


# Puzzling the Jesus of the Parables: A response to Ruben Zimmermann

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**Dates:**

Received: 07 Dec. 2016

Accepted: 14 Apr. 2017

Published: 10 July 2017

**How to cite this article:**

Howes, L., 2017, 'Puzzling the Jesus of the Parables: A response to Ruben Zimmermann', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 73(4), a4480. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i4.4480>

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This article responds to Ruben Zimmermann's latest book, *Puzzling the Parables of Jesus* (2015). In particular, one aspect of his proposed method is challenged, namely, his conscious attempt to do away with considerations of the pre-Easter context when interpreting the parables. The article finishes by proposing a variant methodology of parable interpretation, featuring the parable of the Good Samaritan as a working example.

## Introduction

Ruben Zimmermann's latest book, *Puzzling the Parables of Jesus* (2015), summarises much of his earlier research on the parables. It is one of the most thought-provoking and original books on the subject to appear in the last few decades. It not only challenges archaic ideas and methods, but also proposes an integrative approach of parable interpretation that combines historical, literary and reader-oriented approaches. His proposed definition of the parables of Jesus is well researched, and sure to influence future scholars. This article responds to Ruben Zimmermann's work on the parables, focusing specifically on the abovementioned book. In particular, one aspect of his proposed method is challenged, namely his conscious attempt to do away with considerations of the pre-Easter context when interpreting the parables. The first section of the current article briefly considers key concepts in Zimmermann's book that are relevant to the present discussion; the second section contains my response; and the third section proposes a variant methodology, featuring the parable of the Good Samaritan as a working example.

## Puzzling the Parables of Jesus

Zimmermann (2015:74–75) explains that within the context of historical Jesus research, parables have typically been interpreted to uncover the original setting in which the parables were delivered by Jesus. This is true whether the focus was on the *ipsissima verba*, the *ipsissima vox*, the *ipsissima structura*, the historical setting or the historical context of the parables. Zimmermann explains that this 'historical hermeneutic' of parable research led to the devaluation of the parable texts as they appear in the canonical (and non-canonical) Gospels.<sup>1</sup> Historical Jesus scholars clearly distinguished 'between the canonical tradition and the postulated original material' (Zimmermann 2015:75). This distinction led to the reigning perception that New Testament parables had to be 'surmounted' and 'freed from later "domestication"'. According to Zimmermann, the latter process was guided primarily by form criticism, with its presuppositions of an original 'pure form', a process of transmission, and a *Sitz im Leben* for each parable. He continues to explain that with the additional help of redaction and literary criticism, scholars confidently reconstructed original stages of development that the parables underwent before being incorporated into the Gospels. One may object to this brief portrayal by pointing out that form criticism was much less important for parable research than redaction criticism. Be that as it may, Zimmermann continues to argue that the process of parable interpretation was often plagued by circular reasoning, since images of the historical Jesus was used to interpret the parables, and the consequent parable interpretations were then used to strengthen existing images of the historical Jesus (Zimmermann 2015:75–76). Zimmermann (2015:76) claims that, despite recent developments, form-critical assumptions still plague and direct contemporary parable research. Against this, Zimmermann (2015) argues the following:

The historical quest can have as its goal neither the reconstruction of origins [...] nor the text or the event of the original communication. Although such original situations and data can be logically presupposed, it is not possible to gain access to them in a manner that is controllable by scholarship. [...] The quest for 'pure forms' or original forms has little or no hope of achieving results. (pp. 87, 88)

1. In this article, any reference to the 'Gospels' may include non-canonical texts like the Gospel of Thomas, pre-canonical texts like the Sayings Gospel Q, and non-Synoptic texts like the Gospel of John. Zimmermann argues that much of the metaphorical material in the Gospel of John should be classified as 'parables of Jesus'.

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Zimmermann (2015:90) believes that 'the attempted reconstruction of the original form along source-critical lines should be abandoned'. In the place of such outdated methodologies, Zimmermann (2015:88) suggests an approach that evaluates and transforms form criticism through memory theory. According to this model, the parables are not viewed as deteriorating from an original pure form to a polluted canonical form. Rather, the canonical (and non-canonical) parable genres are viewed as 'media of collective memory' and 'forms of re-use' that 'codetermine the memory process productively and constructively' (Zimmermann 2015:xi, 88, 89). As small forms, the parables 'influenced the collective memory of early Christianity and thus became definitive and identity-giving media of memory' (Zimmermann 2015:80). Within the process of memorisation, the parables both preserve and create tradition (Zimmermann 2015:90). As micro genres, the parables of Jesus are particularly suitable vehicles of memorisation, having great potential for development. Each canonical (and non-canonical) parable text is 'a form of literary memory of the social roots of the Jesus movement' (Zimmermann 2015:93). Zimmermann (2015:90) is, therefore, not interested in discovering the authentic core of any particular parable, but rather in exploring the variation of parable forms as these have been deposited in Christian memory. In no unclear terms, Zimmermann (2015) explicitly states:

Due to the memory approach being employed in this book, no attempt is made to reconstruct some postulated original version of a parable. Each individual source is a memory text that has remembered and preserved a version of Jesus' parables. (p. 189)

