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Preface and acknowledgements

This book is a development of work which I have done on the parables of Jesus since starting my doctoral studies in Durham in 1994. It builds on, expands and attempts to balance out my published thesis *The Voice of Jesus*, which appeared in 2000. But it also seeks to incorporate fresh insights from different angles and sources, and to do so in a way which, I trust, will be accessible beyond the confines of academic biblical studies.

Those who are not so interested in the history of the last couple of centuries of parable scholarship, and want to dive straight into the stories themselves, can skip Part 1. In fact, having done so, they could even choose between Parts 2 and 3, depending on whether they would like a fairly quick overview of how Jesus' stories fit into the Synoptic Gospels (Part 2) or a more detailed study of how they fit into his life and work (Part 3). My popular-level work *Tales Jesus Told* is now out of print, and I have attempted to make Parts 2 and 3, especially, accessible to a wide audience while remaining, I hope, of interest to the academics. Of course, I would be gratified if many read the whole book!

My thanks are due to Philip Law of SPCK for his encouragement of this project from the start. I have benefited greatly from the positive and supportive atmosphere of Spurgeon's College, London, where I work with marvellous colleagues and students. I am grateful to its Academic Board for granting me study leave in the autumn term of 2011 when I was able to catch up (a little) with some of the mass of scholarship, recent and older, on Jesus as a historical figure. I am grateful to have been invited to give a paper at the Ehrhardt Seminar in the University of Manchester in May 2013 where I floated something of the basic shape of the project, and to the encouraging audience on that occasion. I was glad also of the opportunity to give a paper on the theme at the Jesus Seminar of the British New Testament Conference in St Andrews in August 2013. I am especially grateful for comments and questions received from Todd Brewer, David Bryan, Alison Jack, and Professors Larry Hurtado and Francis Watson. They have encouraged me to sharpen my argument in certain places. Naturally, I remain solely responsible for the outcome and for any errors and lacunae that remain.

My wife and family have given me the priceless support of a loving and understanding home, without which the will to persevere with a project like this might well elude me, and to them I owe a very special debt of thanks.

Stephen I. Wright

Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that Jesus of Nazareth told stories. Much less agreement exists on why he did so or how these stories contributed to his wider activity and brief career. This book approaches this topic afresh in an attempt to gather some of the wisdom of scholarship past and present into a new synthesis.

There are three reasons why I believe this enquiry is important. First, although the ‘parables of Jesus’ have been examined from every conceivable angle over the last century and a half, their character as stories, and its implications, has been surprisingly neglected. This is because the stories have been placed in the category of ‘parables’ along with a range of other, mostly shorter sayings which are quite distinct rhetorically from stories. Attention to the genre and strategy of ‘parable’ has tended to exclude a steady concentration on the dynamics of narrative.

There is good reason for this: above all, the use of the term ‘parables’ by the Evangelists as a summary characterization of the way in which Jesus ‘spoke the word’ to people (Mark 4.33–34), and the obviously narrative element of many of these sayings. By focusing on the category of ‘story’ or ‘narrative’, I do not propose that we dispense with that of ‘parable’. Indeed, narrative may rightly be seen as the ‘classic’ parable form (Hedrick, 2004, p. 10). But it has long been recognized that the use of the word ‘parable’ to describe a wide range of recorded sayings of Jesus may not take us very far in understanding their meaning or force. Even what counts as a ‘parable’ in the Gospels is disputed: not surprisingly, since the Evangelists’ use of the word to designate particular sayings is relatively loose.¹ Not all utterances that are normally grouped as ‘parables’ by scholars are labelled as such by the Evangelists, while they include a few utterances as ‘parables’ which scholars would be more inclined to label a riddle, a proverb, a simple analogy, or an instruction – a range of forms all covered, along with others, by the Hebrew *māshāl*.²

