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are more than what was expected of a prophet, though some are unquestionably so. Gruenler may be going too far at times. Finally, in his running application of the hermeneutics of other authors, one gets the feeling that at times he is exploiting the ideas of a writer who may not agree with such an approach to a different genre of literature.

Even so, Gruenler has made a forceful, if not always compelling, presentation of what appears to me to be the most important issue in the historical Jesus debate: presuppositions in one's hermeneutics. This book is a signpost for future studies. Read it, but do not forget

-Harvey.

What is the situation today in the debate? Three points emerge immediately: first, scholars have reopened the question of the *intentions* of Jesus (Meyer, Riches, Gruenler); second, there is a willingness to make *deductions* to fill the gaps in our knowledge of Jesus (Harvey, Gruenler); finally, the reduction of the basic issue to *hermeneutics* is promising (Gruenler, Meyer). Henceforth, any study which assumes Cartesian, epistemological objectivism will have to defend itself carefully.

Speaking of Parables: A Survey of Recent Research

by David L. Barr

There are perhaps fifty parables in the synoptic tradition—perhaps fifteen to twenty pages of text. This review will look at some 2,500 pages of analysis of these parables—works published over the last two years. The sheer bulk of this material illustrates both the fascination of the parables and the difficulty of reading them aright. This collection of works also illustrates the current debate over how one makes a valid (or a useful) interpretation of a literary work—a question of central importance to all of us who deal with texts.

The works under review form a veritable spectrum of hermeneutical options: from a positivist reading of the text which takes meaning as obvious and referential to a semiotic reading which takes meaning to be polyvalent and autonomous—with several shades in between. And here I think we are well advised by the father of literary criticism to seek the mean between the extremes.

One such mediating work is that of **Robert H. Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus*** (Westminster, 1981, 180 pp.). Stein teaches New Testament at Bethel Theological Seminary and has written a very useful introduction which both explores the major theoretical issues (chaps. 1–6) and interprets specific parables (7–10). Concise and informed discussions of the nature of parables, the purpose and authenticity of the synoptic parables, and the history of parable interpretation from Marcion (c. 150) to the twentieth century give the reader the essential background needed to interpret the parables today.

From his review of previous scholarship, Stein formulates four principles which guide his interpretations: 1) seek the one main point of each parable, not allegorizing the details unless necessary; 2) seek to understand the parable in its original social setting within the life of Jesus; 3) seek to understand how the gospel writer interpreted the parable; and 4) seek what God is saying to us today through the parables.

Stein presumes that the meaning discovered in all these levels of analyses will be coherent and harmonious. In fact he regards both levels 2 and 3 as having divine authority, a conviction which also causes him to ignore the other traditional levels of analysis: the social contexts of the parables between the time of Jesus and the time of the gospels. Further, his conviction that the meaning uncovered at levels 2 and 3 is “usually a single meaning” does not allow him to take the differences between Jesus and the gospel writers with sufficient seriousness. We are almost always talking about the parables of *Jesus*. The most frequently cited author is Jeremias, followed by Linnemann and Dodd.

This is a valuable introduction to the main contours of parable research today and a worthy example of informed and critical interpretation. Its lack of serious dialogue with the full range of modern interpretations (e.g., Norman Perrin is not mentioned) is a limitation, but it will at least prepare the reader to understand such a dialogue. It is an excellent place to begin.

Pheme Perkins in *Hearing the Parables of Jesus* (Paulist, 1981, 224 pp., \$6.95) is strong precisely where Stein is weak: she enters into extensive dialogue with other contemporary interpreters (for example, citing Crossan almost as often as Jeremias) and gives serious attention to the diverse interpretations each gospel writer gives to the parables, including the Gospel of Thomas. More than Stein, she is apt to ask specifically literary questions of the parables. For example, how are they put together as stories? How are the versions related? Where does each focus our attention? How does a parable compare to other stories, metaphors, and proverbs of Jesus' day? Like Stein, she pursues their historical context and religious significance.

Perkins has a knack for useful comparisons of her own: Jesus' parables are “home movies” compared to the cosmic scale on which most wisdom and apocalyptic literature discuss the Kingdom of God; the woman's search for the lost coin reminds her of an experience in a supermarket checkout line; tax-collectors remind her of the “white trash” pointed out to her as a child in the South.

