

## RESPONSE FROM THE AUTHOR

# Telling *Short Stories by Jesus* – With Gratitude for the On-going Conversation

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The word “telling” has multiple connotations. As an adjective, it signals something both impressive and expressive, something illuminating and informative, influential and decisive. As a verb, it conveys communicating, disclosing, instructing, judging, and cautioning. As a noun, it is a synonym for narration or recounting. The word, like the parables themselves and like any commentary on the parables, opens to multiple meanings. When the process works, the results are telling, in all the senses of the term. Such telling occurred at the SBL at the panel discussion of *Short Stories by Jesus*. It continues with the printed reviews by Adam Gregerman, Luke Timothy Johnson, Annette Merz, and David Sandmel. They, along with Adele Reinhartz, who so ably presided over the panel, as well as Joel Lohr and Leonard Greenspoon, the chairs of the SBL Jewish-Christian Relations group that convened the session, have my deepest appreciation.

### You Learn Something Every Day

Professor Sandmel begins his review by noting that I am not the first Jewish scholar to write on the parables. He cites Joseph Klausner, whose *Jesus of Nazareth* sits on my bookshelf, but to whom I did not turn in researching this volume. I should have looked. Klausner’s notice of Jesus as an “artist” well fits my understanding of the parables. I also should have looked, but for more personal reasons. After it became clear I was going to do graduate studies in New Testament rather than go to Law School as my mother had hoped, she mentioned to me, “I think we had a cousin who wrote about Jesus.” She then found, in my grandmother’s photo album, pictures of her, my grandmother, and a distinguished-looking white-haired man: the writing on the back, “Joseph Klausner, Jerusalem, 1955.” As best as I can determine, he was my grandmother’s first cousin. The Yiddish term describing such a coincidence is באַשערט (*bashert*), which translates somewhat blandly as “fated” or “destiny” or “pre-ordained”; it is used primarily today in terms of finding a “soul mate” or “life partner.” It appears I have a family legacy to be interested in Jesus the bridegroom. Who knew?

### On Method

Almost every academic book on parables begins with method, and so it is appropriate that my interlocutors have questions about method: authenticity, genre, purpose, and so on. John Meier's fifth volume of *A Marginal Jew* offers a hundred pages on method including an extended discussion on the use of the *Gospel of Thomas* for determining Historical Jesus material. He concludes that only four parables pass the criteria of authenticity: the Mustard Seed, The Evil Tenants, the Talents/Pounds, and the Great Supper.<sup>1</sup> He credits Luke with composing both the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan; Matthean authorship marks the Weed and the Wheat. The Jesus Seminar, which claims to ascribe to the same general criteria of authenticity as Meier but which includes voting in its method, conversely gives the singly attested Matthew 20:1-15, the Laborers in the Vineyard, a majority red vote (58, with 28 pink, 0 grey, and 14 black); they also find authentic the Lost Sheep (31/45/17/1), the Lost Coin (45/41/7/7), and the Good Samaritan (60/29/4/7).<sup>2</sup> Klyne Snodgrass, himself no stranger to method, finds all the parables to have an authentic core.<sup>3</sup> We do not agree on method, or application, or results.

We lack consensus on how or whether to label parables by genre, how to distinguish tradition from redaction, and what sources (*Thomas?* *Q?*) to adduce. We debate where the burden of proof lies: on the one who claims, "unless you prove that Jesus spoke the parables, then we must assign them to the redactional layer" to the other's "unless you prove Jesus did not speak the parables, then we must regard them as authentic." We also have wiggle room: because this line "sounds" like Jesus, it is authentic in intent if not in actual wording. Meier's "*non liquet*," i.e., "not clear either way," could apply to all the parables.

We even lack consensus on how to define what a parable is, or does. For example, Professor Merz suggests that a "parable with no positive figures at all (as in Levine's interpretation of the parable of the Widow and the Judge [Lk 18:1-8]) violates fundamental narrative rules of the genre." The "genre" is our invention. On the other hand, if anyone would violate fundamental narrative rules, a man who analogized his body and blood to bread and wine would be among the candidates. A number of parables offer no unambiguously positive figures: the widow and judge; the Pharisee and tax collector; the friend at midnight; the dishonest steward and his collaborators who help cook the books; all characters in the banquet and wedding parables... "positive" is not the first word that comes to mind. I would not want my children to date any of the figures connected to the Prodigal Son. Picaresque characters, rogues, the morally ambivalent—oh, folks like Abra-

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<sup>1</sup> John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* Vol. 5: *Probing the Authenticity of the Parables* (Anchor Yale Library; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 190.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Walter Funk, Bernard Brandon Scott, James R. Butts, *The Parables of Jesus, Red Letter Edition* (Jesus Seminar Series; Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1988), 101.

