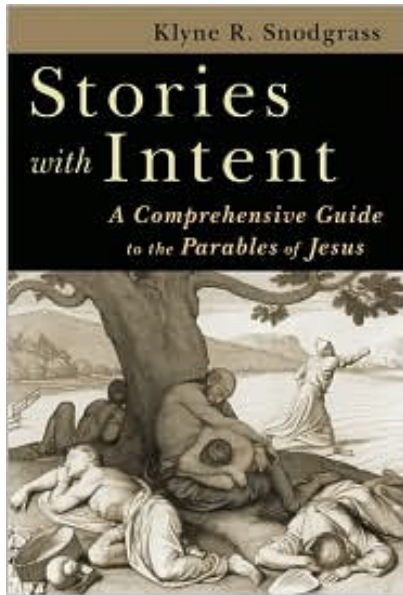


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Snodgrass, Klyne R.

Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus

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Stories with intent is a comprehensive guide to the parables of Jesus for pastors and teachers. As the title of the book indicates, Snodgrass understands the parables of Jesus as stories (expanded analogies) with intent: they seek to make a rhetorical point and were used by Jesus to explain and convince. Most of Jesus' parables are considered to be double indirect communication in that they do not speak of the hearers/readers or the subject at hand; they use other persons and subjects to address the hearer indirectly. Snodgrass suggests the following classification of the parables: aphoristic sayings, similitudes (double indirect extended analogy that lacks plot development), interrogative parables (parables that are presented entirely as questions), double indirect narrative parables (metaphoric analogies with plots), juridical parables (parables that elicit a self-condemnation from the hearer through the aid of an image), single indirect parables (example stories), and "how much more" parables (parables that say that God's actions far exceeds or is not like the person depicted in the parable).

Snodgrass identifies the following general characteristics of Jesus' parables: they are brief; marked by simplicity and symmetry; focus mainly on humans; are fictional descriptions taken from everyday life; are engaging; often contain elements of reversal; usually have the crucial matter of the parable at the end; are told in a context; are theocentric;

frequently allude to the Old Testament; and appear most of the time as part of larger collections of parables.

How should the parables be interpreted? Snodgrass suggests the following principles. First and foremost, the interpreter should be willing to hear the parable and respond to it appropriately (reacting according to the intent of the parable). Apart from this primary point of departure, one should also analyze each parable thoroughly; listen to the parable without presupposition as to its form or meaning; take the orality of the parables seriously; seek to hear the parables as Jesus' Palestinian hearers would have heard them; determine the function of the parable in terms of the general context and teaching of Jesus; take note of how the redactional shaping of each parable fits with the purpose and plan of each Evangelist; determine how the analogy of the parable works; interpret what is given in the parable and not what is omitted; not impose real time on parable time; pay attention to the rule of end stress; note where the teaching of the parables intersects with the teaching of Jesus elsewhere; and determine the theological intent and the significance of the parable.

In addition to the above, Snodgrass takes the following as methodological points of departure: The parables, as we have them in the Gospels, are the surest place where we can find the teaching of Jesus. Although in some cases the Evangelists do not preserve the original context in which the parables were told, it does not mean that they do not faithfully render the content and intent of Jesus' telling. The parables fit Jesus' prophetic stance, and the teaching in the parables can be corroborated in nonparabolic material. Moreover, since the Gospels were not written for specific local communities primarily to address the problems of such a community, but rather for a broad audience (Bauckham), they convey direct communication about the teaching of Jesus. This also goes for the introductions, conclusions, and interpretations of the parables by the Evangelists. In essence, Snodgrass thus argues that what we have in the Gospels is the historical Jesus.

Since Jesus was not the first to tell parables, the forms he used were not new. Because of this, Snodgrass is of the opinion that cognizance should be taken of parables in the ancient world (the Old Testament, early and later Jewish writings, the Greco-Roman context, and the early church). His comparison between the parables of Jesus and those told in the ancient world yields the following results: the primary influence of Jesus' use of the parables is the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament; in the early Jewish material there is relatively little that is close to Jesus' narrative parables; the parables told by the rhetoricians in the Greco-Roman world (e.g., Herodotus, Livy, Seneca, Plutarch, and Epictetus) show that Jesus' parables would not have seemed strange to Gentiles; the few parables told in the early church (e.g., Paul, Clement, and Pastor of Hermas) do not come close to that of Jesus but regularly have explanations and show that parables are effective

because of their contexts; and some parables in the rabbinic literature have close similarities with Jesus' parables, although none of these parables can be shown with certainty to have existed prior to Jesus' public ministry. Thus, although Jesus' parabolic teaching is not unique, there is no evidence that anyone prior to him used parables as frequently and forcefully as he did.