As a result of his focus on memory theory, Zimmermann (2015:17–18, 88, 148–150, 170–171, 189, 195–196) highlights the import of the individual literary contexts of the parables as they feature in the canonical (and non-canonical) Gospels. In his own words, '[t]he point of departure remains the canonical parable text' (Zimmermann 2015:87), and 'the [literary] context is taken into consideration as far as possible as a frame of reference' (Zimmermann 2015:196). Zimmermann (2015:149) views the literary context of any particular parable as constitutive and necessary in its creation of meaning. This is in reaction to the tendency in parable scholarship to view the parable form as autonomous, thereby justifying the practice of removing it from its literary context before interpreting it. In his words, '[p]arables should not be interpreted as free-floating, autonomous works of art whose textual context is completely irrelevant' (Zimmermann 2015:171, cf. 17–18). Instead, a parable's meaning should be discovered in consideration of its literary Gospel context, as opposed to beyond, behind or outside of that literary context. Zimmermann (2015:149) explains that this includes not only the immediate literary context of a parable in the Gospel text, but also the larger literary context of the entire Gospel, and even of a larger collection of texts, as in the Nag Hammadi codices in the case of the Gospel of Thomas. Included for interpretation are also the Gospel introductions and conclusions to individual parables (Zimmermann 2015:195). Zimmermann (2015:149) goes as far as to claim that meaning is *only* possible if a parable is considered within its literary context.

According to Zimmermann (2015:164), the continuous attempt by past and present scholars to reconstruct original versions of the parables reveals a flawed hermeneutic that assumes a single truth for each parable (cf. Funk 2006:36, 40, 42–43, 97–98; Levine 2014:1; Wright 2015:52). Zimmermann (2015:xi–xii, 6–7, 46–47, 103, 147–148, 152–153, 164–174, 204–206) argues that individual parables 'cannot be transformed into one single message and to a univocal meaning'.<sup>2</sup> Rather, the New Testament illustrates that parables are by their very nature polyvalent and that interpretation only occurs with the help of interpreters, who approach the text subjectively (cf. Funk 2006:29; 2007:91; see Levine 2014:1–4). The same is indicated by the history of parable interpretation. Any single parable might have a host of possible meanings – what Zimmermann (2015:148) refers to as 'horizons of meaning' – all of which are simultaneously legitimate, even if some of them might contradict one another. The same New Testament also indicates that despite such polyvalence, there are also limits to what a parable might justifiably mean. Zimmermann, therefore, operates on the assumption of a so-called:

'binding openness', which, on the one hand, accepts a great variety of interpretations but on the other hand does not relinquish an overarching interpretive framework for the truth of the parables. (2015:xii)

According to Zimmermann (2015:170–171, 205), it is the Gospel form and context of a parable that not only indicates the polyvalence of meaning, but also delimits the range of possible interpretations, thereby protecting the parable against postmodern tendencies towards relativity and arbitrariness. Falling outside of legitimate possibilities of interpretation is, therefore, the so-called 'wild allegorization' of the parables by the early church fathers and medieval exegetes (Zimmermann 2015:170, 199). Zimmermann admits that some of the parables are also allegorised in the Gospels themselves, but seems to assume that these allegorisations are somehow legitimate (see below). Zimmermann's emphasis on the polyvalence of the parables is in keeping with contemporary parable research (e.g. Hedrick 2004:13, 47–50; Levine 2014:1, 4; Lischer 2014:162–166; Snodgrass 2008:33; Shillington 1997:17–18; Wright 2015:5). As such, his critique that parable (and historical Jesus) scholars deny or ignore the polyvalence of the parables in search for some 'original version' is not apposite.

For Zimmermann (2015:17, 93, 99–103, 143–145, 196–198), the purpose of historical enquiry is not to uncover some original form or context for any particular parable, but to illuminate the social, economic, historical, geographical, religious and political references that may appear in the parable itself. For convenience, the combined investigation of all these research areas may be called a 'socio-historical' investigation (cf. Zimmermann 2015:100). An example of such a socio-historical investigation would be to consider the functions of sheep and shepherds in the ancient world to better understand the parable of the Lost Sheep. It follows that the purpose of any socio-historical investigation for Zimmermann is to

<sup>2</sup>Quotation from Zimmermann 2015:xi.

explain narrative elements that require such explanation because of the distance between the text and its contemporary interpreters. Since Zimmermann prefers to consider the parables *solely* on the level of the canonical (and non-canonical) Gospels, there is no need for him to reconstruct the socio-economic and politico-religious context of the *historical* Jesus and his *pre-Easter* audiences. This becomes clear when Zimmermann (2015:18) lists three levels of audiences that deserve consideration when interpreting the parables, namely '(1) the listeners to the parable in the narrated world, (2) the first addressees of the Gospel, and (3) the contemporary readers'. Completely missing from this list is the *pre-Easter* audiences of the historical Jesus.

