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Book Review: The Challenge of Jesus' Parables

Richard N. Longenecker, *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2000. Pp. 324. Price \$29.50. ISBN:978-0-8028-4638-9

Introduction

The Challenge of Jesus' Parables belongs to the fourth volume of McMaster New Testament Studies series, it focuses on providing a scholar perspective on the parables of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels. Edited by Longenecker, the volume gathers articles from a symposium of New Testament scholars, including Craig A. Evans, Klyne R. Snodgrass et al.

Part 1 History, Genre and Parallels.

The First section of the volume starts with 3 articles that layout the history, genre and parallels in the interpretation of Jesus' parables. Snodgrass surveys the long history of parables in interpretation, from Early Church Fathers to Reformers, from German New Testament scholarship to 20th century emphasis on Jewish aspect.

Stern's follows attempting to list all the genres that Jesus' parables fall into. Unfortunately, the nature of parables do not allow simple categorization, Sterns states that parables can be: "implicit (as in a metaphor, riddle, story, or example parable) and explicit (as in a simile, similitude, or allegory)(47).

In Snodgrass' survey, he notes that he agrees, and believes that much insights have been achieved by the good works of scholars who pay attention to parallels of Jesus' parables in their Jewish counterpart(26). Evans is next to provide such a view. Evans draws connections between Jesus' Parables and early Jewish Parables, concluding:" Jesus' Parables are right at home in first-century Jewish Palestine"(72).

This first section is best concluded by Snodgrass. Disagreeing with Jones that everything that needs to be explored in term of Jesus' parables has been made, Snodgrass states:

“But that would be as wrong now as it was then, for work will and should continue. Perhaps, however, we have provided enough perspective so as not to repeat the errors of previous interpreters and to appreciate more fully something of the depth of Jesus' intent in these relentlessly engaging stories”(28).

Part 2 Parables of the Kingdom

The second section we witness Hooker, Hagner and Longnecker tackle Jesus' parables of the Kingdom of Heaven found in Mark, Matthew and Luke respectively. The three authors follow a more or less similar structure, a discourse on the related parables in respective Gospels followed by a conclusion on how the message of Jesus permeates into environments of a modern reader. This section is well edited, each of the 3 authors have an equal amount of 22 pages between their works respectively.

Hooker embarks on a massive journey examining topics of “The Kingdom of God”, Jesus' Teachings, and how Jesus' Parables and Miracles work hand in hand. In which, she proposes a connection between the “Kingdom” Parables in mark are related to subsequent miracles performed by Jesus(87).

Hagner probably has the most text to deal with since the gospels of Matthew probably contain the most material on the subject. He concludes with a short parable of his own. In order to continue the work of the disciples, modern Christian are compared to the well trained scribe for the Kingdom, loyal to both the Old and New testament(122).

Longnecker notes in his study of Lukan parables that it is important to understand the artistic literary design that is within Luke's writing. Drawing heavily on Luke's reliance on Mark's gospel as his sources, Longnecker insists that it is Luke's editorial choice to split the “Kingdom Parables” found in Mark and Matthew and paring them with different pericopes(131).

Part 3 Parables Warning and Preparedness

Martens' article shifts the focus from "Kingdom Parables" to specific ones, particularly 4 parables found in Matt 21:28-22:14 and Luke 13:6-9. He intentionally highlights the provocative directness of Jesus' words towards the Pharisees(153). Concluding Jesus' parables of Judgement, Martens rightly warns modern readers of applying the same Judgment towards Jews. He insists:

We need to develop a hermeneutic that allows the writers of the New Testament to speak to issues in their own contexts and in their own ways, but also one that does not permit us to move from "anti-Judaism" to "anti- Semitism.(173)"

France follows Martens "Judgment" parables with the subject of preparedness. France reads the three parables within Matt 25 as one unit, one following the other with implications that flow into understanding of each following parable. France expresses that "being ready " should not simply be seen as expecting the arrival of the final judgment, but rather a call to action before it is too late(194).

Part 4 Parables of Christian Life

Chapters 9-11 focuses on expounding parables found in Luke's Gospel. Barton opens the final portion of the volume with a quote from Bonhoeffer's *Cost of Discipleship*, in which he suggests that it serves as an entry point into understanding 3 parables found in Luke 15(199). Barton summarizes the pericope with each of the parables representing God's grace, his forgiveness and our repentance, and how these are crucial to Christian life and practice (215).

Wright follows with 3 other Lukan parables, Parables of the Rich fool (12:13-21), the Shrewd Manager(16:1-13) and the Rich Man and Lazarus (16:19-31). Wright introduces the reader to the socio-economic context of the Jewish world in his attempt to interpret these parables. Drawing heavily on Herzog, Wright particularly focuses on the actions of the Shrewd Manager and its implications in the first century setting. Wright summarizes his pericope

with each parable as 1.) “Warning the poor against the allure of Wealth” 2.) “Summon the rich to repentance” (232).

Liefeld’s Chapter 11 concludes the section explaining the parables in Luke. Focusing on the theme of prayer, Liefeld details why he believes that these parables are Jesus’ way of teaching on the importance of prayer, in the process he also highlights three different aspects of God and the proper attitude of prayer.

Chapter 12. Keesmaat’s approach to parables stands out from the rest of the volume and she explicitly states that in her opening chapter. By setting the stage in the contemporary context, Keesmaat attempts to understand the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, the Banquet and the Good (or “Compassionate”) Samaritan, with stronger emphasis on how these parables provide hope and challenge contemporary Christians.

Knowles closes the volume with focus on parables that relate to discipleship. In his conclusion to the the passage and the volume itself, Knowles rightly states that :

For the parables still carry with them a challenge to hear the voice of Jesus in the words of the evangelists, and to hear in Jesus' words the voice of God. How individual — and whose voice they hear within them — is, precisely, a question of discipleship (304-305).

Conclusion

These challenges have rightly been dealt with in this volume. The symposium of scholars has provided much insight to the understanding of Jesus' Parables, especially helping the modern reader peer through the redaction of the Evangelists. While providing a scholarly discourse, the various authors did not forget to remind the reader on what implications these interpretations bring to modern Christian life.

On the other hand, due to the nature of the collective work, each scholar seems to have the urge to provide particular context to his/her pericope. The result is much repetition in terms of background information, a stronger editorial process could further streamline the volume.

Finally, while Snodgrass Acknowledges the Jewish aspect of understanding Parables, that sort of information is frankly speaking lacking, discussions on Early Rabbinic parallels and reference to original language are lacking and minimal to say the least. One would benefit far more in understanding the Jewish context of Jesus' Parables reading Young's *The Parables*.