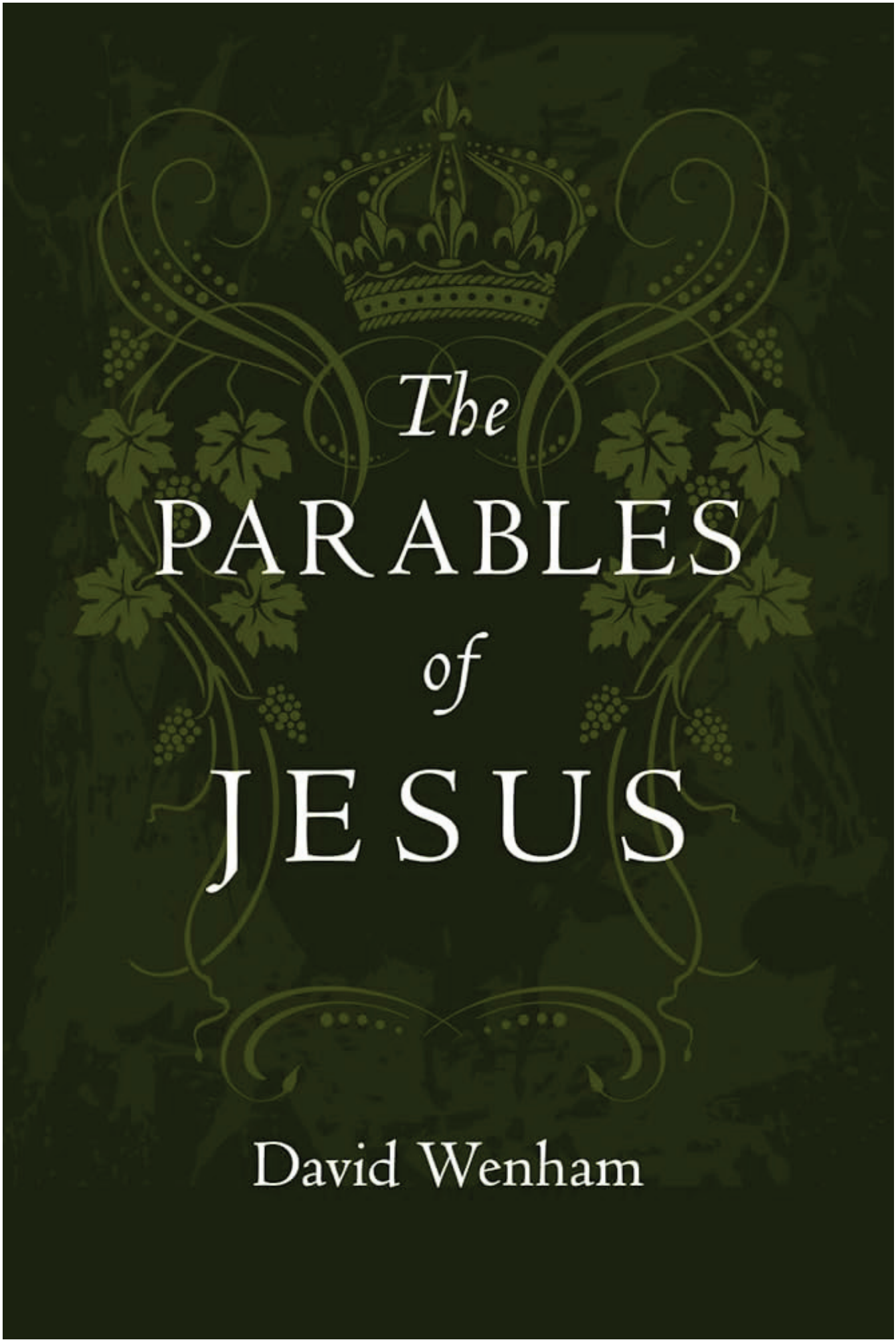

The
PARABLES
of
JESUS
David Wenham

2 SETTING THE SCENE: JESUS' REVOLUTION

Imagine a small Middle Eastern country: its people looked back to times when their country was strong and free, but now they were depressingly weak, poor and under the thumb of foreign imperialists. They longed for release and for a better future. And, being a religious people, they prayed for it, though not always with much optimism. Nationalist leaders came and went, promising great things and yet not in the end delivering them. But now at last it seemed different: this man told them, 'The revolution is here!', and he seemed to be someone who might actually deliver the goods. Crowds were out on the streets; they thronged him and listened with excited curiosity to his speeches . . .

What are Jesus' parables all about? The simple answer to that question is that they are all describing some aspect of the 'kingdom of God'. The 'kingdom of God' was the central theme of Jesus' preaching and indeed of his whole ministry, and the parables should all be seen and understood in that context.

But to say that is not necessarily very helpful to modern readers of the gospels, since many of us have only a very hazy understanding of what Jesus meant by the 'kingdom'. Part of our problem is that the word 'kingdom' itself has different connotations now from those it had in Jesus' day: whereas the word 'kingdom' often suggests a place to us, Jesus used the term in a broader sense to refer to a state of affairs – to God ruling as king – as well as to the realm where God rules. More important, for us today words such as 'king' and 'kingdom' tend to have a less forceful feel to them than they

had in Jesus' day. There are still some kings (and queens!) and kingdoms in our world, but they are mostly constitutional monarchs and monarchies without great power; and, if anything, we tend to regard royalty as a rather old-fashioned institution (much as we may love it).

In Jesus' day, however, kings were far from being constitutional figureheads: a man like Herod the Great, who was in power at the time of Jesus' birth, was an effective and (to his enemies) extremely dangerous military and political ruler. He gained his power by a combination of political astuteness and military force. He then ruled ruthlessly and magnificently, eliminating any whom he saw as a threat to his throne (including members of his own family) and making a name for himself by his marvellous building projects (including the restoration of the Jerusalem temple) and by his lavish way of doing things. 