

***In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus. John Dominic Crossan. New York: Harper and Row, 1973.***

**Preface**

Four levels of meaning in the title:

1. Special linguisticity of Jesus' message (cf. Mt 13.34);
2. Primitive church's reinterpretation of Jesus' parabolic intentions (cf. Mk 4.10-11);
3. Thesis: parables are only to be understood from inside their own world.
4. 'In parables' is the only way to live and know reality.

**ONE: Parables and the Temporality of the Kingdom**

Methodology of the new quest for the historical Jesus:

1. Comparative reading of data common to all three synoptics reveals constant creativity on the Jesus tradition.
2. Deliberate bracketing of any decision for or against authenticity and historicity on the level of the historical Jesus.
3. Attempt to write a history of the transmission.
4. The earliest form can be appraised in terms of historical authenticity for Jesus (looking especially for divergence between this earliest form and the general attitude of the primitive Church).
5. This 'criterion of dissimilarity' applies to style/form as well as to subject/content.

The Form of Jesus' Parables:

Mashal/parabole = almost any type of figurative language.

Linguistic structure is formed in, by, and for a definite situational function.

**Allegory and Parable**

Allegory = a story in figurative language whose several points refer individually and collectively to some other event which is both concealed and revealed in the narrative (cf. Ezek 17.3-10, 11-21); cf. also Mt 4.3-8, 14-10).

**Parable and Metaphor**

Uses of metaphor:

- o Metaphor and confusion: seeing metaphor as confusing/obfuscating is inadequate because of the irreplaceability, irreducibility, and indispensability of metaphor.
- o Metaphor and ornament: 'what oft was thought but ne'er expressed so well'; does not describe clearly what poetic metaphor is.
- o Metaphor and illustration: metaphor as pedagogic cocoon; intrinsically expendable.

o Metaphor and *participation*.

Thesis: *Metaphor can articulate a referent so new or so alien to consciousness that this referent can only be grasped within the metaphor itself.*

The metaphor contains *a new possibility* of world and of language so that any information one might obtain from it can only be received after one has participated through the metaphor in its new and alien referential world.

“The Wholly Other must always be radically new and one can experience it only within its metaphors.”

Involves the imagining of wholly new ways of imagining.

“What once was radically new in symbol or metaphor is always latently powerful to create and inspire another and different radical newness.”

o Metaphor and Structure:

Figurative language:

- ‘talks about one subject and intends another.’
- Dual function: (1) illustrate information so that information precedes participation (allegory, example); (2) *create participation* so that participation precedes information (metaphor, symbol).
- ‘Parable is a metaphor of normalcy which intends to create participation in its referent.’

“It talks of x so that one can participate in x and so understand the validity of x itself.”

It is structure whereby metaphor can offer us this new world rather than that one.

o Structure and Experience:

◆ Poetic experience:

- It is the poet’s vocation so *to articulate this experience metaphorically that the referent of the experience is contained and incarnated in it.*
- “A true metaphor is one whose power creates the participation whereby it truly is experienced.”

◆ Religious experience:

- The experience of the Wholly Other demands and even creates its own form of expression in which it becomes incarnate and present both non-verbally in symbol and verbally in metaphor.

## O Experience and Expression:

Palestinian rabbinical teaching methods included example/allegory inevitably linked to the problem of life or text in a very precise and specific fashion.

The rabbinical stories are didactic figures which are subservient to the teaching situation; the poetic metaphors of Jesus are subservient only to the experienced revelation which seeks to articulate its presence in, by, and through them.

### Experience in Jesus' Parables:

Metaphor = verbal *symbol*

Parable – metaphor structured *within* 'normal reality.'

Poetic/religious experience terminates only with its metaphorical expression so that the two are inseparably linked.

"There is an intrinsic and inalienable *bond* between Jesus' experience and Jesus' parables'."

"That Jesus spoke in metaphorical parables is important both for an understanding of his experience and of that experience's referent itself for which such linguisticity was appropriate."

