

Parables of Jesus

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To my colleagues

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Preface

“With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it” (Mark 4:33). This verse summarizes one of Jesus’ main methods of communicating his message to the people of his day. The word “parable” is a combination of two Greek words that mean “put (*bolē*) beside (*para*).” Thus, a parable is something that is “put beside” something else. Although by definition a parable is simply any comparison between two things, most of us think of parables more specifically as short, memorable stories that illustrate different elements of Jesus’ teaching. Such stories draw a comparison between the reign of God or the Christian life, for instance, and characters and events that Jesus’ audience encountered regularly in their own lives.

There are three points to keep in mind when reflecting on the Gospel parables. First, they were addressed to the general population, not a highly educated elite. As such, they were meant to be easily understood, without a detailed explanation. Some parables, such as The Sower or The Wheat and the Weeds, are followed by elaborate allegories, in which each element of the story is said to symbolize something else completely (see Chapters 2 and 3 of this book). But these were probably added later. Second, parables often contain a surprising element. Generally, something in the parable is different from the normal

experience, and those who heard the parable would have noticed this “twist” right away. Third, since the parables are found within the Scriptures, they are part of God’s Word, which was addressed not only to those who first heard it, but also to us today. The goal of the *Jesus Speaks Today* series is to show how that Word continues to be relevant to our contemporary world while respecting its original context.

This book will focus on the story parables, reflecting on most (but not all) of the parables found in Matthew, Mark and Luke. The approach is the same as in the other three books in this series: my earlier volume, *The Questions of Jesus*; Richard Ascough’s *Miracles of Jesus*; and Alicia Batten’s forthcoming *Teachings of Jesus*. Each chapter reflects on a single parable, considering what it would have meant for the people who first heard it. After exploring how they would have understood the parable in the light of the First Testament and on the basis of their life within the Roman Empire, we will look at what the parable means for us today.

Some of the words and phrases used in this book may require an explanation. First, traditional terminology for the two main divisions of the Bible is problematic and has implications for how one interprets both sections. “Old Testament” connotes “antiquated,” “outdated” and even “replaced” for some. “Hebrew Bible” is popular in many circles, but designating the material by its (primary) language of composition does not take into account the Aramaic portions of Ezra and Daniel or the extensive scholarly use of ancient translations,

to say nothing of the second part of the Bible, which still tends to be called the "New Testament." "Hebrew Bible" also does not incorporate the deuterocanonical books, some written exclusively in Greek, which Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians consider scriptural but Protestants and Jews do not. Similarly, "Jewish Bible/Scripture" is inadequate for Christians in general, for whom that material is also part of their Scriptures. Therefore, the terms "First Testament" and "Second Testament" are used in this book for the two main divisions of the biblical literature.

Second, in the following pages the phrase "Synoptic Gospels" is used in reference to the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. These three are called "synoptic" because, in contrast to the Fourth Gospel (John), their presentation of Jesus can be seen (*-optic*) together (*syn-*). If they are arranged in three parallel columns (different editions of such a synopsis have been published), it becomes clear that Matthew, Mark and Luke describe the same basic events from the life of Jesus in roughly the same order and often with the exact same words. This suggests that there is a literary relationship among these three Gospels, such that two of the authors have copied significant portions from one or two of the others. The most commonly accepted solution to this "synoptic problem" is that Matthew and Luke, working independently of each other, followed the narrative outline and content of Mark's Gospel, but also supplemented it with material taken from a collection of Jesus' sayings. This second source is designated with the

letter “Q,” from the German word *Quelle*, which simply means “source.”

Third, LORD is used in place of the name of the God of Israel. Even though the name is present in the ancient Hebrew manuscripts of the First Testament, a growing sense of the sacredness of both God and God’s name, plus a concern that one might inadvertently take God’s name in vain, eventually led to the practice of not pronouncing the name that was written. Instead, to this day, observant Jews substitute the term *ādōnāy*, which means “my Lord,” wherever the name itself appears. In keeping with this practice, the word LORD is used in place of the divine name, but it is written in capital letters to signify that it is the divine name that is meant and not just the noun “lord.”

Finally, the abbreviations BCE and CE are used. These stand for “Before the Common Era” and “Common Era,” and cover the same period as BC (“Before Christ”) and AD (“Anno Domini” = “The Year of the Lord”). BCE and CE are more commonly used by biblical scholars than are BC and AD.

The following chapters each begin with a reference indicating where in the Bible to find the parable being discussed. Reading about the Bible should not take the place of reading the Bible itself, so read each passage before you read the chapter. This book uses the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) when quoting from the Bible, but any modern translation will do. Differences in wording among translations are usually the result of the different translators’ choices as to how to render a word that has more than one nuance. Do not let

that interfere with letting the biblical texts come alive for you today, which is the purpose of this book.

Two years ago, I returned to Canada to teach at my alma mater, after seven wonderful years teaching in the United States. Since then, I have had the pleasure and honour to teach alongside some of those who taught me, as well as with a newer generation of scholars. My colleagues in Toronto have created a faith-filled and scholarly environment in which to teach and to continue to learn. This book is dedicated to them.

The fact that Christianity is a fundamentally communal religion is central to this book's content. In keeping with this, it has benefited from the contributions of people too numerous to name. I do wish to acknowledge the particular efforts of some, however. At Novalis, Kevin Burns first suggested developing my earlier book, *The Questions of Jesus*, into the *Jesus Speaks Today* series and has skillfully guided that larger project and its individual components ever since. Anne Louise Mahoney has been a wonderful editor, catching errors and suggesting countless improvements. Mark Yenson, a doctoral student at St. Michael's who has been my research assistant, proofread various drafts of the manuscript and compiled the Index of Scripture References.

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