

# Hearing Parables in the Patch

BY JOEL SNIDER

**Clarence Jordan was an unusually able interpreter of Jesus' parables. Not only his academic study, but also his small-town background and experiences in establishing the interracial Koinonia Farm in the 1940s shaped his ability to hear the parables in "the Cotton Patch."**

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**E**ven a casual reading of the New Testament reveals that Jesus, though a carpenter by trade, used a large number of farming images in his teaching. Rural scenes and small-town settings provide the background for much of his message. He talked about the difficulty of plowing in a straight line as an illustration of discipleship (Luke 9:62), described evangelists as harvest workers (Matthew 9:37), and interpreted his rejection at Nazareth in terms of small-town dynamics (Mark 6:4). Consequently, some of the cultural keys to understanding Jesus' message lie in the rural and small-village life of ancient Palestine.

This fact is particularly true when examining his parables. Like much of his other teachings, the stories of Jesus often reflect rural scenes and small-town dynamics. He spoke about a tenant farmer's good luck as an analogy for discovering the gospel (Matthew 13:44) and described different types of soil as means of understanding various ways people receive the gospel (Mark 4:1-9; Matthew 13:1-9; Luke 8:4-8). Noxious weeds highlighted more than one of his stories (Matthew 13:24-30 and 13:31-32). You can easily think of other examples.

Clarence Jordan (1912-1969) became an unusually able interpreter of Jesus' narrative parables, I am convinced, not only through his academic study of the New Testament, but also because his own small-town background shaped his ability to understand them. After looking briefly at

Jordan's rural roots and academic preparation, we will let him guide us to hearing Jesus' parables in "the Cotton Patch."

### **JORDAN'S RURAL ROOTS**

Clarence Jordan is best known for the establishment of Koinonia Farm in the 1940s and for his Cotton Patch translations of the New Testament.<sup>1</sup> Farming and the Bible were his twin vocations. He earned his undergraduate degree in agriculture, graduating in the same class as Senator Herman Talmadge at the University of Georgia. Jordan later complemented his degree in "scientific farming" with a Ph.D. in the Greek New Testament from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. Jordan's amazing intellect, sensitive spirit, and rural upbringing provided a unique background against which he read and interpreted the New Testament, including the parables of Jesus.

Often called a prophet, revered as a Bible scholar, and respected for his views on race, economics, and war, Clarence Jordan was reared in a small town surrounded by a rural economy that was grounded in agriculture. Jordan's perception of small-town dynamics and the agrarian ethos uniquely contributed to his understanding and interpretation of Jesus, including the parables. "His was a theology of the working class, of the farm worker, the most neglected laborer in the United States—like Jesus, from the peasant class," G. McLeod Bryan notes. "Clarence was himself such a farm worker, all his life, a man of the soil who, in the years before blue jeans became a symbol, wore his dirty overalls with pride."<sup>2</sup>

Jordan's hometown, Talbotton, Georgia, provided many of his early lessons on small-town life. Recordings of his sermons and teachings contain many references to how participation in Talbotton's status quo blinded its leading citizens to the spiritual truths of the gospel. This rural-flavored blindness particularly demonstrated itself in hypocrisy on matters of race and economics, always preserving the place of the privileged.

On more than one occasion Jordan told the following story about how the status quo manifested itself in racial division in his hometown. He and his Sunday school classmates were taught to sing "red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight; Jesus loves the little children of the world," but he noted that his classmates were always white. Later in life he described the eleven o'clock hour on Sunday morning as the most segregated hour in America.

