
Klyne Snodgrass’s Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus is just what the sub-title claims: a guide for pastors, teachers, and other interested readers needing some initiation into Jesus’ parables; and a comprehensive guide at that (a point which bears stating in case the 800-plus-page length is not indication enough). The discipline of gospels studies is of course a sub-specialty unto itself, a methodologically eclectic region within the larger realm of New Testament studies. And within gospels studies, to draw the lines even more tightly, is the distinctive quarter of parable scholarship, with its own questions and concerns. For those navigating the winding and variegated streets of this quarter for this first time (or the first time since seminary), Stories of Intent presents itself as a kind of tour guide, presenting the range of options but also, at the end of the day, willing to propose an interpretive place for the weary teacher to lay his or her head.

Snodgrass begins by way of introducing a parable, is “in its broadest sense… an expanded analogy,” which is “used to explain or convince” (p. 2, emphases here and throughout are original). Against interpretations of Jesus’ parables which have forced them “to serve various purposes—for ancient theological purposes to modern ideological ones and pastoral ones,” our author hopes to get after “the intent of the teller—Jesus himself—with all the power and creativity of his teaching” (pp. 2-3). What matters above all is what the good teacher meant by his parables; more precisely, how “did Jesus seek to change attitudes and behaviors with this [or that] parable” (p. 3). Thus, interpretive pride of place goes to the Sitz im Leben Jesu, less so to the Sitz im Leben Evangelium, and within the post-New Hermeneutic and post-post-structuralist discussion, the author’s sympathies align with an author-centered hermeneutic. Jesus’ parables are not simply propositions tailored ex eventu to the church’s situation, but historically retrievable speech acts, whose historical specificity is no bar to present-day application.

The Introduction proceeds by taking up a brief history of parable interpretation (pp. 4-7), further definitional questions (pp. 7-9), strategies for classification (pp. 9-13), reflections on allegorization (pp. 15-17), a cataloguing of parable characteristics (pp. 17-22), and some analysis of the distribution of the parables within the gospels (pp. 22-24). Right up front certain important markers are set down. The author invokes Kierkegaard’s observation on the indirect quality of parables and writes: “most of Jesus’ parables are double indirect communication” in that “they do not speak of the hearer/reader or the subject at hand” (p. 11). This insight in turn serves as a partial basis for Snodgrass’s classification system. Distinguishing himself somewhat from those reiterating the old form-critical taxonomies, the author suggests five broad categories: aphoristic sayings, similitudes, interrogative parables, narrative parables, and “How much more parables”. Precisely because the parables are considered as speech acts, the basis for this characterization is primarily one of function rather than form.

Next comes some discussion regarding how parables should be interpreted (pp. 24-31). This largely consists of eleven principles, all of which are consistent with the argument thus far. Particularly helpful in this section is the following point: “The key is knowing when to stop interpreting. As with metaphor, parable interpretation is about understanding the
limits—and the significance—of the analogy” (p. 28). In other words, if we lose sight of the fact that parables are extended metaphors, we are bound to either over-interpretation or under-interpretation. Moreover, in their metaphorical capacity, parables can neither be reduced to simple propositions nor be subject to a facile formula for attaining their meaning. The act of interpretation is prudential and “will have to be determined from the whole of the parable and the whole of Jesus’ teaching” (p. 31).

While I personally have no scruple with the content of this prolegomena, perhaps one of its more controversial aspects—and it is hard not to be controversial on these questions—will have to do with the author’s assuming the relative transparency of the historical Jesus traditions, which are presumed to echo Jesus’ voice and show only minor overlay either from oral (form-critical) or editorial (redactional) reworking. That is, compared to the broad stream of historical Jesus scholarship, the author is relatively sanguine about the possibility of recovering the parables as Jesus’ parables. He writes, parables are indeed “the surest bedrock we have of Jesus’ teaching;” they “fit Jesus’ prophetic stance” (p. 31). Meanwhile, there is caution in the application of form and redaction-critical methodologies (pp. 31-33). Here one finds no radical paring down of the parables so characteristic of form-critical studies; here, too, minimal weight is placed on redactional seams (introductions, conclusions, and interpretive elements) (p. 33). Along these lines it is no surprise that the gospels are not seen as having been primarily written for a particular community: they were written “to convey material about the teaching and life of Jesus in order to create followers of Jesus” (p. 33).

In the next chapter, entitled “Parables in the Ancient World,” the reader is treated to possible backgrounds to Jesus’ parables, including the Old Testament, early Jewish writings (intertestamental period), Greco-Roman writings, the early church, and later Jewish writings (rabbinica). The author’s judgment is balanced and appropriately reserved. Not wishing to link Jesus’ parables directly with the philosophical schools, he is willing to grant that these teachings “would not have seemed strange to Gentiles” (p. 51). Likewise, “the similarity of the rabbinic parables to sayings of Jesus precludes any idea of ignoring this material” (p. 54), even if it is uncertain that “rabbinic examples may reach back into the first century” (p. 59). The point of these comparisons is to show that parables are “context-specific,” and for this reason “regularly have interpretations” (p. 59). Interpretation is demanded by the historical context.

Having carefully laid the initial groundwork, Snodgrass dedicates the next five hundred pages to an analysis of the parables themselves. He identifies 32 parables and divides them along the following thematic categories: Parables of Grace and Responsibility, Parables of Lostness, the Parable of the Sower, Parables of the Present Kingdom, Parables Specifically about Israel, Parables about Discipleship, Parables about Money, Parables concerning God and Prayer, and finally, Parables of Future Eschatology. The structure of each chapter is roughly the same. First, there is identification of parable type (see the discussion in the introductory matter). Next one finds “Issues Requiring Attention,” where anywhere between four and a dozen important exegetical or homiletical questions are flagged up. Then follows “Helpful Primary Source Material,” including more relevant background materials. Space is then devoted to “Textual Features Worthy of Attention” and “Cultural Background.” The core of each chapter comes under the heading, “Explanation of the