Matthew's Trilogy of Parables

The Nation, the Nations and the Reader in Matthew 21.28–22.14

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INTRODUCTION: OF AUTHORS, READERS AND APPROACHES TO THE PARABLES

1.1   On reading the Gospel narratives

The landscape of Gospels scholarship has shifted dramatically in the last three decades. Redaction criticism has yielded pride of place as the primary method in Gospels studies but there has been no single obvious successor. Instead, Gospels critics offer readings from a bewildering variety of interpretive stances[1] and, increasingly, refer to the methodological pluralism that undergirds their work.[2]

Nevertheless, narrative criticism, in its various forms, posed some of the earliest and most persistent challenges to a redaction-critical approach.[3] The early exponents of a more 'literary' approach commonly set themselves over against more traditional historical critics, mourning the poverty of a redactional approach and proclaiming the end of an era. Similar sentiments – or at least interpretations that reflect these sentiments – continue to punctuate the discourse of Gospels scholarship.

But it has also become more common for scholars on both sides of the methodological divide to call for a more cooperative, interdisciplinary approach. To date, the most significant of these have tended to operate under the assumption that literary and historically oriented methods complement one another by casting light in rather different directions. Where narrative critics focus on the *unity* of the final text, redaction critics turn their attention to the evangelists' reworking of their *diverse sources* that gave rise to the text in its 'final' form. Where narrative critics devote attention to the *narrative world* that emerges from the Gospel *stories*, redaction critics are concerned instead with the *historical world of the evangelist* out of which and for which he writes. Finally, where narrative critics embrace the *reader* and are especially sensitive to the *affective* impact of the Gospel texts, redaction criticism remains an *author*-oriented discipline whose concerns have typically been *cognitive* ones. In short, narrative critics and redaction critics proceed from different presuppositions, aim at different goals, and employ different reading strategies.

As such, it is maintained, if narrative- and redaction-critical approaches to the Gospels are to work in partnership, it must be by asking rather different questions of the narrative.[4]

In what follows, however, I argue that if we carefully define our aims in reading,[5] these very different reading strategies can form an alliance of a rather different – and perhaps more fundamental – nature. More specifically, I argue that narrative and redactional approaches to the Gospels can function as allies by addressing the same issue from their distinct vantage points. Throughout this study I return repeatedly to one historical question: 'What response[s] did the evangelist intend to elicit from his readers?' In an attempt to answer this question, I bring both literary-critical and redaction-critical tools to bear on the texts at hand. This introductory chapter offers justification for such an approach.

Obstacles to a cooperative venture

Integrity vs. fragmentation

Petri Merenlahti and Raimo Hakola suggest that 'a strong emphasis on the inherent unity of the gospel narratives must be considered the most salient feature of narrative criticism'.[6] Not surprisingly, then, narrative critics read *holistically* – they find the significance of the parts in relation to this wider unity.[7] Redaction critics, by contrast, read *comparatively* – they find the significance of the parts at least as much in comparison with the traditions that underlie the current narrative as in relation to the wider whole.[8] Indeed, from the vantage point of the narrative critic, this preoccupation with sources almost inevitably leads to the fragmentation of the Gospel narratives.[9] Either the redaction critic fails to take seriously the narrative integrity of the Gospels or, having paid lip-service to this wider unity, loses sight of it amidst the exhaustive spadework of detailed source analysis. Where redaction criticism does devote attention to the wider Gospel, typically its interests are in structure and theological motifs rather than in concerns such as plot and characterisation that are central to narratives in general.

For their part, redaction critics object that the nature of the unity that narrative critics presuppose is not consonant with the data. An artistic unity may well have been crafted, but it is a unity that is rather more like a patchwork quilt than a seamless garment. The narrative has not been created from whole cloth but has been sewn together from various sources that previously had independent existences. For the redaction

critic, a careful study of the Gospel texts will hardly be able to ignore the shaping of this prior tradition.

Both the redaction critics and the narrative critics offer important insights about the unity of the Gospel narratives. Redaction critics correctly challenge the *nature* of the unity assumed by narrative critics.[10] Narrative critics are hardly unaware of the prior history of the Gospel traditions but, in practice, they may as well be. M. A. Powell admits as much:

> Literary criticism does not deny these observations regarding the development of the text, but it does ignore them. Ultimately, it makes no difference for a literary interpretation whether certain portions of the text once existed elsewhere in some other form. The goal of literary criticism is to interpret the current text, in its finished form.[11]

But, if our aim in interpretation centres upon explaining the text's intended meaning and function,[12] then it becomes difficult to understand why we should bracket out one potentially fruitful line of investigation – the author's treatment of his sources. The secondary nature of the unity of the Gospel narratives would seem to justify redaction-critical examination of the formation of this new 'unity'.

However, unless the evangelists expected their readers and hearers to have access to their sources and engage in critical comparison,[13] we must conclude that they expected their narratives to be read and heard on their own terms. In practice, this justifies a holistic approach to the story they tell. Here, too, and perhaps especially, we should expect to find evidence of the purposes for which these narratives were composed.

