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Tania Oldenhage
Parables for Our Time

Rereading New Testament Scholarship
after the Holocaust

Parables for Our Time

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In memory of my father
Hans-Otto Oldenhage
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Parables for Our Time

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1 Introduction

Reading the Bible in America

What makes biblical interpretation possible is radical detachment, emotional, intellectual, and political distanciation. Disinterested and dispassionate scholarship enables biblical critics to enter the minds and world of historical people, to step out of their own time and to study history on its own terms, unencumbered by contemporary questions, values, and interests.

With these words Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza critically summarized the dominant “ethos” of biblical scholarship in America since World War II.¹ Her audience was the Society of Biblical Literature, the year was 1987, the place was the annual meeting of this academic society in Boston.² Schüssler Fiorenza spoke as the first woman president. Her address was a passionate call for a “rhetorical-ethical turn” (4) and a strong appeal against the posture of value-free detachment in biblical studies: “Biblical interpretation, like all scholarly inquiry, is a communicative practice that involves interests, values, and visions” (4).

Schüssler Fiorenza enacted this shift in her address. In an effort to clarify her own rhetorical situation as presidential speaker, she recapitulated the history of the organization in two steps. First, she described the conflicting participation of women in the Society. She pointed to the first presentations and publications by women in the beginning of the century, to the decline of women's membership until 1970, and to the gradual increase in the representation of female members on the Society's boards, councils, and committees that led to her own appointment as president in 1987.³ However, Schüssler Fiorenza emphasized that she was speaking not simply as the first female president but as a feminist scholar committed to promoting work “in the interest of women” (8). Feminist scholarship on the Bible, according to Schüssler Fiorenza, went beyond the focus on women-related issues in biblical interpretation. It sought “to change our methods of reading and reconstruction, as well as our hermeneutical perspectives and scholarly assumptions” (8). At stake in feminist biblical scholarship, for Schüssler Fiorenza, was a new paradigm.

In a second step, Schüssler Fiorenza described the scholarly ethos that had dominated the Society up to that time. To do so, she examined the rhetoric of the presidential addresses given by her (male) predecessors in the twentieth century. She pointed

out that these addresses propagated biblical scholarship that was far removed from contemporary history and politics. Even after the Second World War the presidents of the Society did not discuss how and in what ways biblical scholars should take account of the period's devastating events.

Since 1947 no presidential address has explicitly reflected on world politics, global crises, human sufferings, or movements for change. Neither the civil rights movement nor the various liberation struggles of the so-called Third World, neither the assassination of Martin Luther King nor the Holocaust has become the rhetorical context for biblical studies. (9)

This failure of the Society's presidents, according to Schüssler Fiorenza, was reflective of a widely shared attitude. Biblical scholars after the war by and large pursued their studies in a "political vacuum" (9), as she described it. She also pointed to a series of shifts toward a new paradigm that, she hoped, would undermine this approach: "The decentering of this rhetoric of disinterestedness and presupposition-free exegesis seeks to recover the political context of biblical scholarship and its public responsibility" (11). According to Schüssler Fiorenza, efforts toward such recovery were already underway.⁴ She ended her address by asking the members of the Society more broadly to become aware of their own work's situatedness in the twentieth century, to engage in what she called an "ethics of accountability," and to attend to the material consequences of biblical interpretation in the present.⁵

In 1988, Schüssler Fiorenza's address was published in the *Journal of Biblical Literature* under the title "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship." I encountered this text in 1992, shortly after I left Germany. Schüssler Fiorenza's essay was my first introduction to contemporary American biblical studies, and it made an impression on me. Its critical description of the dominant ethos in biblical scholarship poignantly captured the scholarly atmosphere with which I was familiar. The "rhetoric of disinterestedness and presupposition-free exegesis" had been the standard mode of discourse during my study of the Bible at German universities. Schüssler Fiorenza's insistence that scholarship happens in a sociopolitical context, that there is a certain "rhetoric" to every scholarly practice, and that scholars are ethically accountable for their work opened up for me an entirely new way of thinking about what it means to do biblical scholarship.⁶

