

READING JESUS' PARABLES
ACCORDING TO
J. D. CROSSAN AND P. RICOEUR

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There has been a fair amount of lively discussion over the last twenty - five years concerning the interpretation of Jesus' parables. This study does not intend to cover the diversity of views proposed over this period, but is restricted to a more modest aim. We shall briefly examine the work of J. D. Crossan and Paul Ricoeur and their contribution to the interpretation of Jesus' parables. Our aim is to bring more sharply into focus some of the hermeneutical issues at stake in today's discussion. It is essential, in the light of new hermeneutical perspectives and arguments, that Biblical interpreters and exegetes become more familiar with the dynamics involved in recent interpretative efforts which influence the understanding and interpretation of Jesus' parables.

First, we shall very briefly introduce the question of parable interpretation in order to situate it in our contemporary context. Second, we explore the hermeneutical orientations in the work of Crossan. Third, Ricoeur's hermeneutical trajectory is succinctly examined. These recent interpreters (perhaps not frequently read in evangelical contexts) will serve as two examples of how Jesus' parables are now being read and how different hermeneutical orientations have influenced their conclusions. Fourth, we shall conclude with an evaluation.

1. Context

Much modern interpretation of Jesus' parables has been focused on the single idea - general principle theory that emanated from Aristotle's Rhetoric versus his Poetics and which is capably represented by A. Jülicher.¹ In adopting Aristotle's classification's as a model for parable interpretation Jülicher rejected any allegorical dimensions, insisting that parables have one and only one point of comparison. While it is true that Jülicher brought a number of justifiable critiques to the allegorical method it remains questionable whether or not he was able to offer a better alternative.²

¹ A. Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 2 Vols. (Tübingen, 1910).

² D. O. Via, Jr. *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension*, (Philadelphia, 1967), 2-22.

We have more recently in passing through C. H. Dodd and J. Jeremias³ and their critique of Jülicher, arrived at a major change concerning the interpretation of parables. As there has already been a tremendous amount of attention given to the work of Jülicher and other modern interpreters of parables,⁴ we have chosen to concentrate on what we have suggested to be our present interpretative context. Interpretation theories such as those represented by Crossan and Ricoeur have had a marked influence on the study of parables and it is imperative to investigate their positions further in order to assess their impact.

2. Crossan's Reading of Jesus' Parables

We find, in the work of J. D. Crossan,⁵ one of the most significant commentators of Biblical parables over the last twenty-five years,⁶ an illuminating methodological, literary and theological analysis. Crossan focuses on a number of questions and issues related to the interpretation of parables. We shall limit ourselves, however, to two of Crossan's particular concerns: what is the purpose of parables and why are there such different and multiple interpretations of them?⁷

Crossan harkens back to the day when there was the illusion of stability, solutions, and a distinction between world - reality and our

³ C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, (London, 1935). J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, (London, 1963).

⁴ Among the many are B. B. Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, (Minneapolis, 1989), and C. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, (Leicester, 1990).

⁵ Crossan refers, in many of his works to the influences of writers such as Stevens, Yeats, and Pound, philosophers such as Heidegger and Nietzsche, and critics such as Derrida and Barthes. One example of this is found in Crossan's book, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus*, (San Francisco, 1973), 81-82. "Heidegger says: 'Because it thinks Being, thought thinks Nothing.' It is this nothing that is, this Nothing, this Nothingness, that Nietzsche warned about with such terrifying accuracy: 'rather than want nothing, man even wants nothingness.'" The frightening challenge, for Crossan, is to dwell in the dialectic between Being and Nothingness. Crossan states, "We are frightened by the lonely silences within the parables."

⁶ See F. B. Brown and E. S. Malbon, "Parabing as a Via Negativa: A Critical Review of the Work of John Dominic Crossan", *Journal of Religion* 64 (1984), 530-538, esp. 530. "Few can claim to have shed as much new light on any genre of biblical literature as Crossan has on parables."