As such, while the presuppositions that underlie typical narrative- and redaction-critical approaches obviously differ, their reading strategies may be mutually corrective. Narrative criticism's persistent focus on the unity of the Gospel narratives can protect against the fragmentation that, if not inherent in a redaction-critical approach, is nevertheless too often its accompaniment.[14] By the same token, redaction criticism's careful analysis of the sources of the Gospels may offer a correction to potentially ahistorical and subjective narrative-critical readings.

History vs. Fiction[15]

Closely related to the presupposition of the integrity of the Gospel narratives is the conviction held by some narrative critics that each of these narratives gives rise to an autonomous and fictional story world. On this model, the Gospels are to be read more as powerful stories than as

historical dramas. Often, what counts here is not so much what happens *in* the narrative as what happens *to* the reader when she encounters the narrative world. For Fowler, for example: 'The Gospel is designed not to say something about the disciples or even to say something about Jesus, but to do something to the reader.'[16] Or again:

> Lest we become nervous about what Mark may be thereby asserting about the twelve apostles, the historical pillars of the early Christian church, let us recall that this narrative does not claim to be history. It is not even referentially oriented. Rather, it is pragmatically or rhetorically oriented. It is not 'about' its characters; it is 'about' its reader. The Gospel writer's chief concern is not the fate of either Jesus or the Twelve in the story but the fate of the reader outside the story.[17]

More cautious narrative critics would demur at Fowler's casual denial of an historical orientation in the Gospel narratives, but are none the less careful to avoid the 'referential fallacy', which consists of 'construing the signifier alone as the sign and as referring directly to the real world, without regard to the signified as the conceptual aspect of the sign'.[18] For Howell, this caution is essential because of the impossibility of creating a narrative world that corresponds exactly to the real world.[19]

If narrative critics typically presuppose a *fictional* story world and focus on its impact upon the reader, then redaction critics commonly presuppose a specific *historical Sitz im Leben* out of which (and for which) the narrative arose, and focus on the recovery of that setting. Emphasis on the fictional world of the story gives way to emphasis on the historical world of the evangelist. Redaction-criticism's orientation has been historical, but has largely focused on the setting out of which the evangelists wrote rather than upon the events that their narratives report. In quite different ways, then, narrative and redaction critics have both distanced themselves from the historiographic nature of these narratives.[20]

Once more, we can learn from both narrative and redaction critics. Narrative critics have demonstrated the fruitfulness of the study of the Gospels as story. For many redaction critics, a preoccupation with the historical setting from which the evangelists wrote and with their 'communities' has deflected attention from the narratives they composed.[21] But probably we ought not subordinate history to fiction as a corrective. F. Watson has recently offered a cogent defence for viewing the Gospels as narrated history.[22] The implied readers of these documents find in the events of these narratives not only powerful and imaginative religious visions but also the creative *re*-tellings of events now past. Nevertheless,

because these events are taken up and emplotted in a narrative format, they are susceptible of the kinds of narrative analysis profitably employed by narrative critics.[23]

In my view, then, the disjunctions Fowler poses are unnecessary. The Gospels *are* designed to say something about the disciples and, supremely, Jesus, *and also* to do something to the reader. Nevertheless, Howell is correct to note the lack of exact correspondence between the narrative world of the evangelists and the historical world of the events they narrate (or, as he rightly notes, between any narrative and the events upon which it is based). But equally, this concession hardly justifies the dismissal of what seems, prima facie, to be the clear historiographic intention of these narratives. Otherwise, since a 'one-to-one correspondence' between the narrative world and the real world is impossible, *any* writing about *any* historical event would only succeed in generating its own fictional narrative world. But, whatever their similarities, and however complex it may be to distinguish between them at times, there remains a difference between history and fiction – historical narratives are constrained by prior historical events in a way that fictional narratives obviously are not.

More precisely, the difference between historical and fictional narratives centres upon generic rules and conventions. We have already noted that historical and fictional works cannot necessarily be distinguished by unique rhetorical devices or format. Nor is the critical distinction simply whether or not the events narrated actually happened. Fictional narratives can incorporate historical events and historical narratives can present as historical fictive incidents – they can make false claims. Instead, it is the nature of these claims that stands at the heart of the distinction between history and fiction. Meir Sternberg's comments are instructive: '[H]istory-writing is not a record of fact – of what "really happened" – but a discourse that *claims* to be a record of fact. Nor is fiction-writing a tissue of free inventions but a discourse that *claims* freedom of invention. The antithesis lies not in the presence or absence of truth value but of the commitment to truth value.'[24] Or again: 'Whatever its faults, real or imagined, bad historiography does not yet make fiction. For if fiction contrasts with fact, it contrasts even more sharply with fallacy and falsity, which are value judgments passable on factual reporting alone. Falling between fallacy and falsity, therefore, *bad* historiography is bad *historiography*: no more, no less.'[25] The author of a fictional narrative may or may not make important truth claims; he may or may not include historical components; but the story he invites his readers to share in is finally an imaginary one *with no claim to historicity*. It is precisely this *claim*, however – that the people introduced are historical figures and that the events portrayed

actually happened – that separates history from fiction. The fundamental difference, then, is the nature of the agreement that an author enters into with his (envisioned) readers.