During the 1990s biblical scholars began to take up Schüssler Fiorenza's challenge to "decenter biblical scholarship."⁷ Scholars of various trainings are now discussing the embeddedness of interpretation within contemporary contexts and are theorizing the ethics of reading biblical texts. These discussions are quite diverse.⁸ Their participants make use of different, sometimes opposing, strategies with often contradicting results. Schüssler Fiorenza's presidential address, for example, links the ethics of accountability to an "ethics of historical reading" that does "justice to the text in its historical context" (14). Ethically responsible scholarship, according to Schüssler Fiorenza, continues the project of historical inquiry, albeit with different presuppositions. In other corners of biblical studies, scepticism about the possibility of unearthing a text's historical meaning prevails. Informed by a variety of critical theories, biblical scholars have begun to emphasize the contingency of meaning and think through the radical implications of this insight for their discipline.⁹ The 1995 publication of *The Postmodern Bible*, written by ten scholars who call themselves "The Bible and Culture Collective," is a landmark

in these endeavors. The book presents and discusses a range of “postmodernist” reading strategies, which

share a suspicion of the claim to mastery that characterizes traditional readings of texts, including modern biblical scholarship. . . . [B]y sweeping away secure notions of meaning, by radically calling into question the apparently stable foundations of meaning on which traditional interpretation is situated, by raising doubts about the capacity to achieve ultimate clarity about the meaning of a text, postmodern readings lay bare the contingent and constructed character of meaning itself. (2–3)

This agenda conflicts with the work of Schüssler Fiorenza, who is wary of postmodernist discourses because of what she considers to be postmodernism's lack of political accountability and vigor, an assessment not shared by the Bible and Culture Collective.¹⁰ However, Schüssler Fiorenza's presidential address and *The Postmodern Bible*, despite all their differences and disagreements, participate in a similar effort: they both develop a critique of the “disinterested and dispassionate” scholarship and, in one way or another, try “to make sense of the Bible in relation to contemporary culture” (*Postmodern Bible* 8).¹¹

From Germany to America

During my years in the United States, the research topic I had brought with me from Germany was affected by the challenges posed by Schüssler Fiorenza and *The Postmodern Bible*. In Germany I had become interested in the hermeneutical discussions around the parables of Jesus. In the center of these discussions stood the conflict between historical criticism, dominant in German biblical studies generally speaking, and more recent literary approaches to the Bible. In regard to the parables, historical-critical approaches had produced two eminent works by Adolf Jülicher and Joachim Jeremias. These classic works had set the basic rules of discourse and had opened up a research framework in which the parables of Jesus were investigated within their first historical settings. More recently, historical critics in Germany had begun to work against the anti-Jewish trends in the scholarship of Jeremias and others by reconfiguring Jesus' stories as genuinely Jewish parables and by recovering their first-century Jewish horizon of understanding.¹² The historical-critical paradigm was contested, however, by a number of scholars who argued that the meaning of Jesus' parables can be found not in their first-century historical context but in their timeless poetic powers.¹³ Appropriating methods and theories from secular literary criticism, these scholars treated the parables of Jesus not as ancient artifacts but as autonomous works of art. To me, the investigation of the parables by means of literary criticism had seemed like an exciting new alternative to historical criticism. I was particularly intrigued by the idea that the parables are metaphorical narratives whose poetic powers can still affect us today.

When I came to the United States in 1992 I intended to deepen my study and was embarrassed to learn that the scholarly movement that I had considered the most progressive strand in New Testament studies was actually already twenty years old. The notion of the parables as metaphors first emerged in American biblical studies in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It grew out of what today is often called the “literary turn” in New Testament studies, a shift that several scholars in the United States initiated

away from traditional historical-criticism to a literary approach to the Bible and to the parables in particular.¹⁴ These discussions arrived in Germany with some delay and in the early 1990s could still be considered “new.”¹⁵ In America they were dated. Arriving from Germany, I was caught in a time lapse.

In her presidential address, Schüssler Fiorenza described the literary trend in biblical studies:

In the past fifteen years or so, biblical studies has . . . adopted insights and methods derived from literary studies and philosophical hermeneutics; but it has, to a great extent, refused to relinquish its rhetorical stance of value-free objectivism and scientific methodism. This third literary-hermeneutical paradigm seems presently in the process of decentering into a fourth paradigm that inaugurates a rhetorical-ethical turn. (3–4)

Indeed, as I explored the landscape of biblical studies in the United States I noticed that scholars who in the 1970s had been discussing the literary qualities of biblical texts had quite different concerns now and that these concerns were often precisely the ethical and political implications of scholarship pointed out by Schüssler Fiorenza.¹⁶ Eventually I, too, became involved in an effort to reclaim a “rhetorical context” for my work in biblical studies.