In his analysis of the individual parables, Snodgrass follows the following structure. First the type of the specific parable is identified, then issues that require attention in the interpretation of the parable (e.g., authenticity, redactional shaping, relationship to other parables and nonbiblical parallels, the importance of cultural factors, and theological questions) are listed. Snodgrass's third step is to list all helpful source material (parallels) for the parable. Then the Synoptic and Thomasine versions of the parable (if any) are compared, after which the parable's structure is analyzed. In step six Snodgrass gives cultural information that he deems necessary for the parable's understanding, and then the parable itself is explained. In his explanation of the parable, attention is given to the issues raised in step two, and his own interpretation is given (in most cases summarized at the end of his explanation step). Snodgrass's second to last step is an "adaptation" of the parable by discussing the (theological) implications or significance of the meaning of the parable (the result of step seven). Finally, as a kind of postscript to every parable, a bibliography for further reading is given.

A critical evaluation of every parable that Snodgrass analyzes in *Stories with Intent* is not possible in this context. A few general critical questions will therefore have to suffice. The first question that can be asked relates to Snodgrass's classification of the parables (e.g., as aphoristic sayings, similitudes, interrogative parables, double indirect narrative parables, juridical parables, or single indirect parables). Were Jesus' Palestinian hearers, when they listened to Jesus' parables, at all interested in the category of parable Jesus was telling? Or did they simply listen to his stories about the kingdom, stories that by way of analogy pictured a totally different kingdom than the kingdom of the Roman Empire they were so used to? Has the classification of the parables, started by Jülicher, not become obsolete? What heuristic value is there in the classification of the parables? Snodgrass's own reading of the parables answers this question: none. In not one instance is a link indicated between the kind of parable Jesus is telling and the meaning thereof. Parable research by now should have reached the point of realizing that the classification of parables is nothing more than a modernistic need to structure our world. Peasants, the hearers of Jesus' parables, most probably could not read or write, and the terms double indirect narrative or single indirect parable would not have made any sense to them at all. Moreover, a classification of the parables more often than not preconditions a certain understanding of the parables, as Snodgrass's interpretation of the Wicked Tenants indeed shows.

Snodgrass is correct when describing the stories of Jesus as descriptions from everyday life. Jesus was an artisan and therefore belonged to the class of the peasantry (although he most probably was not a peasant himself), his audience was the peasants of first-century Palestine, and his stories all came from peasant life (except maybe for the parable of the Lost Pearl). Many of these stories, however, were more than fictional. Part and parcel of the life of a peasant in first-century Palestine was agrarian life, weeds, impure mustard seeds that could destroy a harvest, debt, hunger, a struggle to live above the level of subsistence, abusing patrons who misused power to gain status and honor, elite who invited other elites to banquets to enhance their honor, the loss of land, growing estates at the cost of the peasant smallholder, day laborers looking for work, slaves, and people socially ostracized because of the temple's understanding of God in terms of his holiness, to name but a few of the experiences of the peasantry. Jesus' stories were therefore sometimes much more than fictional. It described the daily experience of the peasant in the Roman Empire and compared the kingdom of God with the kingdom of the *pax Romana*.

Snodgrass's audience of Jesus' parables are not Jesus' Palestinian hearers but the modern reader of the parables in their Synoptic context. This serious shortfall of *Stories with Intent* can clearly be deduced from the cultural information he gives when he analyzes the individual parables of Jesus. Cultural information with regard to the societal arrangements and the dynamics of the social world of first-century (Mediterranean) Palestine are simply absent. The pivotal Mediterranean value of honor and shame is not taken into consideration; patron and client relationships are not discussed; and the distance between the haves (elite) and the have nots (peasants) simply disappear in his readings of Jesus' stories. Jesus stories thus indeed become theocentric stories: stories about God and not stories about patrons and fathers who act differently in a kingdom where God holds sway, not the emperor of the kingdom of Rome. In short, Snodgrass's Jesus is an ethnocentric modern rhetorician. The Synoptic Jesus and the historical Jesus are exactly the same. Any critical New Testament scholar who takes the evolutionary development of the Gospels seriously would be unable to agree with this conclusion. To argue that the Synoptic versions of the parables of Jesus "is direct communication" of the parables of the historical Jesus (33) is mere naiveté. To this can be added Snodgrass's agreement with Bauckham that none of the Gospels were written with a specific local community in mind.

