Are We Making Any Progress in Parable Research?

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"Jesus told parables. Gospel writers give them diverse readings. Modern exegetes give them even more diverse readings." So begins John Dominic Crossan's publicity blurb on the book jacket of a recent monograph on parables. It concludes by commending the "signal achievement" of this work as having "said something new, interesting, and provocative in the very crowded field of parables research." For a postmodernist, this is high praise. The modernist, however, would want also to know if we are making any progress towards valid interpretations of the parables. The pre-modernist might suspect that correct interpretations are already available and that recent "progress" and/or "innovation" is actually regress or distraction from the truth.

Whatever perspective one takes, there is no denying that books and articles on parables continue to flood from scholarly presses without reprieve, even though there are other more underrepresented topics that probably merit more of New Testament scholars' attention. Those works then require review and critique, as in this paper, thus further inundating the landscape. In several book and article-length works, I have chronicled the major issues in contemporary parable scholarship and offered my own modest contribution to the debates, most recently updating the discussion to include works published through early 1993. Subsequent research accessible to me has included three full-length monographs: (1) a detailed French thesis surveying the use of parabolē in Jewish and Greek backgrounds, which goes on to compare and contrast the varying perspectives on parables in Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and early Gnosticism; (2) a wide-ranging study of meshalim in ancient Jewish sources with a handful of applications to New Testament parables or parabolic narratives; and (3) a somewhat idiosyncratic exposi-
tion of a fair cross-section of Jesus' parables in light of Jungian psycho-analysis to argue that we should find our god within ourselves. Article-length studies include a treatment of selected parables from the psychosocial perspective of Erwin Goffman's "frame analysis," a discussion of surprising and extravagant features in Jesus' stories as a pointer to the conflict between rhetoric and poetry; a survey of various features of parables useful for preaching; an examination of the new metaphorical reading of parables in light of the "language of change;" a review of insights gleaned from studying the parables from the perspectives of modern philosophy, literary hyperbole and rabbinic *meshalin*; three short studies by the Jerusalem school of Gospels interpretation, focusing on possible Jewish backgrounds; a perceptive review of recent research into metaphor, demonstrating that parables are not as autonomous as the new hermeneutic and poststructuralist methods have alleged; an application to German parable scholarship of the North American movement away from an apocalyptic Jesus; a ten-part survey of recent parable interpretation that encourages a combination of the new hermeneutic with a study of myth; a classification of Rabbinic parables; and a review of select literature on the parables, mostly in German, from 1984-91.

In this cluttered landscape, however, three works, all full-length books, stand out as worthy of special notice. The first comes from Charles Hedrick, professor of religious studies at Southwest Missouri State and long-time devotee of the Nag Hammadi literature, and is entitled *Parables as Poetic Fictions: The Creative Voice of Jesus*, published in 1994. Hedrick begins by postulating that Jesus' parables were ordinary, fictitious stories that did not require their audiences to bring in outside information or referential language in order to interpret them. The nineteen Gospel parables that begin without any introductory framing material represent the earliest stage of the tradition in this respect. Additionally, these stories were not first of all about the Kingdom of God; that interpretive move developed when the early church co-opted them for use in its debate over the meaning of the Kingdom. Scholars have widely rejected allegorical interpretation of the parables as not reflecting the intention of the historical Jesus, so Hedrick wonders why, inconsistently in his opinion, they still assume any deliberate figurative elements in these stories. Instead, following various leads in