THE PARABLES OF JESUS

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The parables of Jesus are an ethically appropriate genre for his claims about the kingdom of God. But our fascination with gospel parables by Jesus may be extended to gospel parables about Jesus. Especially in parables about Jesus, questions of historical accuracy may lead one to avoid questions about parabolic challenge.

I was invited by this volume’s editor to revisit my earlier work on the parables of Jesus and to give my “sense of where we are in parable interpretation today, and its significance for apprehending the message of Jesus.” That specific mandate exempts me from a full thirty-year review of contemporary parable research,¹ allows me to focus on a dialectical “then and now” across that period, and invites me to at least a modicum of autobiographical as well as exegetical commentary. My emphasis will be twofold: parables by Jesus and parables about Jesus.

PARABLES BY JESUS

In the late spring of 1973, In Parables was between first and second page-proofs. Norman Perrin had read it in manuscript and, since he, David Tracy, and Paul Ricoeur were then conducting a graduate seminar on the parables, he invited me to sit in on one of their sessions. From his two co-leaders, and from several graduate students, I heard this message (paraphrased in retrospect): Your parable interpretation is great, but the historical Jesus is somewhere between unknowable and unnecessary—lose it. I knew that was impossible,

since I was discussing reconstructed parables, parables reconstituted as plot summaries from their present gospel locations and interpretations I was trying to analyze the parables of the historical Jesus, not those of Matthew, Mark, Luke, or Thomas The seminar’s reaction prompted me to add these phrases to the preface in order to have it both ways “The term ‘historical Jesus’ really means the language of Jesus and most especially the parables themselves,” and “One might almost consider the term ‘Jesus’ as a cipher for the reconstructed parabolic complex itself”2 Yet the book’s subtitle was and would remain “The Challenge of the Historical Jesus” It has been clear to me from the beginning that my interest was in parable because of Jesus, not in Jesus because of parable And, of course, almost thirty years later The Historical Jesus was subtitled not The Language of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant but The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant That was also a deliberate choice What was at stake for me in that development?

First of all, why focus on parables as the challenge of the historical Jesus? Why not on healings or exorcisms, dialogues or debates, actions or incidents? What justified giving parables that priority or privilege?

I was still working with the general scholarly presupposition that the criterion of dissimilarity was the most valid basis for reconstructing Jesus, and I summarized its use as follows

Since creative reinterpretation by the primitive church is the presupposition of the whole problem, a rigorous negativity must be invoked to separate what Jesus said or did from what the tradition records of his words and deeds One must look especially for divergence between this earliest form and the general attitude of the primitive church Only when such can be discerned can one be methodologically sure that it stems from the historical Jesus and not from the creativity of the church This will be all the more secure when the original saying has been reinterpreted back toward Judaism in the usage of the earliest Jewish Christianity itself In such cases one can see the radicality of Jesus being muted back into normalcy 3

But to that general methodological presupposition, I added the nuance that the criterion of dissimilarity “will apply not only to subject and content but even more especially to style and to form One is especially interested in forms of expression which are peculiar to Jesus and with which the primitive church does not seem to be too much at home”4 In other words, the parables were the most securely original material in the Jesus tradition because of the application of the dissimilarity principle to “the form as well as the content of Jesus’ words,” that is, “to Jesus’ use of metaphor in sustained parabolic form.” Those narrative parables seemed to be most surely his own characteristic pedagogic genre as “distinct from the usage of the primitive church and also contemporary Judaism” 5 Not that parables made Jesus’ religious pedagogy superior to other options from that intertwined back-

3 Ibid, 5
4 Ibid
5 Ibid, 7
ground; rather, they are simply distinctive enough to be recognizable and therefore separable from it. Such distinctiveness, of course, might well entail a different function or purpose.

