

© Revd Rex A E Hunt
Director
The Centre for Progressive Religious Thought, Canberra
October 2004/July 2005

PARABLES: STORIES WITH A FANG!

I wish to pay my respects to the Ngunnawal People
and to those who have cared for this part of the land
from time immemorial.

Introduction

The year 1985 was a good year for Christian biblical studies. For it was in that year American New Testament scholar Robert Funk established the Westar Institute and called together a group of 30 progressive biblical scholars and invited them to begin a new journey of discovery - a 'new quest' for the historical Jesus. Thus began the 'Jesus Seminar'.

But it was going to be different journey to those commenced in the past. This journey was to start with a 'sayings' data base to see if they could discover a Jesus 'voice print' amid the recorded subject matter of his speeches and public conversation.

While there had been some work done in the past on one form of Jesus' public discourse - parables - this study was to include a comparison of Jesus' language with the ordinary language of his day. Funk, a well know parables scholar himself, was convinced it was in the parables, the aphorisms and the sayings of Jesus that one could catch sight of bits and pieces of the Jesus vision of that something Jesus called God's kingdom or realm or empire.

Yet from these fragments of insight "we can begin to piece together some sense of the whole. Together those fragments provide us with glimpses of the historical figure... indeed, a glimpse of a glimpse" (*Funk 2002:9*).

Robert Funk and The Jesus Seminar

Robert Funk claimed the task was to discover the Jesus 'voice print' as distinctive discourse and as it stood out in contrast to both ordinary speech as well as from the speech of other sages and speakers of his day. To discover the distinctive or original voice in the Galilean crowd, the forgotten Jesus.

Funk's work has interested me for several years. Indeed, ever since 1990 when I sat in Dayton, Ohio, with NT scholar Tom Boomershine and began to understand his narrative or storytelling approach to biblical studies, beginning with the oral tradition. And where I first heard of Robert Funk's work.

Some years later, in 1998, I was to actually meet Funk in Sydney.

While we in the 21st century generally have a 'silent print' mentality to biblical studies - now being challenged by 'electronic' culture - this was not the case in 1st century Galilee.

Therefore, I take as my underlying premise that Jesus was a travelling sage who conversed with those around him, orally. Our religious tradition portrays him as one who speaks rather than as one who writes. There is a fundamental contrast between oral culture (Jesus' time) and print culture (our time).

The primary form of communication in an oral-aural culture was the human voice. The word is something that happens. Where the sounded word is received by the listener there is always community - it "takes two to sound!" (*Jensen 1993:19*). So the imprint of orality is shaped by:

- short sentences,
- provocative and memorable words,
- oft-repeated phrases,
- situational rather than abstract,
- stories often stitched together.

So where to begin? The Jesus Seminar started with the premise: primary information regarding Jesus of Nazareth is derived from the synoptic gospels, along with the Gospel of Thomas. The latter was considered very important as this document, found in 1945 at Nag Hammadi in Egypt, contained 114 sayings and parables ascribed to Jesus - 65 of them unique to Thomas.

Hence their first Report on the 'words' of Jesus: **The Five Gospels. The search for the authentic words of Jesus.**

The task was time consuming. Christian conviction had overwhelmed Jesus. More times than not he had been made to confess what Christians had come to believe. But Jesus was not the first Christian even when he is made to talk like one (*Funk & Hoover 1993*).

Funk and his associates, now numbering around 300 internationally distinguished scholars, claim Jesus develops a consistent rhetorical strategy that matches the content of his message. The Jesus strategy was:

- (i) language is concrete and specific,
- (ii) uses typifications,
- (iii) does not cite or interpret scripture,
- (iv) does not make personal confessions;
- (v) language is indirect and highly figurative or metaphorical,
- (vi) exaggerates;
- (vii) frustrates ordinary expectations, and
- (viii) makes free use of parody.

Remembering the 'red letter' bibles of past generations (and of today - cf. editions of the New Revised Standard Version), where the so-called 'words of Jesus' were printed in red ink while the rest of the Bible was printed in black ink, the Jesus Seminar set up a process whereby scholars would examine the texts and vote on whether it was, in their opinion, an authentic saying or not.

