



*L. Howes*

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## REVIEW: THE PARABLES OF JESUS THE GALILEAN: STORIES OF A SOCIAL PROPHET

VAN ECK, E. 2016.

The parables of Jesus the Galilean: Stories of a social prophet. Eugene,  
OR: Cascade Books. xxviii + 340 pp.  
ISBN (Paperback): 978-1-4982-3370-5

It has become fashionable in recent scholarship to claim that it is methodologically impossible and hermeneutically undesirable to uncover the meaning of the parables of Jesus outside their literary contexts in the New Testament. Some scholars even go as far as to claim that the interpretation and application of the parables in the Synoptic Gospels are representative of the intent of the historical Jesus.

Ernest van Eck's book is an important corrective to this scholarly trend. He illustrates that it is indeed possible to unearth earlier versions, meanings and applications of the parables in a methodologically sound and responsible way. The key to his method is taking the socio-historical context of the parables seriously before even attempting to understand their meaning. Numerous ancient sources are considered for a better understanding of the historical, social, political, economic, religious, and cultural realities that shaped the Galilean landscape during Jesus' public ministry (27-30 CE). As Kloppenborg (2016:x) explains in the foreword, this process "involves a good measure of rather thankless sifting through papyri, much of it untranslated and fragmentary". This publication also demonstrates that the authentic parables did have different meanings and functions before they were incorporated into the narrative frameworks of the canonical and non-canonical Gospels.

Building on the work of important scholars such as J.D. Crossan, B.B. Scott, W.R. Herzog, D.E. Oakman, R.L. Rohrbaugh and J.S. Kloppenborg,

the parables are deliberately interpreted “from a social-scientific and realistic perspective” as “*symbols of social transformation*” (italics original) (Van Eck 2016:xxi). After the introduction, the first chapter explains and defends the methodological approach. Taking seriously the classic warning of Adolf Jülicher that the historical setting of Jesus differs from that of the evangelists, the book directs its focus to the Galilean context of the historical Jesus, making every effort to avoid the pitfalls of ethnocentric and anachronistic interpretations. Social-scientific criticism is identified as the best approach for this purpose. This includes the utilisation of ancient sources, especially papyrological sources. The authenticity of parables is determined in four ways:

- by applying the criterion of multiple independent attestation, with Mark, Q and (when appropriate) the Gospel of Thomas, as independent sources;
- by being suspicious of the literary contexts of the parables in the Gospels, especially narrative introductions and interpretive conclusions;
- by identifying ideological additions to the content of the parables, and
- by applying the criterion of coherence, so that parables are also considered authentic when they fail the criterion of multiple independent attestation, but convey the same essential message as other authentic parables and logia.

Van Eck (2016:10) emphasises that the aim of this method “is *not* to construct the ‘original’ parables of Jesus. This is simply not possible” (italics original). Instead, the aim is to identify parables that communicate the message of the historical Jesus.

In Chapters 2 to 12, eleven authentic parables are treated in turn. Each chapter follows the same basic structure. After a short introduction, the specific parable’s history of interpretation is briefly recounted. Then, the different versions of that parable are considered and a preliminary judgement is made regarding its authenticity. This is followed by a descriptive overview of the historical, social, political, economic, religious, and cultural realities relevant to the interpretation of the parable in question. Next, the parable is interpreted by taking the identified realities into account and determining how the parable would have been received and understood by the Galilean peasantry during Jesus’ ministry. Finally, the question of authenticity is readdressed, given the proposed interpretation, and a final determination is made in this regard. The following parables are treated: the Sower (Mark 4:3b-8), the Mustard Seed (Q 13:18-19), the Feast (Luke 14:16b-23), the Lost Sheep (Luke 15:4-6), the Vineyard Labourers (Matt. 20:1-15), the Unmerciful Servant (Matt. 18:23-33), the Tenants (Gos.

Thom. 65), the Merchant (Matt. 13:45-46), the Friend at Midnight (Luke 11:5-8), the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-26), and the Minas (Luke 19:12b-24, 27).

