.

Blomberg compensates for this weakness by his lengthy comparison of Jesus' parables to their closest parallels in the rabbinic literature, increasing the "intelligibility factor" exponentially by eliminating the earlier literary jargon. Nevertheless, he fails in his attempt to tie these two threads of evidence (literary

theory and rabbinical parallels) together into a clear concise definition of allegory applicable to parables at the conclusion of the chapter. The reader is left with the impression that parables have allegorical meaning (in a limited sense, for not every detail has meaning on a second level), but are not "full" allegories. Maybe a fitting category would be "semi-allegory." A succinct explanation of parable as allegory does not come for another three chapters, in the introduction to chapter five.

The problem in chapter two lies in several confusing quotations which seem to contradict his definition of parable as a form of allegory. The gist of the author's argument in this chapter is that the primary details (i.e. principal characters) of a parable portray second-level meanings. Yet on page 53 he states, " . . . one can never be sure how many of the subordinate details in a narrative are meant to carry extra freight . . . " This assertion seems to water down his definition of allegory and its applicability to parables; if the reader is always unsure how many details are metaphorical, the door is left wide open for "allegorizing." At the end of the chapter (p. 69), he cites John Sider in support of his view: " . . . [parable] is neither an allegory to be interpreted down to the last minute detail nor a comparison limited to a single point of resemblance." By putting allegory on one extreme end of the literary spectrum (opposite simple comparison), he effectively alienates it from parable.

The reader's perplexity is eased by the clarifying comments at the beginning of chapter five, but is provoked once again before he completes the book. He is left wondering how, after assiduously denying the full allegorization of every specific detail in the parables, Blomberg can go on to say (p. 296), " . . . Jesus never likens the kingdom just to an individual subject or object in a given parable but to the situation described by the **entire** narrative. **Every facet of the parables' plots** may thus potentially illuminate Jesus' conception of the kingdom" (bold added). Excising all three of these troublesome quotes from Blomberg's text would dramatically improve the logical coherence of his argument.

Compared to the problematic previous chapter, chapter three, *Form Criticism and the Parables*, is a flawless gem. A painless introduction to the subject of form criticism, this chapter lucidly translates the idiom of the discipline for the novice by applying it to examples readily intelligible to the average Bible reader — the parables. The author demonstrates an even-handed approach to the subject, showing its inherent dangers and false preconceptions as well as its positive contributions to the interpretation of parabolic material (e.g. Aramaic flavor, Old Testament background, etc.). He ably defends the authenticity of many Synoptic parallels and other material that radical form critics quickly dispense with as "later accretions."

Although he takes a fairly conservative stance on the historical reliability of the Gospel accounts of narratives, sayings and parables as accurately reflecting Jesus' teaching, he does not merely ask his readers to presuppose this position. Instead, he overviews the methodology and findings of traditional form criticism, critiques them point-by-point (especially Jeremias), and then

offers a viable alternative, a more "guarded tradition" view of the oral transmission of Jesus' sayings. In so doing, he exposes the speculative nature of much of what passes for "reconstructed tradition history," thereby protecting the parables from the (often) "scissors-happy" radical form critics. Blomberg has done a great service to the integrity of the Biblical accounts of Jesus' parables by showing the intrinsic unity of the parables — introductions, bodies, moralizing conclusions and all — in this chapter.

In chapter four, "Redactional Criticism of the Parables," the author cautiously tiptoes through the theological minefield that is modern redactional criticism to harvest the abundant fruit of hermeneutical wisdom which may be gleaned from such a study. He precisely defines the benefits of redaction criticism in two ways. First, through a brief overview of significant examples of divergences in details between parallel parables he brings the distinctive themes of the Gospel writers to light. Second, by demonstrating instances of topical (rather than chronological) arrangement of material in the Gospels, he highlights the particular theological concerns of each Gospel's author.

The chapter also includes a keen diagnosis of the root problems in the field, namely invalid presuppositions (e.g. the theology-history dichotomy, dictional analysis as a measure of historical accuracy, prophetic elements necessarily being *ex eventu*, etc.) and faulty exegesis. Chapter four would make an excellent primer on redactional criticism for use by wary conservative Christians. It substantiates the usefulness of redactional studies in examining the Biblical text but only so long as faulty presuppositions are recognized and excluded in the process of exegesis.