Norman Perrin claimed that when we “ask ourselves the question as to whether this [earliest form of a given] saying should now be attributed to the early Church or to the historical Jesus . . . the nature of the synoptic tradition is such that the burden of proof will be upon the claim of authenticity.” 9 In his detailed literary-social study of the parables Bernard Brandon Scott disagreed, at least for that parabolic genre. For parables, “the burden of proof [falls] on the one who would claim that the originating structure of a parable is not from Jesus.” 7 He gives three reasons for “reversing the burden of proof.” The parabolic genre is (1) absent in the Hebrew Bible and Hellenistic literature, (2) lacking in the pre-70 C.E. traditions of the Pharisees, and (3) rare in early Christian traditions. “Only the Synoptic Gospels, Q, the Gospel of Thomas, and the Apocryphon of James contain parables. Outside these texts no parables occur.” He concludes that those “three observations do not prove the authenticity of Jesus’ parables—that all the parables go back to Jesus. Rather, they shift the burden of proof to those who would argue that a parable or its originating structure is not from Jesus.” 8

Four points, two of agreement, two of possible disagreement. First, I agree with Scott on what he terms the “burden of proof.” Although he does not mention the criterion of dissimilarity or its application to parabolic genre or form, he has strengthened the case for my own initial approach to the parables. 9 Second, I also agree on what Scott calls the “originating structure” and I had termed ipsissima structura to deny the possibility of ipsissima verba. 10 Jesus may, of course, have told the same parable on many different occasions but even or especially in such oral situations, the same rather than a different parable requires a recognition of structural similarity rather than verbatim sequence, just as you recognize the same joke as distinct from a different one on the same subject. There are, for example, many ways of telling the parable of the helping Samaritan, but a story about the helped Samaritan is not one of them.

Third, our gospel parables are but plot summaries of any such performance matrix. The Good Samaritan parable, for example, takes a minute to read and, in an oral situation, a sneeze would have obliterated the key word and the parable lost its whole challenge. In actuality, it must have taken much longer—with more detail and more acting—to tell it to an audience. An hour, maybe? I presume Jesus, like any oral speaker or teacher, was able to

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9N Perrin, Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus, NTI. (London SCM, 1967) 39, emphasis original
7B B Scott, Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus (Minneapolis Fortress, 1989) 63
9Ibid., 63–64
10Crossan, Cliffs of Fall, 27
expand or contract a given parable to fill the time available at any specific time and place

Fourth, from the beginning I emphasized a thrust within Jesus’ total parabolic complex toward “action”—but an action that was as unspecified in content as it was urgent in demand. I also emphasized a clash between “the structure of speaker expression” and “the structure of hearer expectation” as well as the presence of paradox and polyvalence in Jesus’ parables. At that point, I could go no further because I was working only with parables as material and using only literary criticism as method. In the 1980s, therefore, I widened my material for historical Jesus research from parables to aphorisms and from words to deeds. My method shifted from an emphasis on double dissimilarity in tradition to multiple independence in attestation and broadened to create an interactive and interdisciplinary matrix of cross-cultural anthropology, Judeo-Roman history, and Galilean archaeology, as well as literary criticism. By the early 1990s, even after The Historical Jesus, I still could not see how Jesus’ context made Jesus’ parables especially appropriate as a pedagogical strategy for the kingdom of God.

I first saw that clearly, and maybe too slowly, after reading William R. Herzog’s analysis of Paulo Freire’s pedagogy of the oppressed in Brazil and Chile. “It may seem odd,” Herzog comments, “that a literacy program could generate a revolutionary pedagogy.” Yet it did so because Freire used the vocabulary of the poor as a tool of social analysis so that, as they were learning to read, they were simultaneously learning to read their culture, including its systems of domination, exploitation, and marginalization. When Jesus’ parables of the Kingdom are read on that analogy, they are not seen as primarily a vehicle to communicate theology or ethics but as a codification designed to stimulate social analysis and to expose the contradictions between the actual situation of its hearers and the Torah of God’s justice. Matters of justice were not peripheral to a spiritual gospel but were at the heart of his proclamation and practice. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that justice was at the center of Jesus’ spirituality. It is a concept of the North American church that Jesus was not involved in politics and economics but limited himself to spiritual matters.