After much discussion and refinement, a system of voting using four colours to grade the sayings was used:

Red = Jesus most likely said something like this;

Pink = Jesus may have said something like it;

Grey = Jesus probably didn't say it, but it contains some similar ideas;

Black = Jesus didn't say it. It belongs to a later or different tradition.

While this may seem a novel way of sharing knowledge Funk insisted their work had to be open and honest, subject to debate and peer justification, as well as made available to anyone who was interested. Gone was the time when scholars wrote for other scholars. Ordinary people needed to benefit from such progressive scholarship and honesty. Because too many had been left in the dark due to "soft", if not dishonest or careless sermons.

Of the 500 or so 'sayings' attributed to Jesus, only 90 gained either a Red or Pink response. That is, only 18% were classified as being 'that's Jesus' or 'That's probably Jesus'. A massive 82% were either voted as Grey or Black (*Funk & Hoover 1993*).

Similarly, of **The acts of Jesus**, their second Report, only 16% or 29 out of a total of 176 were graded as either Red or Pink (*Funk 1988*).

Commenting on this result, one of the scholars, Lane McGaughey, says:

"the vote... does not mean they are the actual words of Jesus, but that they preserve the gist of Jesus' message in a way that makes those sayings recognizable as deriving from him and not from the early church or the Evangelists" (*McGaughey 2002:125*).

As to be expected, says McGaughey, the Jesus Seminar findings on the distinctiveness of Jesus' sayings has some serious implications for biblical studies and Sunday sermons!

1. The parables of Jesus are immediately recognisable:

- short stories which begin with a realistic scene,
- transformed into metaphors by a surprising 'twist' in the middle,
- invite the hearers to act on the basis of this new, but not fully defined, vision of reality.

2. In order to fathom their metaphors, each parable must be viewed as a whole rather than allegorising their parts.

3. Jesus 'style' was descriptive rather than prescriptive, indirect rather than direct.

4. Jesus social mission or 'revolt' was less through social action and more through parables of new possibilities and potentials. He "affected the lives of people, but he was not a social organiser or activist" (Scott 2002:38).

These four suggestions sum up the importance of the Jesus Seminar in my understanding of progressive biblical studies.

The oral tradition

Fundamentalists and other conservatives often claim that what is ascribed to Jesus in the books or 'canon' of the New Testament, is what Jesus said. However, both serious progressive biblical scholars long ago abandoned "this historically untenable and theologically naive view" (Scott 1988:1), as well as did scholars of oral tradition.

The cultures and communities in which the Jesus movement arose were essentially oral. Spoken. Therefore, tradition is not a fixed thing as it is in cultures shaped by writing or print. It is very fluid, passed on as talk, from generation to generation. This 'fluidity' is recognisable in the four streams of narrative which helped shaped the written Hebrew scriptures:

- (i) sacred or priestly,
- (ii) prophetic,
- (iii) kingdom, and unfortunately to a lesser extent,
- (iv) wisdom.

Oral storytellers do not ordinarily remember exact wording. Knowledge is shaped by memory. But not memory mindlessly regurgitated, but memory rethought (Boomershine 1988). As Bernard Scott says: "in oral communities purveyors of the tradition freely omitted, invented, modified, enlarged" (Scott 1988:3) their stories, layering and stitching them together to conserve tradition in an episodic manner (Fig. No. 1. Layers of tradition). And Scott goes on to say:

"The question for scholars is how to distinguish these levels of talk, and especially, how to isolate Jesus' talk about the kingdom from other levels of talk in the written records, which is all we now

have"

(Scott 1988:4).

Jesus was a Galilean peasant who wrote nothing. He spoke Aramaic and very possibly some Greek. But we don't know if he could speak Hebrew. His words have been preserved only in the Greek. He taught his followers orally.

The world of Jesus' parables is the fabric of daily life - Monday to Friday - in a Galilean village or family rather than an urban setting (BB Scott 1989). The subjects of his parables were robbery on an isolated road, coins, a vineyard, day labourers, sheep and wayward children. His parables do not speak about God,

neither does he develop a doctrine of God, proclaim his messiahship, predict his passion and death, depict a last judgment, commission the disciples to establish a church, or picture supernatural beings or miracles (Funk 1994:105).