<sup>3</sup> Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

ham, Jacob, Joseph David, Mordechai and Esther, Judith....—hold our interest, are staples of storytelling, and are more likely to engage the imagination. The parable figures are more than just anti-heroes, however, since they are generally too underdeveloped to garner deep sympathy.

My very general definition of parable—a short story with a provocative message—does not include several of the logia (e.g., on “good fruits from good trees” [Lk 6:43-45 / Mt 7:25-20; 12:33-35 / *GThom* 45]) Professor Merz includes in her definition. Professor Merz takes Jesus’ comment, “What person among you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent?” (Lk 11:11-12) as a parable and consequently concludes that not all parables have a provocative edge. I do not see the logion as a parable: there is no narrative such as we find with the Lost Sheep, despite the similar opening (τίνα δὲ ἐξ ὑμῶν [Luke 11:11] τίς ἀνθρώπος ἐξ ὑμῶν [Luke 15:4]), there is nothing much to think about as the parable states the obvious; there is no surprise. I know no father who would substitute a stone for bread, and Jesus’ question presumes that no one else does either. However, a father who fails to invite one of his only two sons to a lavish celebration is an oddity; throwing parties after finding a lost sheep and a lost coin is just strange.

We also argue over the purpose of parables: are they designed to inspire, to challenge, to reveal; are they Christological or ethical or eschatological? I take my cue for parable interpretation from the broader genre of wisdom stories in the Tanakh (including the parables of Judges 8; 2 Samuel 11), provocations from the Prophets, such as Isaiah’s Parable of the Vineyard, Aesop’s fables, the rabbinic *mashal*, and so on. I find this literature serves more to challenge or indict than to comfort. Parables, at least as I am defining them (and yes, I do recognize the circular argument I’ve just risked) tend to be about how to live in the world; they are also about how we might imagine the world could be, or should be.

At the same time, I am wary of what Samuel Sandmel—Dr. David Sandmel’s father—years ago called “parallelomania.”<sup>4</sup> Jesus is neither Aesop nor Isaiah nor part of what Professor Johnson calls “the tradition of the Rabbis.” *Short Stories* does not cite many rabbinic parables; those cited serve less to add arguments about authenticity than to counter interpreters who insist that “Judaism” or “the rabbis” held pernicious views that Jesus sought to counter. The *mashal* is “like” a Gospel parable, but it is also distinct: it is typically grounded in a biblical verse; it is frequently accompanied by a *nimshal*, an application or interpretation; its target audience is other rabbis, not the public. Jesus is a “rabbi,” but he is not a Tanna; nor did he study in the academies of Sura and Pumbeditha. Professor Gregerman is correct: I should have been more precise about the use of “rabbi” in the title.

I read Jesus’ parables not primarily in light of external literature; I begin rather with what else I can determine about Jesus himself (again, of course, risking the circular argument). I find parables to be a form of subversive wisdom, following their use in Scripture Jesus would have known by tradition if not by having read the materials directly: the challenging words of the prophet and wisdom

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<sup>4</sup> Samuel Sandmel, “Parallelomania,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 81.1 (1962): 1-13.

teachers; the insistence of Torah on mandating love of neighbor and stranger. The tradition consistently challenges its heirs: how do we live? What is the right thing to do? How can this world better represent its original design of being good? Thus, the tradition necessarily both sustains and subverts the status quo. Such subversion is also consistent with Jesus' apocalyptic/eschatological as well as prophetic views: he sees something in the world that could be and should be otherwise imagined. Then, like the prophets and the teachers of wisdom, he places conventional figures in unconventional roles. This placement—of mustard seeds growing into giant trees; of sowing a field with weeds rather than just burning it down; of virgins seeking a store open at midnight to buy oil rather than having their friends ration their supply—subverts any image of normalcy. The parables make us imagine, and they make us think.