## The Function of Jesus' Parables

### Parables and the Kingdom:

- Kingdom as Divine Action: cf. Ps 145.11-12 [Kingdom as power and mighty deeds].
- Kingdom and Eschatology: the Kingdom pertains to a teaching concerned with *world-ending*.
  - Consequent (Schweizer)
  - Realized (Dodd)
  - Progressive (Jeremias) – present/future tension
- Eschatology and Linear Time: Jesus may not have been talking at all in our concept of linear time and any present and/or future polarity is quite inadequate to his intention.
- Prophetic and Apocalyptic Eschatology

### Jewish eschatology:

- a. Prophetic: concerned with an ending of world; no concept of a world beyond this one.
- b. Apocalyptic: looked to *the* ending of *this* world; accepted that ending easily because it envisaged a far better world.

Question: *Is Jesus speaking out of the ancient prophetic eschatology precisely in order to oppose and deny the current apocalyptic eschatology of his contemporaries?*

Positive answer: cf. Lk 17.20-24 and Lk 11.20.

Thesis: Jesus is proclaiming *permanent eschatology*, the permanent presence of God as the one who challenges world and shatters its complacency completely.

The Kingdom is that which in shaking man's world at its foundations establishes the dominion of God over and against all 'worlds'.

God, in Kingdom, is the One who poses permanent and unceasing challenge to man's ultimate concern and thereby keeps world free from idolatry and open in its uncertainty.

#### Parables and Time:

- Time and Prophecy: It is extremely difficult to imagine a different view of time when one has been conditioned to think that the past-present-future is the only way in which time can be imagined.

There are moments when our everyday version of temporality, however, shows certain strains.

- Time and Poetry:

Image: Neither static circle nor ascending line but rather spokes coming out from a wheel's core.

"God does not act *in* history or intervene *in* time. It is the presence of God which, in calling to us for response, creates our history and gives us time, this history and this time. Time is, in both senses, the present of God."

- Time and Philosophy:

Heidegger: *Ereignis* becomes the event of the advent of Being overcoming man through intervention in his ventures.

"Human time and human history arise from response to Being which comes always out of the unexpected and the unforeseen, which destroys one's planned projections of a future by asserting in its place the *advent* of Being."

The advent involves a radical reappraisal/*reversal* of the past.

This advent and reversal constitute the force and power of a present which is now really and truly an *action*.

- Not: past/present/future
- But: advent/reversal/action

- Time and Parables:

The parables express and contain the temporality of Jesus' experience of God; they proclaim and establish the historicity of Jesus' response to the Kingdom.

“Jesus’ parables are radically constitutive of his own distinctive historicity and all else is located in them. Parable is the house of God.”

Any one parable is only fully heard within the total melody of all those we can still hear.

The beginning must be with ‘key parables,’ which show most clearly the advent of the Kingdom’s temporality and which contain in themselves the entire parabolic melody.

Treasure – Mt 13.44

Pearl – Mt 13.45

Great Fish – Thom 81.28-82.3

The structural sequence of Mt 13.44-45 can be underlined by noting the main verbs: finds-sells-buys. We are confronted with one whose normalcy of past-present-future is rudely but happily shattered. The future he had presumably planned and projected for himself is totally invalidated by the *advent* of the Treasure which opens up new world and unforeseen possibilities. In the force of this advent he willingly *reverses* his entire past, quite rightly and wisely he sells ‘all that he has.’ And from this advent and this reversal he obtains the Treasure which not dictates his time and his history in the most literal and concrete sense of these words. It gives him a new world of life and *action* he did not have before and he could not have programmed for himself.

Humble and everyday examples startling in their implications.

The basic attack of Jesus is on an idolatry of time.

Jesus opposed the view of time as man’s future in the name of time as God’s present, not as eternity beyond us but as advent within us.

## **TWO: Parables of ADVENT**

Advent and Joy:

Three strands within the advent:

1. Hiddenness and mystery (e.g., budding fig tree, leaven);
2. Gift and surprise (e.g., sower, mustard seed);
3. Discovery and joy (e.g., lost sheep, lost coin).

The paucity of parables of advent probably reflects the tradition’s needs and not Jesus’ emphasis.

The Sower (Mt 13.3-8; Lk 8.5-8; Mk 4.3-8; Thm 82.3-13)

Synoptic tradition:

The Parable

- Mk 4.6,8 are expansions.

- There is not an even emphasis on four situations, but a formal balance and contrast between three situations of waste and failure and three situations of gain and success.

#### The Interpretation

- This interpretation is a later strand of the tradition.
- The Markan insertions tend to emphasize certain aspects of the parable's interpretation needed for Mark's purpose.