## Puzzling the Jesus of the Parables

Zimmermann's emphasis on the Gospel text is an important corrective to earlier methodologies that overemphasised the pre-canonical and pre-Easter versions of the parables, in deliberate neglect of their canonical (and non-canonical) forms and contexts. Yet, Zimmermann's approach is guilty of the exact opposite failing. By overemphasising the canonical (and non-canonical) versions of the parables, he deliberately neglects to consider earlier versions of those parables. He overreacts to the scholarly attempt at interpreting parables on the level of the historical Jesus. His overreaction causes him to throw out the baby with the bathwater. By arguing that the respective *literary* contexts of the individual parables should be given precedence over considerations of the pre-Easter situation in which they were first received, Zimmermann operates on the assumption of a false dichotomy (cf. Wright 2015:44). It is both unnecessary and unwise to force a choice between the Gospel context and the pre-Easter context. In practice, both contexts are usually not considered during the same parable study, but this does not mean that the one is a 'better' or 'more legitimate' context for parable research than the other. Investigating the parables on the level of the historical Jesus is just as legitimate as investigating them within their literary Gospel contexts; depending of course on the aims of the investigation. Inasmuch as Zimmermann's approach is aimed at understanding the parables on the Gospel level, I am in agreement with his hermeneutical and exegetical approach. However, to argue that the canonical (and non-canonical) version and interpretation of a parable is indicative of its meaning on the level of the historical Jesus is just as anachronistic and erroneous as claiming that the over-allegorical interpretation of a parable during the Middle Ages is indicative of its meaning on the level of the Gospel texts.

Although it is true that research on the parables historically tended to search for the one and only legitimate meaning for each individual parable, this does not need to be the case. Even on the level of the historical Jesus, any single parable might have been interpreted differently by different audiences, or even by different members of the same audience (cf. Funk 2006:42–43; Levine 2014:1; Miller 2007:75). In fact, there seems to be evidence in the Jesus material of such varied reception being a trademark feature of parable interpretation in the pre-Easter context (e.g. Mk 4:10–13,

33; cf. Zimmermann 2015:165–166). For example, the first audiences could interpret the parable of the Leaven by focusing on the defilement of the flour, the massive amounts of flour involved, the fermentation process, or some combination of these and other features. Depending on their focus, they could legitimately view God's kingdom as being impure, as increasing in size, as overtaking the world or whatever else. What is more, the same parable could have been told on different occasions, for different audiences, with different emphases, and in different ways (Levine 2014:11, 16; Miller 2007:75). In fairness, it should also be acknowledged that there is no evidence to support the latter idea of multiple retellings of the parables. Whatever the case, it remains true that polyvalence is not only a feature of the parables at later stages of reception, but is already integral to the parables from the very beginning (cf. Funk 2006:42–43; Levine 2014:1; Wright 2015:43). However, polyvalence should not be enforced on the interpreter, as if the extrapolation of only one meaning or avenue of interpretation on the pre-Easter level is for that reason by definition false. It remains possible that a list of minor interpretive accents can contribute to one overarching meaning, even if it also remains possible for different interpretations to function side by side as equally important and legitimate.

Similarly, an appeal to memory theory does not need to result in an approach that disregards the pre-canonical and pre-Easter levels of parable interpretation. Zimmermann (2015:xi, 88, 89) is undoubtedly correct in viewing the Gospel parables as 'media of collective memory' and 'forms of re-use' that 'codetermine the memory process productively and constructively'. Zimmermann (2015:90) is also correct in claiming that the parables both preserve and create tradition during the process of memorisation. Yet, this tendency of memory to not only preserve, but also create tradition indicates that there will be both continuity and discontinuity between the memory of a parable's form and interpretation in the Gospel text, on the one hand, and the parable's form and interpretation as it featured on the level of Jesus, on the other (cf. Funk 2006:162; Wright 2015:44, 49). Attempting to discover the range of forms and meanings a parable might have had when the process of memorisation first started is certainly legitimate. And without the ability to sort between authentic and constructive memory, there is no hope of discovering the historical Jesus. Zimmermann's approach makes no room for the malleability and fallacy of memory that scholars of individual and collective memory habitually discuss and warn about. One need not appeal to archaic form-critical ideas and methods to identify instances where the process of memorisation has adapted individual parables to accommodate and address post-Easter concepts and concerns. Zimmermann (2015:147–148, 152) is certainly correct that meaning only happens when a parable is interpreted by a recipient of some sort (cf. Funk 2006:29), but it must not be overlooked that the pre-Easter audiences of Jesus were also recipients (Levine 2014:80; Wright 2015:49). Like the post-Easter audiences, they also went through a process of memorisation that included reflection of their own

socio-historical context during the communicative event (cf. Zimmermann 2015:93). Zimmermann (2015:149, cf. 152) is also correct that a parable's 'involvement with a communicative situation [...] cannot be limited to the historical moment of the production of that text', but by the same token it can also not be limited to the historical moment at which that parable was incorporated into one or more of the Gospels.