'Kingship' was then something very contemporary and very powerful. So when Jesus announced the coming of God's kingdom or kingly rule, he was not explaining an interesting theological theory; rather he was claiming that something of enormous importance and practical relevance was taking place, of which people needed to take urgent account.

He was in fact announcing God's final intervention in history. The Old Testament prophets looked forward to the time when God would impose his kingly rule on the world. They believed that in one sense God had always ruled the world from the time of creation, and so the psalmists joyfully exclaim 'The Lord reigns' (*e.g.* Ps 93:1; 96:10); and yet at the same time it was quite evident that God was not exerting his rule in a total sense: the sin and suffering and oppression that were such a painful reality in the Old Testament world, not least among God's chosen people of Israel (to whom he had made great promises), were the reflection of a world out of tune with its maker and in rebellion against God's kingly rule. So the Old Testament prophets looked forward to a future time when God would intervene, put things right and rule – so Zechariah 14:9, 'The Lord will be king over the whole earth.'

The Old Testament looks forward to that time in many

different ways, speaking sometimes of the restoration of the people of Israel to greatness, and of the coming of a new king like the great Old Testament king David, and sometimes more broadly of God healing the sicknesses and enmities and hatreds of the world. Isaiah 11, for example, speaks of the coming of a 'shoot from the stump of Jesse' (*i.e.* of a new Spirit-filled king from the family of David), and then of restored harmony in nature: 'The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together . . . They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea' (Isa 11:6–9). Other passages speak of God's people being freed from foreign oppression, of renewed prosperity and of justice for the poor, of war and weapons of war being abolished, of death being swallowed up and tears wiped away, of the estrangement between God and mankind being removed, of God's Spirit being poured out in a new way, and so on. (Some notable passages are Isa 2, 25, 61; Jer 31; Dan 7, 12; Mic 4; Joel 2.)