To be fair, it is not clear to me that Howell wishes to deny the historiographic intent of the Gospel narratives. Instead, I think, he urges caution and cedes priority to the narrative world. Powell, on the other hand, seems to approach such a denial when he defines the *referential fallacy* as the interpretation of 'literary elements in terms of their supposed antecedents in the real world'. These 'literary elements', such as characters in the narrative, are constructs of the implied author who have poetic but not referential function.[26] This study, by contrast, aims to avoid the problems associated with the referential fallacy not by denying historiographic intent, nor even by ceding priority to the narrative world, but rather by explicitly acknowledging that a narrative depiction of reality always represents a particular perception of that reality and can never provide an exact representation of the complex people and events it describes. Here I am not advocating the naïve acceptance of anything that expresses an historiographic intention. Instead, my point is only that, if a narrative – implicitly or explicitly – makes such a claim, it will hardly do to dismiss that claim if we are concerned to explain the intended function of that narrative.[27]

Yet again, redaction- and narrative-critical approaches can be mutually corrective. Put positively, in studies that aim to explain the intended meaning and function of the narrative, Gospel critics would do well to incorporate both the tools for narrative analysis from the narrative critics and the historical orientation of the redaction critic. Put negatively, the critic's focus should rest neither upon the *fictional* world of the story, nor, primarily, upon the historical world of the *evangelist*.[28] In this study, we aim to take up the narrative critic's tools and employ them in the study of a narrative that is fundamentally historiographic in nature.

Author vs. reader

Perhaps the most significant hermeneutical development that we have witnessed in recent decades has been the shift in focus from author to text to reader.[29] Not surprisingly, this shift is reflected in the move from redaction criticism's focus on the author and his intention, to narrative criticism's emphasis on the text and its impact on the reader. As a narrative critic, M. A. Powell distances himself from historical critics by aiming to uncover the intent of the *text* rather than the intent of its *author*.[30] D. Howell, while not wishing to make the reader the exclusive arbiter of

the meaning of a text, none the less insists that the reader 'has a role in the production of textual meaning'.[31] R. Fowler is less cautious. Numbering himself among the reader-response critics he describes, Fowler declares that, 'whatever meaning is and wherever it is found the reader is ultimately responsible for determining meaning'.[32] From one vantage point, these moves are dramatic; from another, they are, at least potentially, deceptive.

On the one hand, the move from an author-oriented study of the manipulation of traditional sources designed to isolate the evangelist's theology and *Sitz im Leben* to the analysis of the rhetorical strategies employed in the final form of the text and the way that these strategies influence the reader is nothing less than dramatic. Redaction criticism's focus on the author's construction of the text has given way, for some narrative critics, to an analysis of the text's construction of its reader. Moreover the preoccupation with ideas that often marked redaction criticism has been subordinated to the effect achieved by the text – the cognitive domain has yielded to the affective, and what a text says may well be less important than what it does. These are momentous shifts, changing the nature of interpretation itself.

On the other hand, momentous as these shifts are, they remain potentially deceptive because careful attention to the author and to the reader are not mutually exclusive.[33] In spite of rhetoric to the contrary, there is no necessary incompatibility between a method that devotes attention to the author's treatment of his sources and one that examines the consequent rhetorical strategies embodied in the final form of the narrative. Nor, as we shall see, is there any necessary incompatibility between focus on the author and his intent and reflection on the impact of the narrative upon the reader. Indeed, I shall argue that a study of the Gospels that incorporates concerns along both of these lines will offer not merely a more comprehensive, but also – at least potentially – a more persuasive and satisfying reading.

Narrative-critical treatments of the author are particularly instructive at this point. In a 1997 thesis R. G. Mills demonstrates that many narrative approaches to the Gospels (including some that purport to avoid questions about the real author) remain, in fact, author-oriented in their interpretive agenda.[34] While the scope of their interest has been broadened to include investigation of the rhetorical strategies employed in the text and their impact on the implied reader, their fundamental questions remain author-centred questions. For many narrative critics, as the examples to which we now turn illustrate, interest in the text and the reader has not eclipsed interest in the author, even when this interest is not explicitly in the foreground.