Zimmermann (2015:88) further overstates his case when he argues that it is wholly impossible for scholars to investigate the parables in their pre-Easter settings in a controllable way. In the last few decades, there has been much overlap and congruence concerning the results of parable scholars who are interested in the pre-Easter setting.<sup>3</sup> For example, a number of scholars have recently come to the same conclusion that the parable of the Talents/Minas (in Mt 25:14–29 and Lk [Q] 19:11–27) functioned on a pre-canonical level to expose and condemn the economic exploitation of peasants in the ancient world (e.g. Crossan 2012:98–106; Howes 2016:18–54; Jacobson 1992:239–244; Oakman 2008:53–55, 68–69; Park 2014:84–88; Rohrbaugh 1993:32–39; Scott 1989:217–235; Van Eck 2011:1–11). Yet, even if there is little agreement among scholars about the interpretation of a specific parable on the pre-Easter level, this only succeeds in underlining the polyvalent character of Jesus' parables.<sup>4</sup> As we have seen, the same polyvalence that Zimmermann assumes for the parables on the Gospel level applies equally to the pre-Easter level. Likewise, scholarly disagreement about the pre-canonical *forms* of specific parables highlights the polyvalent and malleable character of the parables. Zimmermann further seems to overlook that just as there are variations of interpretation among scholars who prefer a diachronic approach, there are variations of interpretation among scholars who prefer a synchronic approach. Even so, there generally seems to be significant scholarly agreement about which parabolic elements represent subsequent elaboration. To use the same example as above, in the parable of the Talents/Minas, scholars generally agree that both the throne claimant story (in Lk 19:12b, 14, 15b, 27) and the concluding maxim (in Mt 25:29 and Lk [Q] 19:26) represent secondary expansions (Blomberg 1990:217; Bock 1996:1528; Bultmann 1968:176; Crossan 1974:22, 24, 1979:31; Davies & Allison 1997:402, 410; Denaux 2001:431; Dodd 1958:148–149; Donahue 1988:105; Fleddermann 2005:838–839; Funk 2006:30, 109–110; Funk & Hoover 1993:374, 375; Hedrick 2014:134–135; Herzog 1994:150; Howes 2016:21, 22; Hunter 1964:19, 79–80; Jacobson 1992:241; Jeremias 1972:58–59, 62, 95, 111; Kloppenborg 1995:295, 296; Luz 2005:248, 249; Marshall 1978:701; Nolland 2005:1013; Piper 1989:144–146, 2000:238; Scott 1981:40, 1989:220, 221, 223, 224; Snodgrass 2008:530, 537; Taylor 1989:165; Tuckett 1996:147; Via 1967:46, 114). To be sure, the discovery of the Gospel of Thomas indicated the astonishing degree of accuracy with which earlier scholars had been able to reconstruct the parables (Patterson 1998:72–73; Scott

3. On the other hand, there has also been varied scholarly results and interpretations of the parables on the pre-Easter level (Wright 2015:5).

4. Yet, I agree with Wright (2015:5) that at least some sifting is in order between these proposals to ascertain the most likely readings.

2007:27; Snodgrass 2008:253). If this is so, then it remains legitimate to not only remove parables from their literary Gospel contexts, but also to remove secondary narrative elements from the parables, in order to ascertain meaning at a previous stage of delivery (Funk 2006:30; cf. Wright 2015:12). This does not mean that parables should be reconstructed with positivistic presuppositions of uncovering 'pure forms' that represent the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus (cf. Zimmermann 2015:87, 88, 90), but rather that obvious examples of additions and adaptations to the parables, together with secondary literary contexts, should be identified as such, and removed from consideration, if one chooses to investigate the parables in their pre-Easter contexts (cf. Funk 2006:30).

While considering the parable of the Sower in Mark 4:13–20 (along with other parables), Zimmermann (2015:170) acknowledges that the evangelist is in this instance responsible for the allegorical interpretation. If this is true, it necessarily follows that such an allegorical interpretation is *not* possible for the historical Jesus. In other words, we have here an example of *discontinuity* in the parable's meaning between the respective levels of Mark and Jesus. It is not necessary to evoke all the outdated presumptions of old form criticism to identify the allegorical interpretation of Mark as irrelevant to Jesus. This is not to make a value judgement on Mark's interpretation (cf. Levine 2014:20). The allegorical interpretation remains legitimate and important on the level of Mark.

Besides allegory, additions and adaptations include most notably attempts by the tradition and the evangelists to drag Jesus himself, his salvific end and his resurrection into the parabolic narrative and interpretation (cf. Verhoeven 2007:48; see Funk 2006:159–160, 166; Levine 2014:18–19, 25–26). Zimmermann (2015:94, cf. 95, 97) goes against the consensus in historical Jesus scholarship when he maintains that 'the original telling of the parable[s] already contained a christological dimension'. Likewise, Zimmermann's (2015:97, 99, 145, 161, 207) claim that the parables were from the beginning concerned with 'religious' and 'theological' matters is not supported by historical Jesus scholarship. Funk (2006:43, 158, 166, 173; 2007:90), McCaughey (2007:11, 13) and others have argued convincingly that the parables were originally not in any way about the person of Jesus, and that they were only 'religious' to the extent that they addressed socio-political-economic-religious-ethnic-moral issues relevant to ancient Judaism. Zimmermann (2015:99, 103, 145, 207) persistently refers to the parables' metaphorical level of meaning as the 'religious domain' or the 'theological domain'. This is unnecessarily delimiting, since the parables are undeniably about an alternative reality that encompasses religious, political, social and economic spheres simultaneously and concomitantly (cf. Funk 2006:43). Zimmermann's language is also anachronistic, since it implies the compartmentalisation and exclusion of secular spheres of reality, which was an unnatural distinction in the ancient world (Horsley 1993:158–159; cf. Funk 2006:44–45,

166; Kloppenborg 2011:285). Zimmermann's (2015:98) statement that the intent of the parables is to 'lead us to faith or more concretely, to a life of belief in Jesus' illustrates just how much his approach is governed *exclusively* by a post-Easter perspective (cf. Funk 2006:109–110; Levine 2014:4, 19, 26). Levine (2014:25) rightly says: 'One need not have to believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior in order to realize that he had some extraordinary things to say'.

