

Preface and Acknowledgments

Studying the parables of Jesus is a challenge. It is a challenge with regard to the conception of *Jesus as the author* of these texts. Parables have always played a major role in research on the historical Jesus. Although there is no doubt that Jesus was a parable teller, it is obvious that there is a difference between the authentic voice of Jesus and the text of the parables as they are derived from the Gospels. How can we come to grips with this problem? In this book I have chosen not to pursue the main and traditional avenues of historical Jesus research, arguing instead for a Jesus-memory approach to the parables. In other words, parables are media of collective memory.

Studying the parables of Jesus is also a challenge with regard to the *parable texts* themselves. Parables are puzzling texts. Incomprehension is not only due to our historical distance from the original context and the resulting gaps in knowledge and lack of understanding, but it is also a feature of the parable genre itself. Parables are metaphoric texts that cannot be transformed into one single message and to a univocal meaning. Uncertainty and ambivalence always remain. However, the parable genre itself is not easy to define. In this book I provide a new definition of a parable, which takes into account both the evangelists' intentional use of genre as well as new insights of modern genre theory.

Studying the parables of Jesus is a challenge with regard to *meaning*. There is a growing tendency among parable scholars to recognize that it is not possible to narrow down the meaning of these texts to a

single interpretation. To the contrary, there is a variety of possible interpretations, which is also seen in the New Testament itself when one parable is narrated in different contexts within two or three Gospels. In this book, I value and appreciate different and even contradictory interpretations, presenting them in such a manner as to allow them to stand side by side. This multiplicity, however, raises the question of whether a reader can do anything she or he wants to do with the text. In other words: Are there limits to the understanding one posits and a place where misunderstanding begins? My own goal is to seek a “binding openness,” which, on the one hand, accepts a great variety of interpretations but on the other hand does not relinquish an overarching interpretive framework for the truth of the parables.

Furthermore, studying the parables of Jesus is a challenge with regard to *methodology*. There are many ways to approach these texts, approaches that have been developed into complex and sophisticated methods. Roughly speaking, we can distinguish methods of historical-critical exegesis (e.g., form criticism, redaction criticism), literary methods (e.g., narrative criticism, study of metaphor), as well as methods oriented to the readers’ contemporary context (e.g., feminist exegesis, liberation theology). Each of these methods has value, and each of them offers an important perspective. At the same time, each individual perspective falls short of exhausting the broad potential for the exegesis of the parables, an interpretive breadth that the parables themselves demand. In this book I attempt to offer (and apply in the second part) an “integrative method,” which includes aspects of all of the three above-mentioned approaches. Hence, the method is nuanced and includes a wide range of hermeneutical questions. It might be compared to a mosaic or puzzle, in which many different pieces must be joined together to get a comprehensive picture at the end. Though a certain amount of complexity is unavoidable, the approach can be handled more easily in what I call the four-step-organon, which will be explored and presented below.

Studying the parables of Jesus finally is a challenge with regard to the *history of research*. Modern parable research began with the *magnum*

opus of Adolf Jülicher penned more than one hundred years ago. Since that time, a plethora of books on parables has been written, and it is not easy to gain an overview of this increasingly vast, and sometimes confusing, field of research. This is even truer if one wishes to remain abreast of and remain informed about international scholarship. In spite of strong German roots with Jülicher and Joachim Jeremias, a certain gap has appeared between continental (esp. German) and American scholarship, and the two threaten to continue to drift further apart. In this book it is my intention to bridge this gap and to demonstrate how current questions are still being influenced by decisions made by older German parable researchers. Furthermore, it is my hope to be able to bring together, at least to a certain extent, current German and American research on parables and in the process to gain insights from engagement with each other.

There have been many people involved in this project to whom I would like to give my sincere gratitude. The origins of this book go back to a research leave spent in South Africa in 2008. I recently had published the *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu* (Gütersloher Verlag 2007; 2nd ed., 2015) and was in the final process of editing the *Hermeneutik der Gleichnisse Jesu: Methodische Neuansätze zum Verstehen urchristlicher Parabeltexte* (WUNT 231; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008; 2nd ed., 2011). In my teaching and guest lectures in Pretoria and some other universities in South Africa, many colleagues and students lamented that there was no English-language parable book with my ideas, as there are fewer and fewer students and scholars who are able to read German with ease. Therefore, they encouraged me to write an English monograph. I had the same experience during visits in Nijmegen (NL) and the United States. So, a first word of thanks goes to all those colleagues and students who were interested in my views and considered them to be of great enough value to be presented in English for a worldwide readership.

This background also explains why the work done in the *Kompendium* and the *Hermeneutik* is the starting point for this book. It also reveals the reason why some sections of this book are revised versions or

translations of contributions to those volumes. Many thanks to the publishers Mohr Siebeck (in particular Dr. Henning Ziebritzki) and Gütersloher Verlag (in particular Dietrich Steen and Tanja Scheifele) who, without hesitation, permitted the revision and translation of parts of the books.

I am deeply grateful to Janelle Ramaley and Dr. Dieter T. Roth for translating and proofreading my manuscript; for some final revision also to Samuel Tedder and Prof. Barbara Rossing. Without their extraordinary help and efforts, I would never have had the courage to publish a monograph in English. Even so, since English is not my native language, this book cannot veil that my thinking and manner of expressing myself remain, to a certain extent, German. Nevertheless, I hope that the arguments made and the discussion offered are understandable and the book itself does not remain puzzling like the parables! I would also like to express my appreciation to Christine Schoen, who helped tremendously in the editorial process. Last but not least, I would like to thank Neil Elliott for accepting this book for publication by Fortress Press. He not only had the confidence that this book has a place in the world of English-language parable research but also patiently encouraged me to finish it.

Finally, this book is dedicated to Luise Schottroff. She passed away on February 8, 2015, when I was working on the last chapters of this monograph. Years ago Schottroff was professor of New Testament in Mainz, a time which she experienced as difficult due to her feminist hermeneutic and political engagement. However, she was not only an excellent parable researcher (as evident in her *Die Gleichnisse Jesu* [Gütersloher, 2005]; ET *The Parables of Jesus* [Fortress Press, 2006]), but also an exemplary scholar and authentic person engaged in the New Testament text, searching for meaning and current theological relevance. Though my approach differs from hers, I would like to devote this book to her memory, which may also be seen as a belated acknowledgement of her time in Mainz. She deserves to be recognized and held in memory by parable students and scholars all over the world.

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Ruben Zimmermann
Mainz