Chapter 13 concludes the book by sketching a coherent picture of the pre-Easter message transmitted by Jesus through his parables. It is found that the authentic parables of Jesus are not theological stories about God, but corporeal stories about the kingdom of God. This kingdom is not to be understood as an apocalyptic, heavenly dreamland, but rather as a present, earthly reality. As such, it proposes an alternative to the exploitative elite kingdoms of the Jerusalem Temple and the Roman Empire. It challenges the inherited politico-economic structures and social values that enable the oppression of the peasantry and poor. Hence, the parables of Jesus are essentially social critiques and political statements. Although the parables did not develop ethical programmes, they do highlight certain behaviours as typical of God's kingdom. These include behaviours motivated by alternative social values, namely compassion, non-violence, inclusion, and general reciprocity. Inasmuch as the peasants themselves live and behave differently, they too are criticised. By promoting inclusivity and social justice, the parables depict Jesus as a social prophet. Like the prophets of old, Jesus not only stood up for the poor by condemning the exploitative practices of the elite, but also broke down boundaries by including outsiders. It follows that the parables of Jesus endorse ideas that remain surprisingly relevant to our post-modern world.

The foregoing summary is inadequate to underscore the real contribution of the book, which lies not so much in the conclusions reached as in the precision with which the social context is elucidated, the sophistication with which the individual parables are analysed, and the persuasive way in which the arguments are formulated and presented. The features that earmark this publication as a work of art and scholarly contribution are essentially bound up in the pioneering analysis and interpretation of individual parables. According to Van Eck (2016:xxi),

[t]he specific contribution of this volume to parables research is that it is the first volume that explicitly focuses on the parables as sayings of the historical Jesus, interpreted from a social-scientific and realistic perspective.

This is certainly true, but the significance of the book is much more far-reaching. Many of the proposals for interpretation are novel and innovative, moving research in the field forward in important ways. The book further illustrates that it is indeed possible to uncover with methodological legitimacy the meaning and message of the individual parables before they were incorporated into the Gospels.

It is without reservation that I make the bold statement that this is one of the best books on the subject to appear in the past fifty years.

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## REVIEW: JESUS AND THE LAST SUPPER

PITRE, B. 2015.

*Jesus and the last supper*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans.  
590 pp.

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In this detailed argument, Pitre aims to confirm at least two statements about the Last Supper: The Last Supper was indeed a Passover meal and the breaking of unleavened bread at the Passover table was the focal point in this traditional meal. In addition, Pitre sets out to convince the reader that the sharing of the bread by Jesus and his disciples at the Last Supper was no accidental act, but the fulfilment of a series of events in the Bible where the breaking of bread reminded the people of Israel of God's covenant with them, and of God's faithfulness towards them.

Pitre's argument is that the breaking of Passover bread at the Last Supper was an extension of previous assurances by God to his covenanted people that he will take care of them, as communicated in the Old Testament by at least three ritual sharing and celebrating of bread during the history of Israel: the *manna in the desert*, which provided sustenance in the desert; the *bread of presence* on the table in the tabernacle, which reminded the Israelites of the presence of God, and the *bread at the Passover*, which commemorated the trek out of slavery in Egypt. All these ritual sharings of bread reminded God's covenant people that He would protect and nourish them, and that they should worship God. By the miraculous feeding of the 5000, Jesus revealed and confirmed that he will nourish the people of God likewise.

In order to convince readers to accept his theory, Pitre had to deal with a number of assumptions shared by many Bible scholars. He had to convince his readers that the Last Supper was indeed an historical event (and not an event created by later writers of the Synoptic Gospels); that the

last Supper was a Jewish Pesach, and that the historical Jesus intended to reform and extend Jewish faith by his ministry, and to found a new faith community. The majority of New Testament scholars are sceptical to such an endeavour, mainly because of the paradigm established by the influence of Albert Schweitzer who held that the historical Jesus never intended to reform Jewish faith, or found a new faith community.

Schweitzer and his followers depicted Jesus as an eschatological prophet who announced and expected an apocalyptic advent of the kingdom of God, a kingdom that will not be built by human endeavour, over some time, but that will break into the presence in some cataclysmic manner. In this apocalyptic paradigm, Jesus functioned as a prophet who announced the imminent coming of God's kingdom, as a shepherd who will look after his flock.

Pitre is convinced that the apocalyptic paradigm is seriously unbalanced. That is the reason why he concerns himself in Chapter 1 (*The problem of the Last Supper*) with a section called the "Self-understanding of Jesus" and "Jesus and the Early Church", in which he emphasizes that the definition of Jesus as a prophet describes only a part of his mission. Jesus was also concerned to build up a community of believers to replace the Jerusalem Temple cult (p. 21). Jesus was more than an apocalyptic prophet; founding a community of believers was indeed on his agenda.

