

Review of *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation*

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I reviewed the book titled *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation* authored by Brad H. Young. Dr. Young is a New Testament scholar and received his doctorate from Hebrew University where he studied under the renown parable scholar Professor David Flusser and served as his research assistant. Dr. Young has authored twelve books and numerous articles.

The book is broken down into six sections beginning with a chapter devoted to the historical and theological development of both Christian and Jewish parables followed by sections discussing issues surrounding the parables such as Jewish prayer, grace, reconciliation and the call to do what is heard. It is Dr. Young's desire to bring attention to the parables as they "merit careful attention and [the] very best efforts of interpretation."<sup>1</sup> As described by Young, "One must understand the purpose of the parables. They illustrate. They teach. They drive home a point. They never obscure the message of Jesus... The parables made the message of Jesus clear... Jesus wanted his hearers to become genuine disciples by putting the message into practice."<sup>2</sup> This review will cover a brief overview of each section as well as highlighting a few examples of the author's scholarship.

The author first introduces us to the conflict of the approaches used to study Gospel parables advancing that the historical and critical method will be where he begins by opining that "the parables of the rabbis must be studied as Jewish haggadah."<sup>3</sup> He explains the difference between folklore and parables emphasizing the use of people in parables and animals in folklore

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<sup>1</sup> Brad H. Young, *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation*, (Peabody, Hendrickson Publishers, Inc. 1998), xv.

<sup>2</sup> Young, *The Parables*, 263.

<sup>3</sup> Young, *The Parables*, 7.

as well as a theological emphasis in parables. He goes on to break down a parable into six components and discusses the common theology used in both rabbinic and Gospel parables.

Part 2 begins by parsing the parable of The Contemptible Friend and the Corrupt Judge. The author concludes that the lesson in both the Gospel parables as well as similar Jewish principles emphasize the divine nature of God through his faithfulness in answering prayer. “The parables of the Contemptible Friend and the Corrupt Judge describe faith as an unrelenting determination, but the illustrations press beyond an idea of persistence.”<sup>4</sup>

The emphasis in Part 3 surrounds “an attempt to imagine God in his immeasurable goodness and in his unmerited generosity” as well as “the welcome of the outcast into the community of faith.”<sup>5</sup> He begins with the parable of the Fair Employer working through it with comparable rabbinic parables. Young posits whether it is fair or just for all to receive the same wage despite the length of time worked and concludes “[t]he parable teaches that it is fair, the first are last and the last are first. They all receive the same wages in the mercy and justness of the magnanimous landowner.”<sup>6</sup> Included in this section is the Parable of the Talents which has been seen from an eschatological view but also as “a strong call for urgent life-changing action.”<sup>7</sup>

Part 4 looks at reconciliation as it is exemplified in Gospel and rabbinic parables and Jewish thought leading with the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Young notes that Flusser “view[ed] the parable as part of Jesus’ teachings concerning the need to love one’s enemy.”<sup>8</sup> The discussion turns to issues of forgiveness, mercy and justice using rabbinic and Christian parables

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<sup>4</sup> Young, *The Parables*, 64.

<sup>5</sup> Young, *The Parables*, 69.

<sup>6</sup> Young, *The Parables*, 70.

<sup>7</sup> Young, *The Parables*, 84.

<sup>8</sup> Young, *The Parables*, 104. Quoted in \_\_\_\_\_, *Die rabbinischen Gleichnisse und der Gleichniserzähler Jesus*, (Bern: Peter Lang, 1981).

including the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant. Young advances that “human forgiveness is crucial for divine mercy.”<sup>9</sup>

Part 5 tackles eight parables focusing on how we are to respond to God’s call in our lives with emphasis on the call to all persons, not just the Jews. Young notes the distinguishing factors used by the authors such as context and includes the Gospel of Thomas. The author comments that the Parable of the Great Banquet was used “in its earlier Semitic form before it was translated into Greek and adapted for the setting in each Gospel text” with Luke’s version closest to the core text and preserving the heart of the original message.<sup>10</sup> Using the Parable of the Lost Sheep and the Parable of the Lost Coin, Young dives into the age old issue of what is more important – the study of Torah or acting out the lessons of Torah in actions of righteousness. Young goes on to examine what is demanded of every disciple in order to surrender all to God using the Parable of the Tower Builder and the Parable of the King Going to War which “stress the wisdom of careful consideration.”<sup>11</sup> He concludes this section with the Parable of the Unjust Steward again by analyzing its’ Christian interpretation and the impact coming from the Jewish context.