These stories and proverbs do expounded a particular, though not original (Geering 2002:123), point of view: the kingdom or realm of God, in the tradition of the sages. No sphere of life is “outside God’s realm: the political, social, economic, ecclesial, and theological are all intertwined” (Reid 2001:7).

Parables. Stories with a fang!

The history of interpretation of parables has been a long and winding gravel road. The respected British scholar, C H Dodd, was breaking new ground when in the early 1960s he wrote:

“In the traditional teaching of the Church for centuries (parables) were treated as allegories, in which each term stood as a cryptogram for an idea, so that the whole had to be de-coded term by term” (Dodd 1961:13).

To treat a parable as an allegory would be, for example, to take the story of the ‘Good Samaritan’ and interpret it thus:

A man- Adam
Jerusalem - the heavenly city
Jericho - moon, and our mortality
robbers - the devil and his angels

To counter this Augustinian style of interpretation Dodd offered his own suggestion:

“At its simplest the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought” (Dodd 1961:16).

Other scholars have now moved on in this or similar directions.

From within the spectrum of stories, two opposites are often compared: myth and parable. In everyday talk a myth suggests a story which is “false, pre-scientific, outdated or... incredible” (Tilley 1985:40). Another way is to see it is as a story which sets up a way of thinking about the world. Such as: all Australians are bronzed Anzacs who live in the outback! Such as: all boat people/asylum seekers are queue jumpers! Myth is also often called everyday wisdom.

On the other hand a parable is a story set within the common sense everyday world of explaining things, but which upsets that way of thinking. Parables reveal the unexpected, subvert the normal, and cast out certainty to make room for hope. They are “always about persons in relation to their world... radically concrete” (TeSelle 1975:2). Therefore, they are stories with a ‘twist in the tail’ or ‘with a

fang!'. They go beyond the 'nice story' or 'domesticated' categories that much past theological or sermon interpretation has offered.

To test this theory we will look at three parables: the parable of the Leaven, the parable of a Man on the road to Jericho and the parable of the Man who had two sons.

(i) The parable of the Leaven (Matthew 13:33)

The Jesus Seminar overwhelmingly voted this parable 'red' - Jesus most likely said something like this.

Often called a mini-parable, this 20 or so word story is about a woman who takes a large quantity of flour - enough to probably feed 100 people - and conceals within it a quantity of leaven.

That's our story.

For the past 50 years or so this story, probably because it is so short, has been interpreted only in a positive light. That is, on the process of leavening. Mix yeast or leaven (often used interchangeable by interpreters) into some flour and water and soon, as Dodd points out, "the whole mass swells and bubbles, as fermentation rapidly advances" (Dodd 1961:144). And that, Dodd claims, "The ministry of Jesus was like that" (Dodd 1961:144).

To stake his claim further, Dodd links this mini-parable to another mini-parable - the companion growth parable of A Grain of Mustard Seed: small beginnings, great growth at the end.

But where in this story is the fang? Not in that interpretation. And our storyteller doesn't offer any suggestions. So let me 'tread where angels fear to go' and offer some thoughts which try to take seriously both the audience and the cultural context of this story. I am relying on Bernard Scott for much of these suggestions.

In this parable there are very strong negative flows to it.

1. Leaven: in the ancient world leaven was a metaphor of moral corruption, rot, decay. The physical characteristics support this:

"Leaven is made by taking a piece of bread and storing it in a damp, dark place until mould forms. The bread rots and decays, unlike modern yeast..." (Scott 1989:324).

Leaven is unholy, everyday. Unleaven is holy, the sacred.

2. A woman: in the ancient world the role of a woman was much debated. It appears to have been associated with the unclean, the religiously impure. Normally baking bread was a family affair involving the children, the father, and women. Women did not take the initiative. They were subject to their fathers and husbands (Scott 2001:27).

3. To conceal: not 'to mix' or 'to cover'.

While there is nothing wrong with the realm of God being hidden, it is the use of the much more negative word 'to conceal' that is important here.

“The woman’s hiding confirms, not overturns, the leaven’s negative connotation... In the metaphorical structure of leaven, the conclusion of the process is not baking but the rising of the dough, which represents corruption” (Scott 1989:326, 327).