Jesus the peripatetic likely told the parables on multiple occasions to multiple audiences. Thus Professor Merz's comment, "According to my own evaluation the main rhetorical purpose of all the parables of growth seems to be assurance to the former followers of John the Baptist and the disciples of the 'Kingdom movement' that God's eschatological intervention is already in action, albeit inconspicuously" strikes me as unlikely. I have no reason to believe that the former followers of John comprised any significant presence among Jesus' followers; the Gospels even note that John kept his own disciples (Matthew 11:2; Mark 6:29). The Evangelists see no reason to contextualize "parables of growth" (itself an arbitrary generic marker; why not "parables of changed nature?") in terms of John's disciples; the Evangelists rather consistently suggest that Jesus spoke to people outside his circle of disciples, and the parables do fit a public audience.

Those audiences, the original hearers, would have received the parables variously, as once a story is told, its meaning cannot be contained. People will always hear the stories differently, and changes in audience can produce changes in meaning. Jesus' followers may well have taken the parables of the Yeast and the Mustard Seed as assurance of eschatological intervention; they may also have seen them as a means of seeing the Kingdom in the present, for example, at a communal oven in a Galilean village, or in the soil, underneath our feet.

To borrow from Heraclitus, just as one cannot step in the same river twice, so one cannot hear the same story twice, as the place of delivery (pulpit to classroom to prison chapel) and the person (age to age, job to job, love to love) will also change. As Jesus moved from place to place, he likely told the same parables but adjusted details, as storytellers and bards adapt materials to the needs of the audience. His messages would have been received differently. The rich man who hears a parable beginning "Some rich man" (ἄνθρωπος τις ἦν πλούσιος [Luke 16:1; cf. 12:16; 16:19]) will hear differently than the poor woman; younger and older sons might enter a story a different point than distracted fathers and absent mothers.

As the parables move from their Aramaic origin to Greek, changes appear, since all translators are traitors. Once each Evangelist chooses a narrative context into which to place the parable, new sets of interpretive possibilities arise. As Professor Gregerman notes, I regard the Evangelists as the first interpreters to

whom we have access. When the Gospels are placed in the canon, additional interpretive possibilities open. And new placements—in codex form; in illuminated manuscripts; in translations; with marginalia; in lectionary and liturgical contexts; in song and art and film and cartoon and meme.... —extend meanings as well. The Parables are also part of Christianity’s sacred text, and as such they should continue to speak. That ongoing voice makes the text a “living Word.” They are also forms of narrative art, and art cannot not be restricted to the intent of the artist, even if we know what that intent is. Art, too, speaks over the ages, in circumstances the artist never envisioned.

There is nothing wrong with (most) of these appropriations; Professor Gregerman is correct: the Evangelists may well have picked up on issues inherent in Jesus’ teaching. For example, all accounts suggest that Jesus spoke about forgiveness and prayer; that these motifs would be found in the Prodigal Son is possible. Yet not everything he said was about forgiveness. Jesus also noted that God counts every hair on our heads (Matthew 10:30//Luke 12:7). By shifting the parables of the Sheep, Coin, and Son to forgiveness, the Evangelist discounts the focus on counting. On the question of redactional placement and so interpretation, I would nuance Professor Johnson’s comment that I share “the premises of the Jesus Seminar, and many other students of the parables from Joachim Jeremias to John Dominic Crossan, first, that the parables provide us access if not to the actual words of Jesus, then to his actual voice, and second, that the framing of the parables by the Evangelists should be regarded as tendentious.” I do not think the parables get us the *ipsissima verba*, not the least reason being that I don’t think Jesus spoke Greek. I do not think that all redactional accretions or narrative framings muddle Jesus’ voice; but some do. Nor do I think the parables alone get us to the heart of Jesus’ message; unlike the Jesus Seminar majority vote, I also think Jesus had a strongly eschatological agenda, condemned people to hell, so valued Torah that he intensified rather than relaxed its practice, was not a feminist egalitarian, and thought his life and death had soteriological import.

All acts of parable interpretation are acts of imagination, but imagination and history are not mutually exclusive. The historical imagination I employ for parable interpretation has several anchors, which are beneath the ship of *Short Stories* but not foregrounded. For readers who want to dive in to the sea (or abyss) of method, here are my six guides.

