



Snodgrass, Klyne R.

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

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth
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Klyne R. Snodgrass is Paul W. Brandel Professor of New Testament Studies at North Park Theological Seminary in Chicago, IL. Although this is not his first book, it is the first book of his that I've read. However, my introduction to his writing came last year when I obtained a copy of *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (IVP, 1992) and I read his article on "Parable" (p. 591-601). At the time I had no idea who K. R. Snodgrass was but I remember thinking to myself, "wow, that article was quite detailed." At 10½ pages it far exceeded anything written in any of my other Bible dictionaries. Compare this with the various entries on "Parable(s)" in the following dictionaries:

1. *Illustrated Dictionary of the Bible* (Thomas Nelson, 1986) — p. 798-800
2. *Hastings' Dictionary of the Bible* (Hendrickson, rpt. 2001) — p. 679-681
3. *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Holman, 2003) — p. 1244-1247
4. *Baker Theological Dictionary of the Bible* (Baker, 1996) — p. 588-590
5. *Richards Complete Bible Dictionary* (Word, 2002) — p. 754-756

While all of these volumes are comparable to one another, they don't even come close to the Snodgrass' article in *DJG*. I said all that to say this: imagine that 10½ page article times 50 with another 267 pages of notes reflecting an additional decade-and-a-half of research and reflection! That's what we have with *Stories with Intent*, and after reading through various portions of this volume for the last three months I can truly say that the subtitle "comprehensive" is the proper descriptor for it.

Snodgrass isn't content to merely interpret the parables for the reader, rather he begins with a 35 page "Introduction to the Parables of Jesus" (1-35) where he answers foundational questions such as "What is a parable?;" "How should parables be classified?;" "What about allegory?;" and "How should parables be interpreted?;" He also discusses the distribution of the parables, the characteristics of Jesus' parables, and finally issues related to New Testament criticism, where Snodgrass says with regard to

the authenticity of Jesus' parables: "*I am convinced, however, that the parables are the surest place where we have access to Jesus' teaching.*" (31)

Snodgrass includes another section before he begins interpreting the parables on "Parables in the Ancient World" (37-59) in which he gives the reader a brief overview of parables in the Old Testament, early Jewish writings (e.g., the *Story of Ahikar*; *1 Enoch*; *Joseph and Aseneth*; etc.), Greco-Roman writings, the early Church, and finally later Jewish writings (i.e., rabbinic literature). This foundation plays a vital role in the rest of the book because it serves as the template for the treatment of each individual parable.

Rather than going through each Gospel and handing every parable as it turns up, Snodgrass has opted for a thematic grouping. So the parables are separated according to their inherent themes, i.e.:

- Grace and Responsibility
- Parables of Lostness
- The Parable of the Sower and the Purpose of Parables
- Parables of the Present Kingdom
- Parables Specifically about Israel
- Parables about Discipleship
- Parables about Money
- Parables concerning God and Prayer
- Parables of Future Eschatology

Under each of these section headings he treats the individual parables, grouping together the double and triple synoptic material while pointing out differences in the synoptic material when significant. Each treatment follows the same format outlined above beginning by stating the type of parable (e.g., "juridical" i.e. a "*particular type of double indirect narrative parable*" (11); "interrogative;" "aphoristic saying;" "similitude;" etc.). Snodgrass then turns to the issues that require attention at which time he asks a series of questions that the reader is to keep in mind while working through the text. This is followed by a listing of helpful primary source material in which Snodgrass directs the reader to relevant passages from the OT, early Jewish writings, Greco-Roman writings, early Christian writings, and later Jewish writings when applicable. I really appreciated that Snodgrass listed the passages in question rather than simple citations; this saves a lot of time in running down references. In the case of the double and triple synoptic material, Snodgrass does a comparison of the accounts before moving on to discussing the textual features worthy of attention. The final thing addressed before moving into interpretation is relevant cultural information.

Once Snodgrass is ready to interpret the parable, the reader is already armed with a solid base from which to work through the text in question. When we get down to finally interpreting the parables we are treated to various options for interpretation and from here all of the "issues requiring attention" (i.e., the series of questions asked in the beginning of each parable) are addressed. After answering all of these questions Snodgrass shifts

attention to “adapting the parable” (i.e., life application). I found myself deeply satisfied with his comments at the end of the Good Samaritan:

Adapting some parables, and certainly this one, is obvious: Just do it! Yet, some scholars and preachers shy away from any thought of morals, fearful that a concern for morals leads to “do-goodism,” hypocrisy, and an attempt to earn salvation, all obvious failures to follow Jesus. Moralism and telling people to be good are not the answer, but if we do not intend to tell people how to live, why bother with teaching or preaching? Jesus (and all the NT writers) certainly did not hesitate to instruct people about how they should live. We are doomed to failure as long as the church refuses to take seriously what Jesus actually said about lifestyle issues, keeping the commands, loving one’s enemies, helping the poor, and doing the will of the Father. Parables do not spell out every aspect of their theologies, but the presupposition of this one is of life in covenant relation with God, not just being good on one’s own. (359)

I think that Snodgrass has touched upon what I perceive to be a major problem in theology in general, and that’s in trying to go deeper the interpreter entirely misses what’s on the surface. This is also something that Snodgrass touches on in the book’s introduction where he notes the tendency of some of the fathers (e.g., Augustine) to over-allegorize the parables (4). By doing this and imposing meanings that were never intended, the plain meaning was missed.

Each parable treatment is closed out with a select bibliography of further reading material. Other features worth mentioning are the six appendices:

1. Occurrences of παραβολή (*parabolē*) in the NT
2. Occurrences of the Verb מָשַׁל (*māšal*) in the OT
3. Occurrences of the Noun מָשַׁל (*māšal*) in the OT
4. Occurrences of παραβολή (*parabolē*) in the LXX
5. Occurrences of παραβολή (*parabolē*) in the Apostolic Fathers
6. Classification of Parables

There are also two indices, one of authors and another of ancient works cited. In addition to this there is a bibliography of primary and secondary source material on top of the further reading lists at the end of each parable. The absolute worst and most unforgivable feature of this book is the 267 pages of end notes! I don’t know what the reasoning behind this decision was. This is a reference book, plain and simple. I imagine that someone could read it straight through but I can’t imagine that many people would, so I can’t think of a single legitimate reason to use end notes as opposed to footnotes in this volume. It’s not as if they’d interrupt the flow if they were there. For this reason I cannot give this book the near perfect rating that I think it deserves. I will however recommend it to anyone interested in the subject with the recognition that it will stand at the pinnacle of reading material on Jesus’ parables for a very long time. In fact, I can’t

see this work ever being surpassed, but I'm sure that someone said that of Snodgrass' predecessors.