From the heights of perspicuity reached in chapter four, the reader descends to the depths of obfuscation in chapter five, "New Literary and Hermeneutical Methods." The author takes his readers on a guided tour of this foreign territory which immediately strikes the uninitiated (those not steeped in 20th century literary theory and its underlying philosophical assumptions) as quite bizarre. Blomberg must be commended for expending immense effort interpreting current literary theory on metaphor (Ricoeur), structuralism and meaning, but these concepts still remain a step or two beyond the grasp of the reader (even upon several rereadings of these sections).

[This reviewer confesses his own bias for objectivity and absolutes in literary interpretation, which makes a formidable barrier preventing him from understanding and benefiting from these alternate approaches. Such a bias makes the discussions of deconstruction, reader-response criticism, and meaning independent of authorial intent especially difficult to comprehend.]

Blomberg admits at the end of the chapter that the newer literary criticisms do not convincingly challenge the authenticity of the parables. The proponents of these views are relatively unconcerned with historical issues; they merely accept the findings of form and redactional criticism and go on from there. Consequently, this chapter is largely inconsequential for the majority of evangelicals whose main concern is with challenges to historical authenticity. It appears that Blomberg included this section purely for the sake of comprehen-

siveness in dealing with the subject of parable interpretation.

After a brief summary of conclusions to part one, part two, the author's analysis of particular parables, begins in chapter six. In this part of the text the author fully accomplishes his stated goal: to apply his distinctive method to the parables, defend their authenticity, and point out allegorical elements, without doing a full-blown exegesis. Blomberg gets to the heart of each parable and distills its essence down to two or three main points. What results is an accurate synopsis of the focal teachings of each parable, making this volume an excellent reference for use in testing the results of one's own exegetical work.

The author seems to be particularly sensitive to the modern homiletical applications of the parables. He finds a delicate balance between false, anachronistic exegesis and the beneficial moral and spiritual outcome of such exegesis by distinguishing between the author's original intention and perfectly valid modern reapplications. In this way, he is careful not to throw the "applicatory baby" out with the "over-allegorized bath water."

While the author's analyses of the various parables in chapters six through eight are for the most part accurate, there are a few exceptions. The first is his examination of the parable of the children in the marketplace in chapter six. At the start of this chapter, entitled "Simple Three-Point Parables," he explains that these "monarchic parables" typically portray an authority figure judging between two subordinates on the basis of contrasting (moral versus immoral) behavior. The authority figure almost always stands for God or his representatives (angels or Abraham). The parable of the children in the marketplace (Mt. 11:16-19) does not fit this pattern in the least. First, the judging figure (the seated children) actually rejects God rather than revealing Him in the act of condemning the other children (God's representatives, John the Baptist and Jesus). Second, the subordinates here are not distinguished on the basis of good and bad behavior; Jesus and John both faithfully represented God, only in different fashions. Third, there is no judgment made between the subordinates, but rather both subordinates are rejected by the seated children. In this parable wickedness is ascribed to the judging figure, not to either of the subordinates.

Chapter seven, "Complex Three-Point Parables," contains the other two exceptions to the author's otherwise splendid analysis of the parables. In his discussion of the parable of the laborers in the vineyard (Mt. 20:1-16), Blomberg erroneously excludes the possibility of degrees of rewards in heaven. He can only make such an assertion by totally ignoring the Matthean context of the parable.

Just prior to the telling of this parable, Peter had inquired what would be the disciples' reward for leaving everything to follow Jesus (19:22-27). In response, Jesus had promised the Twelve a special status in the coming kingdom, and the rest of his disciples the multiplied return of all they had abandoned to follow Him (19:28-29). Immediately following the parable an internecine dispute breaks out among the disciples over who would obtain the positions of highest honor in the kingdom (seated by Christ). Jesus settles the

egotistical contest by establishing service to others as the determinant for the reward of greatness (status) in the kingdom (20:17-28).

