The Parables after Jesus

Their Imaginative Receptions across Two Millennia

David B. Gowler
In memory of

Robert Warren Runnels
(March 3, 1934–June 13, 1991)

and

Gary Warren Gowler
(December 30, 1953–April 8, 2013)
Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”

—Matthew 25:34–36
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David B. Gowler, *The Parables after Jesus*
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Preface

My father loved parables—stories that taught, stories that presented ideas and morals in ways that made pictures in people’s minds. He used the ones he found in the Bible, the ones he plucked from history, or from folk tales, and, of course, he used those he saw in his life and the lives of the people he knew. He wove stories into his Sunday sermons, his Bible classes, and his computer-delivered history lectures. Because he believed stories were so important as teaching tools.


I also love parables; they are stories, like Butler notes, that create vivid pictures in one’s mind, stories that enable us to experience profound truths in often deceptively simple ways, stories that challenge us to respond and act—not only to do better, but also to be better. I especially love the parables of Jesus and have spent much of my career studying, teaching, and writing about them.

Some parables are relatively simple and straightforward. “Go and do likewise,” says Jesus after he tells the parable of the good Samaritan in the Gospel of Luke (10:25–37); the command makes the parable easier to understand, perhaps, but more difficult to put into practice. Other parables are more challenging even to comprehend. How can Jesus apparently praise, for example, a steward who acts dishonestly (Luke 16:1–8)? Still other parables offer even more complexity; they permit and even sometimes encourage a range of responses and interpretations. As I read Jesus’s parables and the divergent ways in which various people have responded to them, I am reminded of the August 23, 1799, letter of William Blake to Rev. Dr. Trusler after Trusler had complained about one of Blake’s works of art that Blake had sent to him (see the introduction...
for details). Blake compares his own *Visions of Eternity* to, for example, the parables and fables of Aesop and argues: “The wisest of the Ancients consid-er what is not too Explicit as the fittest for Instruction because it rouzes the faculties to act. I name Moses Solomon Esop Homer Plato.” The parables are “not too Explicit”: in the famous words of C. H. Dodd, a parable leaves “the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into ac-tive thought” (1961, 16). That aspect of parables can give them tremendous power to affect their hearers and readers in numerous ways.

Parables, then, like other great works of art, challenge our hearts, minds, and imaginations. As Richard Pevear writes about the works of Fyodor Dosto-oevsyky: “They leap out of their historical situation and confront us as if they had not yet spoken their final word” (Dostoevsky 1993, viii). But the parables of Jesus go further than just “rouz[ing] the faculties to act”: they also challenge us to act in other ways, to change our priorities, not just our perspectives; to change our behaviors, not just our attitudes.

This book seeks to explore some of the more important, interesting, and/or compelling interpretations and applications of the parables of Jesus, what scholars call the “receptions” or “afterlives” of parables. Yet such interactions are never solitary or unique endeavors, for all of us stand on the shoulders of interpreters who preceded us; all of us are continually in dialogue with fellow interpreters past and present. Part of the essential elements of reception history, therefore, is listening to and interacting with a wide range of voices, including those not usually heard. These interpretations are often as interest-ing as the parables themselves, and I hope that you find the explorations in this book as significant, exciting, and fascinating as I did as I was researching and writing about them.

For those readers who wish to learn about the process of writing this book and to explore additional receptions of the parables, you may find such discus-sions on my blog, *A Chorus of Voices* (http://www.parablesreception.blogspot .com). More details about sections of the book may be found there, as well as many additional discussions of various receptions of the parables of Jesus.

I am grateful to many members of Baker Publishing Group for their work in producing this volume, but four people deserve special mention. The idea for the book stemmed from conversations with James Ernest, and he provided many helpful insights as the work began to take shape. Bryan Dyer, who inherited the project when the manuscript neared its final form, was also exceedingly helpful, especially as I worked to revise my (lengthy) drafts into a finished manuscript. Rachel Klompmaker proved invaluable as a partner in acquiring permissions for images and other copyrighted materials, and Eric Salo and his team worked diligently to shepherd the

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manuscript into its published form. I am grateful to have had this opportunity to work with them.

Most of the people about whom I write in this book are outside my primary area of expertise as a New Testament scholar. I am grateful, therefore, to three of the Emory University libraries—Oxford, Woodruff, and Pitts—for their outstanding resources upon which I greatly depended for my research. In addition, the Prints and Drawings Rooms of the Tate Gallery in London granted me access to prints by John Everett Millais that are not on display, and the Ackland Art Museum of the University of North Carolina gave me access to its Print Study Room to examine prints by Rembrandt and Thomas Hart Benton.