First, parable-telling appears to be associated with Jesus but less so with his followers, and this factor commends the suggestion that he was known as a parable-teller. If Jesus did not speak the parables, someone would have to invent them. Were Luke the author, then I am surprised he ascribed no parables to Peter and Paul and that he did not import parables into Acts, as he does with the *agraphon*, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). Granted, this is an argument from silence.

Second, the parable contents fit within a first-century Jewish context. They evoke Jewish culture: a priest and a Levite necessary suggest that the third figure will be an Israelite, and so the Samaritan becomes the shock of the parable; any biblically literate person would recognize the trope of a father who had two sons;

the Temple is the place of reconciliation where both Pharisees and tax collectors can be found; heaven and hell are real places where real people, in bodily form, can be seen. Rabbinic texts contain similar stories with similar tropes—such as the workers in a vineyard discussed by Professor Metz. That these tropes are not of direct concern to the Evangelists help to secure their position as tradition. Luke is not otherwise interested in the distinction between priests and Levites; the latter never appear elsewhere in the Gospel. Aside from the infancy materials, which may be latter additions, the only other priests who appear as characters in the Gospel are the High Priests. Luke has no great love for the Temple, which by the time he wrote had already been destroyed. The idea that Lazarus could be in the bosom of Abraham apart from the redemptive work of the cross compromises Luke's soteriology.

Third, by comparing the same parable told multiple ways and by noting how distinct elements in each version relate to other narrative motifs in each Gospel, we can locate redactional concerns. Matthew, for example, tends to increase the violence in the wedding parables; *Thomas* tends to foreground special knowledge or personal value; Luke stresses prayer.

Fourth, in several cases, it appears—at least to me—that the Evangelists are doing their best to contain the parables by allegorical interpretation. My distrust of allegorical readings does not mean that I deny certain cultural references. Vineyards could allude to Isaiah 5; a “lord of the vineyard” may well represent the divine; the “bridegroom” I do think is Jesus, given that the term is a frequent (often self-) identification. But the parables are not pure allegory, and they do not require an external answer key. As I understand them, the parabolic images never lose their earthly significations: a vineyard remains land requiring tending; pearls remain lovely jewels; virgins stay virgins. However, when a story begins with a man owning 100 sheep, I do not see a shepherd (any more than I see a shepherd in the rich man who, according to the prophet Nathan, took the poor man's ewe lamb). Similarly, not all sheep represent Israel; sometimes a lost sheep is just a sheep, and that literal reading is reinforced when the sheep is compared to a coin. The message that a lost coin is about a repentant and forgiven sinner is at minimum overcharging.

Luke has a tendency to reduce women and especially widows to ancillary and often pathetic roles, and that approach marks Luke's reading of the Widow and the Judge. Luke states that the parable is about “the need to pray always and not lose heart.” This reading is, least to me, not an obvious or even logical take-away from the story of a woman who threatens to punch a judge if he refuses to grant her demand for either justice or vengeance. Luke likewise typically casts Pharisees as venal, judgmental hypocrites whereas tax collectors are just darling, as we see already by their approach to John the Baptist. Luke's contextualizations miss some of the nuances, and the ethics, of the parables.

Fifth, the Gospels hint that Jesus left parables without neat interpretations, and given this hint, the explanations that accompany them have greater likelihood to be redaction. Mark struggles, and fails, to find a consistent interpretation of the parable of the Sower. Luke's attempts to explain the Dishonest Steward have left

readers even more befuddled than they are after reading the parable itself. Jesus tells his disciples, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables” (Mark 4:11), but Mark makes clear that even the disciples—the disciples in Mark are not the brightest students in the seminar—do not understand the meaning.

And sixth, I have spent countless hours reading parable interpretation from red-marble Seminar members to red-letter seminarians, traditional historical-critical works and readings “in front of the text,” homiletical guides, and on-line sermons. All of these sources display a fairly consistent attempt to interpret the parables as presenting a break between Jesus and “Judaism,” however and if-ever defined. Far too often the message of the parable becomes not an ethical challenge or a questioning of the status quo, but a “Thank you Jesus that we are not Jews.” If the interpretation requires a negative generalization about Jesus’ Jewish context, such that Jesus becomes the only Jew interested in economic justice, women’s rights, grace as opposed to works righteousness, health care, or an undermining of anything that defines Jews as Jews and not as gentiles, my radar goes on high alert.