One of my aims in studying in the United States was to deal with the problem of anti-Judaism in my field of research and to deepen my knowledge of rabbinical parables. I had encountered the critical concern with anti-Jewish tendencies in New Testament interpretation in Germany and had learned to look for affinities between the parables of Jesus and those of the Rabbis. When I came to the United States I expected that the Jewish studies program of my department would be an excellent site for me to become familiar with rabbinical literature. But things took a different turn. Jewish studies in America engaged me not in a study of ancient rabbinical texts but in the study of the Holocaust.¹⁷ It gave me an opportunity to struggle with the legacy of the country where I grew up.

The history of the Holocaust was not a new topic for me. But what I encountered now was a way of thinking about “Nazism and the ‘Final Solution’ ”¹⁸ that greatly differed from the historical or theological approaches I had known in Germany. I was introduced to discussions of remembrance and representation, to a growing body of scholarship informed by insights from cultural studies and literary theory.¹⁹ I became aware of the intricacies of memory—the dilemma, for instance, that the construction of Holocaust memorials does not safeguard a population from the processes of forgetting.²⁰ And I learned about the problem that our knowledge of Auschwitz depends on the language and narratives that are available to us; that a chronological account, a memoir of a survivor, a fictional Holocaust novel, a movie are all particular kinds of representations with different interpretative patterns, which in their turn have different consequences for our understanding of the events.

The debates over these questions, as I read and studied them, provided me with a new lens for looking at my own field of research, for perceiving how the Holocaust was remembered and represented in the context of parable scholarship. In the spring and summer of 1994 I began to reread major texts in parable interpretation and to examine the ways the legacy of the Holocaust echoes in these texts.²¹ I embarked on a project to show that New Testament parable scholars during the last five decades worked not in a political vacuum but in situations shaped by memories of the Holocaust.

Outline

This book is divided into four parts. Part I, “Holocaust Remembrance in Germany,” introduces questions of Holocaust memory as the broad framework of my project. It is centered around Wolfgang Harnisch's book *Die Gleichniserzählungen Jesu*, published in 1985. Harnisch's work presents an early and original attempt by a German scholar to adopt and integrate into European scholarship the American hermeneutic approaches to the parables. According to Harnisch, the parables of Jesus should be understood as works of art endowed with the power of poetry to reveal new dimensions of reality. I am concerned with one particular place in Harnisch's work. In developing his understanding of “metaphor,” Harnisch cites the first segment of Marie Luise Kaschnitz's poetic cycle “Zoon Politikon,” written in Germany in the mid-1960s. The poem describes how the forgotten memories of Nazi genocide return to a German home and haunt its inhabitants. The poem's place in Harnisch's book raises important questions about the difficulties of remembering the Holocaust in Germany in the 1980s and 1990s. By situating Harnisch's use of Kaschnitz's poem within a contemporary German context, I also situate my project within what Schüssler Fiorenza would call my own rhetorical situation, which is shaped by my status as a member of the so-called third generation in Germany.

Part II, “Historical Criticism and the Legacy of the Holocaust,” turns to the classic work of parable interpretation: Joachim Jeremias's book *The Parables of Jesus*, first published in Germany in 1947. By attending to Jeremias's historical-critical approach, I describe the legacy and common point of departure of the work done by Harnisch and by American literary scholars of the 1970s. I also clarify my own approach to parable interpretation in conversation with historical critics who recently have begun to raise questions about the anti-Jewish tendencies in Jeremias's work. I argue that the current focus on the problem of anti-Judaism fails to historicize Jeremias's book. It is important to take into account the time and place of the book's first publication: Germany in 1947. I show that Jeremias's book, once it is situated two years after the end of the war, becomes symptomatic not so much of Christian anti-Judaism in general but, much more specifically, of the difficulties of responding to the Holocaust in Germany shortly after the events.

My effort to historicize Jeremias's work leads me to an examination of how the difficulties of remembering the Holocaust were transported to the next generation of scholars. To do so, I move to America and to the 1970s where parable scholarship took a hermeneutic turn. Parts III and IV of this book show how scholars in America, working under a new literary paradigm, responded to the legacy of the Holocaust. I focus on two proponents of this literary turn in parable studies. Part III, “Jesus as Poet of Our Time,” focuses on the most prolific and perhaps most influential participant of the literary turn in American biblical studies: John Dominic Crossan. I offer a critical reading of Crossan's book *Raid on the Articulate*, published in 1976. I argue that this book is perhaps the first instance of a biblical scholar trying to make Jesus' stories speak to a post-Holocaust situation. The book exemplifies an important side effect of the literary turn: as the parables of Jesus were turned from historical artifacts into literary texts, they were brought into contact with so-called secular literature, or “texts within our own world,” to use Crossan's phrase. I am interested in the fact that many of the twentieth-century literary texts cited in *Raid* are charged vis-à-vis the Holocaust. Through close readings of two examples of twentieth-century novels as they appear in Crossan's work, Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*

and Elie Wiesel's *Gates of the Forest*, I investigate how memories of recent catastrophes shape Crossan's work without, however, being integrated or explored by Crossan in any way. I also argue that these shapes of memory are typical of American Holocaust culture in the mid-1970s.