Some sections of the book were written for my 2014 Hussey Seminar Lecture at The Centre for Reception History of the Bible at the University of Oxford. I am grateful to Christine Joynes (Trinity College, Oxford) both for the invitation and for her hospitality during my visit. I am also grateful to Chris and Catherine Rowland for their gracious hospitality at Cambridge, which included the opportunity to explore Ely Cathedral and the stained-glass windows depicting parables of Jesus. A few insights from this book appear in condensed form in a chapter titled “The Characterization of the Two Brothers in the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15.11–32): Their Function and Afterlives,” in *Characters and Characterization in Luke-Acts*, edited by Frank Dicken and Julia Snyder (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

I owe a debt of gratitude to Emory University colleagues who read sections of the book within their own areas of expertise and lent their wise counsel about those sections: Maria Archetto, Lucas Carpenter, Sheila Cavanagh, Clark Lemons, Eve Mullen, and Florian Pohl. As I was writing this book, I also had the good fortune to teach an honors seminar, A Chorus of Voices: The “Afterlives” of Parables, at Oxford College of Emory University, and I am grateful to those students who read through sections of the manuscript in that class and offered their helpful insights: Rema Elmostafa, Robert Howell, Alicia Johnson, and Garrett Shuler. I am especially grateful for how they all became excellent dialogue partners as we presented and discussed our own explorations of the receptions of Jesus’s parables in literature, music, visual art, and other media.

Most of all, I am grateful to my family—Rita, Camden, and Jacob—for their boundless patience for a spouse and father whose head is often buried in books and who sometimes seems permanently (and physically) attached to his laptop.

Finally, this book is dedicated as a memorial to my uncle, Robert Warren Runnels, and my brother, Gary Warren Gowler. Uncle Bob and Gary, who
both left this earth far too soon, share a middle name because our mother named her second son in honor of her beloved brother.

Uncle Bob died in 1991 at the age of fifty-seven, and he is survived by his wonderful family: his wife Laures, his son Loren, and his daughter Melissa (and now two grandchildren). Uncle Bob was an extremely talented professional artist, and three of his works of visual art adorn the walls of our home. One of those prized works he created just a few months before his death: a pencil drawing (dated January 4, 1991) of our then newborn son, Camden. The art in this book is especially dedicated to Uncle Bob’s memory.

I wish I had known my uncle better. He and his family moved to Denver when I was young, and we rarely saw each other. I remember well, however, his joy of life, his sense of humor, and his infectious laugh. I also remember the last serious conversation I had with him. That discussion served as a memorable coda to our relationship, one I will always cherish.

My older brother, Gary, died from non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma in 2013 at the age of fifty-nine, and he is survived by his wonderful family: his wife Lori, his son James, and his daughter Anna (and now six grandchildren). One daughter, Bethany, was killed in a tragic automobile accident in 2002.

Among many other things, Gary was a brilliant teacher and a talented musician, so I especially wrote the sections of the book about music for him, most notably the one on Robert Wilkins. Although I have little of Gary’s musical talent, we shared a love for the blues. The last time we saw each other, Gary, Lori, Rita, and I spent a couple hours listening to blues at Buddy Guy’s Legends in Chicago, before walking down the street to get Gary’s favorite pizza, Lou Malnati’s deep dish (the sausage pizza was mandatory for Gary). That evening we spent together served as a memorable coda to our relationship, one I will always cherish.

I know it is a cliché to say this about those who have left us, but Uncle Bob’s and Gary’s influence live on—through their wonderful families, their extended families, and through all the friends, students, and others whose lives they touched so deeply.
Abbreviations


Introduction

So the parable should not be lightly esteemed in your eyes, since by means of the parable a man arrives at the true meaning of the words of the Torah.

Midrash Song of Songs Rabbah 1.8

Parables, at first glance, often seem to be relatively simple stories; their complexity and power can be overlooked. Hence John Bunyan, in the prologue of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, somewhat apologetically asks a key question of his readers: “Would’st thou see a truth within a fable?” (Bunyan, n.d., 20). Bunyan hopes that they will, of course, because seeing truth is usually the point of using fables and parables.

Some parables are indeed relatively simple and straightforward; others, however, can create unforeseen depths of insight and meaning. Parables usually involve some sort of implied analogy, but since the parallels between the things being compared are often not made explicitly, they actively engage their audiences to understand and apply their messages. Parables, by their analogical nature, therefore, encourage hearers/readers to imagine new possibilities as they explore the hermeneutical potential of these brief narratives (cf. Kermode 1979, 44).

So many parables, as the parables of Jesus illustrate, are not innocuous, simple stories; they can be deceptively complex, enigmatic, and dialogic—drawing listeners and readers into continuing conversations. Jesus told these often challenging stories with one ear already listening for his hearers’ responses. These dialogues developed in ever-expanding circles as these stories have been told and retold, read and reread, over the centuries, dialogues that, I argue, deepen and enrich our understandings of what Jesus’s parables denote and
Introduction

To make the dialogues even richer, the responses to Jesus’s parables are not limited to texts or speech; they include music, visual art, poetry, and other modes of interpretation in new contexts. Thus interpreters, ancient and modern, participate in the formation of meaning, and any interpretation of Jesus’s parables is incomplete if it does not incorporate the responses of those interpreters who have preceded us; we stand, whether we recognize it or not, on their shoulders (see Gowler 2000, 38–39, 101–3; cf. 2014, 4–5).

