

# Interpreting the Parables' Recent Interpreters

BY SCOTT HUELIN

The parables of Jesus are tough hermeneutical chestnuts. Many an aspiring interpreter has attempted to crack open their secrets, using some trendy academic method as a sharp tool until its blade becomes dull or its point breaks off. This should not surprise us, as many of Jesus' original hearers found themselves bemused by his parables.

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**T**he parables of Jesus have proven, over time, to be tough hermeneutical chestnuts. Many an aspiring interpreter has attempted to crack open their secrets, using some trendy academic method as a sharp tool until its blade dulls or its point breaks off. This should not surprise us, as many of Jesus' original hearers found themselves bemused by his parables. While Jesus did not seem too concerned about outsiders' failure to understand (e.g. Mark 4:10-12), he did, on several occasions, grow irritated with his own followers' inability to comprehend his teaching (Mark 4:13).

Three recent books have attempted to discover the interpretive key to Jesus' parables through very different approaches and with varying degrees of success. The oldest of the three, Craig L. Blomberg's *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990, 333 pp., \$22.00), is also the most scholarly. The other two books approach the subject more pastorally: Robert Farrar Capon's *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002, 531 pp., \$26.00) and Barbara Green's *Like a Tree Planted: An Exploration of Psalms and Parables Through Metaphor* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997, 164 pp., \$19.95). While Blomberg (an evangelical Protestant and professor of New Testament at Denver Seminary) writes primarily for an academic

audience and only secondarily for an ecclesial one, Capon (an Episcopalian priest) and Green (a Roman Catholic and professor of biblical studies at Berkeley's Graduate Theological Union) both clearly write for the educated lay people who are interested in deepening their spirituality through imaginative engagement with the text of the Gospels. While each book has its distinctive strengths, they are best read in the company of one another, or other similar books, as each remedies a significant blindspot of the others.

### **INTERPRETING THE PARABLES' STRUCTURE**

As a work of academic exegesis, Blomberg's *Interpreting the Parables* is well crafted and very useful. The first half of the book surveys the previous century's scholarship on the parables, both historically (by looking at major interpreters such as Jülicher, Wrede, and Jeremias, as well as their influence) and theoretically (by discussing the strengths and limitations of three major schools of New Testament interpretation: form criticism, redaction criticism, and literary approaches).

Most illuminating in Part One is Chapter 2, where Blomberg takes on a major piece of the scholarly consensus regarding parable interpretation, namely, the conviction that Jesus would never have spoken in allegories. Allegory is a famously difficult rhetorical trope to define. It literally means 'to speak otherwise,' that is, to say one thing by way of saying something else. As an example, we can cite the apostle Paul, who said of the biblical story of Sarah and Hagar, "Now this is an allegory [Greek: *allegoreumena*]: these women are two covenants" (Galatians 4:24). Thus Genesis says one thing (the history of God's saving covenants) by way of saying something else (telling the story of a patriarch's attempts to beget a son). Jesus' interpretation of the Parable of the Sower certainly seems to operate in such a way: by way of a story about a wildly profligate farmer who throws his seed everywhere, Jesus (by his own testimony) makes a point about the Kingdom of God.

Many contemporary scholars, influenced by an overly sharp distinction between Hebraic and Hellenic modes of thought which has crippled academic theology for over a century, regard allegorical interpretation as a hand-me-down from Hellenistic Greek culture forced upon an essentially Hebraic (and therefore un-allegorical) Christianity. As a result they regard New Testament references to allegorical interpretation as later impositions by a Hellenized church upon the original teaching of the historical Jesus. However, such a claim would be hard pressed to ignore the Jewishness of the example cited above, in which Paul provides, in the manner of first-century rabbinic interpretation, an allegorical *midrash* upon Genesis 16-21. Blomberg very helpfully demonstrates the limitations of the "parables are never allegories" consensus without ever making the error of going to the other extreme, namely, that parables must always have one and only one meaning. His position is, thankfully, more nuanced and attentive to the

variations among the parabolic statements we have in the Gospels.

When Blomberg actually gets down to the business of interpreting the parables, though, I suspect his ecclesial readers will be disappointed with him. His method is essentially structural or form-critical, dividing the parables according to the number of significant actors, or points of comparison, in each. Three-point parables, such as the Prodigal Son (elder son – father –

younger son) or the Vineyard (day-long laborers – master – last-minute laborers) are treated separately from two- and one-point parables (such as the Wise and Foolish Builders or the Pearl of Great Price, respectively).

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The virtue of his readings of particular parables is his ability to demonstrate how the structure of the vast majority of parables

points to their communicative intent, the point they are trying to get across. However, the method seems exceedingly dry: diagramming the structural elements of the parables does little to bring anyone closer to the Kingdom of God. Blomberg, to his credit, is aware of this limitation to his method, and so he reserves a final chapter for exploring the theological implications of the preceding three exegetical chapters. However, the very fact that the spiritual significance of his interpretation has to be discerned as a secondary operation performed only *after* the exegetical work is done points out the essential sterility of form-critical exegesis. While Blomberg effectively demonstrates that evangelicals can practice various forms of critical interpretation without losing their faith, he also unwittingly testifies to the limits of modern biblical hermeneutics.