Perhaps the most famous of his stories told of the warden of the local penal farm, who could sing "Love Lifted Me" at a revival meeting and then go to the penal farm and inflict brutal punishment on inmates. Reflecting many years later, Jordan said that particular incident was a crisis of faith for him. "That nearly tore me to pieces," Jordan remembered. "If He was love and the warden was an example of it, I didn't want anything to do with [God]."<sup>3</sup>

Life in Talbotton included economic division as well. A privileged class of citizens—all Caucasians—owned and operated the businesses critical to the town and surrounding county. These business owners—including Jordan’s father, J. W.—made a decent living trading with each other and by controlling the resources on which other members of the community depended. During the depression, when J. W.’s bank failed, Clarence noted in a letter to his mother: “A good many of our people seem to have forgotten that the church is the place of worship and not the bank. Their money has become their god. And it may teach them to put their faith in something more substantial.”<sup>4</sup>

The entrenchment of the status quo and resistance to change on matters of race and economics reappeared later in Jordan’s life, after the establishment of Koinonia Farm. Incidents of intimidation and violence are well recorded in books and articles about Jordan. Neither the Ku Klux Klan nor the local Baptist church was open to the beliefs and practices of Jordan’s interracial farming community. Crosses were burned, shots were fired, and their membership at church was withdrawn.

When threats and violence proved ineffective in forcing the residents of Koinonia Farm to leave the county, opponents to Koinonia implemented an economic boycott. Jordan had a hard time buying supplies or selling his agricultural products. Local merchants who feared for their businesses joined the boycott by pressure and would not challenge the status quo. Jordan told a story of confronting a local butane gas dealer who had cut off service to Koinonia Farm:

We asked if his [participation in the boycott] was due to any fault on our part, and he said no, and that was what made it so hard. We asked why he had done it and he said he was afraid of the pressure. We asked how many customers he had lost on account of us—he said, None!” We asked who was putting pressure on him—he said “Nobody...yet!”<sup>5</sup>

The perceived pressure was all it took for him to boycott Koinonia farm. The strength of the small-town status quo was evident in its implied threat. Its invisible grip made it that much more insidious.

### **JORDAN’S SCHOLARLY VIEWS ON PARABLES**

Jordan’s homespun style in the Cotton Patch translations might lead the uninformed to think that his interpretations were simply designed to be clever. Such a belief grossly underestimates his scholarship. All of his translations were based on an extensive knowledge of the original language of the New Testament, *koine* Greek.<sup>6</sup> He gleaned cultural background for the parables from reading such authors as Josephus.

Based upon his study, Jordan taught that parables are a subset of allegory. They are different from fables, which are patently fiction and have

animals as the main characters. Parables are also different from myths, which Jordan described as stories about gods. Yet, Jordan taught that parables are allegories in that characters and action disguise the truth, which must then be deduced by the hearer. The story changes the scene and the setting in order to throw the audience a bit off guard until the point can be made. Jesus often used parables when the situation was delicate or dangerous – when he could not speak directly to the issue at hand. If a frontal assault against emotional or spiritual defenses was likely to fail, Jesus used a parable to bait people into listening. In other words, parables were the perfect rhetorical tool for challenging the resistance of the status quo.

These convictions about parables led Jordan to develop one of his most familiar concepts related to biblical studies: the Trojan horse parable.<sup>7</sup> Deriving its name from the tactical weapon employed by the Greek army in Homer's *Iliad*, a Trojan horse parable is particularly effective in communicating an unpopular message. This type of parable tells a story in such a way as to slip past the listeners' defenses in order to release the message on the unsuspecting. Jordan used Nathan's parable against King David as a graphic example of the Trojan horse parable. As Nathan tells his story about the man who stole his neighbor's sheep (2 Samuel 12:1-4), King David never sees the trap laid for him in the story until he is caught in it: "Old King David, he's looking and looking," taught Jordan, "but don't [*sic*] hear anything. He's listening and listening, but doesn't see anything."<sup>8</sup>

A parable speaks powerfully but it speaks obliquely, until it shatters the defenses of the person who is listening. In his book on Jordan's interpretation of Jesus' parables, Bill Lane Doulos correctly points out that Jesus effectively used parables to get his message past the emotional defenses of people caught in the status quo: "The parables of Jesus help us see two realities: the reality of a world whose values must be rejected, and the reality of a new world whose values must be accepted."<sup>9</sup>

