

The Vulnerability of the Literalist: A Critique of William R. Herzog II's Interpretation of the Parable of the Talents

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Abstract: This article first describes and then critiques William R. Herzog II's interpretation of the parable of the Talents. Herzog, by means of a comparison between Jesus' use of parables and Paulo Freire's codifications, and utilising much from the social-sciences, analyses the parable in the context of a first century urban elite's household. The hero of the parable, according to Herzog, is the third servant who refuses to exploit the peasants for the benefit of his master and himself. However, Herzog's rejection of the use of allegory and the Gospel contexts in which the parable is found, and the weakness of the comparison with Paulo Freire, ultimately leads to the rejection of this interpretation. Yet much of the social-scientific material that he presents can still inform a contemporary understanding of the parable.

INTRODUCTION

WILLIAM R. HERZOG II'S SOCIAL-SCIENTIFIC ANALYSIS of the parable of the Talents is becoming more popular as it is becoming better known. There were antecedents,¹ but Herzog's book *Parables As Subversive Speech: Jesus As Pedagogue Of The Oppressed*² went a long way towards putting this approach onto a more popular footing. Since the publication of this book Herzog's interpretation has been flowing down to the wider

1. Examples prior to Herzog include Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992) 148-150; Richard L. Rohrbaugh, "A Peasant Reading of the Parable of the Talents/Pounds: A Text of Terror?", *Biblical Theological Bulletin* 23 (1993) 32-39; Robert T. Fortna, "Reading Jesus' Parable of the Talents through Underclass Eyes", *Foundations & Facets Forum* 8/3-4 (1992) 211-228; and Megan McKenna, *Parables: The Arrows of God* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1994).

2. William R. Herzog, II, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994).

church by means of sermons, magazine articles,³ and even the Internet.⁴ In short, Herzog attempts to uncover the original meaning of the parable as intended by Jesus, within a wider reconstruction of Jesus' ministry modelled on the modern educator Paulo Freire, by utilising a social-scientific analysis of advanced agrarian societies. In response, this article will critique Herzog's underlying presuppositions and methodology as well as the resulting interpretation of the parable of the Talents.

A PRESENTATION OF HERZOG'S INTERPRETATION The Hypothesis

Herzog begins his examination of the parables by asking "What if the parables of Jesus were neither theological nor moral stories but political and economic ones? What if the concern of the parables was not the reign of God but the reigning systems of oppression that dominated Palestine in the time of Jesus?"⁵ He refers to his study as an "experiment in reading the parables".⁶ In other words, he openly acknowledges the hypothetical nature of his work.

The first consequence of Herzog's hypothesis is that the parables must be removed from their Gospel contexts using historical-critical methods, namely form and redaction criticism. This is because the parables as they are found in the Gospels clearly serve the theological and ethical concerns of the Gospel writers, and if Jesus' concerns were different then this needs to be made explicit.⁷ This, then, is essentially an *a priori* assumption of Herzog's methodology.

The second consequence of Herzog's hypothesis is that the presence of allegory in the parables is the responsibility of the Gospel writers not Jesus. The Gospel writers "selectively invested them with theological and ethical meanings consistent with their larger themes and concerns".⁸ They did this by allegorising certain characters and details, although this was done selectively, with inconsistent and incomplete results. This is, perhaps, the most intriguing aspect of Herzog's work. Unlike many scholars in the history of parable interpretation who explicitly reject the presence of allegory but then still implicitly interpret them using allegorical referents, Herzog is truly non-allegorical. If the

3. Eric De Bode and Ched Myers, "Towering Trees and 'Talented' Slaves", *The Other Side* (May 1999).

4. For example, the Wikipedia page for the parable of the Talents has a section dedicated to discussing Herzog's interpretation: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parable_of_the_Talents (true as of June 2008).

5. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 7.

6. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 7.

7. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 3-4.

8. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 11-12.

parables describe wealthy exploiters of the peasants, then the parables must be about the exploitation of the peasants by the wealthy.