Schweitzer denied this, but Pitre points out that, in his famous *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, Schweitzer refers only in one sentence to the Last Supper and then casually dismisses the importance of the Last Supper (p. 20). This reaction demonstrates that Schweitzer's own idea of what kind of prophet Jesus was and what he was not, made him blind to most of the other interpretations of Jesus. That is the reason why Schweitzer and his followers missed the emphasis of the Old Testament that the coming Messiah would be like a "second Moses". For this, read his argument on page 60, where Pitre reminds the readers of the similarities between Moses and the "Servant" in the book of Isaiah: both are called "servant"; of both it was said that the "servant" was chosen from birth; that God's Spirit rested "upon the servant"; that both communicated the Torah, and that both established a "covenant". All of this serves to illustrate that, in the Hebrew Bible, the coming Messiah is often spoken of as someone who would be a "servant" like Moses was. God often spoke to his covenant people through his servant Moses, by supplying his people with food and water, most memorably recorded in Exodus 16, where God provided "bread from heaven" to his people Israel, who referred condescendingly to that as "ma-nah" ("What is this?"). Jesus then later fed his followers by feeding the 5,000 in the wilderness (John 6:4). In Judaism, we should

remember that the bond between God and his covenant people has been strengthened for over 3,000 years by the weekly communal sharing of the sabbath bread, and annually by the celebration of the Pesach.

A second assumption with which Pitre has to deal is the belief of some scholars that the Last Supper was not a Passover meal. This argument is built on the assumption that John 13 does not clearly identify the Last Supper as a Passover meal, and the remark in John 18:28 that some Jewish leaders did not enter Pilate's palace the next day, "because they wanted to be able to eat the Passover". In my opinion, Pitre's argument that this eating of the Passover refers to the "consumption of the Passover peace offering" (p. 356) is convincing. The same goes for the foot-washing during the Last Supper, as it is described in John 13, which is not a normal foot-washing, but the ceremonial washing of the hands at the Passover table, which occurs even today at a traditional Jewish Pesach celebration.

In the later part of his book, Pitre argues that the Last Supper was not only a traditional Jewish Passover, but that the first followers of Jesus understood it and passed it on as an "eucharistic" meal. The Jewish Passover, Pitre argues, was already an eucharistic meal, as it was an annual promise to the people of Israel regarding their "restoration" in future. Pitre shows how this tradition was upheld in Jewish literature outside the Old Testament, like the Dead Sea Scrolls and Jewish pseudepigrapha. I am not quite able to voice a considered opinion on this collection of literature, but I am convinced by the references Pitre quotes from 1 Enoch and 2 Baruch, which clearly show that, in some Jewish writings of the 200 years before Christ, while Jews were subordinates to colonial powers, the Passover meal reminded them of God's promises that, in future, they will eat "with the Son of Man ... they will lie down and rise forever" (1 Enoch 62:13, quoted by Pitre on p. 456). Pitre does not interpret "eucharistic" in a technical Catholic phrase, but uses the term to remind those who partake in the Passover that the meal is a physical promise of God's faithfulness.

In *Jesus and the Last Supper*, Pitre has put together, over 500 pages, a detailed and formidable argument that Jesus intended the Last Supper to be a continuation and renovation of the Jewish Pesach. Whoever wants to participate with authority in the discussion of this subject can only do so after having carefully read Pitre's book.

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## REVIEW: LIVING WITH DIGNITY: AFRICAN PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER EQUALITY

MOUTON, E., KAPUMA, G., HANSEN, L. & TOGOM, T. 2015.  
Living with dignity: African perspectives on gender equality. Stellenbosch:  
SUN Press.  
394 pp. ISBN: 978-1-920689-13-1.

Teen die tyd weet ons hierdie is 'n belangrike boek – bekroon in 2016 met Andrew Murray en Desmond Tutu-prys – maar, weet ons al hoe gevaarlik, ambisieus en riskant hierdie werk is? As (wit, heteroseksuele, bevoorregte) man weet ek hierdie is 'n werk wat ons móét lees, maar kan ek dit noodwendig resenseer? Miskien is dit juis die bemoeienis met die vraag wat my tog vir 'n oomblik toelaat en bemagtig om te verwoord wat gehoor (kan) word met die lees van hierdie werk. Die omvang van die problematiek insake *Men in the pulpit, women in the pew?* (SUN PReSS, 2012) – “hul” (Net-ACT) se vorige publikasie en belangrike voorloper tot hierdie werk – blyk inderdaad nou net nog groter en duideliker sodat dit nie langer geïgnoreer kan word nie. Hier is 'n belangrike alternatiewe blik op hoe teologie in ons samelewing, geloofsgemeenskappe en sentrums van teologiese opleiding en nadenke gebeur.