An alternative to Blomberg's interpretation is clearly in order. The hermeneutical linchpin of this passage appears to be the dictum "the last shall be first, and the first, last," which introduces and concludes the parable proper. From the foregoing context it may be inferred that "the first" refers to the rich, while "the last" denotes those lower on the socio-economic scale (i.e. the majority of Jesus' followers). The surprise and shock expressed by the disciples at Jesus' teaching about the difficulties the rich have in entering the kingdom (19:23-25) demonstrates the deeply ingrained attitude that wealth signified God's blessing. Evidently the disciples could not fathom the rich, who had enjoyed God's bounty in the past, being excluded from the coming kingdom. The thought disturbed them so much that they began wondering who could possibly be saved if not the rich, and began inquiring about their own fates (19:25, 27). Jesus reassures them that their obedience has not gone unnoticed and that they will be rewarded handsomely for it (19:28-29), but then segues into a parabolic explanation of his earlier pronouncement on the spiritual plight of the rich.

The parable depicts the rich under the figure of the first group of workers hired (20:2), while the last workers hired represent poorer followers of Jesus. Just as the first group of workers had the advantage of having more time to devote to their work, the wealthy have more money, better education and more important social connections which they may put to the service of the kingdom. The rich subsequently feel entitled to a continuation of their present privileged status at the day of reckoning, as the first group of workers viewed themselves as worthy of greater reward come sundown (20:11-12).

When the time for payment arrives, the first workers are surprised to discover that the last workers receive equal compensation for their meager efforts, and react indignantly. The principle of remuneration is this: everyone is rewarded on the basis of using the opportunities available to them to their full potential, and not necessarily according to the exact amount of work done. Thus the last workers can be paid a sum equal to that paid the first workers; both groups made the most of the opportunities available to them.

This is exactly the problem the rich have with the kingdom. They balk at relinquishing their tight-fisted clutch on their wealth as a precondition for discipleship (cf. 19:22), and even when they do accede to Christ's demands, they feel their obedience qualifies them for special recognition. Although the last workers' efforts appear less meritorious from an earthly perspective, the landowner considers them to be just as important as the first workers', and generously rewards them accordingly. The rich believe that the status and privileges attendant to wealth should accompany them in the kingdom and their envy at God's generosity to the seemingly unworthy even hinders their reception of their own reward (20:14-15). Thus, the last shall be first and the first, last.

The author also tips his theological hand in his exegesis of the parable of

the unforgiving servant (Mt. 18:23-35) in chapter seven. Despite the clear implication of the text, Blomberg denies the obvious meaning of the parable — that unforgiving disciples will lose their forgiveness before God. Instead, according to Blomberg, this unforgiving attitude shows the person has never truly been forgiven himself, for no true disciple would act this way (shades of Calvanism!). Such an understanding robs the passage of its hortatory value for believers struggling with the issue of unforgiveness.

Fortunately, these problematic constructions are the exception rather than the rule in this work. The author is particularly careful in the formulation of his thesis and the presentation of his analyses not to set up "three main points in each parable" as a new hard and fast rule for exegeting each parable. Chapter eight is a perfect illustration of this. In it, the author recognizes and openly deals with examples that do not fit his thesis and therefore modifies it somewhat. He respects the literary integrity of one- and two-point parables and does not force them into an artificial subdivision for the sake of his argument's logical coherence. Letting the texts speak for themselves, the author faithfully practices biblical exegesis rather than speculative eisegesis.

Chapter nine, "The Theology of the Parables: the Kingdom and the Christ," is necessitated by a contradiction arising earlier in the book. In rejecting Wrede's "Messianic secret" motif as inapplicable to parables, Blomberg states, "There is nothing explicitly Christological in the teaching of the parables . . . " (p. 40). Yet in reacting to Flusser and Young for overly reducing the distance between Jesus and the rabbis, he says they do so by " . . . dismissing virtually all eschatological and Christological features in the Gospel parables" (p.67). The reader is thus left uncertain about what is explicitly or implicitly Christological in the parables, that is, until chapter nine.

There Blomberg draws together the teachings of the various parables and presents them in a systematic fashion. He does a good job of calling the reader's attention to imagery Jesus uses in the parables to picture his person and work, images which had traditionally been employed to portray something about God (e.g. Old Testament symbols such as the bridegroom, the shepherd, the sower, etc.). In so doing, Blomberg builds a fairly strong case for an implicit Christology (directly expressed) in the parables of Jesus.