Today we might describe the Old Testament hope as a hope for a divine 'revolution'. We are all familiar with the Marxist hope of revolution, and, although some Christians may not like the thought, there is something important in common between the Old Testament hope and the Marxist vision of a new society characterised by new economic relationships; the Marxist hope may indeed have its roots in Old Testament teaching. The important difference is, of course, that the Marxist revolution is characteristically man-centred and man-made and thus something limited, whereas the Old Testament prophets looked forward to a cosmic revolution with the whole world being at peace again with God and under his kingly control. Jesus announced the coming of this greater revolution. When he told people that 'The time is fulfilled; the kingdom of God has come near' (Mk 1:15), he was saying, in effect, 'The longed-for revolution is now under way.'

To paraphrase 'kingdom of God' with the phrase 'revolution of God' may help us to appreciate something of the

excitement of Jesus' message. He was announcing a dramatic, forceful change in society to people who – unlike many in our complacent modern world – really longed for such a change: God was at last intervening to put things right. Not surprisingly Jesus' contemporaries understood Jesus to mean that the Roman imperialists and their unprincipled and unpleasant lackeys such as the Herods were about to be driven out of Palestine: 'kingdom' to many of them, like 'revolution' to many of us, suggested something primarily political and military. But Jesus had in mind a bigger revolution than that: God's revolution was to be a total revolution overthrowing Satan and evil and bringing earth and heaven back into harmony, and this would not be accomplished by force of arms, but – unbelievably so far as the disciples were concerned, and who blames them? – through suffering and death.

But, although God's revolution was not quite as the disciples expected, it was something powerful and down-to-earth, not just a heavenly reality. Modern readers of the New Testament may be misled by the phrase 'kingdom of heaven', which we find in Matthew's gospel, and suppose that in speaking about the kingdom Jesus was talking about 'getting to heaven'. But the phrase 'kingdom of heaven' is just an alternative way of saying 'kingdom of God' (the expression used by Mark and Luke in their gospels). Matthew, writing his distinctively Jewish gospel, uses the alternative expression because it refers to God indirectly (as Jews often did) rather than directly, and perhaps because it makes it clear that the kingdom in question is not a purely this-worldly kingdom. And yet the kingdom which Jesus proclaimed was not just up in heaven; it was more like an invasion of earth by heaven!

Jesus' extraordinary miracles were evidence of this. He explained them as a fulfilment of the Old Testament promises and as tangible evidence of the overthrow of Satan's evil empire: so when John the Baptist had doubts about Jesus, Jesus said to John's disciples, 'Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the

dead are raised' – a revolution indeed, and a fulfilment of Old Testament passages such as Isaiah 35:5–6; 61:1 (see Mt 11:2–6; Lk 7:18–23).

Jesus' revolution affected not only people's diseases, but also their relationships with each other: Jesus broke through social barriers, bringing together Jew and Samaritan, man and woman, rich and poor. It was no accident that on meeting with Jesus the rich Zacchaeus gave half his goods to the poor (Lk 19:8), because God's revolutionary rule is not something affecting only people's minds or their relationship with God, but also their life in society and their relationships with each other. The revolution of God entails the establishment of a revolutionary society. Indeed the word 'kingdom', when used by Jesus, often suggests not just the process of revolution, but also the new world and society that God is bringing.

Of course, a most important part of the revolution that Jesus brought had to do with divine–human relationships. God's new society includes God – not surprisingly! Thus Jesus proclaimed forgiveness to sinners, thereby bringing people out of the darkness of Satan's rule into the light of God's favour and into the experience of God as 'Abba', Father. 'Abba' was a revolutionary word to use of God: it was the intimate family word used by children to address their father – a little like 'Daddy' in English, though without the juvenile feel that the English word often has. Jews did not ordinarily address their holy God with this word; but Jesus brought a revolution, expressing his own close relationship with God through this word and inviting his followers to do so too (see Mk 14:36; Lk 11:2; Jn 17:1–26; Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6, *etc.*).