Voor ons oor die inhoud praat, eers 'n woord of twee oor die vorm en struktuur van die boek. Die grootsheid van beide die problematiek sowel as aanpak daarvan word treffend verpak met die ryke diversiteit wat dit vertoon insake die meer as twintig outeurs, afkomstig vanuit meer as ses lande, wyd verspreid oor die kontinent, verteenwoordigend van 'n wye verskeidenheid geloofsgemeenskappe en -instellings. Die blote aanpak om van oraloor 'n wye (inklusiewe) verskeidenheid mense en perspektiewe te betrek op die aanpak van die titel, getuig van die noodsaak vir spanwerk, dialoog, proses en komplementering. Sewe keer

(in onderskeie afdelings) word gendergelykheid belig en ondersoek: as 'n saak van geloof en waardigheid; as 'n vraag verstrengel in kultuur; as 'n uitdaging tot die kerke; as 'n vraagstuk insake ekonomiese oorlewing en welstand; of as 'n saak van gesondheid en veiligheid; of as die van huis en familie; en tereg dan laastens, as 'n saak om die toekoms tegemoet te gaan. Die opstelle is nie almal op dieselfde bladsy nie – deels te danke aan so 'n ryke verskeidenheid medewerkers, asook te wagte van die grootsheid van die problematiek – wat ek myns insiens doelbewus kies om as 'n positiewe te interpreteer soos dit daarin “slaag” om enersyds onbedoeld die problematiek te illustreer, maar andersyds dan tog ook implisiet gekorrigeer word deur ander sterker kontoere en bydraes in die boek. Kortom, die blote insluitende aard waarin mense binne hoorafstand kom van alternatiewe bronne en lesings impliseer uiteindelik 'n reuse tree of twee vorentoe op die berg wat nog geklim moet word.

Inhoudelik is daar verskeie positiewe aspekte waarop ek graag kortliks die aandag wil vestig. Aanvanklik het ek nogal gewonder wat kan ek ontdek en leer insake die verwysing na “Afrika”-perspektiewe op die vraagstuk van gendergelykheid. 'n Sterk refrein deur die werk is dat dit doelbewus enige essensialistiese en veralgemeende verstaan van Afrika verwerp. Daar is deurgaans 'n sensitiwiteit by al die outeurs wat in gesprek tree met die verwysing van Afrika dat hul dit vanuit en vir hul bepaalde sosiaal-gekonstrueerde onmiddellike omgewing en konteks doen. Die belangrike bydrae in die verband was veral die kritiese omgang met die begrip “*ubuntu*” by meer as een outeur en opstel. Enersyds is daar Ester Rutoro en Maggie Madimbo se kritiese opmerkings dat *ubuntu* dikwels as normatiewe morele teorie ingespan word om onomwonde te verklaar “that it is *immoral* not to marry and not to procreate” (329). Teen die agtergrond is die kritiese insig van Ezra Chitando veral van belang wanneer hy ten einde verklaar

that if we de-patriarchalise *ubuntu*, it can be deployed to contribute towards detoxifying aggressive masculinities. ... Ubuntu-inspired men in Africa would begin to appreciate more harmonious ways of being human (280).

*Ubuntu* kan beide vroue en mans ontmens, of helend werk mits ons krities omgaan met die wyses waarop patriargie sy tentakels wyd en ver sprei. Die verwoestende invloed en effek van patriargie kom inderdaad op vele plekke en gestaltes voor. Daar is omtrent 'n eltelange lys wat mens kan opstel soos jy deur die bundel opstelle lees. En kom, ons noem maar die voorbeelde: lobola; poligamie; minderjarige huwelike; seksuele reiniging van weduwees; ont-reg van grond, werk, gesondheid en opleiding; tot (of is dit vanuit) “leringe” dat vroue nie in leiersposisies en ampte binne

Christelike geloofsgemeenskappe kan dien nie. Jonathan Iorkighir se opstel oor “heksery” is ‘n goeie verwysing in die verband waarin dit duidelik en onomwonde gestel word:

But why is it that mainly women and children are perceived as witches? The answer to this can in one sense be traced to patriarchy. ... the fear of being branded a witch is designed to keep young people from criticising the ‘elders’, women from challenging male domination and the poor from showing open resentment of the ‘well-to-do’ (109).