#### The Gospel of Thomas

Does not contain the Markan expansions.

Does not have the clear contrast of lost seed and fruitful seed as seen in Mk 4.3-7 as against 4.8.

Mk = 30, 60, 100 / Thm = 60, 120

#### The Earliest Version

Paratactic, using short terse sentences connected by 'and'; favored a threefold structure.

30/60/100 is more original than 60/120.

3/3 comparison is more original than the emphasis on four situations (which lends itself to allegorical interpretation).

Original version = Mk 4.3-8 without the insertions in 4.5-6 and 4.8.

The Mustard Seed (Mk 4.30-32; Mt 13.31-32; Lk 13.18-19; Thm 84.26-33)

#### Synoptic Tradition

##### Markan version

##### Sowing and size

Pre-Markan form: 'which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds, (and) puts forth large branches.'

##### The Shaded Birds

If there is any OT allusion behind Mk 4.31 it is to God's loving Providence (cf. Ps 104.12), and not to the great apocalyptic tree (cf. Dan 4.10-12; Ezek 17.23; 31.6).

The Q version (probably very close to the Lukan text).

##### Sowing and Size

'... which a man took and sowed in his garden; and it grew and became a tree.'

##### The Shaded Birds

Same possible OT reference as in Mark above.

## The Gospel of Thomas

'It is like a mustard-seed, smaller than all seeds. But when it falls on the tilled earth, it produces a large branch and becomes shelter for (the) birds of heaven.'

### The Earliest Version:

Original image = a contrasting diptych of the proverbially small mustard seed and the large branches of the grown mustard shrub beneath which the birds can find abode.

### Growth or Miracle?

In both parables, there are sharp juxtapositions of two states.

The emphasis is not on growth and development, but on the gift-like nature, the graciousness and surprise of the ordinary, the advent of bountiful harvest despite the losses of sowing, the large shade despite the small seed.

"We are being asked in these parables to enter into images of the Kingdom's advent taken from the gracious gift and perennial surprise of nature's inevitability."

The parables of Jesus seek to help others into their own experience of the Kingdom and to draw from that experience their own way of life.

### **THREE: Parables of Reversal**

"The advent of the Kingdom is at once utterly awesome and awesomely normal."

These parables reverse and overturn our world and we find ourselves standing firmly on utter uncertainty; such is the advent of the Kingdom.

### Parables and Examples

Parables and examples differ, because of the 'figurative element' in parables.

The parables of reversal have been turned in almost all cases into examples (especially by Luke).

### The Good Samaritan (Lk 10.30-37)

#### The Meaning for Luke

Four separate units can be considered.

10.25-28 – This context of the Lukan parable appears in Mark without the parable itself.

10.29 – Neighbor is still seen as the one *to whom* something is done.

10.30-35 – Use of 'neighbor' in 10.27,29 and in 10.36 is logically inconsistent.

10.27,29 = he to whom love must be offered.

10.36 = the one who offers love and mercy.

These were probably two originally separate units (10.25-28/29 and 10.30-36/37) which were united because of their common 'neighbor' theme but with opposite meanings not totally harmonized.

This combination was probably already present in Q, and then broken apart in Mt.

10.36-37 – v.36 was probably the original ending as a rhetorical question.

v. 29 and v.37 are added as frames to parallel the parable with 10.25-28.

The Meaning for Jesus (text = Lk 10.30-36).

Structure of the Narrative:

(a) 10.30a	(c) 10.31	(b1) 10.34-35
(b) 10.30b	10.32	(b2) 10.36
	10.33	

The Importance of the Samaritan (cf. Jn 4.9):

The whole thrust of the story demands that one say what cannot be said, what is a contradiction in terms: 'Good' and 'Samaritan'.

When good (clerics) and bad (Samaritan) become, respectively, bad and good, a world is being challenged and we are faced with *polar reversal*.

From Parable to Example:

In parables which present 'moral' actions, there is great danger of confusing the literal and the metaphorical.

"The original parabolic point was the reversal caused by the advent of the Kingdom in and through the challenge to utter the unutterable and to admit thereby that other world which was at that very moment placing their own under radical judgment."

Other Reversal Parables:

→ The Rich Man and Lazarus (Lk 16.19-31).

Vss. 27-31 stems from the early Church rather than from the historical Jesus.