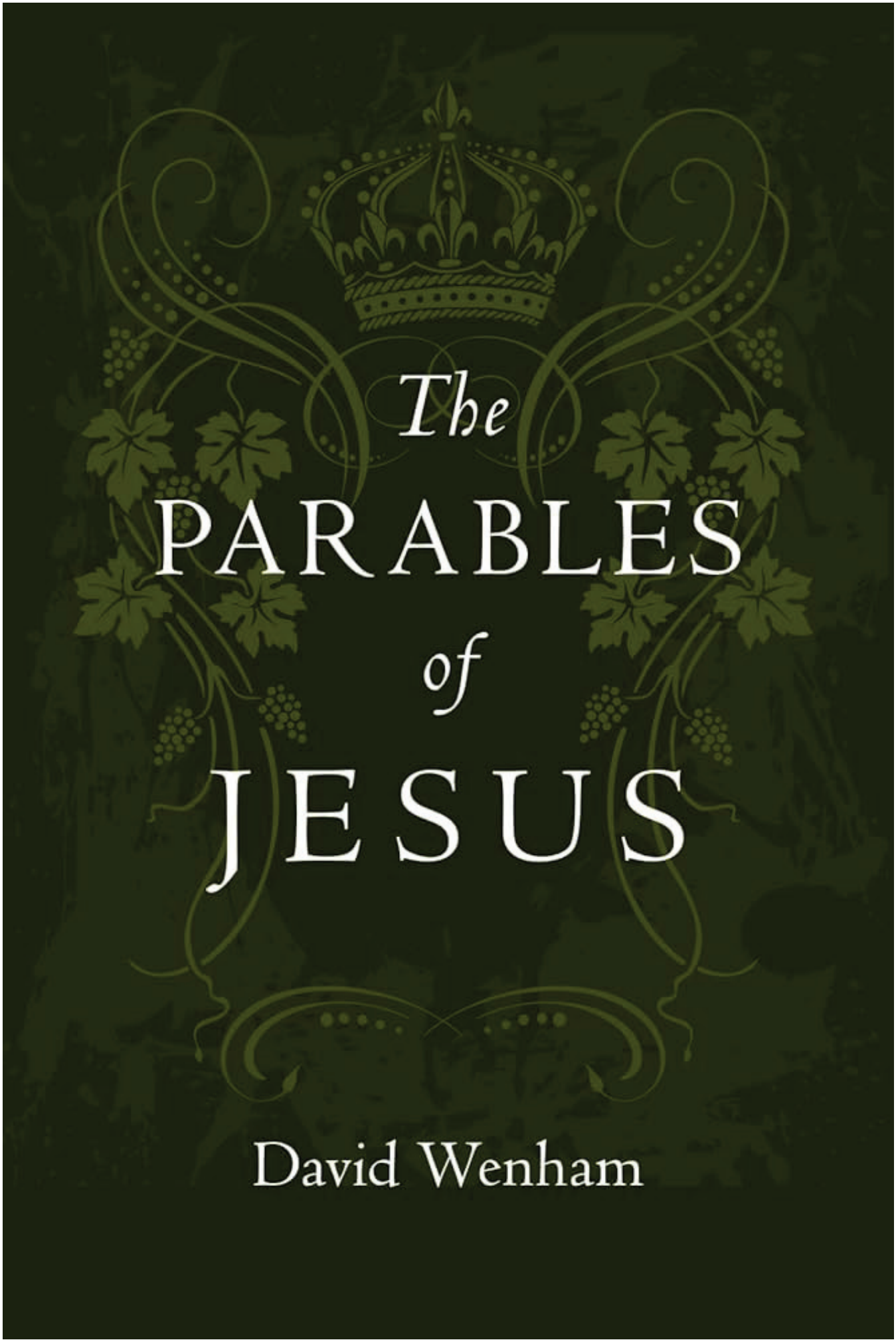
To announce the coming of a revolution is calculated to stir people up. The question on many lips is: What's involved in joining the revolution, and what must I do to get into the new society ('to enter the kingdom')? Some people, especially those who have suffered under the old regime, will be stirred up in enthusiastic support, and will often be prepared to commit themselves in a very costly way to the cause; others, especially those who are comfortably content with the status