⁷ Crossan, "A Metamodel for Polyvalent Narration," *Semeia* 9 (1977), 106.

perception of it.⁸ In Crossan's view, interpreters now find themselves in a world with no fixed center, hence a world which therefore can be described as something of a labyrinth. Such a labyrinth, Crossan proposes, not only relates to the world, but to the play of text interpretation. Parables, for example, can

be played repeatedly and continuously. Since you cannot interpret absolutely, you can interpret forever.

..... we create the labyrinth ourselves, it has no center, it is infinitely expandable, we create it as play for play, and one can no more consider leaving it than one can envisage leaving one's skin.⁹

In the case of parabolic text interpretation Crossan takes up what he refers to as the metamodel of play.¹⁰ Play, for Crossan is characterized as a totality that impinges on all interpretation. It is not to be thought of as played off against something stable or fixed, as if there was some standard or point of reference, but is to be understood as that which defines reality as a whole. Crossan argues that play is revealed in communication through signs and that semiosis (his terminology) is a restricted system of signs that endlessly refer to each other.¹¹ All referents disappear inside signs. There is no question here of a sign to external referent relation, but always a sign to sign system that is enclosed within itself. In this sense, we can align Crossan, to some degree, with structuralism. However, his views, as we

⁸ Ibid., 107. Crossan argues that reality used to limit and prevent "an immediately dangerous and vertiginous possibility of regressus ad infinitum", but those days are lost forever.

⁹ Ibid., 139 and 112.

¹⁰ Ibid., 113.

¹¹ Ibid., 117. Crossan gives his readers two options here. He affirms the latter. "Either semiosis is mimetic or it is ludic, it either reflects a reality without it or it creates a reality within it." However, while not focalizing on these options per se, we would want to challenge Crossan on his attempt to offer an "either - or" option with regards to semiosis in what he has already argued is a metamodel - world of play. Do not either - or's relate to antithesis, rather than to infinite play?

shall now go on to further establish, are not merely those of an ideological structuralist.¹²

With regard to Jesus' parables Crossan affirms that one finds, and finds necessarily that parable is a permanence of paradox. Parable, in this sense is related to Crossan's metamodel of play as its literary counter-part.¹³

Polyvalent narration, that is, a paradox formed into narrative so that it precludes canonical interpretation and becomes a metaphor for the hermeneutical multiplicity it engenders. I would like to retain the term parable for this most profound and disturbing form of story.

There is a small room in Vienna's Schönbrunn Palace walled with mirrors. Locate yourself in the middle and you will see corridors stretching in all directions as far as the eye can see. the corridors of hermeneutics stretch as far as the imagination can reach.¹⁴

Those modern interpreters who have argued that Jesus' parables are clear - cut moral messages are mistaken as there is nothing stable in parables. Crossan disputes any particular clarity in the parables and prefers to view Jesus as the greatest satirist and subverter, "a master of paradox, and indeed of double paradox. He who finds the meaning loses it and he who loses it finds it."¹⁵ In Crossan's view, the parables of Jesus are not timeless truths or a defense of a previous proclamation, but are to be understood as what identifies Jesus' historicity and experience of God which incorporates everything else within it.¹⁶

¹² Also Brown and Malbon, "Parabling as a Via Negativa", 531-533, who argue that Crossan's ideas have undergone a perceptible evolution and one can detect the influence of literary theorists and philosophers who some would classify poststructuralist, deconstructionist.

¹³ Crossan, "A Metamodel for Polyvalent Narration," 106.

¹⁴ Ibid., 140.

¹⁵ Ibid., 139.

¹⁶ Crossan, *In Parables*, 22, 32-33.

Crossan, in his first book length venture, already views parables in intra-linguistic terms.¹⁷ The historical Jesus is to be understood as the language of Jesus and most importantly the parables themselves.¹⁸ Parables, within this framing, are not potential messages, but merely linguistic processes that have a structure, yet are lacking in content and referent.¹⁹

Parables aim to subvert and shatter, while leaving little room for reconstruction in the wake of the debris. According to Crossan, the subversiveness of parables moves readers into the Dark Interval leaving them with insecurity to face "the dark night of story."²⁰ As parables subvert, they also disorient, shock and surprise. Jesus' parables, for Crossan, destroy, overturn, and bring about reversal, but they are unable to disclose anything positive about new understanding in regards to the person of Jesus, the world, the Kingdom of God, or the hearer.²¹ Crossan writes:

"Parable is an attack on the world, a raid on the articulate."