This book discusses more than fifty modes of “reception” of Jesus’s parables that span the first century to the twenty-first. The primary goal is to introduce and discuss a number of diverse voices from a variety of eras, perspectives, media, and contexts. Since one of the primary goals is to introduce readers to the ways in which Jesus’s parables have been received over the centuries, the book is primarily arranged chronologically, not thematically, by genre, or by any other categorization. There are, of course, advantages and disadvantages to this structure, but not only is a basic chronological understanding of the receptions of the parables a necessary first step; the structure is also intended to encourage readers to follow other fruitful modes of reception history. The numerous excerpts from primary sources also facilitate further dialogue, and, as an additional catalyst, individual sections often include connections or comparisons between interpreters. Chapter 1, for example, compares the more allegorical interpretations of the “Alexandrian school” (e.g., Origen) with the more “restrained” exegesis of the “Antiochene” school (e.g., John Chrysostom), with the caveat that the contrasts between them are sometimes overdrawn. Such observations, once again, serve as starting points for further explorations.

Which interpretations to include was as difficult a decision as how to structure the volume. The historical and theological importance of the selections was key, but so was including a diversity of media, approaches, voices, and perspectives. The book does not dwell on academic debates in modern scholarship (rarely are biblical scholars included): those conversations are adequately covered elsewhere (e.g., Gowler 2000). The goal is to include a number of diverse responses to the parables—some of which have dominated discussions and others of which have been marginalized—to allow a wide variety of responses to be heard while attempting to balance depth and breadth.

I include not just biblical commentaries and other theological works such as sermons, but also plays, music, literature, poetry, visual art, and social and political materials, ranging from Augustine to Kierkegaard, from Romanos the Melodist to Fanny Crosby to Robert Wilkins, from Wazo of Liège to Thomas Aquinas to Roger Williams, from Ephrem the Syrian to George Herbert to Emily Dickinson, from Byzantine mosaics to illuminated Gospels.
to Rembrandt to William Blake to Thomas Hart Benton, from Antonia Pulci to William Shakespeare to Godspell, from Islamic hadith to David Flusser to Thich Nhat Hanh, from John Chrysostom to Martin Luther King Jr., and so on.

The options for what to include are almost endless; breadth has sometimes been sacrificed for depth, and sometimes depth has been sacrificed for breadth. How to do justice to these more than fifty voices, for example, in approximately two thousand words each? Yet even in these relatively short sections, the profundity of the interpreters and the profundity of the parables with which they interact shine through.

The Invisible Gorilla, Parables, and Reception History

Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction. (Bakhtin 1984, 110)

This quote, perhaps better than any other, helps to illustrate the philosophical foundation of my approach to reception history—and why I do reception history in the first place. No one person or interpreter holds a monopoly on truth, and an essential element of reception history—and the search for meaning in these biblical texts—is listening to and interacting with a wide range of voices, including those usually not heard.

One basic truth concerning the interpretation of any narrative is that interpreters tend to find what they expect to find. What interpreters expect to see influences what they see. This selective attention places blinders on interpreters, blinders that can be removed only when they join in dialogue with other interpreters who have different perspectives, presuppositions, and modes of analysis.

The famous “invisible gorilla” experiment (http://www.theinvisiblegorilla.com) by Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simons illustrates how our perceptions of what we think is “reality” are skewed by our preconceptions. Participants in the experiment were asked to watch a brief video in which three people in white shirts pass a basketball back and forth to each other and three people in black shirts also pass a basketball back and forth to each other. Viewers of the video were instructed to count the number of passes the people in white shirts made. In the middle of the brief video, a person dressed in a gorilla suit walks slowly from the right side of the screen into the middle of the six people passing basketballs, stops, faces the camera, and beats his
chest before slowly walking off to the viewers’ left. The person in the gorilla suit spends a total of nine seconds on the screen.

Surprisingly, almost half of the video’s viewers did not see the gorilla; because they were focused on counting the number of passes made between the players in white shirts, the gorilla became invisible to them. I have shown students this video in some of my classes over the past few years, and a similar percentage do not see the gorilla. Since what we look for influences what we see, interpreters can miss a significant number of elements in a narrative simply because of their own contexts and presuppositions. Interpreters may believe that they interpret the text “as it is” as objectively and completely as possible but actually overlook a number of significant elements; metaphorical gorillas stroll through the narrative sight unseen. Reception history helps to overcome these shortcomings and to remove exegetical blinders from interpreters, especially when diverse voices from various perspectives are included in the conversations.

The Dialogic Nature of Parables

The riddle-like nature of parables inherently includes some ambiguity, which makes it even more critical for interpreters to gain insight, wisdom, and greater clarity through dialogues with other interpreters. I do not mean to suggest that all interpretations are of equal value or importance—even dialogic narratives like parables provide buoys in the channel of interpretation that encourage interpreters to navigate within certain boundaries of readings—but engagement with other interpretations can make one’s own interpretations more cogent and more comprehensive.

