

Episode 190 Puzzling the Parables (Part 1) with Dr. Ruben Zimmerman

This transcript has been edited for clarity and space.

Ruben Zimmerman

I'm Ruben Zimmerman, I'm a professor at the University of Minsk. And I teach New Testament and ethics.

David Capes

Dr. Ruben Zimmerman, Ruben. Good to see you. Welcome to the first podcast you've done for us here on The Stone Chapel.

Ruben Zimmerman

Yes, I'm glad to be here. And thanks a lot for the hospitality. It's a great place to be. And I'm also happy to be here because I always want to bridge the gap between German scholarship and American scholarship. I realized that Americans don't read German anymore. And so there are many Germans who do not engage with American scholarship.

David Capes

Well, we've got to do something about that. And I think you are uniquely talented to be able to do that both in your writing, but also in the books that have been translated. In fact, we've got one of your books here called the Enigma of the Parables of Jesus, or the puzzling of the parables in English. But it's in Spanish. And so we're starting to add to our Spanish collection. We'll be talking about that book a little bit later. But as we get started, who is Ruben Zimmerman?

Ruben Zimmerman

From a more biographical side, I grew up in the Heidelberg region, and also studied and at the University of Heidelberg. That's one of the oldest universities in Germany and Europe. But I also like to study at many places Erlangen, Bonn, and Santiago de Chile. And so, I did my PhD in Heidelberg. And then I am also an ordained minister.

David Capes

In what tradition?

Ruben Zimmerman

It's a Protestant tradition but the name is not easy to translate because it's something which is not really present in the United States. It's United Lutheran Reformed Church. We call this *Landen Kirche*.

David Capes

Landed church in a way. How old were you when you were ordained?

Ruben Zimmerman

31.

David Capes

And you're married as well.

Ruben Zimmerman

Yes, I'm married. My wife is also a theologian. She teaches religious education. After teaching for a long period in high school, she's now at the University of Siegen. And we have four children who are adults now, and bring us a lot of pleasure. We have some animals and a garden.

David Capes

It sounds like a delight, a *paradiso*. maybe?

Ruben Zimmerman

Yeah, in the biblical sense.

David Capes

Well, you've written a number of important books in German, but also now in English, and we're going to be talking about one of those today. It's called *Puzzling the Parables of Jesus: Methods and Interpretation*. And it's published by Fortress Press here in the United States. And it's a unique book, but you wrote it in English first, right?

Ruben Zimmerman

That's true, yes. I edited a compendium. And that's a commentary on more than 100 parables. That was my first book on the parables, together with co-editors, and also with many authors. Then I also edited a book on hermeneutics on the parables, how to understand the parables. So I used different methods, different approaches. I realized after having done this for about 10 years, when I went to South Africa, also with a Humboldt fellowship, that many people do not read German anymore. So I thought I must do something in English, as well. I put some ideas together in this book, and only later a German publisher urged me to also publish a German monograph. And this came out only in 2023, in an expanded version.

David Capes

So, you are expanding on this book then. This is a good size book to begin with. It does include some definitions of things and I want to begin with a definition of what is a parable. There are those that would think of a parable as a story. A long story where there are characters and they come and they go in the story and they take action. Others say it's more of an analogy. What say you? What do you think of parable is?

Ruben Zimmerman

There's a long debate in scholarship about the definition of a parable. Some also say, oh, it's more like the fables or the Jewish tradition of the *mashal* and they do have some overlap. But I thought it might be good to have a definition which covers most of the use of the term *parabole*, which is a Greek term

in the New Testament itself. And therefore, I use up six criteria. And that means it's a narrative. And that can be a very short narrative, for instance, it occurs in only one single verse. On the other hand, there must be a sequence, or some action. Not for instance, just a metaphor, like "you are the salt of the earth". That's not a narrative because nothing happens. So that's the minimum criteria of a narrative.

David Capes

So it has to have a narrative focus.

Ruben Zimmerman

And this narrative is made up so we call this a fictitious narrative. It's not an historical example. Jesus does not say, yesterday when I came from Jericho or something like that. But he says, I tell you a parable in a certain context, but he invents a story. But at the same time this story is realistic. And that's my third criteria. It's not something unrealistic or fantastic. And this different than with most of the fables. In fables animals might speak so that's not the way parables are presented.

David Capes

It's realistic, because sowers do go out to sow. And women do use leaven to make bread rise. So, these are just common, everyday things that you would see, particularly in agricultural society.

Ruben Zimmerman

That's true. So, in reading the parables, we should also analyze the social and historical background. To understand the parables, the more we know about sowing, about raising sheep and things like that, the more we can understand how this field, this semantic field is transferred to the religious field. And that's also one of the criteria. It's not, for instance, your free agricultural handbook, or something like that. But it's still the parable refers to a kingdom of God. So, the meaning is transferred to another field. No but the kingdom of God itself, it's a metaphor, it's a shift, which demonstrate it's more the reality of God. So, there are many parables, in particular, in Matthew, when this heading is used, so the kingdom of God is like, then immediately, you know, oh, it's not about sheep raising now, but it's about the Kingdom of God. That's the framing. But the parable of the Good Samaritan is not framed like that, but it's still a parable.

David Capes

So, it's still a parable. And it touches on a reality of what kingdom life is like. Because we do have the obligation to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Ruben Zimmerman

Yes, I recall this metaphorical aspect, and that's also a Greek term *metatithemi* means transferring. So this is bridging the two different fields, and by doing so, it is also included that this metaphor is not easy to understand. Because it's a figurative language. It's not just to say, oh, it's like this, or it is this. It's only like this.