Traditional and some modern interpretations have tended to accentuate the positive and ignore either the parable itself - as “trite or insipid” (Funk 1994:52) - or certainly the negative aspects of this parable. Thus, I reckon, they have missed the fang. Why? Because in general we have domesticated these stories. And as Scott suggests:

“For all those who are leaven in their society, this parable assures them that the empire of God is like them. In Jesus’ society this was a large majority of people. All those who were unable for one reason or another to observe the purity code would be leaven and that would be most folks” (Scott 2001:34).

That Jesus associates the realm of God with a "corrupting process suggests a scandalous relocation of the divine presence" (Bessler-Northcutt 2004:59). The listener is frustrated. The listener is frustrated. Don't rely on your own rules of what is good or holy, or expect the realm of God will be what you want it to be!

Especially when the one who is proported to be telling the story, claims the realm of God was among the marginal: that those who are out, are in, and those who are in, are out!

So in the end we are left with this suggestion:

the realm of God is like leaven underhandedly mixed into bread making by a woman - ordinary, common, everyday bread! (parable).

You must be joking, Jesus! Surely the realm of God is like holy, unleavened, uncorrupted bread preserved by men? (myth).

Beware! The parable insists: the realm of God is hidden and will appear under its own guises, even the guise of corruption. In modern guise this parable could be told: “God’s overwhelming love is like cancer that invades a woman’s breast until it has consumed all of her, even in her Sunday finery” (Scott 2001:34).

And that’s a shock! That’s the fang!

(ii) The parable of a Man on the road to Jericho (Luke 10:30-35)

The Jesus Seminar voted this parable 'red' - Jesus most likely said something like this.

Traditionally this story has been called "The good Samaritan" where 'good' means 'go and do the same'. Four people make up this story: two religious, a Judean traveller, a Samaritan traveller - probably a merchant trader.

A man travels a lonely road and is robbed and beaten up, left to die. The Jericho road is a dangerous, lonely road, and one shouldn't take unnecessary chances. The man in the ditch could be you or me! The listeners nod in agreement. So given this man's situation: robbed, abandoned and probably dying, in the ditch, "the hearer is clued in as to the story's type. We await the arrival of the hero with whom we can identify" (Scott 2001:59).

A priest and a Levite, members of the religious profession, people who ought to have shown concern, arrive on the scene, pass by the injured - or was he a dead - person, without offering any help. The religious in the audience want to argue their good reasons: one can not be too careful as a servant of God! But peasants also know that religious professionals can be callous and indifferent to the needs of others! The audience now begins to be divided.

Then a Samaritan, the 'enemy', regarded by the Judeans as not much better than a dog, took the trouble to stop and offer what help he could. And then went the extra mile by taking the injured traveller to a hotel and paying for his care himself. This is unexpected. No more nodding in agreement here. Suddenly those listeners - religious and peasants - all agree. This can't be so! You've got to be joking!

That's our story.

The Samaritan is absolutely essential to the story. If the main thrust of the story was simply about good blokes versus a bad bloke, or as an illustration of love of neighbour, or even a diatribe against heartless religious leaders, the offer of aid by a Judean lay person would have been sufficient. And then it could probably be an example story of something good rather than a parable which turns our world view upside down.

So why is this a story with a fang? This story challenges the hearers' understanding of God, of whom God approves and whether anyone else "would have acted differently from the priest or Levite" (Bessler-Northcutt 2004:57). It shatters a narrow interpretation of the law and un.masks the hatreds and divisions which often become institutionalised by religious strife.

But How? And this is where the fang strikes deep, because it is here that I reckon the storyteller called Luke has missed the radical force of this story.

Luke sets this story within the context of a question: who is my neighbour? It is also the most commonly asked question by those who hear the story. But there is

another more fundamental question of this story: with whom is the listener to identify?

For the record, it was Robert Funk who asked this question. His answer: "not with the Samaritan, but with the man who was lying in the ditch" (Beardslee 1991:53). So the context which storyteller Luke should have set this story to be able to feel its pang, is not 'who is my neighbour?' but 'whom will I allow to be my neighbour?'

Our honest answer to that question, just might really surprise us. Megan McKenna's comment is very suggestive:

"If we were in the ditch in that condition, who is the last person we would want to be indebted to for the rest of our lives, especially if acknowledging the debt would cause us to be outcast and associated with that group by everyone in our current world? Is there anyone or any group that we feel that way about? Would we rather die than face the fact that this person or these people are our neighbours?" (McKenna 1994:149).