When scholars come up with a list of ‘parables’, according to their preferred definition, it always seems necessary to create sub-categories. The division may be according to perceived rhetorical form, as in Adolf Jülicher’s seminal work (1910 (1886, 1898, 1899)). He divided parables into three categories: the short similitude (*Gleichnis*), the story parable (*Parabel*) and the example story (*Beispielerszählung*) (1910, I, pp. 80, 98, 114). The difference between the latter two categories, for Jülicher, is that the story parable is intended to point beyond the situation pictured to a general truth which it somehow resembles (for instance, God’s love for humanity is ‘like’ the love of the father for his son in The Prodigal Son: 1910, II, p. 362), while the example story presents the general truth in the clothing of a specific instance (thus, The Good Samaritan

embodies the truth that ‘the gladly-offered exercise of love earns the highest worth in the eyes of God and humans’: 1910, II, p. 596). Jülicher distinguishes all three categories sharply from allegory, in which a whole series of terms is exchanged for another series (1910, I, p. 80). But his insistence on the story parables, of either kind, expressing a general truth obscured their contours as stories.

The problematic nature of such sub-categories has been discussed by Ruben Zimmermann (2009). In this article Zimmermann explains that his solution, in the major volume he edited (2007), was to do away with them (and the sometimes misleading directions in which they took interpretation of the texts themselves) by producing a supposedly all-encompassing, six-point characterization of the genre parable (2009, p. 170). First among these points was that a parable is always narrative. The danger Zimmermann courts is the old one he tries to combat, however, that of subsuming parables within a predetermined definition of their characteristics. Thus, while accepting the depth of ‘narrative’ structure in many short proverbial sayings, one might reasonably argue that to treat such a saying within essentially the same analytical matrix as a full-length ‘story’ is to invite the blurring of important rhetorical distinctions.

To appreciate Jesus’ stories in their force and distinctiveness, scholars have often turned to comparative studies of ancient literature and rhetoric. Such studies may give us helpful material with which to illuminate what Jesus was saying and doing. The Old Testament (OT), the parables of the Jewish Rabbis, the rhetorical handbooks of Aristotle or Quintilian and the fables of Aesop have all been used to seek such illumination.

We must be cautious, however, about making such comparisons bear more weight than they can reasonably carry, and the net effect of them has often been, again, to downplay the clearly narrative character of Jesus’ most memorable ‘parables’. It does not follow, for instance, from the fact that the Rabbis told parables with a standard structure involving the comparison of two entities or situations (see McArthur and Johnston, 1990), that Jesus’ parables functioned in the same manner (despite the implications of some, such as Young, 1998). A recurring theme of my study is that to jump to a supposed ‘comparative’ force in a story is to fail to apprehend its narrative rhetoric.

When they have drawn on Aristotle to illuminate Jesus’ parables, scholars have tended to look to his *Rhetoric* (a handbook for those who fulfilled specific public roles within Greek society) rather than his *Poetics*, which includes his seminal account of narrative and its workings within popular drama.³ The dominant model for understanding the parables has thus been rhetorical persuasion rather than the experience of entering a narrative. This study seeks to redress this balance by drawing particularly on contemporary ‘narrative criticism’ which finds its roots in Aristotle’s *Poetics*. This entails no claim that Jesus was influenced by this work, just the recognition that insights deriving from it have universal application to the workings of story. Moreover, we will focus on the dynamics of the stories as the Gospel texts have mediated them to

us. A comparative study setting Jesus' stories in the wider field of storytelling in the ancient world, Jewish and non-Jewish, is for another time.

The second reason why I believe this study is worthwhile is this. A further feature of most modern scholarship on Jesus' parables is that, when they have been treated as a corpus, they have usually not been integrated into an overarching portrait of the work of Jesus but treated either as individual units, relating to historical background generally but not to a specific hypothesis about his strategy (e.g. Hultgren, 2000; Snodgrass, 2008; Blomberg, 2012 (1990)), or as part of the tapestry of the Evangelists' presentation of Jesus (e.g. Drury, 1985; Donahue, 1988). Partial exceptions are the classic works of Jülicher (1910 (1886, 1888, 1898)), Dodd (1936 (1935)) and Jeremias (1963 (1947)).⁴ Jülicher's reading of the parables was clearly intertwined with the typically nineteenth-century hypothesis that Jesus was an ideal moral teacher. Dodd's book was key to advancing his argument that Jesus believed the 'kingdom of God' had actually dawned with his coming. Jeremias emphasized the role of the parables in Jesus' defence of his ministry against his critics. Though these works made strides in their different ways in careful historical appraisal of the parables as parables of Jesus, however, their concentrated focus on the parables did not allow much engagement with other Gospel material that might corroborate, challenge or nuance the picture of Jesus which emerged.