Part IV, "The Promise of Metaphor Theory," turns to a second major participant of the literary turn in American biblical studies: Paul Ricoeur. I examine Ricoeur's essay "Biblical Hermeneutics," which was published in the experimental journal *Semeia* in 1975. Although written by a French philosopher, the essay is very much at the heart of American discussions of the parables in the 1970s. In "Biblical Hermeneutics" Ricoeur makes metaphor theory fruitful for parable studies and thereby offers a new interpretive vision of Jesus' stories. Understood as metaphorical narratives, the parables are said to offer a new vision of reality. Ricoeur argues, moreover, that, as limit-expressions, the parables refer to limit-experiences of human life, including death, suffering, guilt, and hatred. I develop a critical reading of what I call the limit-rhetoric in Ricoeur's 1975 essay in light of the fact that the notion of limit was already becoming a crucial trope within Holocaust literary studies.²² By cross reading the fields of Holocaust studies and New Testament parable studies, I raise questions about Ricoeur's deployment of the charged trope of "limit-experiences" in relation to the parables of Jesus.

My last chapter concludes the book by addressing its implications for future work in New Testament scholarship. Tying together my arguments, I demonstrate what a post-Holocaust reading of a New Testament parable might look like. Focusing on the story of the Wicked Husbandmen, I develop an interpretation that critically and consciously builds on the literary turn in biblical studies while situating itself as thoroughly as possible in its own cultural and rhetorical context.

Autobiographical Interventions

Throughout this book I often deploy an autobiographical voice.²³ I decided to do so for several reasons. By taking account of my own history with parable scholarship I wish to construct a position from which it is possible to talk about the desires that are operative in scholarly discourse as well as the expectations that discourse can provoke. Part of my argument is that the hermeneutic endeavors around the parables bring certain gains to the interpreter and that these gains are significant vis-à-vis the Holocaust. In some ways, this argument follows Schüssler Fiorenza's insight that "biblical interpretation . . . involves interests, values, and visions" (4). This means, for example, that the turn to metaphor theory by parable scholars not only is a quest for the true meaning of biblical texts but also holds promises about reconfiguring and reclaiming Jesus' parables in a particular way at a certain moment in time.

However, these "interests, values, and visions," to speak with Schüssler Fiorenza, are largely contained or hidden in my four texts. It is not the case that certain tendencies in a text can be read as a clear sign of an author's "interests." I argue, for instance, that Jeremias's degradation of Jewish literature is not translatable into Christian anti-Judaism in any straightforward way. Similarly, the meanings of Harnisch's and Crossan's quotation of post-Holocaust literature is not at all obvious or unambiguous. This is why I would speak not so much of "interests, values, and visions" as of motivations, desires,

responses, or failures that are mostly inarticulate and less than conscious. I needed a strategy that would allow me to interpret and articulate what in the scholarly texts are only traces, resonances, echoes, gestures, and allusions. It became helpful for me to build a strong “I” in my text, an “I” that is positioned in relation both to the events of the Holocaust and to the hermeneutics of parables, an “I” that picks up, responds to, and interacts with these allusions and echoes.

My autobiographical interventions, finally, intend to make as explicit as possible the rhetorical context of my own project. Granted the impossibility of fully uncovering my own less-than-conscious motivations, I do try to attend to at least some of the reasons that have prompted me to engage in this project. Again, following Schüssler Fiorenza, I want to emphasize that “reclaiming a rhetorical context for biblical studies” is itself a rhetorical practice. Using the autobiographical voice has been a way for me to acknowledge how much my work is informed and motivated by my position as a German who sees herself confronted with the legacy of the Holocaust.

This position, however, was never stable. The post-Holocaust reading of parable scholarship that I present here was shaped over several years. It is informed by the different encounters I made with each scholarly text and by my varying responses to the legacy of the Holocaust as I found it reflected in parable scholarship. Tracing these changes has become an integral part of my work. This means that my book does not provide a definite reading that puts parable scholarship in its place, so to speak, and thus gives a final answer about its historical meaning. Instead, I offer readings that are multileveled, that take account of my changing perspectives, and that draw attention to my own implication in this project.