While discussing the polyvalence of the parables, Zimmermann asks the following rhetorical question:

Can we truly assume that Luke and Matthew (or at least one of the two) so completely misunderstood the parable of the Lost Sheep in Q that they retold it in completely different contexts with divergent themes? (2015:165)

The expected answer to this question is 'no'. Unfortunately, the parable of the Lost Sheep is a poor choice for Zimmermann's case, since there is much discrepancy between Q, Luke and Matthew as far as this particular parable is concerned. Nevertheless, the main thrust of Zimmermann's argument remains valid. To the extent that Luke and Matthew understood any particular Q parable and retold it in the same context with similar themes, there is indeed evidence of continuity between the Sayings Gospel Q and the evangelists. However, the scholarly reconstruction of Q clearly illustrates that there are also examples of discontinuity between the canonical Gospels and Q – instances where the evangelists have adapted the vocabulary, syntax, context, themes and interpretation of Q material. A prime example is the parable of the Lost Sheep, as mentioned above. In other words, we can rephrase Zimmermann's rhetorical question to the following:

Can we truly assume that Luke and Matthew (or at least one of the two) so completely understood the parable of the Lost Sheep in Q that they told it in the same context with the same theme and interpretation?

The apparent answer to this question is also 'no'. In a sense, both Zimmermann's question above and the latter rephrased question are illegitimate, since the evangelists were more interested in their own agendas than the intentions of the historical Jesus. Nevertheless, I engage with these questions here to argue the case that there are both elements of continuity and discontinuity between the Gospels and Q. All of this is also true for the relationship between the evangelists and the historical Jesus (cf. Funk 2006:162). To some extent, Zimmermann acknowledges the existence of discontinuity between the respective levels of the historical Jesus and the Gospels when he uses the word 'create' in the following statement:

The embedding of the texts in the Gospels [...] not only *creates* a historical framework in the life of Jesus but also *creates* a christological context that presents Jesus as the enduring parable narrator.<sup>5</sup> (2015:150)

Zimmermann (2015:165) goes on to ask the following: 'Were the early as well as more recent interpreters simply misusing

5.The italics are not original.

the texts for their own purposes when they discovered potential for meaning that led in completely different directions?' As earlier, the obvious answer to this question is 'no'. Once again, we can rephrase the rhetorical question to ask the opposite:

Were the early as well as more recent interpreters *not at all* misusing the texts for their own purposes when they discovered potential for meaning that led in completely different directions?

The answer to this question is also 'no'. Thus, to the extent that the tradition or the evangelists introduced narrative elements and interpretations that were not possible at an earlier stage, there is indeed evidence of discontinuity between the Gospels and Jesus (Funk 2006:30, 158–159, 161; Levine 2014:15–16). If some parable scholars may be accused of closing off the polyvalence of the parables by insisting on univocal interpretations to the exclusion of all others in an attempt to control their meaning (cf. Zimmermann 2015:152, 153), then the tradition and the evangelists may be accused of the same (Funk 2006:30, 109–110, 155; Levine 2014:15). Conversely, if patristic and medieval interpreters went beyond their sources in adding interpretations (cf. Zimmermann 2015:199), then the tradition and the evangelists may also in this case be accused of the same (Funk 2006:30, 109–110, 155; Levine 2014:18). This does not mean that the Gospel interpretations and adaptations are for that reason illegitimate or groundless (cf. Levine 2014:20). It simply means that some of these developments were not a feature of the parables or their reception when told by the historical Jesus. By the same token, some interpretations that were important on the level of the historical Jesus were not relevant to the tradition or the evangelists, which explains why they at times considered it necessary to control the meaning of the parables by imposing certain interpretations upon their audiences (cf. Funk 2006:30).

## Puzzling the parable of the Good Samaritan

I would now like to propose a method of parable interpretation that not only diverges from that of Zimmermann, but also draws upon it. If conventional historical methods of parable interpretation are viewed as the thesis, and Zimmermann's reactive method is viewed as the antithesis, then the approach I wish to put forward may be viewed as the synthesis. Instead of playing the approaches of so-called 'pre-Easter' and 'post-Easter' parable scholars off against each other, I propose an approach to parable interpretation that combines them. Like Zimmermann (2015:18), 'it is my goal to unify different perspectives into an integrative hermeneutic'. In accepting the validity of both 'pre-Easter' and 'post-Easter' approaches, my proposed methodology is even more integrative than that of Zimmermann. It integrates not only literary, historical and reader-response approaches, but also 'pre-Easter' and 'post-Easter' approaches.