We do not know and cannot recover the specific historical circumstances in which Jesus of Nazareth first uttered his parables. The New Testament Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke provide the earliest extant written receptions/interpretations of them; where they are found in the Gospel narratives and how they are used necessarily influence readers’ interpretations of those parables. Sometimes embedding a parable into a larger narrative can change its meaning dramatically, because the author uses that parable from a certain authorial point of view to make a particular point in the attempt to elicit a preferred response from readers. Tensions can arise between a parable and its literary context in the Gospels, and a larger narrative framework in which a parable is embedded cannot control or contain or complete the parable’s ability to create or communicate meaning. The Gospel authors implicitly or explicitly offer their own interpretations of the parables, and the dialogues
between the voice of Jesus and the voices of the Gospel authors continue, develop, and expand as hearers and readers over the centuries add their own responses and voices to the ongoing dialogues (see Gowler 2000, 38–39).

As this book demonstrates, interpretations of Jesus’s parables are extremely diverse; they vary from era to era, context to context, person to person, and sometimes depend upon the medium in which the parables are (re)presented. Yet one aspect of the parables remains constant: their sometimes-untamable dialogic power. These often-enigmatic stories continue to engage and indeed challenge our hearts, minds, and imaginations.

The Impulse to Control or Restrain Parables

Modern interpretations of Jesus’s parables stand on the shoulders of centuries of interpretations, and all those interpretations have necessarily wrestled with the enigmatic nature of parables and responded in different ways. One impulse within the history of interpretations is to attempt to control or tame those readings—what Bakhtin would call trying to impose a monologic discourse on a dialogic parable—an impulse that arises especially in situations of controversy, where some interpretations are seen as harmful, dangerous, or even heretical.

Irenaeus of Lyons, for example, writes in the context of combating the esoteric wisdom of the heretics called gnostics and their speculative interpretations of Scripture (see chap. 1). He seeks to protect what he sees as the authentic traditions that the church received from the apostles of Jesus and cautions his readers not to adapt parables “to ambiguous expressions.” If interpreters follow this guidance, Irenaeus claims, then “parables will receive a like interpretation from all” (Against Heresies 2.27.1, in ANF 1:398–99).

Irenaeus does admit, however, that “parables admit of many interpretations” (Against Heresies 2.27.3, in ANF 1:399), so he advises that hard-to-understand parables must be harmonized with biblical passages that are easier to understand, advice that many early Christian interpreters followed.

The Impulse to Engage the Enigmas and Challenges in the Parables

Other interpreters explore more fully why Jesus used these powerful and sometimes hard-to-understand stories. Clement of Alexandria, for example, compares the parables of Jesus to the enigmatic symbolism used by other people who seek the truth, including poets and philosophers (Miscellanies
5.8). Symbolism conceals the truth of holy secrets from those who are not worthy to understand them (cf. Matt. 13:10–17, 34); it contains more power than simple, direct statements, and it enables multiple layers of meaning. In addition, parables stimulate the hearts and minds of their hearers to be even more active in their search for words of salvation. It is through such parables and metaphors, Clement argues, that we can discern spiritual realities revealed in Scripture (chap. 1).

John Chrysostom also approaches the enigmatic nature of parables from the perspective that, like Hebrew Bible prophets, Jesus uses vivid parables such as the parable of the sower to make hearers more attentive, to “rouse” their minds, to stimulate his audience to inquire further, and to make his teaching memorable. Parables do perplex some in Jesus’s audience, but they also bring clarity in the minds of those with “ears to hear” (chap. 1).

In a manner reminiscent of Chrysostom, John Calvin discusses the increased rhetorical effect parables can have on their hearers/readers. Parables have more energy and force than do simple, direct expressions, produce greater impact on the minds of their hearers/readers, and also can make truths more clear. Calvin warns, however, that although the use of parables could allow God’s truth to shine forth more brilliantly, their obscurity can lead to that light being hidden by the darkness of human beings and becoming more confusing and unclear (chap. 3).

In a much different way, the poetry of Emily Dickinson can illustrate this two-edged sword of how parables can both illuminate and conceal meaning, since Dickinson’s poetry can both use Jesus’s parables and also operate in a “parabolic” way. Dickinson’s “riddle poems” use many biblical literary forms, including rhythm, parallelism, and sometimes baffling paradox, as she seeks to “tell all the truth but tell it slant.” Truth, in other words, must be told in a circuitous fashion; otherwise, its brilliance will blind its viewers. Truth must arise slowly like the dawn (chap. 4).