My quest is therefore not only to recover, through that act of historical imagination, how the parables might have sounded to their first audiences, it is also an attempt to uproot those noxious weeds of anti-Judaism that have grown up alongside the good message of the parables. Such weeds include seeing the father of the Prodigal not as the expected Jewish God of wrath but the new Christian God of love; asserting that Jews thought all rich people were righteous and would have been appalled to hear a story in which a rich man lands in hell; proclaiming that Jews were so highly misogynist that they would have found shocking that Jesus told stories about women; insisting that priests and Levites would avoid a wounded man, for to help such a fellow meant breaking the purity laws, and so on. All this is nonsense. It is dangerous nonsense. The people who repeat such tropes have no clue that they are cultivating weeds, not wheat. We may have to wait for the eschaton for all the anti-Jewish weeds to be plucked out of New Testament interpretation, but I see no reason not to engage the effort.

### Cultural Relevance

Just as there is always slippage between what people say and what others hear, so there is always slippage between what academics write and what reviewers read. In a commentary published in the *Review of Biblical Literature* (May 2015),<sup>5</sup> Jessica Tinklenberg wrote, “As an academic reader I yearned for a bit more attention to methodology....” Fair enough. My major concern with Tinklenberg’s generally positive review is her claim, “Levine is dismissive of what I would call ‘located readings’ (such as by disability, black liberation, and reader-response critics) as a whole, suggesting they are somehow less valuable a way to

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<sup>5</sup> [https://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/9937\\_11007.pdf](https://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/9937_11007.pdf).

read parables.” I have no problem with embedded cultural readings, *as long as they are not dependent on anti-Jewish tropes.*

Indeed, some readings in front of the text carry enormous profundity. For example, I have been teaching Vanderbilt Divinity School courses at Riverbend Maximum Security Institute for over fifteen years, and the social-location or subject-based readings that my Insider students raise are faithful to the text. When they read the Prodigal as having sinned and yet as forgiven, they see themselves in his position and find comfort. I do not think that was the original message, but it is true to both Jesus’ message and Luke’s reading of it.

At times, historically grounded readings can give rise to a newly contextualized appropriation. In the fall semester of 2015, I taught a course on Parables at Riverbend. A dozen M.Div. and M.T.S. candidates from Vanderbilt Divinity School met weekly with fourteen Insider students at the Riverbend chapel. When we got to Luke 15, I argued that the parables of the Lost Sheep, Lost Coin, and Lost Son are about counting and so about making people feel counted. I gave the example of attempting to make sure that all my students felt counted, that each student mattered. One of my Insider students said, quietly, “We are counted six times a day.” I only then realized that counting can serve to demean rather than to encourage; I also understood better why a sheep would want to run away; I had a different sense of how the Prodigal might have felt in his home. I am not sure that this Insider reading is what Jesus or Luke intended, but this reading is nevertheless ethically profound. Counting children on the playground and counting men on the yard have different meanings. Context matters.

Reading a parable for spiritual enrichment is fine; reading a parable to see what Jesus himself or at least his original audience may have thought is another question. I do think that parable interpretation would be enhanced by attention to the historical context of the material, to the words used, and to the images evoked. Such historical attention is also theologically warranted. To take Jesus seriously means taking seriously his own historical context: he is Jesus of Nazareth, not Jesus of New Haven or Nairobi. Readers “in front of the text” should bring their own contexts to bear on the interpretation; if they want to celebrate multicultural readings, they might also attend to Jesus’ own culture—that would create a better *multi-cultural* reading.

Professor Johnson speaks to my finding universal rather than specifically culturally contextual readings of the parables. Again, nuance is needed: the universal messages of the parables are conveyed through Jewish idioms, and for Jews hearing the messages, the universal message is reinforced by its particularistic packaging. For example, whereas Professor Johnson sees the third parable in Luke 15 as pointing to “*teshuvah* on the part of the younger one and invites such... *teshuvah* on the part of the older son,” I see no one doing *teshuvah* except perhaps the Father. The connection to sheep and coin make me wary of a repentant Prodigal; the connections to Cain, Ishmael, Esau and others make the older son not a model of repenting, but a model of one who was ill-treated, overlooked, and misjudged. By playing on biblical tropes and then subverting the expectations they raise, Jesus is very much at home in his Jewish context; by



evoking sympathy for the older brother, he anticipates rabbinic comments that recognize that Cain deserves sympathy as well. By seeing the text as a Jewish text, I can recognize the father as a parent who—like Isaac and Rebecca, and Jacob—played favorites with his children to the detriment of the household.