The pedagogical ethic of a Jesus or a Freire intends a generative and transformative raising of consciousness so that “mystified illiterates became critical-thinking readers of their world.” That also means, of course, that the parable has ceded control to the parabled. It is they who must debate message and meaning, argue interpretation and implication, and only their silence is the parable’s failure.
All of that is clear in Herzog’s first example, the parable of The Vineyard Laborers in Matt 20 1–16. Standard interpretation focuses on the conclusion, on the owner’s generosity, and on its possible modeling of a gracious God. But most of the parable is about the owner going out at 6 a.m., 9 a.m., 12 noon, 3 p.m., and 5 p.m. and always finding day-laborers waiting for work. He does not have to hire all he can at dawn and pay them what they demand. He knows that there is such high unemployment that he controls the hiring even at harvest-time and even late in the day. And, of course, he can call them lazy when they are not hired. The parable’s conclusion raises a question of individual justice—is the generosity of the owner good, bad, indifferent, or what? But the parable’s main content raises a question of systemic justice—is the situation of maximum unemployment normal or abnormal, right or wrong? Jesus must trust his audience to raise those questions, to see the difference between personal and structural justice, to debate about that difference, and to wonder whether the kingdom of God was about ideal human charity or radical divine justice. There is no presumption that his audience is entirely homogeneous—it could include day-laborers, tenant farmers, small freeholders, stewards, and even some local landowners. It would be precisely in the inevitable clash of response that any raising of consciousness would take place. And it would take time and repetition.

There is one important footnote to that understanding of Jesus’ parabolic pedagogy of the oppressed. When modern commentators accept that parabolic function, they also lose any way to tell what would have happened in any given situation. It was up to the hearers to raise their own consciousness through communal agreement and disagreement. Jesus’ parables were lures not for personal thought by isolated readers but for corporate debate by interactive hearers. “It is probably impossible,” as Herzog concluded on The Vineyard Laborers, “to reconstruct the lively conversation that the encoded parable generated,” and that impossibility holds for all the parables. “At this point, the study given here faced a significant difficulty. It had proposed that parables were discussion-starters. They were used to invite conversation and to lure their hearers into the process of decoding and problematizing their world. But there are no records of the conversations that they generated.” But of course we can at least imagine the divergent responses that individuals would shout back at the speaker and at one another in any oral situation of that time and place. Two other analyses published before Herzog’s book may point in that same direction.

Douglas Oakman asked whether Jesus was a peasant, and answered affirmatively that “occupationally, Jesus is best understood as a peasant child forced to leave the village in search of livelihood.” If Jesus was a peasant speaking to peasants, would they have considered the Samaritan as good or as foolish (Luke 10 30–35)? “Jewish peasants would have multiple reasons for not being sympathetic. For them, the Samaritan is a cultural enemy, an

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17Ibid 79–95
18Ibid 95
19Ibid 261
20D. E. Oakman Was Jesus a Peasant? Implications for Reading the Samaritan Story (Luke 10 30–35) BTB 22 (1992) 117–25 The quotation is from p. 120.
evil man, and a fool: An enemy because a Samaritan, evil because a trader, a fool because he
winds a stranger like family and is unsavvy about the situation at the inn . . . . Would not peasants
have laughed all the way through Jesus’ story?”21 Finally, he asked, “Was the story originally
intended to function in a social-critical fashion?” Linking parables and kingdom of God, he
replied that “the Kingdom represents social challenge and transformation.”22

Of course, Jesus’ audience(s) would not have been homogeneous in class, and even the
peasantry would hardly all have agreed about the Samaritan—especially if they imagined
themselves in that ditch. It is not a case of replacing the monovalent “good” with an equally
monovalent but opposite “foolish” protagonist. Rather, all such judgments—about good
and bad, about clergy and laity, about Jew and Samaritan, about traders, bandits, and
inns—would have been argued out between speaker and audience and within the audience
as well. It is precisely in that interactive debate that social consciousness could be raised,
transformation could be activated, and the kingdom of God could be entered. And, in non-
dominating pedagogy, could be is more than enough.