It is necessary to argue this point a bit further. According to Snodgrass, Jesus' parables should be understood in "the specific contexts of Jesus ministry" (20). This context, however, is not understood by Snodgrass as first-century agrarian Palestine, but the context given by the Evangelists, which is "the proper framework" for the parables' interpretation (26). With this as point of departure, it is understandable that Snodgrass

never questions the authenticity of Jesus' parables in the Synoptics. The Synoptic versions *are* the parables of Jesus. This is indeed a peculiar point of view, since Snodgrass himself states that the Evangelists shaped Jesus' parables to fit with the purpose and plan of their respective Gospels (26).

Snodgrass also argues that, although the specific contexts of Jesus' parables have not been preserved, the general context of Jesus' parables has. The teaching of Jesus' parables therefore intersects with the teaching of Jesus elsewhere—a simple guideline for the interpretation of the parables that is a mere variation of the criteria of multiple attestation and coherence. Snodgrass's own interpretation of the Wicked Tenants (Mark 12:1–12 and parallels) shows the vulnerability of this specific approach. According to Snodgrass, the three versions of the parable in the Synoptics are historically rooted in a particular time of Jesus' life (and thus go back to the historical Jesus). The differences in the three versions of the parable in the Synoptics are the mere result of variations in the oral performances of the parable, the allusion to Isa 5 is part of the original parable, and the Thomasine version is a later adaptation of the Synoptic version thereof. Moreover, the concern of the parable is not to raise questions about violence, since it is a juridical parable, and by necessity the judgment in the parable must be made clear. Mark 12:1–12 and its parallels in the other Synoptics in fact condone violence. In the Lukan version Jesus even instigates violence. Does this intersect with the teaching of Jesus elsewhere in the Synoptics, as Snodgrass argues? Not if Q 6:29 (Luke 6:29/Matt 5:39–40); Q 6:30 (Luke 6:30/Matt 5:49), Gos. Thom. 64/Q 14:16–24 (Luke 14:15–24/Matt 22:1–10), Q 6:20 (Luke 6:20b/Matt 5:3a)/ Gos. Thom. 54; 69b, Q 13:30 (Luke 13:30/Matt 20:16)/ Gos. Thom. 4:2; also Mark 10:31; Matt 19:30; P.Oxy. 654.21–27), Q 12:57–59 (Luke 12:57–59/Matt 5:[24]25–26), and Q 6:27 (Luke 6:27/Matt 5:44) is taken into consideration—ample evidence in the Jesus-tradition that Jesus questioned all kinds of violence. Can one, with this evidence, argue that Mark 12:1–12 and its Synoptic parallels are indeed historically rooted in a particular time of Jesus' life?

As a matter of fact, all the Thomasine versions of the parables are simply brushed aside without any real argumentation. This is because Snodgrass is of the opinion that Thomas is later than the Synoptics. This same technique of brushing aside lightly is used with nearly each and every critical study done on the parables by many respected New Testament scholars. Without any solid arguments, critical scholarship on the parables over many years is simply brushed away without giving any counter arguments. This is also the case with regard to the important insights of many social-scientific scholars who take seriously the parables as products of a specific social system, understand that the parables are products of a high-context society, and therefore try to avoid ethnocentric readings of the parables by employing an array of cultural, anthropological, and social-scientific models. Snodgrass's reading of both the Talents and the Mustard seed can here

serve as two good examples. The fact that the mustard seed was seen as impure and most probably should play a role in the interpretation of the parable is simply brushed aside, and in the Talents the possibility of the parable being a “text of terror” (a warning against mistreating the poor) is negatively assessed because Snodgrass misses the point: the fact that the master praises the first two servants is not a dismissal of this possibility; it is an amplification thereof.

Snodgrass must be applauded for this effort, these critical questions notwithstanding. Scholars with a more critical approach to the interpretation of the parables will not find much in this volume to enhance their understanding of the parables of Jesus. Snodgrass’s approach is simply too conservative to enhance a more rigorous critical analysis of Jesus’ parables; his suggestions for further reading attest to this. Pastors who want to address the burning ethical questions of our postmodern world, such as social and economic injustice, will also not find much to guide them in their endeavor. The Jesus who criticized these problems during his day is not to be found in this volume. Snodgrass, however, should be congratulated with the extensive work done on the possible parallels of each of Jesus’ parables. In this regard, the current volume will become a standard point of reference in future.

A final remark: Snodgrass is correct when he states that the parables of Jesus “are among the most abused and mistreated stories ever told. They have been twisted, shortened, subverted, realigned, and psychologized for centuries by pastors and scholars alike” (6). They, however, also have been modernized and “gospelized.” Therefore, what indeed is “required of all scholars is more caution and humility” (531) when the parables of Jesus are interpreted.