quo, will see the revolution as a threat to be resisted. Jesus' announcement of the kingdom, of God's revolution, had precisely the same effect: some responded enthusiastically, others did their best to suppress the revolution.

Few revolutions are established overnight; there is often a long and fierce struggle with drawn-out resistance from 'reactionary' elements. Jesus' revolution was no exception, nor did he suppose that it would be. He, in his ministry, death and resurrection, established a decisive bridgehead in the occupied territory; but it would be a long struggle with many casualties before Satan was completely ousted and God's legitimate rule restored. Jesus taught his followers to look forward to his return at the end of time, when he would bring the revolution to completion and when God's new world and society would be finally and fully established. In the meantime he called his followers to live for the revolution and in the spirit (or rather 'Spirit') of the revolution, and to keep alive their confident expectation of the final liberation and victory.

To sum up: in proclaiming the kingdom of God, Jesus was announcing the coming of God's revolution and of God's new world, as promised in the Old Testament. God was at last intervening, Jesus declared, to establish his reign over everything, to bring salvation to his people and renewal and reconciliation to the world. But fortunately Jesus did not announce his message in such general theological terms; he announced it primarily through vivid, concrete parables.

To summarise Jesus' teaching about the kingdom at the outset of this book is to some extent to anticipate its findings. But it is helpful to have some idea of the broader context of Jesus' teaching before plunging into a study of particular parables. The study of the parables themselves will in turn fill out and clarify our understanding of the kingdom.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As Christians today, we need to rediscover both the contents and the method of Jesus' teaching. When the crowds heard Jesus they 'were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority and not as their scribes' (Mt 7:28–29).

What is a parable?

Christians tend to associate parables particularly with Jesus, and have the vague idea that parables were a rather special and out-of-the-ordinary way of teaching. In fact the Greek word for 'parable' (*parabole*), and particularly the Hebrew and Aramaic word (*mashal/mathla*), which Jesus probably used himself, are very broad terms, which can be used of pictorial sayings and stories of all sorts.

In this sense all of us use parables from time to time, for example, when we use similes or metaphors like 'He rushed out of the room like a scalded cat' or 'The garden was a jungle.' The modern preacher who illustrates his sermon with stories is using parables. Literature, ancient and modern, abounds in 'parables' in the broad sense. Indeed, one whole Old Testament book is entitled 'Parables': we know it as 'Proverbs', but the Hebrew word for proverb is the same word as is translated elsewhere in the Old Testament as 'parable'. The Jewish rabbis of Jesus' day used parables, some of them strikingly similar to Jesus' own parables. To say then that Jesus taught in 'parables' is not in itself to say that he did something mysterious or very innovative: any good speaker or writer uses 'parables' from time to time.

What made Jesus' teaching different from much other teaching then and now was the centrality for him of parabolic speech. Many preachers pop the occasional illustration or story into their sermons in order to add interest and to illuminate the idea that they have been trying to explain. Someone like Paul does this in his letters (*e.g.* Rom 11:16–24), but Jesus, especially when speaking to the crowds, spoke almost entirely pictorially, explaining his ideas in and through stories, and not just using stories as an aid to illustrate his

points. Whereas much preaching is like a monochrome carpet with a little pattern round the edge to relieve the monotony, Jesus' teaching is like a carpet with bold and distinctive patterns woven throughout. Jesus taught profound theology, yet he did so not in long and complex discourses, but through down-to-earth, real-life stories.