Jesus and Paulo Freire

Herzog raises an important issue with respect to the interpretation of Jesus' parables when he notes that any study of Jesus' parables will be predicated on some larger understanding of what Jesus' public work was all about.⁹ He also notes that most models used are more often than not contemporary ones, that is, contemporary to the interpreter. Consequently, Herzog himself has made recourse to his own contemporary model: the modern educator Paulo Freire:

This study of Jesus' parables follows that precedent by using the work of a modern educator, Paulo Freire, as a paradigm for understanding Jesus of Nazareth. In particular, this study compares both the larger social role each one has played as pedagogue of the oppressed and their use of analogous communication tools, the codification and the parable. Freire used codifications as tactics in his larger educational strategy, and in similar fashion, Jesus used parables for tactical purposes related to the strategy of his larger public activity.¹⁰

After noting the somewhat obvious differences between the two figures,¹¹ Herzog details the basis for his comparison. Both worked with poor and oppressed peoples and both worked with peasants; both lived in what sociologists call advanced agrarian societies; both ministered in societies affected by colonial exploitation that continued to shape the life of its inhabitants.¹² Most importantly, both can be identified as teachers who worked with "the illiterate, the marginalized, and the poor, with peasants and villagers in the countryside"¹³ and who therefore dealt with issues of interest to their "students". Finally, both men were considered politically subversive, and both suffered political consequences because of their work. Freire was imprisoned and then exiled

9. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 14.

10. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 16.

11. Jesus did not launch a literacy campaign in Galilee and Judaea. Whilst both were educators, Jesus was a first-century rabbi and Freire is a twentieth-century university professor. Their cultural influences and ideological commitments are as distinct as their historical settings: Freire's influences range from Karl Marx to Sigmund Freud, from existentialism to humanistic psychology, from structuralism to liberation theology; Jesus' central influence was the Torah (Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 16-17.)

12. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 25.

13. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 26.

by a fascist military regime; Jesus was tortured and crucified by the Roman Empire.

On the basis of this comparison between Freire and Jesus, Herzog concludes that the parables of Jesus “encode generative themes and objectify conditions of oppression so that they can be examined.... They re-present a familiar or typified scene for the purpose of generating conversations about it and stimulating the kinds of reflection that exposes contradictions in popularly held beliefs or traditional thinking.”¹⁴ The parables

were meant to be discussion-starters, whose purpose was to raise questions and pose dilemmas for their hearers. They were open-ended stories that invited their hearers to enter into conversation for the purposes of exploring the social scenes they presented and connecting the hearers to the realities of their lives and the larger systemic realities in which they were caught.¹⁵

The Social-Sciences

Herzog provides modern parable scholarship with important background information concerning the social setting of first-century Palestine.¹⁶ Of special interest to the interpretation of the parable of the Talents is his discussion concerning “retainers”. These were men who served the ruler and the ruling class; they were the functionaries who implemented the exploitative and oppressive policies of the elites. Their most important function was to identify the surplus produced by the peasants, artisans, and other villagers and to transfer it to the control of the ruler. As such, they were the agents of redistribution in the economy. But they had another important function: because they served as intermediaries between the elite and the peasants they also shielded the elite from violence and resentment, and would take the blame if a serious problem arose. Their salaries were usually low but they supplemented this through “honest graft”.¹⁷

Herzog also draws attention to the way these retainers would increase the wealth of their masters. A landowner could demand rent from the peasants working his land in cash rather than a proportion of the produce. If they were unable to repay the loan this resulted in foreclosure and their removal from the land. This land would then be

14. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 26.

15. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 259.

16. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 53-73.

17. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 61.

added to the holdings of the elite who provided the loan.¹⁸ Of course, it would be the retainers who would actually mediate all this. The retainers would also bargain with merchants for the rights to transport the landowner's produce. Again, there were ways they could take their own cut, as well as ensuring profits for their master.¹⁹

Herzog's Interpretation

The central problem of the interpretation of the parable of the Talents, as Herzog sees it, is that the master has always been seen as referencing God. However, this renders the third servant's characterisation of the master as "a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed" (Matt 25:24) problematic.²⁰ The most common solutions are to denigrate the servant's words,²¹ or to say that Jesus is presenting two opposing views between which the hearer has to choose.²² However, many scholars note that the master of the parable still seems rather rapacious, and that therefore he cannot possibly represent God. This is enough justification for Herzog to abandon the allegorical, theological interpretation in favour of a literal, sociological one. He therefore interprets the parable within the setting of the household of a very wealthy urban elite.

Herzog divides the parable into three scenes. The opening scene depicts a wealthy aristocrat assigning to three retainers proportions of his assets according to their status in the household hierarchy (Matt 25:14-15). However, these retainers are his most trusted inner-circle, since even one talent was "no mean amount of money to place in another's hands".²³ Furthermore, it is not likely to be a test of some kind. It does, however, provide an opportunity for the retainers to consolidate or even enhance their standing.

18. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 72.

19. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 249-51.

20. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 154.

21. For example, Dan Otto Via Jr., *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967) 118-119, says that the third servant projects his own repressed guilt onto the master. Alternatively, John R. Donahue, *The Gospel In Parable* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 108, says that the third servant has fearfully misread the master's magnanimity.

22. For example, Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989) 233, sees it as a choice between two competing images of God.

23. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 158-59. A talent was a measure of weight and so as a monetary unit it would refer to a certain amount of gold, silver or even copper. It is usually equated to about 6,000 denarii, where a denarius was a labourer's daily wage. (See W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (ICC; 3 vols. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988-97) 3.405.

The second scene concerns the business venture (Matt 25:16-18). The first two servants immediately put their master's money to use, presumably by exploiting the lower classes either by charging interest on loans for crops using the land as collateral (and foreclosing if the crops didn't cover the incurred indebtedness) or by extracting raw goods from the peasants controlled by the household and trading. Either way, the first two servants "both use the same exploitive economy to increase the plunder that constitutes the master's wealth"²⁴ Herzog also reports earlier studies regarding the implied investment returns: the master would have expected a profit of 100%.²⁵ However, once the retainer had "doubled his money" and thus secured the master's investment, any further profit could be surreptitiously considered his own.

They are always walking a tightrope, keeping the master's gain high enough to appease his greed and not incur his wrath while keeping their own accumulations of wealth small enough not to arouse suspicion yet lucrative enough to insure their future. The master knows the system too, and as long as the retainers keep watch of his interests and maintain a proper yield, he does not begrudge their gains.²⁶

The third servant, however, buries the master's money in the ground, which was a recognised method of preserving capital.²⁷ Interestingly, there is no "editorial" comment made at this point in the parable; the third servant's motivation for not emulating the behaviour of the first two servants only emerges later.

The final scene is the reckoning (Matt 25:19-30). The first two servants are rewarded as expected: "They have both calculated correctly; the 100 percent profit is pleasing to the master. He responds accordingly by

24. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 161.

25. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 160.

26. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 160.

27. Josephus refers to "the gold and the silver, and the rest of that most precious furniture which the Jews had, and which the owners had treasured up under ground, against the uncertain fortunes of war" (*War*, 7:115). Rabbinic literature, while coming from a later period than the Gospels, makes it clear that burying money was perfectly safe: "Samuel said: Money can only be guarded [by placing it] in the earth" (*Baba Mesi'a* 42a). A footnote in the Soncino translation says, "Otherwise the bailee is guilty of negligence – In ancient days there was probably no other place as safe." See also Aesop's parable, "The Miser", in which a miser sells all his property to buy a mass of gold that he buries in a secret place. The plan is only foiled because he keeps coming back to inspect it, thus leading someone to the location who subsequently steals the gold (quoted in Brad H. Young, *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation* [Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 1998] 92.)

promising them bigger and better responsibilities in the future."²⁸ However, this masks the ugly realities hidden within the profit margin: the two servants are "good" "because they have proven to be effective exploiters of the peasants"²⁹ The master's response ("You have been faithful in a few things") may have involved conspicuous down-play in an attempt to impress the retainers, but the ruling classes did control the vast majority of the wealth such that talents were "a few things". Furthermore, the "Enter into the joy of your master" implies that he knows about their extra monetary dealings, suggesting that he is "inviting his clients into a celebration of their plenty in the midst of others' deprivation and want".³⁰

The third retainer, however, is the focus and, according to Herzog, the hero of the parable.³¹ His prior action was the best available precaution against theft and liability and establishes him as prudent and sober. But it does not prepare the hearers for what follows. His speech to the master would have astonished them for its brutal honesty. He is quite explicit that the master is an exploiter, living off the productive labour of others (25:24-25). The master does not deny this (25:26-27). However, the retainer's words "expose the sham of what has transpired and place it under the unobstructed light of clear analysis and prophetic judgment".³² He has become a "whistle-blower".³³ Punishment is immediate. "Having spoken the truth, the servant must be vilified, shamed, and humiliated so that his words will carry no weight."³⁴ The retainer is expelled from the household to become a day-labourer (25:30).

Herzog concludes that the parable's codification creates empathy for the third retainer in Jesus' peasant audience. However, how the parable actually *applies* to them is barely touched on. All Herzog can say is: "To the hearers, the codification also posed critical issues. How would you react to a whistle-blower? Would a former retainer find a welcome in a peasant village? Or would the former hostilities suffocate even the possibility of a latter-day coalition?"³⁵

28. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 163.

29. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 163.

30. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 163.

31. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 167.

32. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 165.

33. Herzog's title for the chapter dealing with this parable is "The Vulnerability of the Whistle-blower".

34. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 165.

35. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 167.

THE CRITIQUE OF HERZOG'S INTERPRETATION
The Hypothesis

The most striking thing about all of Herzog's interpretations of the parables he examines in his book is their thoroughly non-allegorical nature.³⁶ However, despite strident argumentation in the past against the validity of discerning intentional allegory in Jesus' parables, such a narrow position is no longer tenable. Furthermore, there are a number of studies coming out that compare Jesus' parables with those found in rabbinic literature.³⁷ As Craig L. Blomberg says,

Arguing that social and economic issues should (and could) be divorced from theological interpretations proves highly anachronistic. Given the unvarying use of masters to stand for God in hundreds of rabbinic parables, it is almost inconceivable that Jesus should have intended anything otherwise without some far clearer indication in one of his stories somewhere.³⁸

Many of these rabbinic parables involve a king and his subjects, or a master and his servants, and they also make it clear that these characters are supposed to represent God and the people of Israel. In the same way, when Jesus uses a king and his subjects, or a master and his servants, he is not merely making a political or economic statement; he is using stock characters with familiar allegorical meanings.³⁹

Perhaps it is simply the weight of tradition and familiarity, but it is hard to get away from how appropriately the parables fit the allegorisation which Herzog claims have been imposed on them by the Gospel writers. It is nearly impossible to read the parable of the Wicked Tenants (Mark 12:1-9) without making the various allegorical references: the owner as God, the vineyard as Israel, the tenants as Israel's religious leaders, the servants as the prophets, and the son as Jesus. These references appear to be so natural. Herzog's interpretation, that the

36. For example, the Workers in the Vineyard (Matt 20:1-16) codifies the exploitation of day-labourers (Herzog, *Parables*, 95); the Wicked Tenants (Mark 12:1-9) codifies the spiral of violence by describing a local peasant revolt (and its futility) on a great estate (113); the Unforgiving Servant (Matt 18:23-35) demonstrates that even if a king of messianic stature forgave debts of unimaginable proportions, he could not transfer that mercy to the bureaucratic system that encased his rule (148).

37. For example, Young, *The Parables* (n. 27 above).

38. Craig L. Blomberg, "Poetic Fiction, Subversive Speech, and Proportional Analogy in the Parables: Are we making any Progress in Parable Research?", *Horizons In Biblical Theology* 18 (1996) 115-32, esp. 121-22.

39. Young, *The Parables*, 91.

parable serves to codify the futility of peasant revolts, comes across as rather banal.⁴⁰

We could also refer backwards from Jesus' time to the parables found in the Old Testament.⁴¹ Whilst some of these may have been political or economic in nature,⁴² most were theological or ethical. What is certainly true is that these parables, even the political and economic ones, are allegorical in nature. Take, for example, the Poor Man's Only Lamb (2 Sam 12:1-4). Following Herzog's method, we could posit that this parable had prior existence as a purely economic parable – one that was entirely non-allegorical in nature – which detailed the way in which the wealthy exploit the poor, but that Nathan "selectively invested [it] with theological and ethical meanings consistent with [his] larger themes and concerns",⁴³ namely, David's adulterous relationship with Bathsheba. However, such a reconstruction is patently absurd. As such, we should be somewhat reluctant to hypothesise as Herzog does that Jesus eschewed allegory entirely.

Jesus and Paulo Freire

There are also reasons for not wanting to push the comparison between Jesus and Paulo Freire as far as Herzog pushes it. Firstly, if Jesus' parables were supposed to stimulate discussion about how to respond to the exploitation and oppression that they allegedly codified then it is surprising that there is not a hint anywhere in the early Christian tradition that this was how they were originally used.⁴⁴ Herzog has perhaps anticipated this particular criticism when he says that the parables "were used to invite conversation and to lure their hearers into the process of decoding and problematizing their world. But there are no records of the conversations that they generated. No

40. As Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2008) 582, n.39, says; "William Herzog's suggestion that Jesus' parables were discussion starters does no justice to their power and pointedness."