    The author as architect.   For many narrative critics an author's influence, like an architect's, is pervasive. The author, for example, determines the *point of view*,[35] the perspectives – ideological, phraseological, spatio-temporal and psychological – from which the story is told,[36] and, in establishing the perspectives from which the story is told, the author also determines the perspectives from which the story is heard and experienced.[37] Since the reader sees what the author wishes him to see and from the vantage point he determines, point of view becomes, in the hand of the skilful author, a powerful tool by means of which he may influence the reader's response to his narrative. In the words of Rhoads and Michie: 'The narrator speaks from an ideological point of view . . . So the narrator is always there at the reader's elbow shaping responses to the story – even, and perhaps especially, when the reader is least aware of it.'[38]

Similar things might also be said of the narrative's plot. W. Booth, for example, argues that:

> the author's single most important creative act is to invent what Aristotle calls the 'synthesis of incidents', the 'plot' in the sense of the plotted narrative line (which sometimes includes, but is never reducible to, the kind of surface intrigue we refer to when we say 'The plot thickens'). It is always to some degree a doctoring of the raw chronology of events with a quite different chronology of telling. And it is always – in fiction that works well enough to earn our respect – ordered towards some powerful effect inherent in our picture of *these events happening to these characters, as perceived in the transforming vision of this storyteller*.[39]

Narrative critics of the Gospels have not failed to underline this point. Petersen can speak of the 'self-conscious' manner in which Mark plots his narrative with his reader directly in view, and Kingsbury insists that Matthew creates a plot in order to elicit from his reader the desired response.[40]

Moreover the author, who stands like an architect behind both the plot and the point of view of the narrative, is also responsible for the moulding of the story's characters,[41] and thus once more for shaping the way his readers experience the story. By controlling the distance between the reader and the various characters in the narrative, the author invites the reader to sympathise or to condemn, to rejoice or to mourn, to emulate or to despise, to worship or to scorn.[42]

These observations do not, of course, exhaust the ways in which narrative critics have recognised the role played by the author in the design of the narrative. His is the intelligence that selects (and modifies) genre, that employs communicative conventions[43] and utilises rhetorical strategies.[44] In short, the author is the creative force that stands behind the entire narrative. As architect of the narrative, the author employs the rhetorical devices at his disposal purposefully, and we turn here from a consideration of rhetorical strategy to focus more directly on the goal of that strategy, the 'creation' of the reader.

  The real author and the implied reader. Since Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* it has become common for critics of both secular and sacred texts to distinguish between the *real* author and reader, to whom we have only indirect access in any text, and the author and reader *implied* by the narrative itself. Booth writes: 'The author creates, in short, an image of himself and another image of his reader; he makes his reader, as he makes his second self, and the most successful reading is one in which the created selves, author and reader, can find complete agreement.'[45] The real reader's perception of the real author, then, is subject to the image presented by the author as he creates his work. What is more important for our purposes here, however, is the corresponding observation that an author creates an image of his reader even as he creates an image of himself. This implied reader is the figure who stands at the receiving end of all the rhetorical strategies employed by the author and who experiences the narrative through the lens of these strategies. Heuristically, it is useful to conceive of this implied reader as the imaginary figure who not only receives these rhetorical strategies but also, at every point, responds just as he is invited to by the implied author.[46] His response, in fact, is that *intended* by the author. Thus, while narrative critics have typically been hesitant to discuss authorial intention, they nevertheless continue to talk about the intent of the narrative and especially about the responses that it intended to elicit, of which the implied reader is an embodiment.[47]

For Kingsbury the implied reader of the Gospel narratives may also have a secondary, historical function. The implied reader provides us with an index, even if only approximate, of the 'intended readers' – the real readers with whom the evangelists intended to communicate.[48] I do think there is some legitimacy in this approach,[49] but, whatever the implied reader may or may not be able to tell us about the historical readers, it tells us more and more certainly about the historical author who created it. For all of their interest in the text and the reader, narrative critics of the Gospels have not, by and large, abandoned interest in the

author.[50] In particular, narrative criticism has been especially concerned with the intent of the Gospel texts and is well suited for the kind of study I envision.

The pursuit of an author-oriented agenda

As we have seen, once we begin to ask questions about the response that the narrative seems designed to provoke rather than merely recording actual responses or offering alternative readings, we have begun to ask author-oriented questions. In so doing, we have entered into dialogue with traditional biblical scholarship.[51] Nevertheless, since narrative critics have often preferred not to describe their work as aimed at the explication of an author's intent,[52] I need to clarify what it is that I mean by authorial intention. First, in referring to an author's intent, I do not mean to describe a psychological state that precedes, motivates and is somehow distinct from what an author actually writes. Instead, I am seeking to describe the goal of the communication as it can be discerned from the text itself. That is to say, I am aiming to uncover not *psychological* but *expressed* intent.[53] Thiselton suggests that intention should be understood adverbially: 'to write with an intention is to write in a way that is directed towards a goal'.[54] One elucidates an author's intent by explaining the goal towards which the written text points.