"... parable will establish the very principle of irreconciliation and non-mediation. Parable establishes the principle of doubt against all security. Like satire, parable as such has no programmatic content. Its function is negative and its creativity is that of *via negativa*.²²

¹⁷ This means that there is no way that a parable can refer to anything outside itself.

¹⁸ Crossan, *In Parables*, xiii.

¹⁹ L. M. Poland, *Literary Criticism and Biblical Hermeneutics: A Critique of Formalist Approaches*, (Chico, 1985), AAR Academy Series, 111, argues that, "Crossan is more interested in describing how parable becomes metaphor than he is in the parable narrative itself. Crossan focuses on the structure and function, at the expense of the content, of the meanings and beliefs embodied in the story. He does not seem to see that the content, as well as the function, of metaphor is also dependent on the concrete situation that the narrative depicts and the auditors recognize."

²⁰ See Crossan's next book, *The Dark Interval. Towards A Theology of Story*, (Niles, 1975), 57-60.

²¹ Crossan, *In Parables*, 26-27. *Cliffs of Fall: Paradox and Polyvalence in the Parables of Jesus*, (New York, 1980), 94, where parables are referred to as "metaparables" which results in parable being a perfect mirror, not of the world or the kingdom, but of itself.

²² Crossan, "The Good Samaritan: Towards a Generic Definition of Parable," *Semeia* 2 (1974), 82-107, esp. 98, 105.

In commenting on the short parable of Hidden treasure in Matthew 13:44, Crossan briefly refers to a distinction between rabbinic parables and Jesus point of view.²³ In rabbinic parables the actions of selling, buying, and finding follow in sequence. All is done as it should be. However, Jesus reverses the succession making the movement of actions suspect from a virtuous perspective. Crossan argues that Jesus parable suggests a present opportunity which remains imprecise. Purchasing the field alludes to a making room for detection, but the undetectable remains the substance. The parable is an affirmation of how language is not disclosive, but subversive and non-referential. Crossan writes:

I will tell you, it says, what the Kingdom of God is like. Watch carefully how, and as I fail to do so and learn that it cannot be done the more magnificent my failure, the greater my success.²⁴

For Crossan, the answer to why there are multiple and differing interpretations of parables is because parables intend to subvert meaning. Crossan's primary focus remains on the negative. In his world, meaning is harder and harder to come by. As such, a lack of total meaning results in no orientation, no normativity, and no predication in the language of Jesus.²⁵ In the parables of Jesus, Crossan privileges discontinuity over continuity,²⁶ the negative over the positive, assuming that parabolic language is arbitrary, plurivalent, with a "void of meaning at its core."²⁷

What Crossan seems to be arguing for is that the end result of a search for parabolic meaning culminates in the acknowledgment that there is none. This is because God has unleashed, through Jesus'

²³ Crossan, *Finding is the First Act: Trouve Folktales and Jesus' Treasure Parables*, (Philadelphia, 1979), 104-106.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 120.

²⁵ A. N. Wilder, *The Bible and the Literary Critic*, (Minneapolis, 1991), 122.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 123. "With respect to Jesus' sayings there must have been some substantial appropriation and continuation of the language of the past and its meaning. I myself see the continuity at the level of denotative symbol and conception which Jesus both exploited and revised."

²⁷ Crossan, *Cliffs of Fall*, 9-10.

parables, an unrelenting attack on the very form and content of human language.²⁸ With such a view of language as relativized, deficient of meaning and extra-linguistic reference, Crossan argues that parables are polyvalent. An indeterminacy or an opaqueness of meaning, for Crossan, is paradox and paradox is entirely negative.²⁹ Jesus' parables are about negation.