A few concluding remarks need to be made about the overall style and content of the book. Stylistically, Blomberg's work has much to commend it. The book is meticulously organized. Each section over two pages in length is usually broken down into some form of an enumeration (although the numbering system for such subheadings can be confusing at times, as on page 65 where the heading "Differences from the parables of Jesus" is assigned the number 2.2.2.2 — perhaps the use of bold print, capital letters and italics would be an improvement). Transitions between chapters and subsections within chapters are always smooth, demonstrating polished literary technique, especially since the separate chapters focus on radically different subject matters. The author effectively encapsulates the contents of previous chapters in one or two paragraphs before embarking on a further quest for relevant material.

As regards content, three compliments and one critique are in order. First,

the author's overview of the history of parable interpretation is simply superb. From the traditional allegorical exegesis typical of the Church Fathers to the revolutionary works of Julicher, Wrede, Bultmann, Cadoux, Dodd and Jeremias, the author displays a masterful grasp of the entire course of parabolic interpretation throughout Church history, without bogging down in minutia. He also demonstrates historical sensitivity to the minority (conservative?) view in parable scholarship, as represented in the works of Bugge, Fiebig, Buzy, Hermaniuk, Tinsley, Taylor, *et al.*

Second, for a rather academic discussion, the author knows how to pique the reader's interest and spice up his work through allusions to current issues which are quite controversial. References to liberation theology (pp. 116-17, 161), the findings of the well-publicized "Jesus Seminar" (p. 15), Lordship salvation (p. 92), pre-, post- and a-millennialism (pp. 300, 303-4), individual piety versus social justice (305-9), and dispensationalism (pp. 309-313) command the reader's attention better than a purely scholarly dissertation ever could.

Third, the author takes time to offer adequate answers to honest objections. He shows how "inaccurate" details of first century life in Palestine were meant to highlight the allegorical nature and distinctive emphases of each of Jesus' parables. For example, Blomberg allows that no self-respecting patriarch of a family in the ancient Near East would lower himself to running out to welcome a prodigal son home before he had even repented, but he goes on to point out that this discrepancy is intended to illustrate the lavish forgiveness of God for His wayward children. Instead of sidestepping difficulties in the parables, Blomberg faces them squarely and provides convincing explanations.

One final complaint deals with Blomberg's exegesis of the parable of Lazarus and the poor man, a subject that he discusses in several different places throughout the book. It is this reviewer's opinion that the author overstresses the prohibition of deriving theological import from this parable about conditions in the intermediate state. This is arguably the clearest description of a conscious state after death in the whole Bible. Jesus spoke this parable to an audience which probably would have readily accepted such a description of the post-death situation: a conscious state of existence wherein reason, memory and the ability to communicate are retained, and either torment or comfort is experienced as a punishment or a reward.

One of two possible explanations must be accepted. Either Jesus merely accommodated His teaching to the erroneous views of His audience about life after death or the secondary description of life after death is just as inspired and true as the primary teaching focus of the passage. It seems highly unlikely that Jesus would perpetuate a false Egyptian myth dealing with a subject as crucial as the nature of post-death existence. The second alternative still allows for some exaggeration in the parable for the purpose of allegorical emphasis (e.g. the agony of hell being relieved by a drop of water and the great chasm that forbids either group from crossing over to the other), which Blomberg readily admits for the other parables. In the end Blomberg himself ends up

granting that this parable teaches about perceivable punishment and a continuing use of reason in the afterlife (cf. p. 206, conclusions (2) and (3), which speak of "experiencing irreversible punishment" and the damned "protesting their subsequent fate").

Due to a restricted budget and the frustration of buying textbooks for classes and later regretting the purchase, this seminary student usually takes required texts out of the library or borrows them from his professors. If a book turns out to be exceptionally good or holds promise as a valuable reference work for use in future ministry, the student enters the book's title on his "wish list" of future purchases, to be acquired when discretionary funds are more readily available. Blomberg's *Interpreting the Parables* is so useful on so many different levels (as a history of hermeneutics, an introduction to various critical methodologies in Biblical studies, and a concise commentary on all of the parables) that it has earned its place at the very top of the aforementioned list. Who knows? He might just break down and buy it for himself for his birthday.