According to Jordan, Jesus employed two major types of parables: *narrative parables* (which include all the stories Jesus told, as well as his simple comparisons) and *dramatic parables* (which are acted out signs with meaning deeper than the overt actions involved). Included among these dramatic parables are the signs in John's Gospel, the temptation of Jesus, the virgin birth, and the Lord's Supper – any event where the message was intentionally deeper than the ostensible action. Jordan's broad

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definition of parable, when applied to such incidents as the virgin birth, created some controversy.<sup>10</sup>

### HEARING THE “NARRATIVE PARABLES”

The influence of Jordan’s farming knowledge on his ability to interpret and communicate Scripture is especially evident in his readings of the “seed parables.” In the Parable of the Mustard Seed (Matthew 13:31-32), Jordan saw that the gospel is not sterile like an inert grain of sand, but rather is full of life and potential. The mustard seed provides a graphic image of the power of the Kingdom of God. Though small and easily overlooked, it will explode with life if given the proper treatment. And a seed, as it sprouts, has enormous power. Jordan told of planting peanuts and watching a single one push back a clod of dirt that weighed many more times than the tender shoot the seed was producing. Just as nothing could stop that seed from sprouting up, nothing can stop the Kingdom of God from growing.

In the Parable of the Weeds among the Wheat (Matthew 13:24-30), Jordan explained that the farmer intended to plant “certified seed” – seed guaranteed to have no more than a limited amount of noxious weed. Here is his Cotton Patch translation:

Then [Jesus] laid before them another Comparison: “The God Movement is like a man who planted certified seed in his field. Then after everybody had gone to bed, his enemy came and overplanted the wheat with zizania. When it all came up and started to grow, the zizania was clearly present. The farmer’s fieldhands came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn’t you plant certified seed in your field? Then how come it’s got zizania in it?’ He replied, ‘An enemy did that!’ The fieldhands asked, ‘Do you want us to go and chop it out?’ The farmer said, ‘No, because you might dig up the wheat with the zizania. Let them both grow until harvest time. Then I’ll say to the harvest workers, “Gather all the zizania first and pile it up for burning, and then harvest the wheat and put it in my barn.”’”<sup>11</sup>

“No farmer plants the bag of seed until he’s read the tag [on the bag],” Jordan taught.<sup>12</sup> Along came an enemy who over-seeded the original crop with zizania, the very kind of weed the farmer had paid *not* to have in his certified seed. This zizania (which Jordan also called “pigweed”) closely resembles wheat, but it is a weed that inhibits the growth of the true crop. As Jordan goes on to interpret the parable, he describes the “enemy” as members of the Ku Klux Klan, who did their work at night. He and other members of Koinonia Farm knew about the nighttime tactics of the Klan from residing in rural Sumter County, Georgia.

In an unusual reading of another of Jesus’ narratives, Jordan linked the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) to the story of the Gerasene demoniac (Luke 8:26-38).<sup>13</sup> In Jordan’s telling, the demoniac *was* the prodigal

son who had wandered to the far country, and the herd of “hogs” that Jesus cast into the sea (Luke 8:33) were the very animals tended by the prodigal son (Luke 15:15-16). Agricultural images and rural dynamics are critical to Jordan’s recounting of these two stories.

For instance, modern readers steeped in Western culture, for whom country-cured, hickory-smoked ham is a delicacy, will have difficulty understanding the moral crisis faced by the prodigal son in this situation. Jordan explained, however, that tending the nearby hogs made the young man lose his mind. This young man had been taught that touching hog meat or “smelling red-eyed gravy” was blasphemy. How much more did getting into the trough and eating “slop” with the hogs present a religious crisis!

A key to Jordan’s telling of the story was the fact that the herd of pigs represented “bootleg hogs” – that is, a herd kept just across the sea from Galilee, which was a “hog dry” country. All the hams, shoulders, fatback, headcheese, and pickled pigs feet represented by this herd was a huge financial investment for the owner. In Jordan’s mind, the herd epitomized religious hypocrisy at its highest form: making profit from the very items forbidden by religion.