(iii) The parable of the Man who had Two Sons (Luke 15:11-32)

The Jesus Seminar voted this parable 'pink' - Jesus may have said something like this.

Traditionally this parable has been called 'The prodigal son', although there are at least three main characters featured in the story: the father and two sons. Now to the story in sketch outline only.

A younger son wants to leave home. He insultingly asks his father for his share of what may become his inheritance. Knowing there was no point in trying to hold on, the father agrees and shares out his livelihood to both sons. The younger son leaves home and lives a life of extravagance.

When an economic depression hits the country where he is living, the younger son is soon broke. He takes a low-caste job to try and survive. But soon finds out this is not for him and decides to go home. So he works on a speech to tug at his father's heart strings in the hope he will be welcomed back and not killed.

The father, who has always been watching and waiting and loving, sees his son coming, and, ignoring the teachings of the Hebrew scriptures once again, runs out to meet him, acting like a woman rather than a man, and welcomes the son back with an extravagant homecoming party.

Likewise, the elder son, after a hard day's work separated from his father, also decides to go home. On his arrival he notices a party is in progress and is told it is for the younger son, who has now come home. In true sibling rivalry he takes offence, yells abuse about his father, and refuses to 'go in' to the party.

As with the younger son, the father lovingly goes out to meet him. And the story ends - unresolved - after a short but heated debate about feelings and property and power, between the father and the angry elder son. Meanwhile the younger son is still inside at his homecoming party with all the trappings of being received back, thinking he has struck a clever bargain with the father.

That's our story. So where's the 'fang'?

First, this is a story about a father who had two sons. Indeed, not only had two sons but loved two sons, went out to two sons, and was generous to two sons.

Second, the father does not reject either son, under any circumstance. His love is given to both, not to one at the expense of the other. Yet this same love does not resolve the conflict. It accepts conflicts as the arena in which the work of love is to be done.

Third, there is a missing third act in this parable (Scott 2001). The conflict between the brothers is left unresolved. So a real question: what happens next? Bernard Scott is helpful with this suggestion:

"Soon the father will die. Then what? If the sons continue on with their established scripts, they are headed for a collision. One will kill the other. Or they can follow the father's script and surrender their male hono(u)r and keep on welcoming, accepting, and being with the other. They have a choice between being lost or found, dead or alive" (Scott 2001:82-83).

In this parable a simple suggestion is made: that re-imagined world, hoped-for world, pictures co-operation, not contest, as the basis for the realm of God. That one is loved not according to pre-set conditions. And that's a twist.

And if we had more time/space we could go on:

- The mustard seed (Luke 13:18-19) - the realm of God is associated with uncleanness just as Jesus associates with the unclean, the outcast;
- The sower (Mark 4:3-8) - the harvest is ordinary and everyday. In failure and everydayness lies the miracle of God's activity;
- The lost coin (Luke 15:8-10) - the kingdom/realm is less than anticipated.

And so on...

An unending conversation

The parable of the Leaven.

The parable of a Man on the Road to Jericho.

The parable of the Man who had Two Sons.

Three parables. Three stories which turn our common 'garden-variety' world upside down. Three stories from a rebel who, according to Bernard Scott, "revolts in parable" (Scott 2003:138). Three stories without conclusions, because parables "do not teach something, but gestures toward" (Beutner 1994:x).

Taken as simple teaching devices or example stories or allegories, the parables end up being domesticated and homogenised and the parable teller becomes an icon rather than an iconoclast (Funk 1996:44-45). But taken in all their radicalness, in the spirit of Jesus' skepticism, and with a daring dose of reconstructivism, three possible areas for continuing conversation emerge:

- (i) Jesus as parable teller becomes parable himself (TeSelle 1975);
- (ii) the parables create a counter-world, a hoped-for world, a re-imagined world - all in the face of the other world, the real world which "teases the hearer with its possible application" (Scott 1988:17), and
- (iii) discerning the relationship between the sayings of Jesus and those attributed to the earlier Jewish sages (Geering 2002).

Sure, many parables can leave us frustrated. Lloyd Geering's comment seems very suggestive:

"The Jesus most relevant to us is he who provided no ready-made answers but by his tantalising stories prompted people to work out their own most appropriate answers to the problems of life. That is why the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son will be remembered long after the historic confessions and creeds have been forgotten" (Geering 2002:145).

