Contemporary scholarship has discovered in the parables of Jesus paradigms of brilliance and wit, exemplifying Jesus’ verbal acumen, his narrative skill, and his incisive commentary on the human situation before God. The parables are commonly regarded as a distinctive, if not the most distinctive, feature of the speech of the historical Jesus, and, hence, the most promising avenue of historical Jesus research. At the same time, the fate of the parables in Christian tradition illustrates what has been imagined as a more general shift from the message of the Kingdom in its original freshness to its domestication in the language of the Church, from proclamation to dogma, from metaphorical language to theology. Books on the parables regularly cite the elaborate allegorical exegesis of the Good Samaritan by Origen or Augustine to illustrate how far from the “original” sense patristic writers strayed. But one does not have to look as far as the third or fourth centuries to detect such deviations. It is clear from the editing of the parables by the synoptic evangelists themselves that they did not treat the parables as fresh and lively narratives, combining the every dayness of Palestinian village society with playful inversions and resonant metaphors; instead, the parables offered mere surfaces upon which to inscribe instructions on salvation history, christology, ecclesiology and morals.

The subject of this essay is not the parables at the level of oral performance by Jesus, but their literary appearance—perhaps the

earliest literary appearance—in the Sayings Gospel Q and the way in which the “Jesus of the parables” becomes the “Jesus of Q”.

*From Parable to Didactic Narrative and Back*

Even before the attention of scholarship turned to the poetic character of the parables, they were regarded simultaneously as key to the understanding of the kingdom proclaimed by Jesus and as showcase examples in the history of exegesis. In a devastating *tour de force* Jülicher had shown how from Clement of Rome to his own day parables had been treated as allegories, and how allegorical exegesis had resulted in a plethora of interpretations, none of them particularly convincing. 2 “Simplex sigillum veri” was the alternative and for Jülicher this meant that parables ought to be interpreted in a way that acknowledged that they were framed in simple, vivid and everyday language. 3 From the imagery (das Bild) of the parable the tertium comparationis had to be determined and applied to the real matter (die Sache) under discussion, the kingdom. 4 Jülicher discovered in the parables a kingdom of God characterized by “a fellowship in God..., a fellowship of brothers and sisters under the protection of their father...”, a kingdom “in which spiritual effort and endeavour is demanded of all its members, not one in which preference is given to high birth or standing or intellectual capacity, but to reconciliation, humility, love, trust, patience, vigilance, prudence, self-denial, faithfulness...”. 5 The parables illustrated these virtues, and, hence, for Jülicher the parables functioned in an essentially didactic manner. His view of Jesus as a teacher of humane morals, indeed, as the “apostle of progress” 6, epitomized the German liberal view later articulated in Harnack’s *Das Wesen des Christentums*. 7

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3 Jülicher, *Gleichnisreden Jesu* 1.322.
5 Jülicher, *Gleichnisreden Jesu* 1.149.
6 Ibid. 2.483.