

## Review of The Challenge of Jesus' Parables

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I reviewed the book titled *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables* edited by Richard N. Longenecker. There are thirteen different authors including one chapter written by the **editor**. Each author was chosen for their expertise in the study of parables and “their known ability to write intelligibly for readers who are not necessarily academics.”<sup>1</sup> The book is broken down into four sections beginning with three chapters devoted to the history, genre and parallels of parables followed by three sections examining the parables of Jesus by subject. This book was written as part of a series produced by McMaster Divinity College coming out of their annual symposium on New Testament studies which “are (or should be) of crucial concern to Christians today.”<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.

Professor Michael P. Knowles defines a parable as

...an extended metaphor that typically illustrates significant features of God's character and conduct, and sets out consequences for human conduct, by reference to commonplace features of everyday experience. The compelling appeal of parables, however, derives from the fact that their familiarity — dealing with such common matters as farmers, rulers, seeds and weeds — is often confounded by unexpected reversals or outcomes. The listener (or reader) is drawn by the power of a good story, only then to discover that the narrative leads him or her in unexpected directions or to unanticipated conclusions.<sup>3</sup>

This is a general definition and includes elements generally accepted in defining the genre

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<sup>1</sup> Richard N. Longenecker, ed., *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables*, (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 2000) ix.

<sup>2</sup> Longenecker, *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables*, ix.

<sup>3</sup> Longenecker, *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables*, 286.

of parables. However, David Flusser would add “that the parables are not realistic, but pseudo-realistic — that is, that while Jesus' parables build on the features of everyday life, they go well beyond those every day, realistic features in making their points.”<sup>4</sup> The parables reviewed in this book were spoken **by Jesus as well as some rabbinical parables.**

The first section of the book deals with the history of parables, the genre and the parallels to parables. Recalling the history of the interpretation of parables, Professor Klyne R. Snodgrass, opines that

[a]llegorizing, in fact, was the primary method for the interpretation of Jesus' parables from at least the time of Irenaeus to the end of the nineteenth century... Unfortunately, it still occurs all too often in modern preaching... Still, allegorizing is no legitimate means of interpretation. It obfuscates the message of Jesus and replaces it with the teaching of the church.<sup>5</sup>

The author reviews the work of additional scholars evaluating how the interpretation evolved and noting the work of Adolf Julicher, C.H. Dodd and Joachim Jeremias finding that “[s]ince about 1970..., [a]ttention has turned to hermeneutical and aesthetic concerns.”<sup>6</sup> In understanding the genre of parables, the author breaks down types of parables including story parables which “make up the most famous of Jesus’ sayings” and example parables but warns that allegorizing these parables “violate[s] the intention of the author.”<sup>7</sup> In Chapter 3, the author reviews the history of parables taking note of the earliest parables dating prior to Jesus and recorded in Early Judaism noting that these parables “are not exactly comparable to those of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Longenecker, *The Challenge of Jesus’ Parables*, 18.

<sup>5</sup> Longenecker, *The Challenge of Jesus’ Parables*, 3, 5

<sup>6</sup> Longenecker, *The Challenge of Jesus’ Parables*, 10.

<sup>7</sup> Longenecker, *The Challenge of Jesus’ Parables*, 44.

<sup>8</sup> Longenecker, *The Challenge of Jesus’ Parables*, 51.

In Section 2, the authors cover the parables of the Kingdom dealing with the three Synoptic Gospels in individual chapters looking at each of the authors of Matthew, Mark and Luke and examining the parables within each Gospel. The Gospel of Mark includes only two parables with a focus on the Kingdom, but the author would include the Parable of the Sower and opine that it also has something to do with the Kingdom. The Gospel of Matthew includes seven parables “that concern the mysteries of heaven...”<sup>9</sup> The Gospel of Luke contains three parables which are comparable to the Kingdom parables in Mark and Matthew. The author takes considerable time in distinguishing Luke’s work.

Section 3 reviews only two parables dealing with warnings and preparedness. In these parables, Jesus warns the nation of Israel of a coming judgment should they not mend their ways and that no one knows the day of judgment. Chapter 7 contains extensive discussion about redaction criticism.