41. See the discussion in John W. Sider, *Interpreting the Parables: A Hermeneutical Guide to their Meaning* (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1995) 193-207, 251-252, and Birger Gerhardsson "The Narrative Meshalim in the Synoptic Gospels: A Comparison with the Narrative Meshalim in the Old Testament", *New Testament Studies* 34 (1988) 339-63. Gerhardsson identifies only five narrative meshalim: Jotham's mashal of the Trees (Judg 9:7-15), Nathan's mashal of the Poor Man's Only Lamb (2 Sam 12:1-4), Jehoash's mashal of the Thistle (2 Kgs 14:9), Isaiah's mashal of the Vineyard (Isa 5:1-6) and Ezekiel's mashal of the Vine and the Eagles (Ezek 17:3-10). Sider adds the Watchman (Ezek 33:2-6), the Two Brothers (2 Sam 14:1-21), and the Escaped Prisoner (1 Kgs 20:35-43).

42. Jotham's mashal of the Trees would be an example of a political parable.

43. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 11.

44. Blomberg, "Poetic Fiction", 122.

one was around to write a verbatim account."⁴⁵ But, as Blomberg notes, this is wholly inadequate:

The Gospel tradition is replete with summary statements about the kinds of things Jesus and his followers talked about, and such summaries could easily have indicated if they had tried to resolve problems codified in the parables in the way Herzog postulates.⁴⁶

This lack of support for Herzog's hypothesis is problematic.

Secondly, Herzog has been very selective in terms of the parables he has chosen to analyse in his book. The reason he gives for this is lack of space⁴⁷; however, as some reviewers of his book have noted,

Herzog has chosen the parables which reflect social and economic issues; one could have studied a very different group of parables and been hard pressed to discover a Jesus who could be described as "the parabler, pedagogue of the oppressed and prophetic social critic...." Herzog has ignored also the fact that there are other aspects of the teaching of Jesus which will not easily fit into the framework of his exposition: parts of the Sermon on the Mount, for example read like subversion of the subversives!⁴⁸

If Herzog's hypothesis is to stand successfully, it should explain more about Jesus' teaching than it actually does.

Interestingly, in Herzog's subsequent book *Jesus, Justice, and the Reign of God: A Ministry of Liberation*,⁴⁹ Paulo Freire barely appears. Instead, Herzog's "larger understanding of Jesus" is that he was a prophet who argued against the Jerusalem elites' reading of the Torah, who critiqued society like the oracular prophets of the Old Testament like Amos, Hosea, Isaiah and Micah (although without their social privilege and political leverage), and who therefore performed signs (primarily healings and exorcisms) like the great sign prophets of the Old Testament Elijah and Elisha in order to acquire honour in public debate.⁵⁰ Freire is merely alluded to when Herzog says "critical analysis was part of the prophetic project. This is what I have already argued

45. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 261.

46. Blomberg, "Poetic Fiction", 130, n 53.

47. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 4: "It seemed preferable to study nine parables in some detail than to survey a greater number of parables in superficial fashion."

48. Norman M. Pritchard, "Review of *Parables as Subversive Speech*", *Australian Biblical Review* 44 (1996) 84-85.

49. William R. Herzog, II, *Jesus, Justice, and the Reign of God: A Ministry of Liberation* (Louisville KY: Westminster/John Knox, 2000).

50. Herzog, *Jesus, Justice*, 66-68.

with regard to the parables. Put Jesus in the role of a peasant prophet, and he is a 'pedagogue of the oppressed'."⁵¹

There are more references to Freire in Herzog's most recent book, *Prophet and Teacher: An Introduction to the Historical Jesus*.⁵² There is even a short summary of Freire's life, and the similarities to Jesus' life, for people who have not read *Parables as Subversive Speech*.⁵³ However, the most that can be said about Freire's influence on Herzog's portrayal of the Historical Jesus in this book is that Herzog will occasionally borrow Freirean language to describe Jesus' teaching methods. So, when discussing Jesus' use of a denarius as a riposte to the Pharisees (Matt 22:19), Herzog speaks of it as a "codification...of the contradiction between payment of tribute and preserving the covenant".⁵⁴ Similarly, when speaking about the parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge (Luke 18:1-8), he says, "the parable codifies a limit situation that seems to afford no exit from a profound dilemma".⁵⁵ This barest of influence clearly downplays the comparison between Jesus and Freire and thus severely weakens Herzog's hypothesis.