Søren Kierkegaard approaches the enigmatic power of parables by stressing that truth must be presented through indirect communication, such as parables, which necessarily involves a “double reflection” on the alternative possibilities that such indirect communication presents. Parables thus challenge their hearers/readers to “untie a knot,” to make a decision, an “appropriation” that must be done by every individual. Not only do you interpret a parable; the parable also “interprets” you, and you are called to respond. Thus the parables uttered by Jesus—or even the parables constructed by Kierkegaard—challenge their hearers/readers to become participants, examine themselves, and reach greater spiritual and moral heights, and therefore the parables affect the fundamental choices their hearers/readers make (chap. 4).
The Impulse to Embrace the Dialogic Nature of Parables

Some interpreters are even more receptive of the dialogic nature of parables, such as Ephrem the Syrian in his mystical poetry. For Ephrem, symbols are dialogic or polyvalent in that one meaning does not exhaust their potential, and one meaning does not exclude another meaning. In Ephrem’s *Hymns on the Pearl*, for example, the pearl can serve as a door that opens and reveals many facets of the “Truth”; it can symbolize the kingdom of heaven, Christ, faith, the virgin birth, Jesus’s crucifixion, and many other realities. This symbol also serves as the invitation and beginning point for spiritual meditation (chap. 1).

As someone who speaks of the “doors of perception” (*in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*), William Blake is one of the best examples of an interpreter who creatively embraces the dialogic nature of Jesus’s parables and their ability to engage their hearers/readers in “perceiving” infinite reality. Blake’s poetry and images stem from his visionary, supernatural impulse (i.e., his “Genius” or “angel”). As noted in the preface, Blake’s blunt reply to a complaint about one of his works from Reverend Trusler—who demanded an explanation of the work sent to him—demonstrates Blake’s view of what true art (like good parables) should do. Trusler, a wealthy cleric, writer, and publisher, had commissioned Blake to create a watercolor illustrating the topic “Malevolence.” As was often the case, Blake’s vision took precedence; he created the watercolor *Malevolence: A Husband Parting from His Wife and Child; Two Assassins Lurking in Ambush* (currently in the Philadelphia Museum of Art). The “malevolence” in the work was that the assassins would murder the mother and child once the father left them unprotected. Trusler, who ultimately rejected the work, wrote Blake to complain that the work did not fulfill the commission and that the fantasy contained within it was “unnatural.” Blake responded that he was “compell’d by [his] Genius or Angel to follow where he led.” As Blake’s letter of August 23, 1799 (postmarked August 28), states:

I really am sorry that you are falln out with the Spiritual World Especially if I should have to answer for it I feel very sorry that your Ideas & Mine on Moral Painting differ so much as to have made you angry with my method of Study. If I am wrong I am wrong in good company. I had hoped your plan comprehended All Species of this Art & Especially that you would not reject that Species which gives Existence to Every other. namely Visions of Eternity You say that I want somebody to Elucidate my Ideas. But you ought to know that What is Grand is necessarily obscure to Weak men. That which can be made Explicit to the Idiot is not worth my care. The wisest of the Ancients considerd what is not
too explicit as the fittest for instruction because it rouses the faculties to act. I name Moses Solomon Esop Homer Plato. (Blake 1969, 793)

For Blake, there is no one “correct” meaning attributed to a biblical text. Instead, Jesus’s parables in particular and the Bible in general are doors to perception and stimuli to the prophet’s imagination (chap. 4).

The play Godspell illustrates the dialogic nature of parables in a very different way, but it also emphasizes the challenging nature of parables and the ultimate responsibility of hearers/listeners to engage, respond, and take action. The following dialogue takes place between Jesus and Judas about a saying that Luke 6:39–42 designates as a “parable”:

Jesus: Now, how can you take a speck of sawdust out of your brother’s eye when all the time there’s this great plank in your own?

Judas: I don’t know. How can you take the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye when all the time there’s this great plank in your own?

Jesus: You hypocrite! First you take the plank out of your own eye so you can see clearly to take the speck of sawdust out of your brother’s.

Judas: Wait a moment! That’s no answer to the question.

Jesus: Did I promise you an answer to the question?

Judas: No.

Godspell, more than any other play or film, uses the parables of Jesus (and the Sermon on the Mount) as the primary foundation for its portrayal of Jesus and his message, a message in which Jesus’s followers are challenged to listen, understand, and believe in a message of love, forgiveness, humility, and service that often contravenes human expectations and cultural conventions (chap. 5). This approach aptly illustrates the dialogic nature of Jesus’s parables: all are called to respond.

This Book as a Stimulus to Further Discussions

This book is a basic introduction to the different ways Jesus’s parables have been interpreted over the millennia, so it is closer to an anthology than to a diachronic analysis over time, although readers will find some diachronic discussions in numerous sections of the book. The number of receptions in the book limits the number of such reflections, but the breadth of receptions will...
illuminate many aspects for readers. The book also can serve as a resource, a starting place for readers’ further explorations in investigating the reception history of Jesus’s parables (see the appendix for a description of each parable cited and for lists of each parable’s interpretations included in the book).