David Capes

Well, that's one of the reasons that I love your book, because you give us all permission to say, what does that mean? They are puzzling. Some are simpler than others. But some are very puzzling at the end of the day.

Ruben Zimmerman

And I would even say, all of them are puzzling in a certain way. For instance, the parable of the leaven. It seems to be a daily routine, how to make bread. But at the end, it's an extreme amount of dough, which is made. So, this is a transfer signal to say, Oh, that's not for a normal family. There's so much bread. You can feed the whole town. So, they are signals that this should be transferred. And I would say that this incomprehensibility is not only because we do not understand something which took place in antiquity, but it's part of the genre itself.

David Capes

I like the fact that through the interpretive methods you employ, you ascribe the parables as having a polyvalency. It's not just one meaning. There was a very famous German theologian who insisted that parables have just a single meaning. But that doesn't seem to be your tack.

Ruben Zimmerman

That was Adolph Julicher. He was most influential scholar on parable research for the whole 20th century. His book was published in 1899, but also in a second edition in 1910. He said that there is one point approach between the different CSR so they have just one single meaning. And I contradict that, because as we see in the history of interpretation that scholars, readers, and preachers read it in different ways. And we see the same thing occur in the Gospel itself. In the Canon, for instance, Matthew and Luke interpreted the same parable in different ways. There is a variety of readings within the Gospel itself. So, I want to explore a method which takes this seriously and does not go for one single meaning but opens up horizons.

David Capes

So, these six criteria must be met in order to say I have a parable here. Okay. So the contextual piece, but also the appeal to the reader itself.

Ruben Zimmerman

Yes, that's true. I didn't mention the last two criteria. They are the context rally relatedness, and also the appeal to the reader. These are not exclusive criteria, because many texts fulfill these criteria. Yes. This appeal, I think, sets three, multiple interpretations, because the readers do not understand and even the disciples do not understand. So, they asked Jesus to explain the parable. And so why should we understand the beginning. The goal is not to hide something, but to raise our understanding to the next level. It's a paradoxical thing to say that this incomprehensiveness is set in order to show a deeper meaning.

David Capes

I remember reading that in your book. I'm trying to remember the exact statement. But it's like the incomprehensibility is what leads ultimately to the comprehensibility. That it seems like it's a paradox there.

Ruben Zimmerman

Yes, but I think the readers are pushed to find a deeper meaning. And so, they are invited to join in a process of interpretation, which not only seeks the original meaning, but also the meaning of this word of God in their own life.

David Capes

Well, we're going to look at a couple of parables in the next podcast. But before we close out today, I was fascinated that you steered away from the idea of the historical Jesus, that you didn't really want to go that direction. Instead, you focused upon the way Jesus is being remembered. Tell us about your thought process.

Ruben Zimmerman

Parable research was closely linked to the research on the historical Jesus. So, for instance, John Dominic Crossan, a famous scholar on both sides, he said, oh, I'm only interested in the parables because I am interested in the historical Jesus. Then the German scholar, you can hear me as he said, that's the bedrock of the historical Jesus. So, we have close access to the voice of Jesus as the authentic voice. So, scholarship was mostly interested in this voice of Jesus. And so they deconstructed in a way, what we have in the gospels. The idea was that the original voice of Jesus must be reconstructed. And we should get rid of all these theological and allegorical things of the evangelist.

David Capes

Because Jesus didn't really speak that way.

Ruben Zimmerman

Yes, and so I would turn it around and say there is some kind of process. But at the end, the former research said in the Gospel, we find some kind of domestication or the evangelists made it verse and things like that, but I think we have the text as it is in the Gospels. So what scholars reconstructed was many times their own idea about the parables, not what we have in the text.

David Capes

Yes. Make Jesus in our own image.

Ruben Zimmerman

Exactly. So that's a hermeneutical circle. And I would argue that the memory might differ in some sense, as we know from our own memories. But a memory also intensifies what was in the original version. I read most of the parables or all of them as a true memory. And there was a reason why we included in the companion 104 parables, including John and the Gospel of Thomas. And the other extreme, might be seen with John P. Meyer, who was a famous scholar on the historical Jesus.

David Capes

He was a Roman Catholic scholar.

Ruben Zimmerman

Yes, he focused on the historical Jesus. And only in the last book, the fifth one, he touched on the parables, because he had the opinion, Oh, I cannot stand the normal tradition that this is a historical bedrock. So, he laid dynamite under the bedrock. According to his criteria, he ended up with only four parables from the authentic voice of Jesus.

David Capes

And you guys pulled together and thought, we have Jesus remembered truly by some of his followers, 104 instead.

Ruben Zimmerman

Yes that's exactly right. When I met Meyer, I had this slogan: 104 instead of 4.

David Capes

Well, I'm hoping that you win the day because I think there's a lot more historical material there. But it's more difficult to get at particularly with the criteria that has been espoused for all of these many years. I'm glad though that you include John in this.

We're talking to Dr. Reuben Zimmerman about his book *Puzzling the Parables of Jesus: Method and Interpretation* published by Fortress. And in the next podcast, we're going to actually do some interpretation and reading of parables, the parable of the mustard seed, but also the parable of the dying grain. Dr. Reuben Zimmerman, thanks for being with us today on The Stone Chapel Podcasts.

Ruben Zimmerman

It was my pleasure. Thank you.