The reluctance to integrate the parables into an overarching reconstruction of Jesus' ministry has no doubt been a symptom of the general reluctance through much of the twentieth century, in the wake of both Albert Schweitzer's critique of the nineteenth-century 'questers' and Rudolf Bultmann's historical scepticism, to claim that it is now possible to draw a genuinely historical portrait of Jesus. The reluctance is often conditioned by commendable scholarly caution. Biblical commentators, for instance, are more likely to offer detailed material on the background of an individual parable, and/or the way it fits as a literary unit into the Gospel where it is now found, than to hazard opinions as to how it fits into the ministry of the historical Jesus – even that ministry as the particular Evangelist has reconstructed it. There is also understandable caution about 'psychologizing' Jesus. While those concerned with the continuing reception and usefulness of Jesus' stories have been happy to import psychological categories into their interpretations (e.g. Tolbert, 1979; Ford, 1997), historians have tended to shun them as, almost inevitably, going beyond the evidence. As James Breech perceptively showed, however, although the parables themselves give us remarkably few overt clues about Jesus' personality, self-understanding or aims, we might find his very silence on these things deeply instructive (1983, esp. pp. 213–22).

Conversely, when the focus of scholars has been on the career of Jesus as a whole, there has been an understandable compression in their treatment of the parables, which inevitably tends to flatten their diversity and allow only limited attention to individual stories in their peculiarity. N. T. Wright has some highly suggestive comments about the parables in relationship to Jewish

prophetic and apocalyptic tradition within his major construal of Jesus' ministry (1996, pp. 125–31, 174–82) and some play a key role in the argument: note especially the reading of The Pounds and The Talents as speaking of YHWH's return to Zion (1996, pp. 632–9). Oddly, however, John Dominic Crossan, author of two creative books on the parables, deals only very briefly with them in his major work on Jesus (1991).⁵ The phenomenon I am describing has been well summed up by Snodgrass (2013, pp. 45–6, n. 2): 'Most works on the historical Jesus . . . give minimal attention to the parables, and books on parables often give inadequate attention to the historical Jesus.'

Not only, then, is there a gap in the scholarly study of certain parables of Jesus as stories, there is a gap in the study of them as stories told by Jesus. Fuller justification for these statements will emerge in Chapters 1 and 2. The upshot is that there remains a surprising divergence of views on the nature and purpose of Jesus' storytelling. This divergence is easily masked by frequent reference to Jesus as a storyteller, without corresponding frequency of enquiry about what sort of stories they really were and what they might imply about their teller. And though some of the stories get the regular epithet 'well-loved' – not least The Good Samaritan and The Prodigal Son – there are probably more which continue to puzzle, challenge and even offend. As they continue to be discussed and meditated upon, especially in church settings, blank looks greet Jesus' apparent commendation of a steward's dishonesty (Luke 16.1–8); people wonder what exactly we are to learn from a king who sends an unforgiving debtor to the torturers (Matt. 18.23–35); and preachers take evasive action when it comes to the king who first burns a city in response to the refusal of a wedding invitation, then imprisons one who has accepted it because he is not wearing the right clothes (Matt. 22.1–14). The gap in scholarship is surprising given the extraordinary scholarly interest in narrative as a category that has emerged in many disciplines in the last half-century or so,⁶ though much important headway has been made on particular stories and particular aspects of Jesus' ministry, and I draw gratefully from a number of relevant works.

The third reason for my focus is that Jesus is often claimed as a champion for storytelling as a powerful and central medium for communication (particularly Christian communication). There is a danger of superficiality in this, if the range of possible purposes of Jesus' own storytelling is overlooked. Like any rhetorical form, story is not a mere innocent dress in which one can present any message one likes. Message and medium are bound up together. Nor is it merely a vehicle for conveying meaning. It does something as well as saying something, and through saying something.