### **INTERPRETING A “DRAMATIC PARABLE”**

Jordan’s concept of the virgin birth provides a look into the Georgian’s views on the dramatic parables, as well as insight into how Jordan’s agricultural knowledge contributed to his interpretation of them. In Jordan’s understanding, the virgin birth was the New Testament’s symbolic way of expressing that God “sired” Jesus spiritually. When alluding to the virgin birth, the Gospel writers were not reporting about biological functions from which Jesus was conceived; rather, they were reporting the theological truth that God had come in human form.<sup>14</sup> The virgin birth says to the world that the incarnation has begun.

Jordan’s symbolism in the “siring” image becomes even more apparent when

he applied the concept to the spiritual life of believers. He claimed that God is the father of Jesus Christ in a unique way. However, just as God’s actions in the beginning of Jesus’ life may be spoken of in terms of divine impregnation, the action of God in the initiation of the spiritual life of believers may be described with a similar analogy. Jordan’s scriptural basis for this teaching is found in Jesus’ encounter with Nicodemus, when Jesus proclaims,

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“You must be born again” (John 3:3, 7). Jordan noted that the *koine* Greek has a word for “birthing” (*tikto*), but Jesus instead uses the word *gennaō*, which describes the male’s impregnating role in pregnancy. Thus, Jesus tells Nicodemus, “You must be sired from above.”

One may disagree with Jordan’s teaching that the virgin birth is a parable or with his interpretation of this theological concept. What matters here is that the farming image of “siring,” which is familiar to anyone who has bred livestock, is Jordan’s key interpretive point. It is his familiarity with animal husbandry and the nuances of the Greek language that make his interpretation possible.

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### CONCLUSION

Clearly, parable study has transitioned since the time Jordan gave parables the blanket description of “allegories.” Equally apparent is the broadening of our understanding of God, which today could easily include feminine characteristics when describing how God works in the life of believers. We must admit that Clarence Jordan’s approach to interpreting parables reflects his particular time and historical setting.

Yet we should not succumb to the belief that his interpretations of the parables came about simply because he had a mastery of the homespun language of the rural South. He did not simply paraphrase parables in agricultural idioms in order to give them the cotton patch flavor. The “parables in the patch” were ingeniously crafted by a unique individual with degrees in agricultural science and the *koine* Greek of the New Testament, and a genuine love for both farming and Scripture. The “parables in the patch” will not be duplicated easily or soon.

### NOTES

1 For more information on Jordan’s life and work, see Dallas Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971) and Henlee H. Barnette, *Clarence Jordan: Turning Dreams into Deeds* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1992). Jordan’s Cotton Patch translations are available with new introductions from Smyth & Helwys Publishing ([www.Helwys.com](http://www.Helwys.com)).

2 G. Mcleod Bryan, “Theology in Overalls: The Imprint of Clarence Jordan,” *Sojourners* (December 1979), 11.

3 Lee, *Cotton Patch Evidence*, 9.

4 Clarence Jordan, Letter to Maude Jordan, April 1, 1933, in the Clarence Jordan Collection, Box 1, in the Rare Books and Manuscript Department of the University of Georgia Library.

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5 Lee, *Cotton Patch Evidence*, 113 f.

6 Jordan's doctoral dissertation was entitled, "The Meaning of *Nekros* and *Thanatos* (Dead and Death) in the Epistles of Paul." Unpublished doctoral dissertation. The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky, 1938.

7 *Power from Parables*, No. 1, Compact Disc, Koinonia Farms, Americus, Georgia, n.d.

8 Ibid.

9 Bill Lane Doulos and Clarence Jordan, *The Cotton Patch Parables of Liberation* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1976), 17.

10 See Clarence Jordan, Letter to Charles Kirtley, June 11, 1969, The Clarence Jordan Collection, Box 8. See also *Power from Parables*, No. 1, near the end of the recording.

11 Matthew 13:24-30 from *Clarence Jordan's Cotton Patch Gospel: Matthew and John* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2004).

12 *Power from Parables*, No. 1.

13 *Power from Parables*, No. 3.

14 Clarence Jordan, "The Humanity of God," an original manuscript of a lecture delivered at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, October 2, 1968. The Clarence Jordan Collection, Box 16.

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