Vss. 19-26 is literally a strikingly amoral description of *situational reversal* between the rich man and Lazarus.

Metaphorical point = the reversal of expectation and situation, of value and judgment, which is the concomitant of the Kingdom's advent.

→ The Pharisee and the Publican (Lk 18.10-14a).

"The literal point of the parable is a startling story of situational reversal in which the virtuous Pharisee is rejected by God and the sinful publican gains approval. The metaphorical challenge is again clear: the complete, radical, polar reversal of accepted human judgment, even or especially of religious judgment, whereby the Kingdom forces its way into human awareness. What, in other words, if God does not play the game by our rules?"

→ The Wedding Guest (Lk 14.8-10).



“This example of situational reversal shows how the Kingdom arrives so that one experiences God’s rule as that which turns one’s world upside down and radically reverses its normalcy. The Kingdom is not one’s ultimate concern but that which undermines one’s ultimate concern.”

→ The Great Supper (Mt 22.1-10; Lk 14.16-24; Thm 92.10-35).

The Synoptic Tradition:

- Matthew has made the parable an allegory of the history of salvation.
- Luke has moralized the parable.

The Gospel of Thomas: Here, the function is a warning not to let material cares distract one from the invitation to the gnosis.

The Earliest Version:

Situational reversal: all the invited guests are absent and the uninvited are present.

As parable it provokes their response to the Kingdom’s arrival as radical and absolute reversal of their closed human situation.

→ The Prodigal Son (Lk 15.11-32).

Situational reversal.

Aristotle: “But the greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor. It is the one thing that cannot be learnt from others; it is also a sign of genius, since a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity of dissimilar.”

Eschaton and Paradox:

GOOD

BAD

Priest & Levite

Samaritan

Rich Man

Lazarus

Pharisee

Publican

First-Seated

Last-Seated

Invited Guests

UNINVITED Guests

Dutiful Son

Prodigal Son

Jesus announces God as the shatterer of world, as the One of permanent eschatology, and so his language is sharpened necessarily into *paradox*, for paradox is to language as Eschaton is to world.

The challenge of the historical Jesus puts language itself under strain because only paradoxical language is adequate to a message of permanent eschatology.

#### **FOUR: Parables of Action**

Parables and Ethics:

According to Jesus and Paul, it was the gift of God’s presence that made a good life possible, not a good life that made the reward of God’s presence inevitable.

The parables of Jesus seek to draw one into the Kingdom, and they challenge us to act and to live from the gift which is experienced therein.

They make us face the problem of the grounding of ethics and we want only to discuss the logic of ethics.

Parables (such as Mt 5.39) deliberately overthrow ethics.

The Kingdom's advent is that which undermines world so that we can experience God as distinct from world, and the action and life which the Kingdom demands is built upon this insecurity.

#### The Action Parables:

This type of parable was most congenial to the early church's preaching purpose and therefore predominates in the NT.

They portray critical situations which demand firm and resolute action, prompt and energetic decision.

The Wicked Husbandmen (Mk 12.1-12; Mt 21.33-46; Lk 20.9-19; Thm 93.1-18):

#### Synoptic Tradition:

Certain major elements strain the allegory badly:

- Motivation theme:

What is the meaning of 'respect' for the Father?

What are the hopes of 'inheritance' for the tenants?

- Whence the sudden change (v. 9) from impotence to vengeance on the part of the owner, and why rent out the vineyard again after such an experience?
- Citation from Ps 118: the triumph of the son does not appear within the allegory but is added in this proof-text.

#### Gospel of Thomas:

There is no overt allegory within the story in this version.

This is probably a very early and quite independent version of a parable of Jesus.

The parable was gradually allegorized before and during the synoptic tradition and this process resulted in a growing strain between the logic of the original story and the necessities of the allegory.

The Original Meaning: Parable of action.

#### The Servant Parables:

The Theme of the Servant.

Bipolar: master/servant relationship;

Moment of critical reckoning therein.

In one cluster of these parables, we move within the horizon of expected order and orderly expectation:

- Doorkeeper
- Overseer
- Talents
- Throne Claimant

In a second cluster, this horizon of expected normalcy is questioned, probed, and finally contradicted:

- Unmerciful Servant
- Servant's Reward
- Unjust Steward
- Wicked Husbandmen
- Vineyard Workers

Jesus has created his own expectation and then deviated from it.