As first and second steps, I propose applying the methodology of Zimmermann to the level of the canonical (and non-canonical) Gospels, on the one hand, and applying the

methodology of scholars like Jeremias (1972), Funk (2006), Crossan (2012), Van Eck (2016) and Meier (2016) to the level of the historical Jesus, on the other. As we all know, these latter scholars interpret the parables outside of their literary Gospel contexts, and for them socio-historical and social-scientific investigations of the parables are not only aimed at clarifying the parable and its narrative elements internally, but also at elucidating the context of the historical Jesus and his pre-Easter audiences externally (e.g. Crossan 2012:56–57). This socio-historical context of Jesus and his first audiences fulfils the same function for these scholars that the literary Gospel context fulfils for Zimmermann. Whereas the literary Gospel context both reveals and delimits possibilities for interpretation on the Gospel level, the socio-historical context of Jesus and his pre-Easter audiences both reveals and delimits possibilities for interpretation on the level of the historical Jesus (cf. Levine 2014:9). It goes without saying that both steps will consider the socio-historical references internal to the parable and that there would probably also be some degree of overlap between the respective socio-historical settings of Jesus and the evangelists (cf. Wright 2015:45). At the same time, one should allow for some degree of discontinuity between the socio-historical settings of Jesus and the evangelists, respectively (Wright 2015:54). Be that as it may, what is important methodologically is that the consideration of the parable on the level of the historical Jesus deliberately appeals to the socio-historical context as a criterion to both identify and delimit possible horizons of meaning. Here I am not referring to any specific context, like Pharisaic opposition, since these contexts have been irrecoverably lost to history, but rather to the pre-Easter socio-historical context of the parables in the ancient world (cf. Funk 2006:41; see Miller 2007:75–76). Scholars are generally agreed that the pre-Easter audiences of Jesus were for the most part Palestinian Jews and that they were made up of diverse socio-economic segments of the population, but that the overwhelming majority of them were from the lower segments of society, including especially the peasantry and poor (cf. Crossan 2002:250, 251, 253; Dodd 1958:21; Funk 2006:37, 41, 44, 61; Rohrbaugh 1993:33, 38).

If consideration of this socio-historical context is combined with our increased ability to remove secondary material from the parables, it becomes entirely possible to identify horizons of meaning on the level of the historical Jesus. While Zimmermann (2015:93) is correct that ‘a backward-looking, socio-historical restriction of the significance and meaning of the parables would be inappropriate’ on the Gospel level, it is entirely appropriate on the level of the historical Jesus. Likewise, although Zimmermann (2015:144) is correct that ‘the narrated world of the parables is not limited to a particular social class’, it is simultaneously true that the *historical* Jesus told the parables ‘from below’, with the underclass of ancient society primarily and specifically in mind (Funk 2006:41, 44; cf. Rohrbaugh 1993:33; Van Eck 2011:5; Wright 2015:40–41). Finally, Zimmermann’s (2015:75–76) concern over the tendency towards circular reasoning in parable scholarship (see above) can be addressed by

comparing the results of pre-Easter parable interpretation with less ambiguous Jesus material (cf. Wright 2015:3–4). In short, I propose that the first two steps in turn, and not necessarily in this order, use the literary context of any particular parable to consider its meaning on the Gospel level, and use the pre-Easter socio-historical context of the same parable to consider its meaning on the level of the historical Jesus. This approach is very similar to, but not the same as the approach advocated by Stephen Wright in his new book, *Jesus the Storyteller* (see 2015:44–46, esp. 45).

As a third step, I then propose comparing the results of the latter two steps to determine the areas of continuity and discontinuity (cf. Funk 2006:162). In other words, the third step entails comparing the horizons of meaning on the level of the historical Jesus with the horizons of meaning on the level of the canonical Gospels in order to determine areas of continuity and discontinuity between the two levels. On the one hand, this would enable one to see how the process of memorisation productively and constructively contributed to the preservation of the parables (cf. Wright 2015:44). On the other hand, this would enable one to better understand which interpretive possibilities were at hand for the two respective levels. The purpose is not to override or surmount either of the two levels, but rather to give each level its due, and to be sensitive to the possible horizons of meaning at each respective level. I imagine that Zimmermann would support the method proposed here, since it integrates his own approach into a more holistic approach. As Zimmermann (2015:18) himself implores: ‘The various approaches to understanding Jesus’ parables must not be played out against each other’. Hence, the approach advocated here is not intended to replace or discredit approaches that focus exclusively on the level of the historical Jesus, or, conversely, focus exclusively the level of one or more of the Gospels. Instead, it is proposed as a method that would ideally complement existing avenues of parable research and bring diverse approaches together under one holistic umbrella.

Let us now turn to a working example. I chose to use the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25–37 to illustrate my methodology. This choice was motivated by the fact that the parable of the Good Samaritan is absent from the other canonical Gospels, as well as from the Sayings Gospel Q and the apocrypha. This allows us to focus *only* on the levels of the historical Jesus and Luke, which is appropriate since the current article is mainly interested in the levels of the historical Jesus and the (different) canonical Gospels. It is true that some scholars do not regard the parable of the Good Samaritan to be authentic in the first place (e.g. Meier 2016; cf. Scheffler 2013), in which case it would not be an appropriate selection for the current intentions. Yet, scholars overwhelmingly agree that this parable goes back to the historical Jesus. For the sake of the current exercise, let us assume that the majority opinion is correct.