The book is organized thematically: after reflections on the nature of parable, proverb, and story, the reader is given “hints” for reading parables. Her method proceeds in three phases: 1) close textual analysis including both comparisons of various versions and literary analyses, 2) contextualization (history, gospel, methodology) and 3) interpretation (human significance and religious significance). Though her discussions of each of these is too brief, the ample illustration of her method in her examples should clarify her meaning. Chapter three, “Religion and Story,” will have to be read several times by those unfamiliar with rhetorical and structuralist analysis, but could provide a very useful entry to this terminologically confusing approach. She lacks the sort of general discussion and historical survey that makes Stein's book such a useful place to begin.

Most of the book consists of her own creative interpretations. She considers parables of growth, portrayals of God, allegorization, love, reversal and equality, ethics and the community. Her interpretations achieve a stimulating balance of literary analysis, historical information and religious insight which does much to achieve her goal not to “stand between the reader and the parable,” but rather to clarify and make acces-

1. This is an excellent second book on the parables and a near-perfect counterfoil to Stein's book.

For those less concerned with methodology, another possible starting point, though more demanding than the previous two, is the work of **Lambrecht, S.J., *Once More Astonished: The Parables of Jesus*** (Crossroad, 1981, 245 pp., \$9.95). This book began as a series of lectures to priests and religion teachers in 1975, was published in Dutch in 1976, translated into English and printed in India in 1978, then revised and published in America in 1981.

Lambrecht is fully conscious of the perplexities felt by modern Christians as they learn the complex traditional and redactional histories of the parables. He assumes it is possible to begin with the gospel narratives and retrace this path back to Jesus. He wishes further to raise the questions about the continuity of meanings along this path and the question of their meaning or "actualization" today. For this latter task he finds resources in the ideas of Paul Ricoeur, Dan Via, J. D. Crossan and others. Though he finds the results of structuralist analysis "disappointing".

After a very brief discussion of the nature of parable ("a metaphorical process within a narrative") and a brief description of his method (working backward from the gospel narrative, through its sources and the oral teaching of the early church, to Jesus' teaching, and then forward to the word of Jesus the "still-living Lord"), Lambrecht launches into a serious discussion of selected parables in Luke (Lost Sheep, Lost Son, Good Samaritan), in Mark (The Sower and a few others) and in Matthew (Virgins, Talents, Last Judgment).

Typically, he begins with an analysis of the context of a parable in a gospel, compares it to other versions (or tries to reconstruct earlier versions) and tries to explain the variations and thus posit the earliest version of the story. He then asks what this would have meant in the situation of Jesus and what it could mean today. While this analysis is not always convincing, it is always stimulating. Lambrecht is master of his method and of contemporary scholarship, always able to lay out clearly at the major interpretive options are. Most refreshing is his daring to ask whether the various redactions of Jesus' parables are legitimate interpretations of his meaning.

Lambrecht never quite lives up to his title, but he does provide a comprehensive overview of how certain parables are currently interpreted along with several original and insightful suggestions of his own. It is especially good at trying to relate the parables to the larger context of each gospel.

In contrast to the previous three books, the following three have little to recommend them. Their methodologies make no serious use of form criticism and their conclusions rarely rise above the methodical. The best of the three is one by **Simon J. Kistemaker, *The Parables of Jesus*** (Baker, 1980, 301 pp., \$10.95 hardback). Kistemaker is at least aware of the range of contemporary exegesis, and his extensive notes and bibliography are quite useful.

He finds Jesus' use of parables to be absolutely unique and sees their purpose to be "to communicate the message of salvation in a clear and simple manner." He is willing to "trust" that the gospel writers captured Jesus' intention and is "confident that the contexts in which the parables are placed refer to the times, places, and circumstances in which Jesus finally taught them," "because of the link with eyewitnesses." It is far easier to make such assumptions than it is to demonstrate them. Kistemaker is equally naive in delineating his methodology; he sets forth four principles: 1) note the historical context given in the gospel, 2) mine the literary and grammatical structure of the parable, 3) make your interpretation agree with the "rest of scripture," and 4) translate its meaning into terms relevant today. At least we can be sure we will never be "once more astonished" if we follow such a procedure; we will be allowed to speak only in the doctrinal tones to which we have become accustomed. This book is only for those looking for a nice, evangelical interpretation of the parables, with some good summaries of what Jeremias and others have said about their context, and an extensive bibliography.