Crossan's hermeneutical orientation is entirely pessimistic. He seems driven by his affirmation that since there is no absolute interpretation, one must interpret forever. While the former half of his hermeneutical orientation may be substantiated, when it comes to the latter the conclusion is assumed, not argued or demonstrated. He appears to exchange the failure of one absolute interpretation theory for the supposed success of another. Crossan practices a hermeneutics of playful suspicion which results in leaving interpreters of Jesus' parables caught within the webbing of the text, a text which overtly means and refers to nothing. Hermeneutically speaking it is important to be aware that Crossan not only proposes to interpret the parables of Jesus, but he also wishes to use them as an example of the only way to interpret the world. After having delineated Crossan's hermeneutics concerning the lack of meaning and extra-linguistic reference in Jesus' parables, we shall now turn to develop Ricoeur's position.

3. Ricoeur's Reading of Jesus' Parables

The difference between Ricoeur's and Crossan's hermeneutics will become clear in what follows. Such indeterminacy as argued for by Crossan, can be understood to some degree at least from Ricoeur's perspective, to be text boundaried. In other words, Jesus' parabolic texts have the capacity to resist a total escape of meaning and extra-

²⁸ Ibid., 20.

²⁹ See Crossan, "Stages in Imagination", in: *The Archaeology of the Imagination*, C. E. Winquist, ed., JAAR Thematic Studies 48/2, (Chico, 1981), 56, where he argues that "paradox is the highest and final stage of imaginative development." Paradox is defined purely negatively. Also, Brown and Malbon, "Parabbling as a Via Negativa", 537. "In this (Crossan's) scheme, parable is judged to be of positive value only because it is negative in strategy. He gives priority to subversion" (parenthesis mine).

linguistic referent in order to disclose as well as subvert. While Ricoeur equally practices a hermeneutics of suspicion he refuses to stop here. His perspective of a hermeneutics of disclosure may indeed fit better with that of Jesus' parables themselves. In addition, there is the possibility that parabolic opaqueness is positive.

For Ricoeur, the failure to arrive at an absolute interpretation may also be understood as a surplus of meaning, rather than a wholesale negation of it.³⁰ In contrast to leaving their readers completely in the dark, in the concave of the tumultuous uncertainty that reigns in language and life, Jesus' parables as texts have the capacity to refigure reality and to bring about a transformative new understanding of God, world and self. Furthermore, Ricoeur argues that parabolic polyvalence is not entirely open to a gratuitous free play. Texts, even parabled ones, have interpretations that can be considered more or less probable, in spite of their not being absolute.³¹ His affirmation of parabolic sense, in the Biblical text is to be understood as a manifesto related to his unwillingness to abandon an original Biblical textual sense for either the subterfuge of absolute interpretation, non-sense, or even an exclusive readerly sense.

Ricoeur works with several parables, but for our purposes we shall focus again on the very short parable of Matthew 13:44.³² For Ricoeur the parable is full of meaning. The implication that parabolic sense is found in the emplotted drama suggests three critical movements. Set in motion are: 1) finding the treasure, 2) selling everything, 3) buying the field. In Ricoeur's observation, as this motion percolates through the interpreter's imagination, thoughts, and feelings, there is a discovery that "much more" is meant, than the parable's normal situational context delivers. Finding is a finding of something, albeit and importantly for Ricoeur, the something is something given,

³⁰ Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and The Surplus of Meaning*, (Fort Worth, 1976), 45-46, 55-57.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 79.

³² Ricoeur, "Listening to the Parables," *Criterion* 13 (1974) 18-22, reprinted in: *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of his Work*, C. E. Reagan and D. Stewart, eds., (Boston, 1978), 239-245, esp. 240-241.

as opposed to acquired.³³ This expression can comprise a variety of encounters: encounter of people, encounter of death, or encounter of tragic situations, all of which affirm and disclose that our lives are not an achievement of ourselves. These various findings then point in the direction of time and a way of being in time. This mode, in Ricoeur's view, relates to "Event par excellence" in the sense that something happens, and as such, we must be geared to and primed for the newness of the new.³⁴