Richard Rohrbaugh asked a similar question about “a peasant reading of the parable of
the talents/pounds.” In the peasant world of imposed limitation, with its ethic of family
subsistence and village security rather than imperial exploitation and commercial wealth,
one experienced rich people as “inherently evil . . . because to have gained, to have accumu-
lated more than one started with, is to have taken the share of someone else.”23 In that peas-
ant morality, the first two servants would be exploiters who probably increased the master’s
money by loans and foreclosures (of peasant farms), and it would be the third servant who
acted honorably and ethically by refusing to enter into such oppressive activity. Rohrbaugh
also noted that when Eusebius recorded the version of this parable from the Gospel of the
Nazoreans, he described the three servants as having respectively squandered, multiplied,
and hidden their master’s money, so that they received, respectively, prison, rebuke, and
acceptance. In other words, that extracanonical version and the comments of Eusebius
judge that multiplying the deposit is reason not for praise but for rebuke.

Rohrbaugh commented that “the Nazorean rendition fits the environment of Jesus
much more easily than either of the canonical versions of the story” so that “the present
scholarly judgment about the secondary character of the Nazorean text . . . surely
warrant[s] a new and closer look.”24 Be that as it may, there is still an unresolved tension
between a monovalent reading of the parable—even if it changes the approval from multi-
plier to hider—and a polyvalent reading that presumes audience debate precisely about
where approval should fall. Rohrbaugh concluded that “Jesus’ peasant hearers would almost
certainly have assumed [the parable] was a warning to the rich about their exploitation of

21Ibid., 123.
22Ibid., 123–24.
32–39. The quotation is from p. 34.
24Ibid., 37.
the weak. Is it possible that they were right?" Robert Rohrbaugh reasoned that Jesus’ audience included not just peasants but others as well. That is surely correct. Even if Jesus’ audience was composed primarily of peasants, it would not have been exclusively so. And even among peasants, there would be diversity of outlook, as Antipas’s romanization, urbanization, commercialization, monetization, and scribalization changed Galilean peasant life-patterns. If an audience contained others as well as peasants and if “the elitist reading is bad news for peasants” while “the peasant reading is bad news for masters” (38), would not audience debate have been inevitable—and also intentional on Jesus’ part?

Robert T. Fortna described a debate among maximum security prisoners who had chosen the parable of the Talents for their theological discussion group. Asked “which of those three slaves in the story do you like the best?,” one Smitty replied, “I kinda dig that third dude.” Asked “how do you feel about the boss?,” he said, “He just part of the System. He tryin’ to use me to make his money for him.” My own general experience teaching parables to large classes of undergraduates is similar. You could always trust debate and disagreement—especially when somebody was quite sure what it meant. As long as the group was not uniformly churched, that would almost always work. Whether dealing with peasants then or now—or prisoners, or undergraduates, or anyone else—such debates would almost always happen, as long as the group had not been programmed to some univocal meaning by teaching or preaching.

In summary, this is where we have arrived today: the function of Jesus’ parables about the kingdom of God was to create debate about justice, to raise consciousness about oppression, to ask how God would run this world if God sat on Caesar’s throne, and to do all that through internal transformation rather than external domination. Parables were the ethical mode of e-ducation upward rather than in-doctrination downward. They lured the audience into self-education. And education is, first, foremost, and always, about knowing your options. Parables were the special pedagogy of Jesus’ kingdom of God.

