

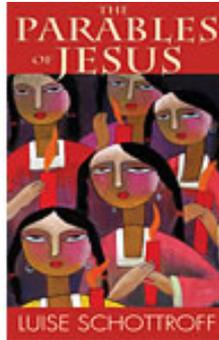
○ SOMETIMES A CIGAR BECOMES A PROCRUSTES' BED

REVIEW OF LUISE SCHOTTROFF, *THE PARABLES OF JESUS*

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Christina Petterson reviews Luise Schottroff's *The Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006).



Luise Schottroff has undertaken the task of challenging dominant interpretations of the parables of Jesus and offering an interpretation situated within a contextual theological framework.

No, no, no, don't stop reading!

This is Luise Schottroff, who has written numerous books, articles and essays on feminist criticism and social criticism, on theology after Auschwitz and theology in an inter-religious dialogue. And all this has taken place within a German theological context, which is one of the more notoriously conservative academic environments.

This book is a serious attempt at constructing a parable theory that does not promote or construct offensive, suppressing or degrading interpretations of the text. This includes casting Jews as the evil other and God as a bloodthirsty vengeful despot. Instead *The Parables of Jesus* offers an interpretation of 'eschatological hope for the coming of God and of the justice that will put an end to all injustice and all violence' (p. 2).

Well then, shall we dive into it?

The book is divided into three main parts. The first, 'Learning to see', and the third, 'Jesus the parable-teller: The parables in the literary context of the gospels', are interpretations of the parables according to Schottroff's parable theory. The second 'In search of a non-dualistic parable theory' is an exposition of her method.

The reason for this division is that in the first section, she wishes to present some of the parables that have given rise to the most theologically problematic interpretations. These 'ecclesiological' interpretations she then contrasts with the 'eschatological' interpretation, which is the essence of the parable theory in this book. So each parable is followed by its dominant interpretation, which is then contrasted to the liberating interpretation. When the reader is aware of the theological problems inherent in the dominant readings, and what needs to be done to overcome this gross misunderstanding, the way is prepared for the theoretical part.

Part 2, 'In Search of a Non-dualistic Parable Theory' consists of eight short chapters, which explain this particular theory. One of the characteristics of the theory employed is that it is built upon a non-dualistic eschatology, that is, an eschatology, which is not constructed around dualisms of time and body. Rather eschatology is a way of speaking about God as that which is already near, and not what is to come. Here Schottruff affirms her position within liberation theology in contrast to church and university, which are governed by either fundamentalist eschatology (in particular in USA, where ecclesiological interpretations are employed to distinguish 'us' from 'them') or 19th century linear eschatology (Jesus as failed prophet within a linear understanding of eschatology). These dualisms she argues, 'result in dualistic theories of religion, symbolism and metaphor, in which the divine is assigned to a sphere separate from the real life of human bodies' (p. 84). This distorts or spiritualises the content of the words that actually have a social and political meaning, but are defused by the metaphorical interpretation. So the interpretation must also provide a nonmetaphorical interpretation of the parables, exposing their political potential. This political potential in the parables is usually overlooked, since traditional interpretation of Scripture seems more obligated to maintain a political and social status quo, than to challenge these. This obedience to authority as a hermeneutical given shows up in interpretations, which do not differentiate between the divine sphere of power and the civil sphere, or between God and Caesar. Schottruff regards these interpretations as distortions since, in her view, the parables are seen in the tradition of Jewish critique of imperialism, a meaning, which was replaced by obedience to authority in the ancient church.

The book as a whole is a theological and pastoral work and the reader is never left in any doubt. The belief in God's good and just nature peppers the pages and thus provides the backdrop of the interpretations of parables. As oppressive as this may seem, it is actually refreshing that these theological presumptions are foregrounded and addressed instead of presupposed, hidden and covertly defended as it 'occasionally' does in this particular field.

The readings of the parables do break with centuries of Western interpretation, and so provide the reader with different interpretations that highlight the social conditions of the texts and there are several occasions when I stopped and thought, oooh, I hadn't thought of it that way.

However I am not convinced...

The book seems to be stranded somewhere along the lines between the academic devil's cake and the pastoral appetite of the deep blue sea.

On the one hand Schottruff wishes to develop a parable theory, which collapses the ecclesiological we-them dualism. She wishes to situate the parables in the everyday world of Palestine and develops her parable theory in line with Jewish parable theories. One of the reasons for this is to refute the anti-Jewish reading of the parables, which have dominated the field. As it was for Dorothee Sölle, whom Schottruff may be seen in theological tradition with, this is clearly unacceptable after the war-crimes of World War II. The first two parables she interprets are ones with heavy anti-Jewish potential (The Pharisee and the Toll-collector and The Parable of the Vineyard). Another reason is to cleave on to the rabbinic parable tradition in order to avoid any uncomfortably close associations with the Roman Empire. Clinging to the rabbinic tradition, Jesus and his parables are an early testimony to the Jewish discourse about God and Roman rule (42-43). So the kingdom of God must always be understood in the language of the Jewish tradition, where God is king, 'as political discourse about God that is critical of power'. The kings of the

parables however, are a different matter. These are human kings, and so connected with the Roman Empire and its officials. And when the reader of the parables is invited to compare, it is emphasising the *difference* between the two forms of power. This means that each parable must be read individually and its theological content determined singularly. So the task at hand: to make the parables theologically acceptable is not an easy one. It demands attention, sensitivity and care, where every single parable is concerned. But this moulding them into a given conception of God does signal that THE MEANING isn't as easy to find or theorise but needs very hard work. And so the theory cannot be applied to all the parables, because some must be understood differently to make God palatable. This seems to be the reason for not wishing to engage in any metaphorical understandings, except of course, where they are necessary. The interesting thing is that Schottroff cannot evade the language of violence and power in the parables. She juggles it around like a hot potato only to land it in the all too predictable lap of the Roman Empire, which has become a comfortable theological safe house for all evils then and now.

Now I am all for the attempt to try to understand the texts in a different way, and accentuating the social images of the parables as more than just a casual vehicle for the spiritual meaning, but this silver platter of theory, which is supposed to make the reading look appetising and special, actually makes it very unconvincing, and ordinary in the sense of, oh no another person has found the theory, which describes the original meaning of the texts in their original social contexts *and* that incidentally avoids all the politically incorrect interpretations in the social context of 2006. But speaking of social contexts, this review doesn't do full justice to *The Parables of Jesus* in its own social context, where it does present a profound ideological and theological challenge in a very strong protestant tradition. For this challenge, I am full of admiration and certain that an important step has been taken in a very significant direction.

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