### **REINTERPRETING THE PARABLES' MEANING**

Capon's book (which is a compilation of three previously released books: *Parables of the Kingdom*, *Parables of Grace*, and *Parables of Judgment*) exhibits a similarly ambiguous relation to historical-critical method. While he draws upon its results and, in a few notable instances, shares its presuppositions (such as his prejudice against parable as allegory), he only occasionally wields it as an interpretive tool. Rather the methodological center of Capon's exegesis is listening, and specifically listening for what new things God might be saying to the Church today. In this, Capon seems to have achieved a far more satisfying synthesis of dry scholarship and living faith than Blomberg manages, for his kind of listening involves attending

to both the text as ancient artifact and the voice of the God who speaks through this text to its contemporary readers.

In several cases Capon's distinctive approach frees the New Testament text from certain interpretive straitjackets and yields fresh insights. When Capon, for example, points out the ironic humor involved in the enacted parable of the coin in the fish's mouth, he implicitly (and helpfully) challenges the common interpretive assumption that Jesus must always speak with the gravity of a Victorian moralist (pp. 173 ff.). Moreover, Capon's determination to trace Jesus' growing consciousness of his Messiahship and the sacrifice it will require, while open to any number of theological and exegetical objections, takes more seriously than most the implications of Chalcedonian Christology, namely, that Jesus was (and is) fully *human* as well as fully divine. In other words, Capon takes seriously the character of Jesus, his human particularity, as presented in the Gospels, and so he generally tells more compelling stories about Jesus than the average academic interpreter.

However, Capon's hermeneutics of listening does not always live up to its promise. Despite Capon's insistence that he only wants to serve the text and, through it, the One who speaks its meaning, his distinctive interpretive hobbyhorses often leave readers with a sense of having suffered from a bait-and-switch maneuver. In his attempt to listen afresh, Capon frequently introduces foreign or anachronistic elements into his exegesis. In what might be the most notorious example, he associates the field bought by the man who found the precious pearl (Matthew 13:44-46) with the slightly archaic colloquialism 'buying the farm' as a euphemism for death. On this reading, God hides the mystery of the kingdom in the world at its creation (here he is thinking of Colossians 3:3), and that mystery is only fully revealed to us — to *all* of us, believer and unbeliever alike — at our deaths (p. 117)!

Here Capon's interpretation strains the limits of credulity not only because of its manifestly ahistorical contextualization but also because it demonstrates Capon's overarching goal in interpreting the parables: to exclude *a priori* any interpretation of any particular parable that would assume or produce a division between insiders and outsiders. Capon's vision is of a God whose grace is so abundant that no one need fear missing it, and that conviction creates the problem that the whole three-book structure seeks to solve: how to read the parables of judgment *as* parables of grace, and so to come closer to understanding and experiencing the kingdom now. But in order to read the parables of judgment as parables of grace, Capon must take them as an ironic sop tossed to disciples and persecutors alike in order to reveal to them their bloodthirstiness and fondness for exclusion.

While Capon is to be commended for his fresh examination of the parables and his clear desire to restore them to their usefulness for cultivating Christian spirituality, his faithfulness to the content of the Gospels remains highly questionable. His struggle is the inverse of Blomberg's, who pre-

ferred (at least in fact, if not in theory) the details of the parables to their significance.

### **REINTERPRETING OURSELVES THROUGH THE PARABLES**

Barbara Green's book provides hope for a rapprochement between the two. Her book, unlike Capon's, is replete with footnotes referring to important academic interpretations of the relevant texts. She takes quite seriously

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the notion that Scripture has a content that ought not to be ignored. And yet her method is, in one sense, rather ahistorical: she contextualizes the parables by placing them alongside the Psalms. The purpose of this move is not to claim some sort of literary dependence (though one certainly could), but rather to point to the fact that the Psalms, as the poetry and hymnody of both Israel and the

Church, provide a resonant manifold for Jesus' perplexing pronouncements. In other words, the Psalms provide a shared context of interpretation for both Jesus' first-century hearers and his contemporary followers.

This phenomenon, moreover, suggests that the parables, like the Psalms, aim at guiding us in self-understanding as much (or more than) the understanding of the text itself. Consequently the chapters, which pair metaphors common to both the Psalms and the Gospels, are less exegetical than they are exploratory and prayerful. None of the chapters provides a definitive interpretation of any one metaphor or parable; she is even willing to question whether we ought to consider the prodigal's father's behavior commendable, much less whether he represents God the Father (p. 50). But her point is not to undermine the notion that Scripture has a meaning; it is rather to ensure that we take advantage of Scripture's power, under the influence of the Spirit and aided by practices of spiritual reading, to reframe our understanding of the world and our place in it.

Green's commentary stands in a long tradition of contemplative prayer and of exegesis as a means of prayer (the predominant practice of the ancient and medieval church), but it stands in stark contrast to the kind of sterile, methodical works produced by Blomberg and countless other academic interpreters in the wake of modernity. At the same time, Green's emphasis on reinterpreting oneself in light of Scripture and God's gracious activity through it avoids Capon's eisegetical tendencies (i.e., to read his

own ideas into the text), because the goal now becomes reading the self in light of the text rather than reading the text in light of the self and its concerns. Whereas Capon sought to reread his universalism into Scripture, Green seeks to reread herself (and to aid us in rereading ourselves) in light of the Gospels and the Psalms.

Green's wonderful little book is a great reminder to the Church that Scripture is not only a means of truth but is also a means of grace. Perhaps, then, the chestnut that is most difficult to crack is not Jesus' perplexing sayings but rather the soul of the interpreter who struggles to make them reveal their mysteries. If so, then the best method would seem to be the opening of oneself to Jesus' words, rather than the other way around.

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