Lack of historical contextualization can also confuse, as Dr. Sandmel demonstrates in reference to the cultural relevance of several of my examples. My appeals to Gilligan's Island, Rocky and Bullwinkle, Shari Lewis's Lamb Chop, and Mr. Potato Head may well be lost on readers of younger generations or international readers unfamiliar with American television. The same point holds for the parables of Jesus. We cannot be all things to all people, and one of the lessons we should have learned about multiculturalism is that we speak out of a particular subject position. It then becomes the task of the readers—of the Gospels and of commentaries on the Gospels—to become familiar with the historical contexts of the writers. If readers of *Short Stories by Jesus* look up "Boris Badenov," so much the better. If they get to Boris Godunov and then to Mussorgsky, better still.

### **Jewish-Christian Dialogue**

Dr. Sandmel proposes that the parables may "be a place where today Jews and Christians might find some common bonds, or at least common challenges." The universal messages of the parables appear most strongly when the narratives are heard in their (as I imagine it) first-century Jewish context. A parable that is primarily or only about Christology or soteriology will necessarily be parochial; a parable that tells us that we need to make all people feel counted, or that how we assess our priorities and then act upon that assessment matters, or that there is greater mystery in the world than we recognize, crosses times and cultures. If we read, as I choose to read, the Bible (however the canonical borders are determined) as a book that primarily helps us ask the right questions rather than provides all the answers, then the parables epitomize what the Bible does: they help us ask the right questions. As a form of wisdom literature, they make us think. The idea that Jesus had enough respect for the people he encountered to ask them to think seems, well, food for thought.

Yet these universal messages are conveyed in a Jewish idiom. I have found, in reading parables in joint Church/Synagogue programs or in rabbis' study sessions that the material generally resonates with Jewish audiences. Jews are quick to pick up on the expected third character who follows the priest and the Levite; they are generally less likely to regard the Prodigal as repentant; they do not immediately turn to theological arguments but are more inclined to take the details of the parables as having their own import. For Jewish readers, the *peshat* remains in place.

The same point holds when I read rabbinic parables with Jewish audiences. Whereas Professor Merz uses my example of the king in *Song of Songs Rabbah* searching for a pearl to show that a parable requires a *nimshal*, my own reading and often that of fellow Jews, still retains the literal meaning. I am not saying that all Jews read (or do anything else) alike; I am however noting a particular cultural

sensitivity toward finding multiple meanings, resisting the esoteric, focusing more on the ethical than the theological, and being able to find the humorous. The parable *can* mean that Torah is important, but it is not limited to that reading. So to limit it, even by the *nimshal* itself, makes the *mashal* not only an allegory but also a statement of the obvious. The parable already works, already does something, without the *nimshal*. It sets up a king as ready for satire, and that image holds political value (I really am Klausner's relative!).

In terms of such community-based readings, Professor Johnson asks: "Are not the parables in their gospel contexts a better basis for conversation among Jews and Christians today than the parables removed from their gospel context?" The answer need not be an either/or, since both approaches have value in dialogue, just as both approaches have value in the academy. For a dialogue setting in which the Jews are less familiar with the Gospel context (one cannot presume that the Christians would be all that familiar either), abstracting the parable from the narrative context is the more practical approach. For groups in which trust has been built and for which more difficult questions can be asked, the narrative context becomes essential. The context can often lead to the recognition of how and why the New Testament has been read through anti-Jewish lenses; to hear the Gospel text through the ears of Jews who did not follow Jesus, whether in the first century or today, is a salutary exercise for Christians.

A good opening for dialogue would be Professor Johnson's positive view that "Luke tries to show that Gentile believers do not replace the Jews, but rather represent the extension of faithful Israel." I would very much like to agree with his claim (it's "good for the Jews," as my grandmother would say), but I have doubts. By the end of Luke's Gospel, the only faithful Jews are those who follow Jesus; by the end of Acts, Paul has rejected the Temple, been rejected by pretty much all Jewish communities, and found the synagogues to be places of hostility. Acts concludes with Paul quoting from Isaiah, the same Mark and Matthew use to speak of how parables befuddle if not condemn the Jewish population:

Go to this people and say,  
 You will indeed listen, but never understand,  
 and you will indeed look, but never perceive.  
 For this people's heart has grown dull,  
 and their ears are hard of hearing,  
 and they have shut their eyes;  
 so that they might not look with their eyes,  
 and listen with their ears,  
 and understand with their heart and turn—  
 and I would heal them.