One of the goals of this book is to help readers better understand the importance of context for interpreters’ responses to Jesus’s parables. The different ways interpreters respond to the wheat and weeds parable, for instance, are influenced by their historical contexts. Wazo of Liège, for example, lived in the mid-eleventh century in (what is now) Belgium during a time in which a number of Christian heresies arose, and Wazo uses the wheat and weeds parable to argue that the church should not execute such “heretics” or turn them over to the state to be executed. Circumstances changed, however, as the church began to respond more vigorously to various heresies. Pope Gregory IX started a papal inquisition in 1231 to suppress such groups as the Cathars, Christian heretics who flourished in southern France and northern Italy in the twelfth through the fourteenth centuries (Fichtenau 1998, 27). By the thirteenth century, heresy was a capital offense in most of Europe, a context in which Thomas Aquinas interprets the wheat and weeds parable in a much different fashion than did Wazo: he argues that the state is responsible for executing heretics that the church deems worthy of death. The historical context is also entirely different for Roger Williams’s interpretation of the wheat and weeds parable four centuries later, in a post-Reformation context in the New World. Williams famously advocates for religious liberty and that neither the church nor the state should use any coercive force against perceived heretics.

Several examples in this book also demonstrate that even the same person can interpret the same parable in different ways, depending on the context. Note in chapter 4, for instance, how Frederick Douglass interprets the parable of the rich man and Lazarus during the Civil War to depict slaves (Lazarus), slave owners (the rich man), and Abraham Lincoln (Father Abraham). More than two decades after the war (and slavery) ended, however, Douglass uses the same parable to argue for the liberation, or emancipation, of a different oppressed group: women.

**A Test Case for Further Explorations: The Prodigal Son**

The parable of the prodigal son, since it arguably has been referenced and interpreted more than any other parable of Jesus, provides almost countless examples of the directions further explorations could take. Receptions of this parable are so numerous that even book-long analyses are not able...
comprehensively to explore the majority of receptions (see Fenske 2003). Since the materials are so vast, one approach is to focus on receptions during specific eras, such as the time period covered in chapter 1 (most of the era that is often called the “patristic age”). Once the overview of the receptions during the period covered by chapter 1 is completed, it will be clear that early Christian interpretations fall within four categories (see Tissot 1978), most of which use allegory. In brief, during this era the father symbolizes God, but interpretations vary according to how the two brothers are received:

- **Ethical interpretations** view the elder brother as symbolizing the righteous and the younger brother as symbolizing sinners (e.g., Jerome and Cyril of Alexandria).
- **Ethnic interpretations** equate the elder brother with Israel and the younger brother with gentiles (e.g., Tertullian and Augustine). Sometimes ethnic interpretations incorporate aspects of ethical interpretations, such as that gentiles are sinners because they are idolaters.
- **Penitential interpretations** see the elder brother as rigid Christians who oppose reconciliation with baptized Christians who afterward fall into sin and then repent (e.g., Clement of Alexandria and John Chrysostom).
- **Gnosticizing interpretations** envision the elder brother as symbolizing the angels and the younger brother as symbolizing humanity (e.g., Pseudo-Jerome, Epistle 35).

Likewise, an analysis of the receptions of the parable in the medieval period reveals that interpretations during that era also focused on allegorical understandings in the ethical, ethnic, and penitential modes.

Innumerable other attempts have been made to explore the impact of the prodigal son parable in a more manageable selection of materials, such as narrowing the focus to a specified corpus of materials (e.g., English literature: Siebald and Ryken 1992; European literature: Brettschneider 1978), a particular perspective or methodology (e.g., feminist readings: Beavis 2002; social-scientific readings: Rohrbaugh 1997), the work of an individual (e.g., William Shakespeare: Tippens 1988), or an individual work (e.g., Rembrandt’s *The Return of the Prodigal Son*: Nouwen 1994, 6).

This volume, even though it discusses receptions of the vast majority of Jesus’s parables, provides enough examples of the reception of the prodigal son parable that trends in the reception history of the parable are evident. Insights may be gleaned in all five chapters of this book concerning interpretations of the prodigal son parable in a variety of media, such as visual art.
(Albrecht Dürer, Rembrandt, John Everett Millais, Thomas Hart Benton), plays/film (Antonia Pulci, William Shakespeare, *Godspell*), sermons (Hildegard of Bingen), music (Romanos the Melodist, Robert Wilkins), poetry (George Herbert), and other literature.

Receptions of the parable during the succeeding centuries almost always followed the trend in the earliest interpretations that equated the father in the parable with God. There are, however, interesting variations in the “afterlives” of the two brothers—their impacts on audiences and interpreters—from the earliest to the most recent interpretations. As the opening lines of James Weldon Johnson’s poem “The Prodigal Son” note:

But Jesus spake in a parable, and he said:
A certain man had two sons.
Jesus didn’t give this man a name,
But his name is God Almighty.
And Jesus didn’t call these sons by name,
But ev’ry young man,
Ev’rywhere,
Is one of these two sons. (Johnson 1990, 21)

The afterlife of the elder brother almost always fits into one of three categories. More often than not he is marginalized, ignored, or minimized. A second trend, following the readings of some early interpreters, is to identify him with those unrepentant Jews who are indignant at the emergence of Christianity. A third mode of reading, following other early interpreters, is to envision the elder brother as self-righteous Christians who are urged to move beyond their feelings of jealousy concerning the return of repentant sinners (Parsons 1996, 147–74).