Unfortunately, the study by **J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Parables of Jesus*** (Zondervan, 1982, 180 pp., \$8.95) does not even have these simple virtues to recommend it. There is neither bibliography, footnote, nor index. His knowledge of the customs of the day is limited (e.g., he imagines the ten virgins taking their tiny house lamps out into a nighttime procession). His interpretations sometimes are farfetched (the "least of us" in the judgment parable in Matthew 25 are best thought of as the 1000 Jews saved during the tribulation and referred to in Rev. 7: 1

suppose we need not worry, then, about finding Jesus hungry or naked or homeless today).

Pentecost regards the parables as essentially disguised propositions, all of which presuppose "Israel's irreversible state of rejection." He too proposes four principles: 1) "the parables concerned the Kingdom of heaven"—not the Church; 2) their immediate context in the gospels is the only legitimate context in which to interpret them; 3) study the parable to determine its one main point; and 4) study the biblical customs and geography. Most of the book is an examination of some fifty-one parables as to their setting, their problem, and their solution—all *ex cathedra*.

David Allan Hubbard's book, *Parables Jesus Told* (IVP, 1981, 94 pp., \$2.95), is, as he says, a simple book. It is essentially a collection of sermons on the parables, eleven in all. It lacks notes, bibliography, and index. Hubbard is good at telling the stories, and sometimes has surprisingly accurate details (the virgins carry torches), but he also adds a good bit of imaginative detail merely on his own whimsey (spilling olive oil on themselves in their haste). He assumes their context in the gospels is to be taken as definitive for Jesus and that each parable has one point; he seeks to state the demand that each makes. Perhaps a resource for devotional reflection or a few good sermon ideas is all one should expect from such a book.

It is more difficult to decide what to do with **Kenneth E. Bailey's** work, *Through Peasant Eyes: More Lucan Parables, Their Culture and Style* (Eerdmans, 1980, 187 pp., \$16.95 hardback). The book has several virtues, including remarkable literary-rhetorical skills, profound insight into Middle Eastern peasant culture, and clear presentation. The book is a pleasure to read.

While eschewing allegory, Bailey argues convincingly for a symbolic dimension to the parables; while arguing for a "single response" to each parable, he believes each has several "themes"; while he agrees that a parable is more "a mode of religious experience" than "an illustration," he insists on spelling out the theological teachings of each. Some of these tensions are necessary, but they leave the reader somewhat unsettled. He does himself disservice in other ways, also. He too easily assumes the narrative context is the historical context. He cites material from Matthew and Paul to support his case for Luke. He is too easily convinced that material comes from Jesus. The disappointing part is that he knows better. He is a remarkably well-read missionary.

Yet if the book is judged by its strengths it is well worth reading. His literary judgments are original and provocative. His cultural insights are important and revealing. He does not dwell on quaint customs, but reveals the method and values inherent in peasant culture in the Middle East—some of which he can trace back to little-known Arab commentators of a thousand years ago. It is not a book to begin with, but neither should it be ignored.

The next three books form a new category: they are not so much books about the parable as they are about "parabaling," a word they are distressingly apt to use. These writers are concerned with the implications of language, especially metaphor and narrative. They are, alas, not so concerned with their own language: "However, it is becoming clear that Jesus infringed the symbol system of his religious tradition so that he modified the fundamental structure of the correlative semantic code." One has the feeling of coming in on the middle of a conversation, though that sentence is on the first page of the preface to Funk's book.

If one is determined to read this stuff—and there is a great deal here worth reading—the choice beginning place is **Amos Wilder's *Jesus' Parables and the War of Myths: Essays on Imagination in the Scriptures*** (Fortress, 1982, 168 pp., \$13.95 hardback).

The book is a collection (without index) of Wilder's essays written between 1959 and 1974 and includes an introduction by James Breech (who collected the essays) and a very valuable preface by Wilder. As only a master can do, Wilder summarizes the dominant modes of interpretation from Schweitzer to the deconstructionists, complete with his own annotations. Suffice it to say he is not infatuated with modernity ("Why should Melville or Wordsworth be stretched on the Procrustean bed of some schema shaped to account for the disorders in contemporary letters?").