Parabolic sense, Ricoeur argues, is not so much to be found in the Kingdom of God, and what it is compared to, than in what happens in the story. In this case, we may infer that an interpreter is historico-critically informed as to the life setting of the parable, however, at the same time becomes aware that the sense of the parable is not entirely understood in these various situations, as various situations per se, but rather is parabolically turned towards the relevance of the plot, its dramatic structure, and its denouement, as producing meaning beyond the original context. Ricoeur clearly distances himself from the single idea - general principle theory, that emanated from a focus on Aristotle's Rhetoric versus his Poetics (Jülicher), and Crossan's theory, which argues that parabolic texts in and of themselves lack the capacity to mean or refer extra-linguistically.

As we continue through the parable, its meaning-full art is subsequently asseverated in the two further critical movements which must be linked dialectically to finding. These two movements, selling and buying, can also be referred to as Reversal and Decision. In reference to this Ricoeur remarks:

... much has been invested in this word "conversion," which means much more than making a new choice, but which implies a shift in the direction of the look, a reversal in the vision, in the imagination, in the heart, before all kinds of good intentions and all kinds of good decisions and good actions.

³³ This "givenness" is important to note, as Ricoeur, in both his philosophical and Biblical writings emphasizes the original giftedness of the "given", in contrast to the acquiring of the "something." "Listening to the Parables", 241, The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur.

³⁴ Ricoeur, "Listening to the Parables", 241, The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur.

Doing appears as the conclusive act, engendered by the Event (finding) and by the Reversal. First, encountering the Event, then changing one's heart, then doing accordingly. This succession is full of sense: the Kingdom of God is compared to the chain of these three acts: letting the Event blossom, looking in another direction, and doing with all one's strength in accordance with the new vision.³⁵

While the finder - doing, and Reversal and Decision are instructive and "meaning-full" elements in the parable, perhaps Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion and revelation are in danger of a theological under-reading of the parabolic Kingdom of God. The point however at this juncture, is that Ricoeur wants to stress that the parable is full of meaning. While it may shock, negate, and subvert, the parable has the ability to reorient its hearer in a meaning-full direction.

This leads us into the related dimension of Ricoeur's concern, as opposed to Crossan, regarding the status of parables in their capacity to refer. While Ricoeur has strongly argued for this dimension of the Biblical text, we must ask how it is to be accounted for in parables. We have seen that for Crossan the parables are referent-less, but if Ricoeur argues for referent, specifically what referent does he have in mind? Parabolic reference in one sense, Ricoeur has argued, is human experience. He states this in the following way:

Could we not say that a poetic language, such as that of parables, proverbs, and proclamatory sayings, redescribes human reality according to the "qualification" conveyed by the symbol Kingdom of God? This would indicate that the ultimate referent of parabolic (proverbial, proclamatory) language is human experience centered around the *limit-experiences* which would correspond to the *limit-expressions* of religious discourse.

The referent, we could say, of the parable is human experience, conceived as the experience of the whole man and of all men, as it is interpreted in the

³⁵ Ibid., 241.

light of the *mimetic* resources of some realistic *and* extravagant *fictions*, themselves embedded in specific narrative structures.³⁶

We shall in one sense agree with Ricoeur concerning his argumentation that parabolic discourse refers to human experience and a redescription of human reality. However, in another sense, we should wish to discover if this is the limit of the referent of such discourse. In other words, are parabolic referents exclusively existential, or is it conceivable that they also include a theological element? How shall we read Ricoeur? Is it not possible that Ricoeur's sensitivity for the meaningful self engenders a potential conflict of referents or a seeming one-dimensionalism in regards to parabolic reference and religious language in general? Some of Ricoeur's interpreters would argue this is indeed the case.³⁷ In their conception, Ricoeur reduces parabolic referents and religious language to selfhood, or a way of being in the world. While it is true, perhaps, that a more constricted reading of Ricoeur may produce such a conclusion, it is our opinion that Ricoeur's position resists such a critique in the following way.