**PARABLES ABOUT JESUS**

If the preceding analysis is correct, commentary on the parables must become commentary on their diverse audiences—peasants, stewards, and masters, to be sure, but also (within the peasantry) small freeholders, tenant farmers, day laborers, beggars, and bandits. But also, and above all, it will be about the twenties C.E. in Lower Galilee, when the dislocating effects of romanization-as-urbanization finally hit full force with Sepphoris as capital in 4 B.C.E. and Tiberias as its replacement in 19 C.E. Future commentary will be less about the self-expression of the parable than about the self-education of the parabled. That may be

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25Ibid., 38.
the future for the parables of Jesus but what about parables about Jesus? Maybe that is where we will have to stretch our imaginations even more fully.

I still agree with Scott’s conclusion that the earliest Christian tradition did not invent many parables and place them on the lips of Jesus, that “the tradition was not as creative in regard to parables as it was with other elements of the Jesus tradition.”27 Why? I suggest that the tradition did not spend much time creating parables by Jesus because it was too busy creating parables about Jesus. I begin, as in the previous section, with autobiography.

In June 1967 I returned to the States from a sabbatical at Jerusalem’s Ecole Biblique. During the next two academic years I taught graduate courses on the resurrection texts and on the parables. There were no curricular demands for those subjects so I must have chosen them freely, but I no longer remember why—except, of course, that they interested me enough to study them, teach them, and think about them. I do not recall choosing them as conjunctive or comparative data, but I did notice that the ways in which the evangelists told and retold, adopted and adapted the parabolic stories by Jesus seemed remarkably similar to the way they told and retold, adopted and adapted the resurrection stories about Jesus.

At that time, and especially in lectures to laity about biblical historicity, I used the following, again and again, as a fundamental example. It is still such for me. Luke tells the inaugural revelation of the Risen Lord to Paul three times in the Acts and he must have known you would get eventually from Acts 9 through Acts 22 to Acts 26, and you might even compare those divergent versions. Apart from other minor differences he considered unimportant, Luke carefully worked the central revelation of Paul’s pagan-mission mandate so that, first, it came from God to Ananias in 9:15–17, then from Ananias to Paul in 22:12–15, and, climactically, from God directly to Paul in 26:14–18. That self-conscious and quite deliberate Lukan process served as a fundamental case-study from which I could explain creative redactions of either parable or resurrection stories. In other words, the creative handling of resurrection stories—especially that constitutive case—was influencing my understanding of parable stories rather than vice versa.

In the later 1960s, then, I could have pursued research and publication in either direction, toward parable or toward resurrection. From that beginning over thirty years ago, I saw at least those resurrection stories as parables about Jesus, as utterly self-conscious creations by writers who knew exactly what they were doing. I would say eventually about Luke 24:13–35 that “the symbolism is obvious as is the metaphoric condensation of the first years of Christian thought and practice into one parabolic afternoon. Emmaus never happened. Emmaus always happens.”28 As it happened, however, I proceeded to concentrate on parable stories and not resurrection stories. But what I propose here is that we start to concentrate at least equally on parables about Jesus as we have always done on parables by

27Scott, Hear Then the Parable, 64.
28Crossan, The Historical Jesus, xiii. By the way, Emmaus is still inaugurally there in The Birth of Christianity, xi.
Jesus. Here are two examples of how that might work

A first and rather simple case. The *Epistula Apostolorum* 5 lists the miracles of Jesus and among them that “he walked on the sea, and the winds blew, and he rebuked them, and the waves of the sea became calm.”

Despite that combination of Mark 4:35–41 and 6:45–51, it is not much of a story, and “walking on the sea” allows for little response, perhaps, beyond “Jesus is as divine as Poseidon!” or, more wisely, “how very nice for Jesus!” But what if one read the whole story in Mark 6:45–51, read it as a deliberately and self-consciously created parable? *Jesus sends out the disciples without him They get nowhere He walks on the sea, out, as it were, for a pre-dawn stroll He does not help them until they cry out Then he enters the boat and all is well* The walking on the sea is not a self-indulgent short-cut homeward nor an act of assistance to an endangered fishing-fleet. It is much more precise than that: the disciples (the church or the leadership of the church?) make no progress without Jesus in their boat, must acknowledge that, and ask him in. We could, of course, argue about historicity, and that may be the safest way to avoid the story as deliberate parable. For, if it is a parable, it asks us to debate among ourselves what happens to a church without Jesus. Furthermore, is it not fascinating that somebody already asked that question long before the first century was over?