Wilder is primarily concerned with the way language not only reflects reality but also creates it, with what he calls the "social-historical dynamics" of "biblical myth." Typical of his concern is his interpretation of the *kind* of story represented in Jesus' parables, their naturalness and realism: "Jesus, without saying so, by his very way of presenting man,

shows that for him man's destiny is at stake in his ordinary creaturely existence—domestic, economic, and social. This is the way God made him. The world is real." Further, he wants to know why the parables fascinate us and how they provide "structures of consciousness." It is a worthy endeavor, and the essays are a pleasure to read, even if not always easy to understand. It is a book for careful reading and reflection.

Robert Funk's book, *Parables and Presence* (Fortress, 1982, 206 pp., \$15.95), shares many of the same concerns, but deals more directly with the parables. Like Wilder's work, most of this has been published as essays in scholarly journals or anthologies. Only chapters 2-6 deal with the parables (about sixty pages); the rest deals with the letter form and with language.

Chapter one introduces in a very general way the problem of language. Chapter two closely examines certain narrative parables and concludes that they were composed in Greek. Chapter three examines the kind of language used in the Good Samaritan story, which he believes to be metaphor. Chapter four sets forth the narrative elements and plot structures of ten parables. Chapter five pursues this analysis further in the Samaritan story, seeing the structure of the parable as a relation between narrative roles. Chapter six is a short discussion of the "temporal horizon" portrayed in the parables, or the degree to which expectation of the imminent end functions as a metaphor.

In each case the discussions are brief and betray their origins in technical journals. Nevertheless, one with some familiarity with structuralist categories should find several stimulating ideas in chapters 4-6. But if you do not already know what a syntagm is you had better start elsewhere.

In the third book we also come late to a conversation already well under way. Not only is *Cliffs of Fall* (Seabury, 1980, 120 pp., \$9.95) **John Dominic Crossan's** third book on the parables, but it is a vigorous dialogue with some of the leading theorists of interpretation in contemporary letters: Paul Ricoeur, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Stanley Fish, Harold Bloom and others. In addition, the three chapters of the book were all prepared for presentation in scholarly meetings or journals.

In spite of all this, and in spite of some esoteric language, the book is easy to read. Its theme is expressed in its subtitle: *Paradox and Polyvalence in the Parables of Jesus*. Put simply, Crossan argues that while we may with a great deal of effort manage to make language mean only

one thing, the essence of language is to be ambiguous, playful, capable of more than one meaning. Language is more like planting seeds (chapter two) than like sending code. Some do not take root, but others bring forth thirty, sixty, a hundredfold.

Thus Jesus' parable about the word becomes a parable about parables, a *metaparable*. Such reflections lead Crossan in the direction of "negative theology," or stressing what cannot be said about God. Such paradox is at the center of the argument. Jesus' parables are seen as the literary outworking of the "aniconicity of God," the imaging of the unimaginable God. It is a book full of provocative ideas which have yet to be heard by evangelical interpreters.

A specific example of how **Crossan** works out his *via negativa* can be found in his other book: *Finding is the First Act: Trove Folktales and Jesus' Treasure Parable* (Fortress, 1979, 141 pp., \$4.95). This rather odd book seeks to test a structuralist theory that the meaning of a literary work can be most clearly revealed by a synchronic (i.e., a-temporal) study of a literary type. In this case, Crossan does an exhaustive study of Jewish treasure parables and world folklore to provide "background" for reading Jesus' parable of the Hidden Treasure (Mt. 13:44). Some surprising insights are thus generated, but the conclusion is ironically not polyvalent. It is just what one would expect: we have another metaparable which teaches us to give up even our giving up.

The final work I will mention is not really a book about the parables; it is a book about Jesus which uses the parables as a way of discovering who Jesus was (a strategy shared by Crossan, incidentally). **J. Ramsey Michaels**, Professor of New Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, has written a major book attempting to rediscover the vision of Jesus: *Servant and Son: Jesus in Parable and Gospel* (John Knox, 1981, 322 pp., \$8.95).

The parables are seen as "complete stories functioning as metaphors," which puts Michaels closer to the approach of Wilder and Crossan than to Dodd and Jeremias: "To attach to a parable one meaning, once and for all, is to frustrate a story-teller's intent." The book is a significant endeavor to read the parables from the vantage point of Jesus and to ask what they would reveal about his experience of God, his self-understanding, and mission. It is a daring endeavor which probably does not succeed. But it does show that the consequence of our study of the parables is as important as it is difficult.

All of this from twenty or so pages of stories . . . at least a hundredfold.

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