But more important is the unstated proposition from this brief study of parables:
can we have faith with Jesus
in the re-imagined world of the parables?

It remains to be seen if the 21st century church can develop such a 21st century gospel.

Bibliography:

- Beardslee, W. A. 1991. *Margins of belonging. Essays on the new testament and theology.* AAR Studies in Religion 58. GO: Atlanta. Scholars Press.
- Bessler-Northcutt, J. 2004. "Learning to see God" in R. Hoover et.al. *The historical Jesus goes to church.* CA: Santa Rosa. Polebridge Press.
- Beutner, E. F. 1994. "Forward" in R. W. Funk. *Jesus as precursor.* CA: Sonoma. Polebridge Press.
- Boomershine, T. E. 1988. *Story journey. An invitation to the gospel as storytelling.* TN: Nashville. Abingdon.
- Dodd, C. H. 1961. *The parables of the kingdom.* Gt. Britain: Glasgow. Fontana/Collins.
- Donahue, J. R. 1988. *The gospel in parable. Metaphor, narrative, and theology in the synoptic gospels.* Philadelphia. Fortress Press.
- Funk, R. et. al 1988. *The parables of Jesus. Red letter edition.* The Jesus Seminar. CA: Santa Rosa. Polebridge Press.
- Funk, R. W.; R. W. Hoover. (ed). 1993. *The five gospels. The search for the authentic words of Jesus.* NY: New York. Macmillan Publishing.
- Funk, R. W. 1994. *Jesus as precursor. Revised Edition.* CA: Sonoma. Polebridge Press.
- Funk, R. W. 1996. *Honest to Jesus. Jesus for a new millennium.* NY: New York. HarperCollins.
- Funk, R. W. (ed). 1998. *The acts of Jesus. The search for the authentic deeds of Jesus.* NY: New York. HarperCollins.
- Funk, R. 2002. "Jesus: A voice print" in R. Hoover (ed). *Profiles of Jesus.* CA: Santa Rosa. Polebridge Press.
- Funk, R. W. 2002. *A credible Jesus. Fragments of a vision.* CA: Santa Rosa. Polebridge Press.
- Geering, L. G. 2002. *Christianity without God.* CA: Santa Rosa. Polebridge Press.
- Herzog II, W. R. 1994. *Parables as subversive speech. Jesus as pedagogue of the oppressed.* KN: Louisville. Westminster/John Knox Press.
- Jensen, R. A. 1993. *Thinking in story. Preaching in a post-literate age.* OH: Lima. CSS Publishing.
- McKenna, M. 1994. *Parables. The arrows of God.* NY: Maryknoll. Orbis Books.
- McGaughy, L. C. 2002. "The search for the historical Jesus. Why start with the sayings?" in R. Hoover (ed). *Profiles of Jesus.* CA: Santa Rosa. Polebridge Press.
- Reid, B. E. 2001. *Parables for preachers. Year A.* MN: Collegeville. The Liturgical Press.
- Scott, B. B. 1988. "Introduction: What did Jesus really say?" in Funk, R. et. al *The parables of Jesus. Red letter edition.* The Jesus Seminar. CA: Santa Rosa. Polebridge Press.
- Scott, B. B. 1989. *Hear then the parable. A commentary on the parables of Jesus.* MN: Minneapolis. Fortress Press.
- Scott, B. B. 2001. *Re-imagine the world. An introduction to the parables of Jesus.* CA: Santa Rosa. Polebridge Press.

- Scott, B. B. 2002. "The reappearance of parables" in R. Hoover (ed). Profiles of Jesus. CA: Santa Rosa. Polebridge Press.
- Scott, B. B. 2002. "Did Jesus speak greek?" in The Fourth R 15, 6, 11, 15-19.
- Scott, B. B. 2003. "Father knows best: Where is fundamentalism taking us?". Photocopy edition. In private circulation from the author.
- TeSelle, S. M. 1975. Speaking in parables. A study in metaphor and theology. Gt. Britain: London. SCM Press.
- Tilley, T. W. 1985. Story theology. Theology and life series 12. DE: Wilmington. Michael Glazier.