A second and more complicated case. I begin again with this summary statement from the *Epistula Apostolorum* 5: “Then when we had no bread except five loaves and two fish, he commanded the people to lie down, and their number amounted to 5000 besides women and children, whom we served with pieces of bread; and they were filled, and there were (some) left over, and we carried away twelve baskets full of pieces.” That, at least, is more a summary story than a summary statement, and it distinguishes a “he” and a “we.” Once again, however, one should read the entire narrative, the whole story in Mark 6:34–44. In this case, I also compare that version with the one in John 6:5–13.

For convenience, I have divided the story into five moments and named them Solving, Seeking, Seating, Distributing, and Gathering. Also, I have emphasized the dialectic of *he* and *they* because in this miracle there is an unusual rhythm of Jesus (*he*) to disciples (*they*) and then to crowds. In this particular story, the disciples are always in the middle, are always present not just as background but as intermediaries.

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30 In most early Christian miracle lists, the interaction of Jesus, disciples, and crowd disappears completely. For example, “in a desert place he will satisfy five thousand from five loaves and a fish of the sea, and the leftovers of these will fill twelve baskets for the hope of the peoples” (*Sibylline Oracles* 1 356–59), “from one wallet men will have a surfeit of bread” (*Sibylline Oracles* 6 15), “from five loaves and a fish of the sea he will satisfy five thousand men in the desert, and taking all the leftover fragments, he will fill twelve baskets for the hope of the peoples” (*Sibylline Oracles* 6 275–78) See *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed J H Charlesworth, 2 vols (Garden City, N Y Doubleday, 1983–85) 1 343, 407, 424
Solving (Mark 6:35–37; John 6 5–7). In Mark the situation of hunger begets two divergent solutions. For the disciples, who speak first and bring up the problem, it is: “send them away.” For Jesus, it is: “you give them something to eat.” They find the directive silly and say so bluntly. Those divergent solutions mean that Jesus pulls the disciples into the middle of each succeeding step. They are forced to follow Jesus’ solution. John is quite different on this first element and so also thereafter.

When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said,
THEY “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late, send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat”

HE But he answered them, “You give them something to eat”

THEY They said to him, “Are we to go and buy two hundred denari worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?”

When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip,

HE “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do

THEY Philip answered him, “Six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little”

Seeking (Mark 6:38; John 6 8–9). In Mark, then, but not in John, the dialectic of Jesus and disciples continues. They are sent to find out what food is available and then report their findings.

HE And he said to them, “How many loaves have you? Go and see”

THEY When they had found out, they said, “Five, and two fish”

HE One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to him, “There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?”
Seating (Mark 6:39-40; John 6:10). Mark and John agree here, and only here, on the dialectic of Jesus and the disciples. They are told to have the people sit down, and do so.

HE: Then he ordered
THEY: them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties.

HE: Jesus said,
THEY: "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all.

Distributing (Mark 6:41-42; John 6:11-12a). Two points here. First, especially against parallels with Exodus and manna, Jesus does not bring down bread from heaven or turn stones into bread. He simply takes what is already there among the people, and it is more than enough for all. Jesus, in contact with God ("looked up to heaven" in Mark, "had given thanks" in John), does it—there is no mention of multiplication. Second, in Mark, though not in John, there is the usual dialectic of Jesus and the disciples. Distribution goes from him through them to the people.