It is important to note that Ricoeur argues that Biblical discourse proposes the referent of a new world, a new birth, the Kingdom of God, a new covenant, all of which can be said to have their genesis for us, neither in the given self, nor in the autonomous me, but in the Biblical text.³⁸ We shall suggest that Ricoeur goes even further. In our assessment, Ricoeur rightly affirms that the referent of the Biblical text, in addition to human experience and a world, is God, and that in fact, it is because God is the referent that there can be a given self in opposition to an autonomous me.³⁹ If this is the case,

³⁶ Ricoeur, "Biblical Hermeneutics," *Semeia* 4 (1975), 34-35. (*Italics his.*)

³⁷ H. Frei, "The 'Literal Reading' of Biblical Narrative in The Christian Tradition: Does It Stretch or Will It Break?," in: *The Bible and the Narrative Tradition*, F. McConnell, ed., (Oxford, 1986), 36-77, esp. 50; W. C. Placher, "Paul Ricoeur and Postliberal Theology: A Conflict of Interpretations?," *Modern Theology* 4 (1988), 35-52, esp. 43; K. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: A Study in hermeneutics and theology*, (Cambridge, 1990), 140-141.

³⁸ Ricoeur, "Philosophy and Religious Language," *Journal of Religion* 54 (1974), 1, 81.

³⁹ This is reminiscent of Ricoeur's well known critique of the self-positing subject.

then it is possible to refute this critique of Ricoeur. God, as Ricoeur has stated, is the central referent of Biblical discourse.

Un des traits qui font la spécificité du discours biblique est, comme on sait, la place centrale qu'y tient le référent <<Dieu >>.⁴⁰

In Ricoeur's viewpoint, that God is the referred to, in the solidarity signifying of the multiple literary forms of Biblical discourse - narrative, hymn, prophecy, parable, etc. - is clearly affirmed. Parables, for example, in the contrast between their realism and extravagance, the extraordinary in the ordinary, arrowingly aim in the direction, through the plot and its point, of the Wholly Other.⁴¹ It is then, in regard to parables, through the combination of narrative structure, metaphorical process, and limit expression, that God is named and referred to. This works out in the following way: the narrative structure recalls the "original rootedness" of the language of faith in narratives; a metaphorical process "discloses" the poetic character of the language of faith; limit expression supplies the "matrix" for theological language as this language unites analogy and negation "God is like...., God is not...".⁴²

We contend, in drawing from a widened panorama of Ricoeur's texts,⁴³ that it is possible to affirm what we shall refer to as a triple Biblical referent: firstly, God; secondly, the proposed world of the text; and thirdly, human experience. Thus, human reality can be redescribed, as it were, because of the primacy of the first and second of this trinity of referents always preceding the self/me.⁴⁴ The fusing

⁴⁰ Ricoeur, "Herméneutique philosophique et herméneutique biblique," 128, *Du texte à l'action*, (Paris, 1986). "Philosophical and Biblical Hermeneutics," 97, *From Text to Action*, (Evanston, 1991), ET.

⁴¹ Ricoeur, "Nommer Dieu", *Etudes théologiques et religieuses* 52 (1977), 4, 489-508, reprinted in: *Lectures III*, (Paris, 1994), 281-305, ("Naming God", reprinted in: *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 34 (1979), 4, 215-228, Also, reprinted - cited in: "Naming God," *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative and Imagination*, M. I. Wallace, ed. (Minneapolis, 1995) 217-235, esp. 229, ET).

⁴² Ricoeur, "Naming God," in: *Figuring the Sacred*, 230.

⁴³ In our opinion, Ricoeur's interlocutors focus too narrowly on his *Semeia* 4 article.

⁴⁴ This too, from our perspective, stands against those (Frei and others) who argue that Ricoeur's general hermeneutic reigns over his Biblical. It is however, not any or every

correspondence of these referents in no way eliminates their distinction, and as such, they can be understood as, "to the limit," while at the same time, "limited," in their capacity to give a totalizing perspective to that which is beyond "limit."