(Acts 28:26-27, cf. Isaiah 6:9-10; Matthew 13:14-15; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10).

Paul's last words are, "Let it be known to you then that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen" (Acts 28:28). I'm not seeing much of a "Jews are included" in Luke's corpus. Here we have room for more conversation,

since I would very much like Professor Johnson's more generous reading to be the correct one.

Professor Merz notes, "Not everything identified as an anti-Jewish reading in the book deserves to be labelled as such...." Her point is important: determining whether something is anti-Jewish can be as much of a minefield as separating tradition from redaction. Anti-Judaism is comparable to pornography in several ways; one of those ways is that determination is often subjective. We have seen this phenomenon of "is it or isn't it anti-Jewish" played out in responses to Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ," to Sean Spicer's comments on how Bashar al-Assad was worse than Hitler, who did not "use chemical weapons" but rather set up "Holocaust Centers," to the most pernicious example, the debate over whether one who is anti-Zionist (defined as being against the idea that Jews have a national homeland) is also anti-Jewish.

It is on this matter that Professor Merz's comments on the Parable of the Laborers lead to a substantive discussion. Professor Merz, reading Matt 20:1-16 in light of rabbinic parables about laborers and vineyards, concludes, "There can be no doubt that working in the garden (of the king) or in the vineyard was a common, fixed metaphor for observance of the Torah in the rabbinic corpus. This metaphor may have been used in the same sense by Jesus." She is correct; Jesus may have used the same metaphor. The problem arises when the workers are seen as comparing following the *mitzvot* is back-breaking work or as promoting a works-righteousness soteriology. Neither the enormous difficulty of following Torah nor salvation by works is the point of the rabbinic parables. They are interested in quality not quantity; they are not describing the Torah as an impossible burden. I do not find convincing from either an historical or a narrative perspective the claim that the first hired are Jews and the last hired are, respectively, those baptized by John and Jesus. Once an answer key is required, the parable is no longer challenge but now insider esoterica.

The parable of the Laborers is not about Torah observance, although the rabbinic parallels move in that direction as Professor Merz notes. Same set up; different setting, different teacher, different meaning. It is primarily about a just wage, as the numerous historical parallels I adduce in Jewish history to the phenomenon of paying the same (living) wage to those who do unequal work suggest. To read Jesus' parables by starting with the rabbis and working backwards strikes me as a less helpful move than to read Jesus' parables in light of his own context and his biblical and contemporary contexts.

*However*, by reading the parable in light of Rabbinic imagery, Professor Merz opens a nice possibility here that I had not considered. To claim that the parable shows that Jews regarded Torah obedience in terms of back-breaking labor designed in a works-righteousness model is not helpful. But to imagine Jesus as playing with the stereotype of the those who presume themselves righteous—along the model of the parabolic Pharisee who announces "see how much I've done"—*that* would be a plausible reading. This allegorical reading also presents a humorous image of the vineyard owner/God, who still has to pay the first-hired their eschatological rewards. I can picture a "New Yorker" cartoon, with God ex-

plaining to St. Peter, “Yes, we had to let them in, but we will make sure they go through the program on diversity training.”

Or, perhaps, we are all right. I see the parables as less “meaning” than “doing”; as artistic products they do something: they make us think; they remind us of other texts. I also think that they challenge us, morally and ethically as well as exegetically and hermeneutically. They speak, at least to me, not so much about theology and soteriology. Parables speak about relationships: oblivious parents and disaffected children; the rich who see the poor at their doorstep but do nothing to alleviate either their condition or the circumstances that placed them there; the mystery and wonder of nature such that we can all sense something greater than ourselves; the focus on our ultimate concern by which we can determine what is of import and what is not; the teaching that life is more important than categorizing insiders and outsiders; the view that the good life can be found not in some distant palace or heavenly mansion, but at the communal oven of a Galilean village. They are joyous, enigmatic, wonderful stories. When heard in their first-century contexts, they speak across the centuries to audiences not bound to confession or ethnicity. They are art, created by a gifted artist. More, they encourage us to be artists as well.