Jesus' stories and sayings reflect vividly the world in which he lived: there are stories and sayings about family life, like the story of the rebel son who came back home, about agriculture and the natural world, like the story of the unproductive fig tree, about trade and commerce, about weddings, rich and poor people, politics and kings.

Master-communicator

The fact that Jesus taught so graphically through stories and sayings which reflect first-century Palestinian life tells us much about the sort of person Jesus was. He was no ivory-tower theologian expounding abstract and abstruse theories; he was someone with his feet very much on the ground, able to talk to ordinary people in ordinary terms. The Christian doctrine of the incarnation is that in Jesus God became man; it is evident from Jesus' parabolic teaching that he was not simply human, but that he was a man who felt with, and identified with, the world and situation of his contemporaries in a way that is not always characteristic of religious leaders. This makes theological sense: the incarnation was not simply a matter of identification, but also of communication. Jesus' parables reveal him as a master-communicator.

It is, of course, not just the fact that Jesus used a large number of lifelike parables that justifies the claim that he was a master-communicator. It is also the appropriateness and force of the parables he used. Anyone can devise banal and/or inappropriate sermon illustrations. Jesus' parables are consistently appropriate and powerful, capturing the listeners' attention and then bringing them face to face with some aspect of his message which would be far less effectively communicated through non-pictorial language. Sometimes

the power of the parable lies simply in the use of a thought-provoking analogy, such as that of the new wine in the old wineskins. Sometimes it is in the unusual twist and challenge that a story contains, as in the parable of the good Samaritan, which has particular biting force because it is a Samaritan, a religious and social outcast, who is the kind hero, or in the parable of the labourers in the vineyard, who work for different periods of time but all receive the same wage. Sometimes the story is one that stimulates thought and leaves people to make their own connections, as with the parable of the prodigal son, with its powerful portrayal of the runaway son, the loving father and the righteous elder brother.

It is not only Jesus' parables that show him to have been a master-communicator, but his whole life and ministry, because Jesus did not paint vivid, visual pictures of God's love only through his words, but also through his actions. His giving of the bread and wine to his disciples at the last supper was an acted parable, as was his carefully planned entry into Jerusalem on a donkey before the crucifixion. His eating with tax-collectors and sinners was an acting-out of the message of the parable of the prodigal son. His miracles, for example his healings, his miraculous feeding of the hungry and his transformation of the water into wine, were pictures of the kingdom of God, although also more than pictures, being actual samples of that kingdom in action. Jesus' parables were therefore not just a convenient teaching method which Jesus happened to hit on. They were part and parcel of his whole ministry; they were a forceful and visual demonstration of what he had come to do.

Understanding the parables: (a) context

If Jesus' parables were such a significant part of his ministry, then it is obviously important to seek to understand them, both for the historian and even more so for the Christian who sees the teaching of Jesus as having continuing relevance and authority today. How then are we to understand Jesus' parables?

The major obstacle in the way of our understanding is our distance from Jesus and his situation. We are chronologically distant from Jesus – almost two thousand years away; we are socially and politically and religiously distant. This means that the full force and flavour of Jesus' sayings may often elude us. Most of us, for example, are not familiar with the disastrous effect of putting new wine into old wineskins, or with the dangers of the Jericho road described in the parable of the good Samaritan, nor with the political and religious background to the story of the nobleman going to get a kingdom in the parable of the pounds.

Interpreters have often ignored the problem of historical distance, and, in keeping with their convictions about the ongoing authority and relevance of Jesus' teaching, have explained the parables in terms of their own context and experience and convictions. Thus the parable of the good Samaritan has been taken by some as a summary of Christian doctrine – describing the fall of man, the work of Christ (= the good Samaritan) and the role of the church (= the inn). By others it has been interpreted psychoanalytically, the good Samaritan being the model counsellor, unobtrusively meeting the needs of the unfortunate sufferer.