HE: Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves,
THEY: and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And all ate and were filled;

HE: Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied,

Gathering (Mark 6:43-44; John 6:12b-13). This is the one time that Mark lacks an explicit Jesus-disciples (he-they) interaction. The disciples gather the fragments, but with-

THEY: and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.

HE: he told
THEY: his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets.
out Jesus explicitly telling them to do so. In John, to the contrary, the dialectic is present.  

This is, of course, the narrative of a miracle, but is it miracle-in-parable or miracle-in-history? I propose that the story is a deliberately created parable about Jesus. It is not about multiplication of food that is not present but about distribution of food already present. It suggests that when God in Jesus distributes food fairly, equitably, and justly, there is more than enough food for all. It also suggests that the church (the disciples as leadership, or as symbolic of the entire community?) wants no part of this functional destiny and must be pulled by Jesus—kicking and screaming, as it were—into the middle of that process: Jesus through disciples to people. The disciples say: “Send them away.” Jesus replies: “You give them food.” No wonder we prefer to emphasize a miraculous multiplication that we want but cannot obtain rather than a just distribution that we can obtain but do not want.

CONCLUSION

The parables of Jesus, as interactive audience education, are an ethically appropriate genre for his claims about the kingdom of God. That kingdom, as God’s will for this earth, can be entered here and now by the many through a lifestyle of horizontal sharing from the bottom of society upwards. Such a covenantal kingdom was, of course, in calculated opposition to Antipas’s commercial sub-kingdom of Rome entered here and now by the few through a hierarchical lifestyle of greed from the top downwards.

Romanization, urbanization, commercialization, monetization, and scribalization (all redundant terms) struck Judea forcibly but carefully under Herod the Great—with, for example, the newly enlarged temple at Jerusalem and the newly created port at Caesarea Maritima. Herod the Great, however, ignored Galilee, and it fell to his son Antipas to bring that fivefold redundancy forcibly yet carefully to Lower Galilee—for example, in the newly enlarged capital at Sepphoris and the newly created replacement at Tiberias. That is why the Baptism movement of John and the Kingdom movement of Jesus happened when and where they did. And Jesus’ parables were a genre for a divine counter-kingdom; they did not betray its substance by their style, its content by their form.

Moreover, I propose that we extend our fascination with parables by Jesus to include parables about Jesus as well. There are presuppositions we take for granted in parables by Jesus, but tend to forget in parables about Jesus. Imagine what would happen if, after Jesus told the Good Samaritan, the unanimous original reaction followed these lines: this is wise warning not to travel alone, especially where bandits prowl the desert fringes of that infamous Jerusalem-Jericho road. Or: this is wise advice to follow a two-to-one majority, espe-

31That could be just coincidence, or Johannine redaction of his Markan source—or could it be a tiny indication that a common earlier miracle source had that dialectic in each of those five elements? In any case, John is not at all interested in telling this parable in the way Mark does. For some background thoughts on the miracles in Mark and John, see Crossan, The Historical Jesus, 310–12
cially when that majority is your own divinely appointed leadership. If one or two members of the audience suggested those conclusions, it would be interesting. If all agreed about them, it would be disastrous. But, no doubt now as then, the more unanimity is asserted, the more somebody, at least somebody, will disagree with it. So, then as now, a first principle must be this: listen to the whole story, the full narrative, the entire parable, before you start your argument. Only then will disagreement be instructive.

Here is another principle well understood in parables by Jesus, but often forgotten in parables about Jesus. What if the audience, having heard the Good Samaritan parable, unanimously chose to debate its historicity. “I think,” said one, “it is history, for I was on that road only yesterday.” “I think,” said another, “that it is parable: did you really think his Sower story was about agriculture?” “I think,” said a third, “that whether it is parable or history, the point is the same: what if the alien is kinder to us than we are to each other?”

Historicity is always a valid question, and there are times when it is an absolutely crucial one. But notice how, in parables by or especially about Jesus, such questions about historical accuracy may be used and welcomed to avoid questions about parabolic challenge.
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