Second, to concern oneself with authorial intention is not to restrict oneself to cognitive concerns. Since acts of communication intentionally *do* things as well as *say* things,[55] an exercise designed to explore the goal of the communication can profitably concern itself not only with the verbal meaning, but also with the anticipated response. To use the terminology of speech-act theory, locutions have both *illocutionary* (i.e., what speech acts do – promise, threaten, instruct, etc.) and *perlocutionary* (i.e., what speech acts bring about – comfort, intimidation, understanding, etc.) force. Although perlocutionary force encompasses both intended results and unforeseen consequences, in the chapters that follow, I shall attend to both the illocutionary and the perlocutionary *intents* that may be inferred from the texts at hand.[56]

From this vantage point narrative criticism, which – in its various forms – has traditionally shown great interest in the responses evoked from the reader and redaction criticism, with its persistent interest in the author, promise to be fruitful allies in a study that seeks to explain what the author intends to elicit from the reader by way of response. Their unique interpretive stances promise distinctive contributions in a dialogical study of the Gospels. To this point, the divergent presuppositions,

aims and reading strategies of narrative and redaction critics respectively have curtailed the cooperative pursuit of the intended function of the narrative by representatives of the two disciplines, but, when we recognise that both disciplines can, and often do, pursue an author-oriented agenda, the methodological gulf no longer seems unbridgeable. Sober redaction-critical analysis can only strengthen the best narrative-critical analysis, and vice versa. The suggestion that any given rhetorical strategy seems designed to elicit a particular response will be strengthened by recognition of the evidence that points in a similar direction in an evangelist's manipulation of his tradition. Of course, this same evidence may call into question other readings. Equally, conclusions that arise from the analysis of Gospel sources may rightly be regarded with suspicion if they are not corroborated by the rhetorical strategies employed in the final form of the wider narrative. It is not only narrative-critical readings that are susceptible to the subjectivity of their interpreters. This, then, is the agenda I have set for this study: to explicate the response that this trilogy suggests the author intends to elicit from his readers. In so doing, I employ the tools of both redaction and narrative criticism.

If methodological upheaval has accompanied the critical study of the Gospel narratives, this is hardly less true of the parables. The remainder of this chapter turns to examine briefly questions of method in reading the Synoptic parables, focusing upon two issues confronting a critical reading of the parables that have particular relevance for this project – issues that are in one sense subsets of the problems addressed above.[57]

1.2   On reading the Synoptic parables

Integrity vs. fragmentation: *whose* parables shall we study?

As components of the wider narrative, the Synoptic parables are susceptible to the tension between integrity and fragmentation highlighted in our earlier discussion: should they be read *comparatively* or *holistically*? In the case of the parables, however, this tension is exacerbated by a century of research conducted in the shadow of A. Jülicher.

The legacy of Jülicher, Dodd and Jeremias

In 1886 Jülicher published the first of a two-volume treatment of the parables that would irreversibly alter the interpretation of the Synoptic parables.[58] He argued that Jesus' parables were clear, concrete, powerful stories designed to instruct simple Palestinian peasants. The evangelists,

however, (mis)understood Jesus' parables to be mysterious allegories and were themselves responsible for sending the church into a blind alley from which it would take nearly two millennia to escape. If we are to hear the literal speech of Jesus once more, we must excise those allegorical elements that the later tradition added. C. H. Dodd[59] and J. Jeremias[60] accepted and extended Jülicher's conclusions with such effect that in 1976 N. Perrin could pay the following tribute to the extraordinary influence of Jeremias's work:

> it is to Jeremias above all others that we owe our present ability to reconstruct the parables very much in the form in which Jesus told them. Indeed, when we talk of interpreting the parables of Jesus today we mean interpreting the parables as Jeremias has reconstructed them, either personally or through his influence on others who have followed the method he developed.[61]

Today, in spite of criticisms – in some cases trenchant ones – that have been levelled against Jeremias's approach,[62] it is not uncommon for contemporary scholars simply to *assume* Jeremias's reconstructions as the *starting point* for their own reflection.[63]

For our purposes, the obvious significance of all of this is that for much of this past century most parables scholarship has focused on the *reconstructed parables of Jesus* rather than on the parables in their present form in the Synoptic Gospels. The problem of the fragmentation of the Gospels that narrative critics have lamented is, in one sense at least, compounded when we come to the study of the parables.[64]

Redaction criticism and the parables

The influence of the Jülicher tradition thus meant that redaction criticism never exercised the same kind of methodological sway in the study of the Synoptic parables that it did elsewhere in Gospels studies.[65] Very few monographs treated the parables from a distinctively redactional vantage point.[66] Nevertheless, journal articles and the standard commentaries provide ample evidence that redaction critics did not neglect the parables. Their work, with its characteristic focus on the contributions of the evangelists, represented a step away from the fragmentation of the Synoptic parables that had become part and parcel of the Jülicher tradition. But, of course, their treatment of the parables was marked by the strengths and weaknesses that marked the method as a whole.

Narrative criticism and the parables

If redaction critics have offered comparatively few full-length treatments of the parables, they have nevertheless thus far eclipsed the contributions of narrative critics.[67] In part, we may attribute this to the relative newness of the latter discipline. More importantly, perhaps, the holistic nature of the narrative-critical enterprise means that narrative critics have been more apt to devote their attention to blocks of the narrative than to the treatment of particular forms. If, however, the Synoptic parables are worthy of investigation in their own right, then it would seem that narrative criticism has a role to play in the rehabilitation of the evangelists' parables. *Gospels parables help shape both the characterisation of the story's leading players and its developing plot. Conversely, the impact of the wider story leaves its mark upon the reader's reception of these parables*. The tools of narrative criticism are especially well suited for consideration of issues like these, and chapters 3 and 4 of this study seek to employ these tools in the study of the three parables at Matthew 21.28–22.14.