Part 6 closes Young’s study with the Parable of the Sower. This parable uses the example of soil to demonstrate the condition of our heart’s when we hear the message of the Cross and whether we are ready to receive it or have a hard heart just like the soil. Using Jewish parallels, Young concludes that the ancient Near East audience would understand the analogy of the soil.

Finally, the author focuses on “eschatology and the old Pharisaic belief in reward and punishment following death [which] are themes in the parables of both Jesus and the rabbis.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Young, *The Parables*, 120.

<sup>10</sup> Young, *The Parables*, 173.

<sup>11</sup> Young, *The Parables*, 223.

<sup>12</sup> Young, *The Parables*, 277.

“Jesus directs attention to the kingdom of heaven” in the Parable of Rich Fool citing “only what is accomplished to help others and what is done to please God will merit reward.”<sup>13</sup> The final parable of study is the Parable of the Ten Maidens which Young characterizes as eschatological.

In discussing the parable of the Contemptible Friend, Young takes note that parables were first passed on orally and

the performance of the story suffers when it is studied only as a written text. When hearers listen to the storyteller tell his tale in a parable about a neighbor who stands at the door of his friend at midnight with a simple request, they understand what will happen. The friend inside is expected to open his door and invite his neighbor to come inside and receive anything he needs... He must give his neighbor anything he requires.<sup>14</sup>

Young clearly defines the culture at the time of the tale and allows the context to complete the understanding of the parable.

Again, Young depicts the culture when he describes how the loving father in the Parable of the Father of Two Lost Sons is the all-powerful God.

The major role in the parable is played by the compassionate father. He loves his sons enough to allow them the freedom to make their own decisions. Even when they make the wrong choices, he is waiting and willing to help them. The comparison between God and the compassionate father of the parable would be obvious to a first-century audience... The correspondence of God is striking for, like the helpless father of the parable, the Creator of heaven and earth allows people to choose even when they make the wrong choice.<sup>15</sup>

This analysis would not only be recognized by a first century audience but sit well with today’s church.

Young emphasizes the need to examine Jesus’ parables considering his Jewish heritage.

Many modern theologians increasingly attempt to define the message of Jesus over against Judaism. Jesus is said to have taught something quite different, something original, unacceptable to the other Jews. The strong Jewish opposition to Jesus’ proclamation is emphasized. To deal with such views is not the task of New Testament

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<sup>13</sup> Young, *The Parables*, 280.

<sup>14</sup> Young, *The Parables*, 48.

<sup>15</sup> Young, *The Parables*, 148.

scholarship but belongs to modern research on ideology; yet Jewish parallels to the words of Jesus and the manner in which he revised the inherited material clearly refute the above assumptions. Even though he gave his own personal bent to Jewish ideas, selected from among them, purged and reinterpreted them, I cannot honestly find a single word that could not exasperate a well-intentioned Jew.<sup>16</sup>

Brad Young does a comprehensive job of gathering and interpreting Jesus' parables by considering his Jewish heritage and redefining them in light of comparable rabbinic parables. He highlights the culture within which they were spoken emphasizing the need to insure the proper context. This reviewer found the scholarship satisfying but at times, repetitive. The author tended to repeat himself by couching what was already said in a different way but with no added value. However, there is great overall value in the scholarship of this book.

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<sup>16</sup> Young, *The Parables*, 197. Quoted from David Flusser, *Reflections of a Jew*.