Herzog's Assumed Audience

Herzog assumes that the people in Jesus' audience were peasants. This follows directly from his hypothesis that Jesus' ministry can be likened to the work of Paulo Freire. However, this covers over a potential weakness in Herzog's methodology. The issue can be more clearly seen in Richard L Rohrbaugh's interpretation of the parable of the Talents. Reacting to traditional interpreters of the parables who remove them from their Gospel contexts and supply them with a new context and therefore a new audience, Rohrbaugh argues

since estimating the audience from the supposed thrust of the parable is both risky and premature, we might prefer at the outset to envision a much more general audience that could have included not only opponents, but also disciples of Jesus, as well as a wider group of unspecified hearers. Given the fact that upwards of ninety percent of agrarian populations were rural farmers, it may have even included Galilean peasants.⁵⁶

51. Herzog, *Jesus, Justice*, 66.

52. William R. Herzog, II, *Prophet and Teacher: An Introduction to the Historical Jesus* (Louisville KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2005).

53. Herzog, *Prophet and Teacher*, 16-18.

54. Herzog, *Prophet and Teacher*, 191.

55. Herzog, *Prophet and Teacher*, 145.

56. Rohrbaugh, "Text of Terror", 33.

However, despite all the “risk” and uncertainty, he then goes on to posit that these very peasants were the intended audience for Jesus’ parables, presumably on the basis of numerical probability.

This approach falls foul of John W. Sider’s general critique of a form-critical approach to the parables:

Scholars who theorize about Jesus’ actual audience try to match what they take to be the meaning of a parable with the most likely occasion for it in “the recorded experience of Jesus” (Cadoux, 55). But we can gain little new knowledge about Jesus’ meaning in a parable from this sort of theory about its original hearers, because it is based on someone’s prior ideas about the meaning of the parable...⁵⁷

One feels that Herzog should be aware of this problem since he himself says, “Any study of Jesus’ parables will be predicated on some larger understanding of what Jesus’ public work was all about.”⁵⁸ In other words, he recognises that the context in which one places the parables affects one’s interpretation of the parables. Yet, one could argue that Herzog’s interpretation of the parables has affected the context in which he places them.

In addition to this, Barbara Reid has pointed out a possible inconsistency in Herzog’s identification of the parable’s intended audience. Herzog’s analysis of the parable would make more sense if the parable were originally spoken, not to peasants, but to *retainers*, who, after all, would have been in a position to emulate the behaviour of the third servant.⁵⁹ For Herzog to argue that Jesus’ audience was comprised of peasants and that the parable challenged them about whether they would welcome such a former retainer into their village is too big a jump, and leaves the parable devoid of any real power.

The Parables and The Gospels

Finally, Herzog’s interpretation does not do justice to the contexts given to the parable by the evangelists, implying that, if Herzog is right, the evangelists (and presumably the early church before them) misunderstood Jesus. The issue is somewhat complicated by the fact that

57. Sider, *Interpreting the Parables*, 226-27, citing A. T. Cadoux, *The Parables of Jesus: Their Art and their Form* (London: James Clarke, 1931).

58. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 14.

59. Barbara E. Reid, “Review of *Parables as Subversive Speech*”, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 58 (1996) 348-49, see p. 349.

there are two versions of the parable, one in Matthew and one in Luke.⁶⁰ However, there are significant differences between these versions, so much so, that Klyne Snodgrass can say: "If these two parables derive from the same original, then the traditions on which Matthew and Luke depend must have diverged very early. Serious consideration must be given to the fact that these are two similar but independent parables."⁶¹ One important point that must not be pushed aside, which Herzog is so quick to do, is that both Matthew and Luke have used the parable in a specifically *eschatological* context. In Luke, the parable is said to be a response to those who thought that the Kingdom of God was to appear immediately (Luke 19:11). In Matthew, the parable is found in the Mount of Olives discourse, where Jesus is replying to his disciples' questions about the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the age (Matt 24:1-3).⁶²

Two factors lend weight to the veracity of the Gospel contexts:

- (1) After examining all the comparisons in the Old Testament, whether these appear as a phrase (simile), reduced to a word (metaphor), or expanded into a story (parable), Claus Westermann concludes that they all "receive their function from their particular contexts; this function is derived from the context".⁶³ He therefore argues:

The relation in which the comparison is involved is not one of image and subject matter, rather, in the comparison an event from one sphere is juxtaposed with an event from another (with the image serving the subject matter).⁶⁴

In other words, what the parables in the Old Testament are likened to is "built-in" from the start. Applying this to Jesus' parables, if they are explicitly likened to "the Kingdom of God" then this is quite likely original.⁶⁵

60. Interestingly, Herzog appears to accept Matthew's version as being the closest we have to Jesus' original parable, since his entire discussion of the parable follows the details as found in the Matthean text.

61. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 525.

62. Some have questioned whether the Matthean version of the parable is specifically a Kingdom parable since it does not begin with the usual formula. However, the Greek word *ἵσπερ* (a somewhat more emphatic marker of similarity between events and states) functions to connect this parable directly to the one that precedes it, namely the parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins, which is explicitly introduced with "The Kingdom of Heaven is like..."

63. Claus Westermann, *The Parables of Jesus: In the Light of the Old Testament* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990) 150.

64. Westermann, *The Parables of Jesus*, 150-1.

65. See also Birger Gerhardsson, "If we do not cut the Parables out of their Frames", *New Testament Studies* 37 (1991) 321-35.

(2) Ben Witherington III notes that “parables often came with interpretations or explanations in early Judaism; they were not normally self-contained and self-explanatory.... [O]ne should not automatically assume that an explanation of a parable in the Synoptics is necessarily a product of later Christian reflection on Jesus’ parables....”⁶⁶

Taken together, and therefore approaching the parables of Jesus from opposite temporal directions, this suggests that the Gospel contexts should not be too quickly disregarded. However, it seems that not many of the scholars who follow the social-scientific approach to the parables seriously consider the possibility that the Gospels accurately record the contexts in which the parables were originally spoken by Jesus. Yet if one brings the wealth of background information provided by the social-sciences to the interpretation of the parables *within the contexts supplied by the Gospels* then many of the important insights made by Herzog and others can still be seen to apply.

For example, most of the characters in the parable of the Talents may well be exploiting the peasants. However, without commending or condemning how they went about the task, the ‘faithful’ stewards can still function as examples for Jesus’ disciples to follow in that they were faithful in doing their allotted task.⁶⁷ Jesus often used unlikely characters in his parables to make the point of the parable drive home all the harder. Jesus’ choice of a Samaritan in the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37) is culturally unexpected and significantly deepens the impact of his teaching about one’s neighbourly responsibilities. The two characters in the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9-14) would have been perceived by Jesus’ audience to be at opposite extremes on the religious scale of piety such that the conclusion is all the more striking. The Dishonest Steward (Luke 16:1-9) can also function as a model for disciples, despite his dishonesty, in that he used his position to secure his future.

Alternatively, Joel R. Wohlgenut suggests that the enormous gains made by the first two servants were intentionally hyperbolic:

I insist that the amazing gains reported on the entrusted sums in the parable are exactly that, amazing. The brevity with which their acquisition is described is not designed to provoke investigation, but

66. Ben Witherington III, *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 160.

67. As Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on his Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1994) 508, puts it: “the portrait has to do with the forcefulness of Jesus’ demand for good works, not with the ethics of taking what belongs to others”.

rather amazement. Against Herzog, I do not believe that listeners would have been enraged through reflection on the hypothetical sources of such revenue, but rather would have laughed at the third servant for missing out on such an apparently glorious opportunity.⁶⁸

However, this still leaves the issue of the “rapacious” master referring to God. Blomberg suggests one approach: “the picture of God as both a generous rewarder and a stern judge is not one that sits well with many modern commentators, but it is a thoroughly biblical portrait”.⁶⁹ More can be said, however. In his discussion of the Unjust Judge (Luke 18:1-8) Herzog mentions but then essentially dismisses a potentially helpful analysis, *argumentum a minori ad maius*⁷⁰:

Because he reads the judge as a God figure, Luke appears to use the parable to argue from the lesser to the greater: if the judge responds to the widow, how much more will God respond to the cries and petitions of the saints.⁷¹

Yet this may well be how we are supposed to approach the master of the Talents as well: God desires us to use that which he has entrusted to us just as a rapacious master wants his servants to increase the money entrusted to them by whatever means possible. As Richard T. France puts it, “As in other parables (notably Luke 11:5-8; 18:2-5), where an unattractive human trait is used to illustrate the character of God, we need not assume a simple allegorical equivalence. The message is not that God is a ‘rapacious capitalist’, but that he is not satisfied with inaction.”⁷²

Literary Considerations

With respect to Herzog’s interpretation of the Talents, a number of literary arguments can be raised against Herzog’s reading. First, if the

68. Joel R. Wohlgenut, “Entrusted Money (Matthew 25:14-28): The Parable of the Talents/Pounds” in George Shillington (ed.), *Jesus and his Parables: Interpreting the Parables of Jesus Today* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997) 103-120, esp. 119.

69. Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Leicester: Apollos, 1990) 216.

70. This is the rabbinic principle “from the lesser to the greater” (*qal wahomer*) or, as Kenneth E. Bailey calls it “from the light to the heavy” (Kenneth E. Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes: More Lucan Parables, Their Culture and Style* [Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1980] 136-37). For further examples of this hermeneutical principle at work cf. Matt 6:26; 7:9-11.

71. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 216.

72. Richard T. France, “On Being Ready (Matthew 25:1-46)” in Richard N. Longenecker (ed.), *The Challenge of Jesus’ Parables* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2000) 177-195, esp. 185-86, quoting briefly from F. W. Beare *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981) 486.

hero of the parable is the third servant, why does the parable not end with his declaration against the master, rather than the master's retort? "As the parable stands, it is only with great difficulty that we side with the servant in the face of the master's criticism."⁷³ Secondly, if the servant was making a stand, why are his actions explicitly said to be the result of his fear of the master? "If he indeed caches the money out of 'fear', this would suggest that his action is something other than a heroic defiance of the oppressive system."⁷⁴ Herzog completely avoids any discussion of this component of the parable.

Finally, Herzog definitely goes too far when he interprets 'weeping and gnashing of teeth' in the final verse of the parable as literally describing the life of the poor: "Gnashing of teeth can refer to the sound of chattering teeth caused by being in the cold without adequate clothing or shelter, or it can refer to the sound of teeth grinding because one is in pain or deep anguish..."⁷⁵ Such a reading is unlikely in the extreme especially since the weight of scholarly exegesis sees these references as likely Matthean additions.⁷⁶ Furthermore, should the phrase go back to Jesus – and the one Lucan reference certainly makes this a possibility – it is far better seen as originating from an Old Testament idiom for anger or malice.⁷⁷

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, then, Herzog's hypothesis must be rejected. The parables *are* intentionally theological and ethical. But that need not mean that they are not political or economic at the same time. Rather, the political and economic elements are subservient to the overarching theological and ethical story. Consequently, the way the parables have been interpreted by the Gospel writers cannot be so hastily rejected. It is hard to imagine, assuming that Herzog was right and that Jesus' parables *were* political and economic codifications of oppressive exploitation, that they came to be so differently interpreted by the evangelists within such a short span of time. As Birger Gerhardsson so stridently puts it:

73. Wohlgemut, "Entrusted Money", 114-15.

74. Wohlgemut, "Entrusted Money", 115.

75. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 166.

76. The phrase appears almost exclusively in Matthew (Matt 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; cf. Luke 13:28). "Weeping and gnashing of teeth" are "Matthew's favourite metaphors for the final lot of the wicked..." (Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28* [Word Biblical Commentary 33B; Dallas: Word Books, 1995] 736).

77. Compare with Job 16:9; Ps 35:16; 37:12; 112:10; Lam 2:16. See especially Ps 112:10: "The wicked man will see and be vexed, he will gnash his teeth and waste away; the longings of the wicked will come to nothing".

If we really accept this view [that early Christianity has misunderstood Jesus' *mashal* teaching entirely, fundamentally and pervasively], then we have sawn off the branch Jesus research is sitting on. And I suggest that in that case we pass on to some less meaningless and superfluous occupation than guessing what in fact Jesus might actually have meant, since nobody among his early adherents seems to have understood it.⁷⁸

This is, unfortunately for Herzog, precisely the situation that arises if his hypothesis is followed.

Instead, the parable of the Talents can be best interpreted within its Gospel context, allowing the allegorical elements within the parable to connect naturally with the appropriate referents in the wider narrative.⁷⁹ The social-sciences, far from providing a scenario that forces us to overthrow the first ever recorded interpretation of the parable, actually fill out the background details in a way that leads to a richer appreciation of Jesus' story-telling method: even rapacious capitalists can function as positive examples of good discipleship.

78. Gerhardsson, "The Narrative Meshalim", 357.

79. The question as to what precisely the referent to the Talents is, in particular, was the focus of the author's article "Identifying the Talents: Contextual Clues for the Interpretation of the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30)", *Tyndale Bulletin* 56.1 (2005) 61-72.