Here, however, we turn to examine the problem for which the most vigorous modern debate has been reserved – the question of the parable's function.

Author vs. reader: how does a parable function?

The Jülicher tradition

Jülicher is, of course, most famous for his emphatic rejection of the allegorical readings that had long dominated the church's interpretation of Jesus' parables.[68] Nor may Jülicher's verdict be dismissed as a mere historical relic. Even among scholars who disagree fundamentally with Jülicher about what Jesus' parables are and how they function positively, widespread agreement remains that they are not allegories and Jülicher still stands as the champion of this position.[69] For good reasons, however, the sharp distinction he drew between parable and allegory has not gone unchallenged.

In two important works, P. Fiebig underlined several parallels between the rabbinic *meshalim* and Jesus' parables and noted, in the *meshalim*, the presence of stock metaphors that pointed the reader to historical actors and events outside of the story.[70] To be sure, the extant rabbinic literature post-dates the NT period,[71] but it does demonstrate that these rabbis drew no sharp distinction between parable and allegory. Nor, apparently,

did Israel's Scriptures. Scott insists that there are no parables – short narrative fictions – in the Hebrew Scriptures,[72] but more than once David pronounces judgement on characters in fictional narratives only to be 'caught' by his own verdict (cf. 2 Sam. 12.1–7; 14.4–13). Elsewhere the prophets tell fictional stories that depict Yahweh's dealings with Israel (Isa. 5.1–7; Ezek. 17.3–10).

In the LXX παραβολή, which translates מָשָׁל, can designate a wide variety of figurative sayings – proverbs (1 Kgs. 5.12 (4.32 EVV); Ezek. 18.2–3), riddles (Sir. 39.3; 47.15), bywords (Deut. 28.37; 2 Chron. 7.20), laments (Ezek. 19.14) and allegorical narratives (Ezek. 17.2) – in addition to prophetic oracles (Num. 23.7, 18). The evangelists' use of παραβολή, falls well within this range of LXX uses, if not achieving the same breadth.[73] Matthew, for example, prefers to use the term to describe (allegorical) narrative fictions (e.g., 13.3, 24), but also employs the term of proverbial utterances (15.15; 24.32). What is noteworthy in all of this is that the evangelists' use of παραβολή to denote enigmatic utterances – utterances that demand special attention and wise interpretation – is far from novel.[74] We can hardly discount the possibility that Jesus, as heir to this biblical tradition, employed both enigmatic and allusive references linking his stories to that tradition and to the world of his hearers.[75]

The discussion is important, but in one sense the point becomes moot when we turn to the interpretation of the Synoptic parables. The evangelists plainly label as 'parables' fictional narratives that have allegorical components, and invite their readers to pay close attention to their allusive references to the Scriptures and to the world outside the story.

It was not, however, Jülicher's banishment of allegory but his assumption that the parables were essentially *instructional* in nature that would face the most radical challenges in the decades to come.

Ernst Fuchs and the 'New Hermeneutic'

Ernst Fuchs and the New Hermeneutic offered the first serious challenge to this notion that the parables of Jesus were basically didactic in function.[76] For Fuchs and his students,[77] Jesus' parables function as *language events* (*Sprachereignisse*) for those with ears to hear. The hearer is drawn into the world of Jesus' parables not as an observer but as a participant and, as a participant, does not so much interpret the parables as be interpreted by them: 'The text is therefore not just the servant that transmits kerygmatic formulations, but rather a master that directs us into the language-context of our existence, in which we exist "before God".'[78] We cannot, therefore, separate the form of the text from its intent.[79] It

is rather in confrontation with the text itself that we encounter Jesus' faith, his vision of the kingdom, and are ourselves interpreted. Instead of propositional truth to be interpreted, these texts offer confrontation at the deepest levels of our existence and enact an event that opens up to us new possibilities for a more genuine existence.

This image of the parable as a language event is a particularly fruitful one. The insight that Jesus' parables offer more than didactic illustrations of abstract moral and theological concepts, as they tended to be regarded by Jülicher and his heirs,[80] is certainly to be welcomed. The parables execute a performative and not merely an informative function. Similarly welcome is the contention that the form of the parable constitutes no mere husk to be discarded once the kernel – the *message* of the parable – becomes apparent. Once we acknowledge the capacity that these stories have *to grasp* their readers, we can hardly dismiss the form of the story as merely ornamental.