We have shown that Ricoeur's hermeneutics recognizes a textual meaning and reference in Biblical parables. Such a recognition engenders a valid critique of Crossan's hermeneutical theory of non-sense and non-reference. Ricoeur's hermeneutics then are able to affirm both a parabolic sense and reference, which credits the parable-story with making textual sense as opposed to non-sense, while liberating it from the constraints of an enclosed intra-linguistic sign system, without referent and therefore without the mimetic power of "re-describing" human existence. Ricoeur's efforts lead us far beyond the contours of Crossan's relentlessly negating parabolic scenario towards a vehement affirmation of a parabolic fullness of sense and extra-linguistic referent.

4. Conclusion

We shall conclude with the following points. The hermeneutical trajectory of Crossan is helpful to a degree. We can agree with some points: the polyvalence of parables, the emphasis on their subversion, shock and disorienting character. Crossan has done more than anyone to point out these traits. Nevertheless, we disagree with his ultimate conclusions. In our opinion, Crossan is over negatively influenced by a contemporary hermeneutics of suspicion and a metamodel of play that is then too comprehensively read back into Jesus' parables.⁴⁵ As a result of such a hermeneutical orientation, parables only seem to be able to confirm Crossan's views, rather than to be able to offer any

text that refers to God, nor can human experience or reality be re-described in precisely the same way as the world of the Biblical text proposes.

⁴⁵ Brown and Malbon, "Parabbling as a Via Negativa", 536 point out, "One experiences a tension between Crossan's expressed concern for interpreting the language of the historical Jesus and his concern for a certain philosophy he is predisposed to ascribe to the 'linguistic' Jesus. To equate reality with language, to locate the metaphoric center of language as a semantic void, to see Jesus' parabling as self-conscious, polyvalent linguistic play that reflects its own limits and thereby displays this void - to reason this way is in effect to come dangerously close to making Jesus out to be a first century structuralist/deconstructionist."

positive resistance to an interpretative paradigm that is imposed upon them. Crossan's hermeneutics leaves interpreters with a "world view" which in the end may be closer to his own than to that of Jesus.

A further point of difficulty in Crossan's analysis of the parables is his restricted centering on parables themselves. In our estimation, when Jesus' parables are too narrowly concentrated on there is an increased danger of a reductionistic distortion that tends to ignore the wider context of the stories. Not only do parables as parables militate against Crossan's own totalizing perspective, but when situated in their wider narrative contexts it is unlikely that they so readily support his extreme hermeneutical assessments concerning language, meaning and referent.

Ricoeur's hermeneutic of revelation moves us closer to the parables of Jesus. While Ricoeur could be more clear theologically, on the level of sense and reference in parables his work is to be commended. In turning to the theological however, we would question the sufficiency of his rendering of Matthew 13:44 in regard to the theological component of the Kingdom of God. Ricoeur is likely, in our opinion, to be correct in his view of the Event as gift, but is this the limit capacity of the symbol, Kingdom of God, as used by Jesus?

In a Ricoeurian perspective, the response to this question is to point out that the Gospel says nothing about what the Kingdom of God is, only what it is like.⁴⁶ Jesus is not to be understood as a theologian who uses concepts, but as a teacher who taught by images.⁴⁷ While this is, in some sense accurate, and we are not entirely against Ricoeur's position, it is our contention that he could legitimately say more theologically.

⁴⁶ Ricoeur, "Le 'Royaume' dans les paraboles de Jesus," *Etudes théologiques et religieuses* 51 (1976), 15-19, esp. 16. However, Ricoeur does seem to go beyond this in, "From Proclamation to Narrative," *Journal of Religion* 64 (1984), 501-512, esp. 508, footnote 14, where he points out the Kingdom of Heaven is "like", says what God does.

⁴⁷ In our opinion, Ricoeur is in danger of succumbing to the same reductionistic tendencies he critiques in others. Why not concept and image? Ricoeur's penchant to minimize the significance of concept, in this context, relates to his bias against scientific language as opposed to poetic discourse. However, Ricoeur does, in another context, stress the discourse relevance of the concept and seeking its clarity in aiming to hold understanding and imagination together in the hermeneutical process. See Ricoeur, *La métaphore vive*, (Paris, 1975), 383, *The Rule of Metaphor*, (Toronto, 1977), 303, ET.