Kortom, die verskeidenheid van perspektiewe op gendergelykheid wat die bundel na vore bring, is van onskatbare waarde – mits ons in die proses nie vergeet dat hieragter skuil ‘n olifant in die kamer, genaamd patriargie. So ‘n patriargale diskoers impliseer byvoorbeeld ook dat daar geen ander seksualiteit as net die van (manlike) heteroseksuele oriëntasie kan wees nie (274); of selfs dat mense in “gestremd verander” (Mia Lindvelt, 287). Die verwoestende effek van patriargie strek dus veel wyer en dieper sodat dit talle vlakke van *menslike* bestaan raak. Die verwysing deur Lydia Mwaniki en Elna Mouton na die (bekende!) werk van Schüssler Fiorenza vat hierdie kardinale insig dalk die beste saam:

[such language] is not simply a matter of patriarchal, gender[-]biased dualism but of more comprehensive, interlocking, hierarchically ordered structures of domination, evident in a variety of oppressions, such as racism, poverty, heterosexism and colonialism (360, voetnota).

‘n Direkte konfrontasie met patriargie is onvermydelik, en vervolgens is die opstelle van Elize Morkel en Elisabet le Roux van onskatbare waarde. Ons moet vroue – maar eintlik so ook onself – nie verdere (dubbele; meervoudige) leed aandoen deur weg te skram om juis van “Afrika *feministiese* teologie” (in plaas van net vroue teologie) te praat nie (239); met ander woorde, bloot net te sien as nog een of ander interessante ontwikkeling wat iewers in ‘n voetnota geplaas kan word nie. Elize Morkel (126 e.v.) se verhaal argumenteer oortuigend dat die gevaarlikste posisie om in te wees nie altyd noodwendig een is van onbewus-en-ontmagtig nie, maar veel eerder die kwadrant waarin ons bemaagtig is, maar *onbewus* leef.

Die boek is ook nie sonder leemtes en gebreke nie. Alhoewel die sewe (!) perspektiewe nie voorgee om volledig, volkome en omvattend te wees nie, is dit tog ‘n vraag of ons enigsins die problematiek kan aanpak sonder ‘n liturgiese perspektief. Is die liturgie nie by uitstek die plek waar ons ander leer praat nie ... of ten minste bewus word van ‘n ander soort taal en blik op die wêreld? Nie net is taal van kardinale belang in ‘n “projek”

soos hierdie nie, maar veral die plek en ruimte waarin die Woord-gebeure plaasvind. Anders gestel: Kan ons werklik (anders) praat oor die ander perspektiewe en uitdagings indien ons nie krities nadink oor hoe ons leer praat vanuit ons ruimte en tye van aanbidding nie?

Tweedens, ek het 'n waardering vir die sensitiwiteit en belang van 'n trinitariese aanpak reg aan die begin van die bundel deur Nico Koopman, maar wonder wel oor die afwesige ontginning van die *perichoretiese* verbeelde verhoudings en gemeenskappe wat die Drie-enige God vir ons open. Menswaardigheid en gelykheid is tog nie generiese, neutrale en onskuldige begrippe in sigself nie, maar ten diepste gerig op bepaalde verstaan van magsverhoudinge. Teen die einde betrek Koopman wel 'n belangrike begrip vanuit die post-koloniale teorie as hy skryf: "I am male, but due to my hybridic living with females I am more than male" (29), maar tog kan ek nie help om te wonder of die balans reg is nie. Trouens, dit is 'n vraag wat voortdurend by mens opkom in die lees van die bundel opstelle. Belangrike name en werke verskyn inderdaad, maar daar sou tog nog veel meer van hierdie feministiese teoloë en hul werke gemaak kon word.

Bogenoemde kritiek is egter nie om enige afbreek te doen aan die werk nie. Inteendeel, eintlik eggo dit maar net wat die bundel al te goed insien, naamlik dat hiermee geen laaste tree gegee is nie, want ons is nog, wat gendergelykheid betref, ver van ons bestemming.

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## ERRATA

The Afrikaans title of the article of Retief, Cilliers & Schmidt in *Acta Theologica* vol 36(2):81-91, had a spelling mistake. The correct Afrikaans title is: DIE FILISTYNSE PLAAG IN 1 SAMUEL 5-6: MEDIES-TEOLOGIESE VERKLARINGS.

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