Even within the receptions of the prodigal son documented and discussed in this book, there are fascinating impulses within the third trend above, those which identify the elder brother with self-righteous Christians and the younger brother with sinners who return: (a) reconciliation between the two brothers after the prodigal’s return, and (b) self-identification with the younger son. Both impulses primarily stem from penitential interpretations of the parable, but they also include ethical interpretations, since the younger son depicts those Christians who fall away from their faith but repent and return, and the elder son symbolizes those “righteous” Christians who are being urged to celebrate the return of their repentant brothers and sisters (for more details, see Gowler 2016).

Reconciliation between the two brothers: Included in this volume are a few examples of receptions that “finish” the story and supply a joyful ending.
to the parable, just as the other two “lost” parables of Luke 15 (sheep, coin) conclude with joyful celebrations. In these examples, the elder brother listens to his father’s pleas and joins the celebration over his errant brother’s return. Reconciliation between the two brothers is portrayed or assumed in Antonia Pulci’s *The Play of the Prodigal Son* (chap. 2), a stained-glass window in Chartres Cathedral (chap. 2), the blues song “The Prodigal Son,” by Robert Wilkins (chap. 5), and the play/film *Godspell* (chap. 5).

*Self-identification with the younger son:* There are also fascinating developments in receptions of the younger son, most notably self-identification with the prodigal, whether in his debauchery, repentance, or reconciliation with his father. Important examples of such receptions are found in the selections of visual art in this volume, where the artist apparently self-identifies with the prodigal son. The first (probable) self-identification within visual art is Albrecht Dürer’s engraving *The Prodigal Son amongst the Pigs* (1496), which depicts the son’s moment of repentance in his desperate circumstances as he tend the pigs and longs to eat their food (chap. 2). The most famous self-identifications with the parable, however, are found in Rembrandt’s works (chap. 3), such as one of his early paintings, *Self-Portrait with Saskia in the Guise of the Prodigal Son* (1634–1636), where Rembrandt portrays himself as the prodigal son celebrating extravagantly in a tavern with a prostitute—depicted by his wife, Saskia—on his lap. Roughly contemporaneous with this painting is an etching in which an emaciated prodigal kneels before his father in repentance. Perhaps the best-known example of Rembrandt’s apparent self-identification with the prodigal is found in his masterpiece—and one of his last paintings—*The Return of the Prodigal Son* (1667–1679), of which Henri Nouwen writes: “I knew that Rembrandt deeply understood this spiritual homecoming. I knew that, when Rembrandt painted his *Prodigal Son*, he had lived a life that had left him with no doubt about his true and final home” (1994, 6). I also include one other probable self-identification by a visual artist with the prodigal son: Thomas Hart Benton’s 1939 lithograph *Prodigal Son*, an idiosyncratic depiction of a prodigal like Benton (and others) who had waited far too long to return home. That haunting image offers no joyful reconciliation of any kind (chap. 5).

This book also includes two examples in music—one ancient and one modern—of the afterlives of the two brothers. These examples both involve some form of identification with the younger brother and the reconciliation between the two brothers.

The first example is the *kontakion* (chanted sermon) by Romanos the Melodist, the great Byzantine poet and hymn writer (chap. 1). It contains the earliest self-identification with the prodigal son included in this book.
kontakion begins with the speaker/singer identifying with the sinful prodigal, since all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. It then urges the members of the congregation not only to repent from their own sins but also to celebrate the repentant returns of other prodigal sons and daughters. Reconciliation between the two brothers thus symbolizes reconciliation between Christians, which is something to be greatly desired.

The second example involves an even more complex dynamic found in blues music: the “prodigal son” motif among some early blues artists. This motif is illustrated, in part, with Robert Wilkins’s song “The Prodigal Son.” The song originally was a classic blues lament in which a young man complains to his mother about the women who have treated him wrong. This secular song, however, was then “converted” into a religious song with the same tune but new lyrics based on the parable itself. This “conversion,” in part, resembles the prodigal son motif found within some early blues artists, who self-identified with the prodigal son and envisioned their lives as reenactments of the parable. The debauchery of the prodigal son represented their “sinful” lives playing blues, the “devil’s music,” and many early blues artists underwent dramatic conversions in which they “returned home” to their heavenly Father (chap. 5).

Conclusion

These examples from the afterlives of the two brothers in the prodigal son parable give just a glimpse of the further discussions and explorations that this book is meant to encourage and enable. As you work your way through the different responses, approaches, and voices, I hope that you reflect on the different treatments, methods, and perspectives of the various interpretations. Maybe, at the very least, some “invisible gorillas” will be revealed as you read, reflect, and begin your own explorations.
Developments, elaborations, and reinterpretations of Jesus’s parables already are found in the New Testament Gospels, including various stages of allegorical interpretations, such as the explanation of the parable of the sower in Mark 4:13–20. Scholars still debate whether or how much the historical Jesus used allegory, but it will become clear in this chapter that, from the earliest period in the reception of his parables, allegorical interpretations dominated. Interpreters understand the Scriptures as including various symbols, parables, and riddles that require explanation for the “spiritual” sense, so allegorical readings were the most commonly held understandings of the parables and other biblical texts for hundreds of years (see Crouzel 1996, 153). As Frank Kermode puts it: “Allegory is the patristic way of dealing with inexhaustible hermeneutic potential” (1979, 44). Scripture, these early interpreters believe, is the Word of God, inspired by the Holy Spirit, and, when interpreted correctly, consistent in its message. It is also, however, filled with mysteries: “God is able to speak in riddles and metaphors and has an exceptional ability to stir the curiosity of true listeners” (Studer 1996, 357).