On the other hand, the sharp distinction that Fuchs drew between propositional and performative communication cannot be sustained. Following J. L. Austin, Thiselton argues that, in some instances at least, informative assertions and truth-claiming propositions 'constitute a condition of effective performative force'.[81] The story that Nathan told David (2 Sam. 12) aptly illustrates this point. It elicits from the king a verdict – in this case (as often in parables) a self-indictment (2 Sam. 12.5–6) – and ultimately provokes his repentance (2 Sam. 12.13). But finally this performative utterance depends, for its effectiveness, precisely on David's acknowledgement of the truth claim that stands behind the parable (2 Sam. 12.7–13). Surely something similar happens with Jesus' parables. The hearer must embrace the portraits Jesus' stories offer of God and his reign if the stories are to wield the desired performative force. Therefore Jesus' parables are more, but not less, than propositional.[82] It is not so much that his parables bear no message that can be translated into discursive speech as that they forfeit their rhetorical *impact* in the process of premature translation.[83]

Certainly the evangelists saw no necessary disjunction between propositional and performative functions in Jesus' parables. For Matthew, appropriate hearing of Jesus' parables cannot be restricted to things cognitive and cerebral. The one who hears the parable rightly is the one who '*hears the word and understands, who bears fruit and yields . . .*' (13.23). Hearing must give way to obedience, but it is equally obvious – both in The Sower and elsewhere where Matthew takes pains to *explain* Jesus' parables (e.g., 13.36–43; 13.49–50; 13.51; 15.15–20; 18.35) – that the evangelist regards understanding as a necessary condition for

the obedience for which the parables call. And, since my main concern in this study is with hearing the parables that Matthew records, I intend to inquire after both the performative function that Jesus' parables seem designed to execute (now for *Matthew's* hearers and readers) and their underlying truth claims.

B. B. Scott and the American discussion

On the other side of the Atlantic, a group of American scholars echoed many of Fuchs's contentions, but moved beyond him in their distinctive understanding of metaphor, and the consequent open-endedness of the parables. B. B. Scott's *Hear Then The Parable* represents the culmination of a generation of this particular branch of American scholarship that gave rise to both the SBL Parables Seminar and the Jesus Seminar.[84]

For Scott, as for D. Via[85] before him, the parables are aesthetic objects. He places the parables in a first-century Jewish context but suggests that the aesthetic nature of the parables grants them independence over this context: 'As narrative fictions they have priority over their context. To put it another way, they interpret the context, not the other way around.'[86]

Not surprisingly then, parables are open-ended and polyvalent.[87] If the parables are aesthetic objects that have priority over their contexts, they are capable of eliciting a variety of readings: 'Words and, even more, connotative narratives naturally move towards polyvalency. It is a manipulation of reality to select only one out of a number of possibilities suggested by a narrative. A methodology that seizes on the one point of likeness as a parable's meaning destroys the parable.'[88] Scott insists that the parable can have external referents – Jesus' parables regularly 'reference' a symbol, the kingdom of God – but no one reading exhausts the number of legitimate readings that arise from these stories.[89]

The centrality of the metaphorical process to language remains crucial for Scott, as it was for Wilder, Funk and Crossan before him.[90] But here he tempers the earlier enthusiasm of his colleagues, acknowledging that the Romantic view of metaphor upon which they drew was naïve, especially in its insistence that metaphor yielded a direct apprehension of reality and in the sharp distinction posited between metaphor and allegory.[91]

In my view, the American discussion is most fruitful when it echoes the concerns of the New Hermeneutic. Funk's work is a case in point. He insists that the parable remains open until the listener is drawn in as a participant. Having been caught up in the story, the hearer must then render a judgement.[92] Both of these observations strike me as helpful reformulations of Fuchs's most important concerns.

Too often, however, a-priori considerations determine the course of the discussion, and too often Scott and his predecessors build uncritically upon the results of earlier parables scholarship.[93] When Scott insists, for example, that parables have priority over their contexts, the only defence he offers (aside from noting the appearance of both rabbinic and Synoptic parables in more than one context) is that, as narrative fictions, the parables are aesthetic objects and therefore must be independent of and have priority over their context.[94] But surely this amounts to little more than an assertion of his position, and fundamentally important conclusions about the nature of parables – not least their polyvalence – arise from this assertion.[95]

Reader-response criticism

If Scott and his predecessors have stressed the aesthetic nature of Jesus' parables and their consequent polyvalence, then reader-response critics have emphasised the participation of the reader in determining the meaning of *any* text.[96] The earlier work of Fuchs, Funk, Via and Crossan has probably meant that the application of a reader-oriented criticism to the parables has been less innovative than its application to the broader Gospel narratives. Like the New Hermeneutic, reader-response criticism stresses the self-involving nature of the text, both in the sense of drawing the reader into the world of the text and of eliciting response. For the reader-response critic, however, this happens not because the words of the text create a 'language-event' but because of the capacity of the reader to engage and be engaged by the text. Over against the New Hermeneutic, it is not so much that the meaning of a parable cannot be expressed propositionally as that the meaning (propositional or otherwise) found in the text is inexhaustible and limited only by the perception of its readers. Here reader-response critics align themselves more closely with deconstructionists[97] than with the proponents of the New Hermeneutic, and, whereas Fuchs and his students, situated as they were in the midst of the new quest for the historical Jesus, sought to hear the parables as Jesus' original audience would have,[98] reader-response critics have focused their attention on the text of the Gospels. Without divorcing the reader from the author, chapter 5 of this study takes up this question of the response to the written text emphasised by reader-response critics.