The trouble with such unhistorical interpretations is that they are often more a reflection of the ideas of the Christian interpreter than of the ideas likely to have been in Jesus' own mind. And although it is admirable to interpret the teachings of Jesus in ways that speak to us today, it is obviously important that it is the teaching of Jesus that is so interpreted, and not just his words taken out of context. It is dangerously possible to make words mean almost anything if we ignore their context. If we cut off a branch from a tree, we can carve it into anything we want, but it is no longer part of that tree; similarly, if we take Jesus' words out of their context, we can make them mean almost anything we want, but such interpretation has little claim to be Jesus' teaching in a significant sense. Sound interpretation of Jesus' teaching must be historically rooted.

The word 'context' is probably the key to the proper

interpretation of the parables of Jesus. We need to understand the parables of Jesus, first within their overall historical context, second within the context of Jesus' teaching and ministry, and third within the context of the gospels in which they are found.

First, before we apply the parables to ourselves and our situation, we must seek to put ourselves into the historical context of Jesus and his hearers and to hear the parables with their ears. Such a historical understanding, however imperfect it may be, must then be the basis and the measure of our contemporary understanding. Thus we need to understand what the terms priest, Levite and Samaritan meant in the first century in Palestine, as well as something of the history of Jewish/Samaritan relations, if we are to appreciate the full force of Jesus' parable of the good Samaritan. We need in particular to be alert to the Old Testament background to many of the parables, since Jesus' hearers will repeatedly have made connections between his teaching and the Scripture that was so important to them: for example, Jesus' parable about the vineyard in Mark 12:1–12 will immediately have reminded his hearers of Isaiah 5, where Israel is compared to a vineyard. This is a vital clue to the interpretation of that parable.

As well as paying attention to the historical, literary, cultural, religious, social and linguistic context of first-century Palestine, we need also to understand the parables within the context of Jesus' teaching as a whole. The parables must be understood within the context of Jesus' proclamation of the coming kingdom, and not in the context of twentieth-century psychoanalytic theory or whatever.

Paying attention to the context of the parables within the gospels is also important. The evangelists often give us clues about the setting and meaning of the parables, as does Luke, for example, when he indicates that the parable of the good Samaritan was given in reply to a lawyer's question about what it means to 'love your neighbour as yourself'. Some scholars doubt if the gospels are a reliable guide to the original meaning of the parables, arguing that the writers of

the gospels have reinterpreted Jesus' teaching in the light of their own later Christian experience. However, scholarly scepticism is often exaggerated, and the evangelists' hints about the interpretation of the parables should be taken very seriously. At the very least the gospels are our earliest evidence about how the parables of Jesus were understood and used shortly after Jesus' ministry.

Having said that, we should perhaps qualify it slightly, since some of the New Testament epistles, for example the letters of Paul, have possible echoes of Jesus' parables from time to time, and may be even earlier evidence than the gospels. However, the gospels specifically set out to record Jesus' teaching, whereas someone like Paul makes use of it in the context of his own teaching; so, although it is always worth seeing if the epistles give us clues as to how Jesus' teaching was understood, the evidence is less directly useful than that of the gospels themselves.

Understanding the parables: (b) form

If 'context' is one key word for the understanding of Jesus' parables, 'form' is another. The interpreter needs to be sensitive to the particular shape and structure of the parable being studied. It has been a common assumption among scholars and preachers for some years that Jesus' parables all had one main point, and that they should be interpreted accordingly. But that is at best an over-simplification and at worst an arbitrary theory which results in artificial and distorted interpretations. Jesus, like other Jewish teachers, used different sorts of parables – some simple, some more complex. The interpreter must not force them into one mould, but must seek to identify the particular points of emphasis and to distinguish the points that are significant from the narrative details which simply add colour to the story.