Section 4 concludes with the balance of the New Testament parables broken down by theme. The areas contained in these parables range from God’s love and forgiveness to strange neighbors and risky care. All told, there are fourteen parables some which are contained in more than one Gospel with emphasis on their differences.

While there are several remarkable observations and conclusions made by the various authors, time allows only a reference to a few as an example of the scholarship in this book. Each one cited added to this reviewer’s understanding of the depth of the message Jesus gave us in his parables. One author, Ernest Fuchs along with two students, made a “significant (contribution) because of their application of their understanding of language to the interpretation of the parables generally.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Longenecker, *The Challenge of Jesus’ Parables*, 11.

<sup>10</sup> Longenecker, *The Challenge of Jesus’ Parables*, 11.

For Fuchs, existence is essentially linguistic. He argues for what he calls "the language-character of existence" (Studies of the Historical Jesus, 211), and he asserts that "the real content of language . . . is . . . being itself". The parables are such "language events" (*Sprachereignisse*). This concept is similar to the idea of "performative utterances," which emphasizes the power of language to accomplish and enact. For Fuchs, parables are analogies, and in analogy lies the very language power of existence. The purpose of an analogy is not to increase the knowledge that one has. Rather, an analogy functions to shape one's attitude. Thus, Jesus' parables have the power to bring to expression the reality to which they point. In his parables, Jesus' understanding of his own situation enters language in a special way so that his existence is available to his hearers. The parables, therefore, are a summons to this existence; and to respond, one must allow oneself to be laid hold of by Jesus' existence (*ibid.*, 220).<sup>11</sup>

Editor and author Richard Longenecker goes deep in his discussion of the lesson of the

Parable of the Sower and while he does not vary from the norm, he includes a depth of his own.

Yet underlying these more obvious features, there seems also to be a challenge given by Jesus in the parable for his disciples to revise in quite a radical fashion their views about the work of the Messiah and their understanding of the reign or "kingdom" of God. In contradistinction to the dominant Jewish views of the day that the Messiah would be all-glorious, and the Messianic Age would come about victoriously and with overwhelming power, Jesus, it appears, taught his disciples that his ministry and the reign of God should be compared to seed sown in a field — which, for various reasons, can be rejected; and even when accepted, will manifest various degrees of response. The enigma or "mystery/mysteries" of the gospel proclamation (Mark 4:11; Matt 13:11; Luke 8:10) is evidently this: that God's reign in people's lives and in the world does not come about with overwhelming power and majestic glory, but is more like seed that is sown, which experiences various responses — in many cases, rejected; in other cases, however, accepted, though in varying degrees.<sup>12</sup>

In the Parable of the Compassionate Samaritan, Jesus is asked the question of "who is my

neighbor." Professor Michael P. Knowles characterizes Jesus' answer in a generous interpretation

born out by the life and words of Jesus.

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<sup>11</sup> Longenecker, *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables*, 11.

<sup>12</sup> Longenecker, *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables*, 134.

As we have seen from the previous parables, God's world is a world where forgiveness in the broadest sense of the word is central. It is a kingdom of unexpected reversals, where the lowest members of Israel are the ones welcomed the most enthusiastically to the feast. And now, as the Parable of the Compassionate Samaritan teaches, it is a kingdom where the boundaries have been drawn even wider — where the most odious enemy is discovered to be one's neighbor, capable of such unexpected goodness that those who want to be righteous must follow the actions of those they most despise. That is the startling impossibility of this parable. In order to be righteous, the lawyer is called to go and do the likes of what an immoral Samaritan would do (cf. v 37b).<sup>13</sup>

In the Preface, Professor Longenecker suggests that it is the goal of this conglomeration of essays on parables to make the subject matter accessible to the public rather than just academics. There is some plain language but much of the research requires a comfort level with historic sources that were used in compiling the Gospels and an understanding of literary criticism is helpful. There are also references to Greek and Hebrew which can be complicated. However, the different styles of authors did make some chapters more readable, and the variation of opinion was interesting. But unless you have an academically oriented interest in parables as a genre, this book may not be an easy read.

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<sup>13</sup> Longenecker, *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables*, 282.