We shall explain our position in the following way. The parabolic Kingdom of God, seems indeed to be "like" many things, but is this the case, because it is first of all one symbol,⁴⁸ that then in turn, functions at a multiplicity of levels? It is entirely possible, in our opinion, that Jesus is able to use all the parabolic images he does, precisely because the "sense" of the phrase is both conceptual and imaginal, related to and invoking a complex constellation of thoughts, feelings, observations, and imaginary processes that God is King: God "does" something and that something is to reign.⁴⁹ Jesus proclamation of the good news of the Kingdom (Mt. 4:23), and that the Kingdom of Heaven (God) was near (Mt. 4:17), and to an even greater extent that it had arrived in his person, deeds, and miracles, at the very least points to the image-concept that God was King, and that this Kingship was manifesting itself in word, deed, and action (Mt. 12:22-29), which was to be equated with treasure.⁵⁰

Despite our critique and preference for a "saying more" in regard to Ricoeur's view on the Kingdom of God, it is evident that Ricoeur's hermeneutics, in opposition to Crossan's, argues that the parable is full of meaning (perhaps even more full than he acknowledges), recognizing its task is not merely that of subversion, but also that of disclosure. Since the configured parable is full of meaning and refers, it has the capacity to reveal and to refigure reality bringing about a new understanding of God, world and self.

Resumé

⁴⁸ D. O. Via, Jr., "The Parable of the Unjust Judge: A Metaphor of the Unrealized Self," in: *Semiotics and Parables*, D. Patte, ed., (Pittsburgh, 1976), 26. Via writes of Jesus' narrative parables, as stories of God's reign. Also, R. T. France, "The Church and the Kingdom of God: Some Hermeneutical Issues," in: *Biblical Interpretation and the Church: The Problem of Contextualization*, D. A. Carson, ed., (Nashville, 1985), 38. France convincingly points out that the Jewish background of the phrase, along with the variety of associated linguistic forms and areas of reference in Jesus' teaching, shows that the Kingdom of God does not conform to any single subject sphere and therefore functions as a symbol. The point is, the belief that God is King cannot be restricted, exhausted, or entirely expressed by any one referent. "The phrase serves then not so much to define the subject-area of the statement in which it occurs as to establish the conceptual framework within which that statement is to be understood."

⁴⁹ This surely would have been conceived of, in some fashion, by a good percentage of Jesus opponents to whom many of the parables are performed and addressed.

⁵⁰ G. E. Ladd, *The Presence of the Future*, (Grand Rapids, 1974), 227-228. Also, N. Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, (New York, 1967), 76-77.

The parables of Jesus continue to be a matter of considerable debate amongst theologians, exegetes and literary scholars. This article discusses the hermeneutical tendencies and orientations of two contemporary interpreters of Biblical parables. John Dominic Crossan and Paul Ricoeur have had, over the last twenty-five years, a tremendous impact on how we view and interpret Jesus' parables. We intend, in today's context of a marked uncertainty concerning sense and referent in the Biblical text, to examine the results and limits of each interpreter's hermeneutical trajectory. Is Crossan's position that parables only subvert, shock, and disorient an adequate understanding and explanation of the parables of Jesus? Does Ricoeur's hermeneutics offer a plausible response to the supposed incapacity of Jesus' parables to have sense and reference?

The article is comprised of four parts. We shall first deal briefly with the context of parable interpretation. Second, there is a close examination of Crossan's hermeneutics in reference to reading Jesus' parables. Crossan argues that Jesus' parables are an affirmation that Jesus is a master subverter. God has unleashed, through Jesus' parables, a relentless attack on the very form and content of human language. Parables are meaning-less. Third, we turn next to elucidate a Ricoeurian hermeneutics and how he reads the parables. In Ricoeur's opinion, Jesus' parables have the capacity to communicate both sense and extra-linguistic reference. Parables are meaning-full. Fourth, we draw together the conclusions concerning both readings, articulating the strengths and weaknesses of each.