

Herzog's *Parables as Subversive Speech:*
Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed

Introduction

- “The parables as I was reading them made sense if they functioned for Jesus as the codification worked in Freire’s pedagogy of the oppressed. This meant that the parables were not earthly stories with heavenly meanings but earthy stories with heavy meanings, weighted down by an awareness of the workings of exploitation in the world of their hearers. The focus of the parables was not on a vision of the glory of the reign of God, but on the gory details of how oppression served the interests of a ruling class. Instead of reiterating the promise of God's intervention in human affairs, they explored how human beings could respond to break the spiral of violence and cycle of poverty created by exploitation and oppression. The parable was a form of social analysis every bit as much as it was a form of theological reflection.” (3)

Part 1 – “*The Parables of Jesus, the World of the Parables, and the Pedagogy of the Oppressed*”

1. *The Parables of Jesus, the Reign of God, and the Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

- Herzog uses Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to understand Jesus' parables.
- Both suffered consequences for subverting the political and economic order through their teachings.
- Herzog on Freire and Jesus:

“Employing Freire's work to construct a larger image of Jesus' public activity offers another advantage because it bridges the apparent gap between traditional roles often ascribed to Jesus, such as rabbi or teacher, on the one hand, and his death in Jerusalem at the hands of urban elites and colonial overlords, on the other. How could an educator be executed as a political subversive? Short of concluding that it was all a mistake, one must bridge the gap between the two. Freire's work illustrates the tie between working as a pedagogue of the oppressed and its dire political consequences. Education is not neutral; it is political to the core. In both Brazil and Galilee-Judaea, the social, political, and economic construction of reality was the creation of ruling elites, who fashioned their descriptions of reality to justify their right to power, wealth, and privilege while using it simultaneously to explain the subsistence existence of the masses. Their oppressive social orders were legitimated by this thematic universe, which attempted to mystify the ways in which they extracted their wealth from the so-called surplus of the peasants and rural poor who produced it and then accumulated it for the purposes of status display and conspicuous consumption.

Within this framework, the purpose of elite-controlled education, whether through formal schooling or informal influence and the codifying of "wisdom," was to inculcate these

ideologies masquerading as cosmology and social order. Insofar as peasants and other exploited groups accepted this thematic universe and internalized its judgments, they were participating in their own oppression. Arguments over Torah, over who was clean or unclean, over who was prominent and who deviant, or over who was shameful and who honorable involved more than splitting theological hairs; they were power struggles. Any pedagogue threatening the political role of "the great tradition" in defining the world was an enemy of the social order. To work among the masses in other than paternalistic and condescending ways was threatening. If the powerful perceived the threat as dangerous enough, they would respond with repressive measures." (25)

2. *The Peril of Not Modernizing Jesus*

- Overview of the quest for the historical Jesus.
- Jesus' parables are always seen through the lens of one's overall interpretation of Jesus and his ministry.
- Thus, all understandings of Jesus and his parables include a modern interpretational lens; Herzog is openly using an ideological lens in this book based on the relationship between oppressed and oppressor.

3. *Interpretive Strategies for Reading the Parables*

- Review of past interpretive strategies used to read Jesus' parables.

4. *The World of Agrarian Societies and Traditional Aristocratic Empires*

- Overview of the social and economic context of first century Palestine, and the rural context of Jesus' potential hearers.
- Building on this overview, Herzog illustrates that the characters in Jesus' parables are archetypes found in agrarian society, not merely abstract theological symbols.

Part 2 - *"Unmasking the World of Oppression: Posing the Problems"*:

- The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard (Matt. 20:1-16):

“Most readings of the parable of the laborers in the vineyard have generated both consensus and diversity, because they have accepted the theological investing of the parable by Matthew. This tradition of interpretation locates the parable's center of gravity in God's generous goodness, while finding the parable's prophetic word directed against the grumbling workers. The historical counterparts of those workers may have shifted from interpreter to interpreter but included a limited number of options. Whether allegorized into theological or moral types, as has been the tendency of interpreters of the Matthean parable, or identified with historical groups, as has been the tendency of interpreters of the parable as a Jesus parable, the laborers remain the villains of the story. Their villainy was an inevitable outcome of the construal of the "lord of the vineyard" as a God figure. Once he had been so identified, his words had to be justified, and the laborers' words and actions had to be censored or condemned. The reading of the parable proposed here differs because it does not begin with the identification of the vineyard owner with God. Once the *oikodespotes* can be seen as a member of an oppressing elite class, his actions and words are open to scrutiny. This examination, then, frees the interpreter to cast a different eye on the workers and, above all, to hear their complaints

in a different light. In light of this reading, it would seem that the dative introduction to the parable (“for the kingdom of heaven is like”) is a Matthean construction. This is certainly my first instinct. It is possible that the introductory phrase is meant ironically or sarcastically: “So this is what the reign of heaven is going to be like . . . more of the same oppression and exploitation!” In this case, the parable codifies the incongruity between the coming reign of heaven and the earthly systems of oppression that stake their claims to legitimacy on it and pretend to be the guardians of its values in this age. It seems more likely that the parable of Jesus did not include this reign of heaven reference, but a case could be made for its inclusion.” (96-97)

- *The Parable of the Wicked Tenants (Mark 12:1-12), The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant (Matt. 18:23-35), The Parable of the Talents (Matt. 25:14-30; Luke 19:11-27):* Herzog sees these parables as attempts to raise hearers' consciousness of oppression, linking this to Freire's conception of *conscientization*.

Part 3 - "**Opening Up New Possibilities: Challenging the Limits**":

- *The Parable of the Pharisee and the Toll Collector (Luke 18:9-14), The Parable of the Friend at Midnight (Luke 11:5-8), The Parable of the Unjust Judge (Luke 18:1-8), The Parable of the Dishonest Steward (Luke 16:1-9):* Herzog interprets this set of parables as Jesus' attempt to open up new possibilities for action, or a conversion in *praxis*, to lead to social transformation.

Concluding Remarks

- “The anchoring of parables in everyday life indicates one arena for beginning reflection. This kind of theologizing begins not with the mysteries of God but with the perplexities of daily life. If we could master the art of codifying our daily lives as effectively as Jesus encoded his context, we would have rich materials on which to build our common theological and ethical reflection. The codification is a means to an end, not an end in itself. It enables a people so caught up in their context that they hardly see it to step back and gain perspective. As this occurs, social analysis and theological reflection emerge as distinct yet related moments in a dialectical and dialogical process.

When this occurs, the people of God could discover a different kind of spirituality not confined to an ethereal realm beyond space and time but rooted in and growing out of their historical and social context. Justice and justification, righteousness and right relations, gospel and social gospel, social analysis and spiritual reflection are dimensions of a single whole, not antithetical opposites. The discussions of the parable-codification studied here have demonstrated how integral such codifications can be.

Placed in this perspective, the parables not only disclose previously unexamined dimensions of Jesus' ministry but may hold clues to our own ministry as well.” (265-266)