Within this majority, there is relative agreement that, on the level of the historical Jesus, the parable of the Good Samaritan mainly intends to break down ethnic and religious boundaries

(e.g. Crossan 2012:48–62; Scott 1989:189–202; cf. Funk 2006:85–90, 143–146, 151–152, 155; Levine 2014:77–115; Wright 2015:104–109). By featuring a despised Samaritan instead of a Jew as the protagonist who goes above and beyond to help the injured man, the parable confronts and overturns established ethnic and religious prejudices shared by all Jews during the Second Temple period. One could certainly point to a number of additional interpretations that would also be valid on the level of the historical Jesus. One example would be the narrative's exposition of the general insensitive and indifferent attitude of the religious elite towards the common folk and their daily plight. It is well known that the historical Jesus challenged religious and political leaders through his subversive words and actions, ultimately leading to his death on the cross. Another example would be the benevolent and compassionate conduct advocated by the parable. It is a truism that the historical Jesus promoted love and compassion in word and deed (cf. Wright 2015:109). To simplify the discussion going forward, I will refer to the parable's tendency to promote kindness and charity to others as its *ethical* dimension, and to its tendency to promote the breaking down of religious and ethnic boundaries as its *subversive* dimension. Even though the parable carries additional messages on the level of the historical Jesus, it is generally agreed that these are subordinate to the parable's subversive dimension. In this regard, the semantic hierarchy in the parable of the Good Samaritan differs from the number of equally valid meanings that we saw the parable of the Leaven conveys on the level of the historical Jesus.

Zimmermann (2015:293–331) interprets the parable of the Good Samaritan on the Gospel level, admitting that he can only focus on a *selection* of the parable's possible interpretations (Zimmermann 2015:316). Even so, I believe that he does indeed focus on the most important accents in the parable considering its literary context in Luke. Zimmermann (2015:322–326) skilfully describes how Luke brings out and develops the parable's ethical dimension. As Zimmermann explains, Luke uses the parable to bring about a change in perspective from the question 'who is my neighbour?' to 'whose neighbour am I?' The parable functions in Luke to promote sympathy with one's fellow man and woman, resulting in beneficial action towards all other people. By actively doing good to others, the do-gooder *becomes* the neighbour of those who benefit from his or her kindness. Moreover, by placing him or herself in the position of acting subject, the do-gooder encounters the other person as neighbour and encounters God as love. Zimmermann (2015:326–328) further explains that the mentioning of the inn-keeper suggests that the responsibilities of kindness and charity do not fall solely on the individual, but extends to institutional and ecclesial support. Levine (2014:112) adds that the inn-keeper's role also underlines the continuous nature of the care.

Zimmermann (2015:318–322) also confirms the earlier interpretation of the parable on the level of Jesus for the Lukan level as well. In other words, Zimmermann argues

that Luke retains the parable's subversive intent to break down religious and ethnic boundaries through a 'process of decategorization' (Zimmermann 2015:320). This goes against the claim by scholars like Funk (151–152, 155), Scott (1989:189–202) and Crossan (2012:48–62), who argue that Luke has completely replaced the parable's subversive dimension with its ethical dimension, so that the parable is not at all about the breaking down of religious and ethnic boundaries on the Lukan level. In the vocabulary of these scholars, Luke has turned a challenge parable into an example story. They argue that the introduction and conclusion added to the parable by Luke removes any hint of the parable's subversive dimension. It is true that Lukan framing specifically emphasises the *ethical* dimension and appeal of the parable. In fact, the pericope opens in verse 25 with a question about what to *do* and ends in verse 37 with the directive to '*do likewise*' (cf. Crossan 2012:37; Scott 1989:191). Although the introduction also enquires about the *identity* of one's neighbour, there is no indication that this enquiry has anything to do with religious or ethnic identity. In the Lukan conclusion, Jesus asks: 'Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?' (Lk 10:36, ESV). Instead of answering that it was the Samaritan, the lawyer answers: 'The one who showed him mercy' (Lk 10:37, ESV). In other words, the Samaritan's status as a Samaritan is not mentioned, and the focus is on his ethical role as a sympathetic person who helps out those in need (see Funk 2006:151–152, 155).

Despite all this, there is evidence indicating that the parable's subversive dimension was not lost on Luke or his audience, who would have been familiar with the reigning ethno-religious antagonism between Jews and Samaritans. Luke retains the reference to the Samaritan in the parable, so that even if the audience did not know anything about Samaritans (which is highly unlikely), they would have recognised the sympathetic person as an outsider of sorts. More importantly, though, Luke sets up the parable in the preceding chapter of his Gospel by recounting an incident during which Jesus was refused lodging by the locals when he was travelling through Samaria (see Lk 9:51–56). According to Luke (9:53), Jesus was refused 'because his face was crossing toward Jerusalem' (ὅτι τὸ πρόσωπον αὐτοῦ ἦν πορευόμενον εἰς Ἱερουσαλήμ). In other words, their inhospitality was motivated by the fact that Jesus was a Jew on his way to Jerusalem and its Temple. The Samaritans considered their own Temple on Mount Gerizim to be the only true religious sanctuary of the God of Abraham (see Levine 2014:105–106). Even if Luke's audience knew nothing about the Samaritans and their temple (which is highly unlikely), they would have been able to pick up on the hostility of the Samaritans from the information given. Moreover, they would have been able to deduce that the antagonism was motivated by religious and/or ethnic differences between them and the Jews. In other words, Luke provides information about the hostility between Samaritans and Jews shortly before his telling of the parable (Levine 2014:108). As if this information is not entirely sufficient for Luke, he underlines the immensity of the antagonism by

having James and John ask Jesus if they should summon fire from heaven to consume these unreceptive Samaritans (Lk 9:54, with text-critical issues). Jesus rebukes his disciples for their aggressive attitude, but the audience is left knowing that there is some type of profound rift between the Samaritans and the Jews (cf. Scott 1989:190). To Luke 9:51–55 can be added other references to Samaritans in Luke–Acts as evidence that such references were informed by the appropriate ethno-religious assumptions (e.g. Lk 17:11–19; Ac 8:9–25). Luke 9:51–55 is more decisive for the interpretation of the parable, though, mainly because it both precedes and appears in close proximity to the parable.