Thus in the parable of the good Samaritan it is undoubtedly significant that the hero of the story is a Samaritan, and probably significant that his disappointing predecessors

are a priest and a Levite, but the Samaritan's oil, wine and donkey, while contributing to the picture of the Samaritan's generosity, are not significant in themselves. Recognising the relative importance of such things within a parable is not always easy: a combination of literary and historical sensitivity is needed.

Applying the parables today

Although I have emphasised the importance of a historical understanding of the parables of Jesus, it would be a mistake to suppose that a purely historical approach is either possible or desirable. Every interpreter of history is influenced by his or her own situation and questions, and every Christian must want to appreciate the meaning of Jesus' parables for today. However, it is important to distinguish the historical task and the task of application, and to emphasise the importance of both. The interpreter's role may be compared to the role of a translator. A good translator requires two things: an accurate appreciation of the original language and its idioms, and a similarly accurate grasp of the language into which he is going to translate. Similarly with the exposition of Jesus' parables, sensitivity to Jesus' situation and sensitivity to today's world are both essential.

Despite the importance of applying the parables to today's world, this book will be concentrating on the historical side of interpretation, both because it is fundamental – obviously if we get this wrong, we cannot get the application right – and also because our historical distance from Jesus makes it the more difficult part of the equation for us to get right. But the book will be a wasted effort if its readers are content to stay with the historical meaning and fail to make the connections to today. Jesus' teaching is as exciting and important today as it was in his own time, if we will listen. He said: 'He who has ears to hear, let him hear' (Mk 4:9).

FOREWORD BY JOHN MARK COMER

THE SCANDAL OF THE KINGDOM

HOW THE **PARABLES OF JESUS** REVOLUTIONIZE LIFE WITH GOD

DALLAS WILLARD

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE DIVINE CONSPIRACY*

TEACHING TO TRANSFORM

Great teachers know that the goal of teaching is to change people's ways of life by presenting the listeners with words and experiences that *impact the active flow of their lives*. Jesus accomplished this by teaching in the context of ordinary life, using illustrations drawn from common occupations and daily activities. Instead of using religious ideas and sacred objects, Jesus used everyday things like money, fruit, vines, feasts, seeds, coins, trees, and sheep. Everybody could understand and identify with what he was saying: "Yes, I've lost a sheep!" Jesus' illustrations and examples made the kingdom of God more accessible.

When Jesus said, "The kingdom of the heavens is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened" (Matthew 13:33, paraphrased), everyone knew about leaven. He was speaking to them right where they lived. They knew it was the kind of thing that makes bread rise. They recognized it as something that started out small but then expanded, working quietly to penetrate all of the dough. Like leaven, good teaching gets tucked away in your mind and becomes more meaningful as it expands with the passing of time. After the story, bread would be a reminder of the nature of the kingdom of the heavens.

Good teachers say things in ways that ensure their teaching is easily remembered. Without computers, records, handouts, or even pens, Jesus' hearers had to be able to "get it" just from listening. So he found ways to poke holes in what people already believed and shake them up a bit. They didn't have to try to remember what he said because it puzzled them enough to stay with them.

Culture is what people believe without thinking and act on without explanation or justification. Jesus got right to the heart of the assumptions and practices common to the culture of the day. He planted thoughts in people's minds in such a way that those thoughts didn't stop growing. Imagine how people felt when they heard, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God" (Matthew 19:24 NRSVue). People's reactions to Jesus' teaching show how effective this method was (Matthew 7:28; Luke 4:32).

In general, the way Jesus taught was to take whatever cultural balloon was floating by and let the air out of it. He went to dinner with a man who had filled his house with wealthy neighbors and relatives and said, "When you have a dinner, don't invite your relatives and your wealthy neighbors" (Luke 14:12, paraphrased). Now, do you think his host said, "Let me write this down so I can remember it when he's gone"? No, he was struck by this contradiction to what he believed. That's how Jesus taught and why people remembered it. Because they remembered it, it changed their lives.