With their distinctive emphasis on a temporal reading, reader-response critics rightly treat the parables as important components of the larger Gospel stories. In other respects, I suggest, although they build upon quite different philosophical foundations, as a critical tool for the study

of the parables, the strengths and weaknesses of reader-response criticism closely parallel those of the New Hermeneutic.[99] Both rightly stress the self-involving nature of the parables, but both rather overstate the radical open-endedness that such participation entails.

Conclusion

Two conclusions have emerged from our brief discussion. First, the task of reconstructing Jesus' parables has too often led to the neglect of the parables in their current forms in the Gospel tradition. Nevertheless, this quest has reminded us once more that the Synoptic parables are texts with a prior history. This study makes no attempt to reconstruct the 'original' parables of Jesus, but does aim to make judicious use of redaction criticism in tracing the evangelist's adaptation of his tradition. Alongside this redactional investigation I shall employ narrative-critical tools, attending to the contribution of the parables at Matthew 21.28–22.14 to the wider Gospel narrative, and to the shaping influence of that wider story on the reception of these parables. This approach seeks to underline the integrity of the parables both as stories in their own right and as components of the evangelist's larger communicative action.

Second, the disjunction between performative and propositional language that may be traced back to Fuchs is a false and unnecessary one. But Fuchs's insight was tremendously important – for those with ears to hear, the parable becomes a self-involving language event capable of grasping the hearer at the deepest level.

In the chapters that follow, this study returns to both of these concerns, seeking to demonstrate the fruitfulness of the type of alliance between redaction- and narrative-critical approaches proposed above. Chapter 2 consists of a *Forschungsgeschichte* of earlier twentieth-century studies of the trilogy of parables at Matthew 21.28–22.14 and, in response to recent challenges by S. Van Tilborg and I. H. Jones, a vigorous defence of its Matthean composition. The evangelist himself is responsible for the formation of the trilogy and, as we shall see, its careful design reflects distinct interest in the reader and her response.

Chapters 3 and 4 broaden the focus from the trilogy itself to the wider Gospel and explore the impact that this wider narrative makes upon the implied reader. The exercise is of fundamental importance. Each of the parables in this trilogy indicts the Jewish establishment, announces their exclusion from the kingdom of God and makes reference to those who would replace them as the subjects of God's reign. However, throughout the church's history exegetes have found in these parables an indictment

not merely of the Jewish establishment, but also of the *nation*, and, if the nation was excluded, then – not surprisingly – it was the *Gentile nations* that were included. While there are Matthean specialists who still defend this interpretation, in recent years it has become increasingly common to find readings of these parables that insist that the indictment in view here must be restricted to the Jewish authorities, and that there is no obvious reference to Gentiles anywhere in the trilogy. In these chapters I seek to bring the evidence of the wider narrative to bear on these questions and, if my conclusions more nearly approach the former of the two readings noted above, I nevertheless shall argue that the wider narrative prepares the reader for a more nuanced reception of these stories than either of these alternatives would suggest. Chapter 3, which examines Matthew's portrait of the nation of Israel and devotes special attention to the contrasting characterisation of the Jewish leaders and the people, concludes that the judgement that this trilogy announces falls upon Israel and not only upon her leaders, though they remain chiefly responsible for the nation's catastrophic fall. Chapter 4 turns from the nation to the nations and argues that these parables point to the future inclusion of τὰ ἔθνη in τὸ ἔθνος that God had promised to raise up from Abraham.

Against the backdrop that this study of the wider narrative provides, chapters 5 and 6 turn once more to concentrate upon the trilogy of parables itself. The two chapters both approach the problem of envisioned response, but from distinct vantage points. Chapter 5 focuses upon the reader,[100] offering a narrative-critical reading of the parables that pays special attention both to their setting in this trilogy and to the rhetorical strategies employed in the trilogy that seem designed to entangle the reader in the concerns of these stories and to shape his response to the parables. Chapter 6 focuses upon the author, employing a more traditional redaction-critical approach that highlights the distinctive Matthean features of the trilogy, but once more bringing the results to bear on the question of anticipated response. Both chapters conclude that as important as salvation–historical matters are in this trilogy, they by no means exhaust its concerns. Instead the trilogy builds towards the paraenetic climax achieved at 22.11–14.

Chapter 7 presents the conclusions of this study and is followed by an appendix, which offers a fresh analysis of the parable of The Two Sons' complex text–critical problem. I shall argue there that one of the implications of seeing the evangelist's careful design in the trilogy is that the reading of the parable supported by B, Θ, et al., is to be preferred over the reading accepted by NA[27].