Seeing that Luke deliberately provides his readers with enough background information to know about the enmity between Jews and Samaritans, Zimmermann is correct that the subversive dimension of the parable is retained by Luke. Yet, this background information does not appear *directly* before the parable in Luke's overarching narrative sequence, but is removed from it by some 30 verses. By contrast, the immediate literary context, as we have seen, highlights the ethical dimension of the parable. In addition to the introduction and conclusion added by Luke, the parable is immediately followed by the story of Martha and Mary, which specifically develops the *ethical* dimension of the parable. This indicates that although the parable's subversive dimension is extant on the Gospel level, its ethical dimension is much more important to Luke. Zimmermann (2015:317–318) finally adds one more interpretive avenue. According to him, it is legitimate to identify the Samaritan retrospectively with Jesus Christ, so that the actions and attitude of the Samaritan symbolise the compassionate and self-sacrificing life of Jesus. This christological dimension of the parable further enables an *eschatological* reading of the Samaritan's comment to the inn-keeper that he will return at a future date to extend his care and support. It is doubtful that these allegorical interpretations will win over any significant number of scholars, even for the level of Luke.

If we now compare the level of Luke and the level of the historical Jesus, it is clear that there is a large degree of continuity between them. Most crucially, not only the *ethical* interpretation that promotes kindness and charity to others, but also the *subversive* interpretation that promotes the breaking down of religious and ethnic boundaries is in force on both the Lukan and historical Jesus levels. As we have seen, the subversive interpretation was central to Jesus, while the ethical interpretation was secondary.<sup>6</sup> On the Lukan level, however, the ethical interpretation was central, and the subversive interpretation was secondary. Instead of a difference in meaning or interpretation, it seems more appropriate in this case to speak about a difference in *emphasis*. To the extent that both versions of the parable included both interpretations, there is evidence of continuity between Jesus and Luke, but to the extent that the subversive dimension received top billing on the pre-Easter level of Jesus and the ethical dimension received top billing on the

6. In his telling of the parable, that is – not necessarily in general.

post-Easter level of Luke, there is evidence of *discontinuity*. The degree of discontinuity is even greater when it comes to the person and role of Jesus. To the extent that Zimmermann is correct about Luke espousing both a christological and an eschatological reading of the parable, discontinuity is evident between Jesus and Luke in this regard (Levine 2014:18–19, 26; Wright 2015:109; cf. Verhoeven 2007:48, 49). The historical Jesus did not tell the parable to say anything about his own person, much less his Parousia. To claim as much would be inherently anachronistic.

## Concluding remarks

By focusing exclusively on the canonical (and extra-canonical) versions and interpretations of the parables, Zimmermann acts no differently from the subjects of his critique. Whereas these latter scholars largely disregard the forms and interpretations of the parables in the canonical (and non-canonical) Gospels, Zimmermann disregards the forms and interpretations of these parables at earlier stages of delivery. As an alternative, the methodology suggested here attempts to accommodate and combine both pre-Easter and post-Easter approaches, without replacing or invalidating either. To be clear, I am not arguing that an exclusive focus on either the pre-Easter or post-Easter level is illegitimate. In fact, I am arguing the exact opposite, namely that it is wrong to allege that the exclusive focus of the opposite camp is illegitimate. The method proposed here is understood as an addition to existing approaches, whether or not they focus exclusively on one level. The intent is to complement and reconcile existing approaches, not to replace them. The parable of the Good Samaritan functions here to illustrate how my proposed method of parable interpretation might be applied in practice. Even if the reader disagrees with the details of my analysis, the proposed method remains valid and useful.

I suspect that if my approach is applied to other parables, results would differ. The parable of the Talents in Matthew 25:14–30, for example, would most likely feature much less semantic continuity between the respective levels of Matthew and Jesus, if any. Some other parables, like the parable of the Mustard Seed in Matthew 13:31–32, would probably feature an intermediate degree of continuous and discontinuous semantic dimensions. Such findings would all be legitimate. In fact, such variance accords well with the unpredictability and flexibility of memory and reception, not only in general, but also during the historical process of reinterpreting and passing on the Jesus tradition until its ultimate sedimentation in the written Gospels. Both examples used above are also commonly accepted as featuring in the Sayings Gospel Q. I mention this to remind us that the situation is usually much more complex than allowed for by the parable of the Good Samaritan. There are also degrees of continuity and discontinuity between Jesus and the pre-canonical tradition, between the pre-canonical sources internally, between the pre-canonical sources and the canonical Gospels, between the Synoptic Gospels and John, between the canonical and non-canonical Gospels, and so on. Determining degrees of



continuity and discontinuity between all these players is both possible and necessary. Ultimately, that is my main point.

To state my case clearly in closing, I propose a holistic method by which all individual parables may be investigated to determine the areas of continuity and discontinuity between their pre-Easter and post-Easter levels. A full range of results are possible, so that any individual parable may be found to display complete, great, moderate, low or no degree of continuity (or discontinuity). These are all acceptable results in principle, presuming that the investigation was sound and truthful in practice.

## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

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