Jesus' activity as a narrator of tales plays a wider role too in Christian theology and praxis. For example, it may enhance an image of him as a wandering charismatic holy man, which some will find more credible and perhaps comfortable than the apocalyptic or *Christus Victor* images of Christian tradition (see for example the various works of Marcus Borg, e.g. 2011). Alternatively, the tales themselves may be interpreted in an apocalyptic light,

thus yielding a Jesus who conforms somewhat more to the traditional Christian picture (N. T. Wright, 1996). In the arguments for a ‘narrative theology’, the central impetus of Jesus as a storyteller is acknowledged (McFague, 1975). But in what sense, if any, did Jesus’ stories constitute ‘theology’? That is far from being agreed, though writers continue to offer suggestive explorations of the theme (e.g. Blomberg, 2012 (1990), pp. 408–46). I hope to shed further light on this question.

Two further introductory observations before I describe how the book unfolds. First, since the stories Jesus told are, on the whole, the longer utterances among those that are loosely called ‘parables’, they inevitably offer more scope for variety in understanding than the rest. The present study does not seek to eliminate plurality of readings; like Zimmermann (2009, pp. 175–6), I regard such plurality as inherent to the dynamics of telling and hearing parables, and I would include stories especially in this. As we shall see, however, recent scholars have given markedly different interpretations to Jesus’ stories, which cannot really coexist compatibly within a single coherent account of his aims and teaching. Without imposing artificial rules of ‘legitimacy’ on contemporary readings, improbable limitations on the spectrum of what Jesus’ first hearers may have gleaned from his stories, or a narrow presumption that they must all ‘work’ alike, I think it is reasonable and profitable to do some sifting among the diverse ‘hearings’ of the stories in order to see what hints they may offer about the stance and strategy of Jesus.

Second, I do not propose to engage in the wider debate about the justification for ‘the quest of the historical Jesus’ in the various forms that the quest has taken and continues to take. It will be clear, however, that I believe that working towards an accurate historical portrayal of Jesus is no less important than working towards such a portrayal of any other influential historical figure, and arguably a good deal more. The often angst-ridden dealings between people of Christian faith (of various hues), other faiths and no faith are ill-served by substituting tendentious assumptions (from any quarter) for serious discussion. I will outline the rationale for my own approach more fully in Chapter 3. Here I will just say that, though all scholars bring certain assumptions to their work, I am not among those who despair of attaining a level of cool rationality as a medium of shared debate and apprehension of historical reality. As a Christian I do not hide my practical concerns about the relevance of this discussion (as just outlined). Nor can I claim to be free from bias, but I will be glad to hear from any student of Jesus, Christian or not, who thinks that bias has unduly coloured the picture I paint here, and seek to correct it.

My study will proceed as follows. In Part 1, Chapters 1 and 2 survey the real though partial insights into Jesus as a storyteller which do indeed emerge from modern scholarship on the historical Jesus and on the parables, despite the lack of clear focus on ‘story’ as such. I recount this selective ‘history of scholarship’ as a tale of the eclipse of Jesus’ stories through the nineteenth century (Chapter 1) and the gradual but partial recovery of them through the twentieth

(Chapter 2). As I argued in an earlier work (S. I. Wright, 2000b), important insights emerge also from ‘pre-modern’ scholarship on the parables; but that is beyond my scope here. After these chapters, we will then be in a position to delineate more precisely the investigation which needs to be carried out, and Chapter 3 lays the methodological groundwork for that investigation. Here I introduce key categories in the recent and contemporary study of Jesus and the Gospels which now seem to invite application in a more concerted way to his stories: orality, testimony, memory, performance, reception history and above all narrative. I offer a justification for the way in which I seek a fresh appraisal of the nature, purpose and import of Jesus’ storytelling through these lenses, especially the last, and for the way in which I attempt to relate the Gospel renderings of the stories to suppositions about the historical Jesus.

In Part 2, we will seek to imagine how the stories would have resonated with hearers as part of an early oral performance of the Gospels, taking each of the Synoptic Gospels in turn in Chapters 4—6. In Part 3 we will try to enter the dynamics of the original oral exchange between Jesus and his hearers, dividing the stories up for convenience in Chapters 7—10 according to the spatial and temporal location given them by the Evangelists. Finally, Part 4 (Chapter 11) ‘gathers the echoes’ in an attempt to sketch the outlines of the purpose(s) of the stories as they relate to Jesus’ activity, and of the storyteller himself insofar as they reveal him.