Interpretations during this period vary, but they have some common elements. Foundational to most interpretations is the belief that Scripture—whatever that encompassed—is divinely inspired and unified; thus one easily understood biblical text can be used to explain another hard-to-understand biblical text (e.g., some parables). In addition, God is more fully known through the revelation of Jesus and the New Testament, and, as the parable...
of the laborers in the vineyard demonstrates to many interpreters, God’s revelation is progressive in that mysteries are revealed over time. Another common element is that the Hebrew Bible is often interpreted typologically or allegorically: interpreters believe, for example, that events or concepts found in the Jewish scriptures foreshadow, symbolize, or prophesy the life, ministry, or teaching of Jesus (Papandrea 2012, 126–30).

Most of the interpreters in this chapter illustrate these trends, and they also reflect some of the diversity within the church of this period. These interpreters are primarily “ante-Nicene”—before the important Council of Nicaea in 325 CE—and some are Nicene or post-Nicene, working during or after the Council of Nicaea. They include the more well-known “church fathers,” such as some of the “Greek Fathers” (e.g., Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and John Chrysostom), the “Latin Fathers” (e.g., Tertullian and Augustine), and one “Syriac Father” (Ephrem the Syrian). Also included is the significant voice of Macrina the Younger, who is often overshadowed by her three brothers, Peter of Sebaste, Basil the Great, and Gregory of Nyssa, the latter two being two of the three famous “Cappadocian Fathers.” In addition, the chapter includes a divergent voice, The Gospel of Philip, a representative of Christian gnosticism that was deemed heretical by the church. Finally, the chapter concludes with important examples of parable interpretation from both art (e.g., frescoes, illuminated manuscripts, and mosaics) and music (Romanos the Melodist).

Irenaeus (ca. 140–ca. 200)

Irenaeus writes that in his “early youth” he saw Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna (martyred ca. 156), who “always taught the things which he had learned from the apostles, and which the Church has handed down, and which alone are true” (Against Heresies 3.3.4, in ANF 1:416). Since Polycarp might have listened to John the Apostle, as the early church historian Eusebius reports (Church History 5.20.4–8), Irenaeus possibly was one of the last witnesses to the generation who learned at the feet of the apostles of Jesus.

According to Eusebius, Irenaeus became bishop of Lyon after a local persecution killed numerous Christians, including Pothinus, Lyon’s first bishop (Church History 5.1.1–63). Irenaeus’s major surviving work, Against Heresies, is a sustained polemic against the teachings and practices of the gnostics, particularly Valentinian gnostics (Norris 1965, 45) and Marcion. Gnostics like Valentinus claimed to have a special saving revelation, as the Greek word gnōsis (knowledge) implies, a secret tradition of esoteric wisdom that Jesus
privately transmitted to select disciples who, in turn, delivered those traditions to them. This esoteric wisdom allowed gnostics, they believed, to move from the corporeal realm to the pure spiritual realm. Marcion is best known for distinguishing the “lesser” God of the Hebrew Bible, which he called the *demiurge*, from the transcendent God of Jesus. Irenaeus envisions such gnostics as a central threat to the Christian church, but, in the process of refuting them, *Against Heresies* also makes significant contributions to the development of what will become Christian orthodoxy.

The gnostics were dangerous, in Irenaeus’s view, because they led Christians astray with their claims of esoteric wisdom transmitted by Jesus in secret. In contrast, Irenaeus points to the authentic tradition passed on by apostolic succession, that is, from the apostles down through the bishops to the church. A defense of Scripture as apostolic writings thus plays a key role in Irenaeus’s arguments, although Irenaeus’s authoritative writings include only the four Gospels, Acts, the Pauline Letters, Revelation, and possibly 1 John and 1 Peter—not all the other works that eventually made their way into the Christian canon.

Irenaeus’s interpretations of the parables influenced a number of later interpreters, and he succinctly states his interpretative approach in *Against Heresies* 2.27 (ANF 1:398–99). God has made it possible for anyone who is “devoted to piety and the love of truth” to study Scripture to understand the “things which God has placed” within our power to understand, because Scripture speaks “clearly and unambiguously in express terms” about those things:

And therefore the parables ought not to be adapted to ambiguous expressions. For, if this be not done, both he who explains them will do so without danger, and the parables will receive a like interpretation from all, and the body of truth remains entire, with a harmonious adaptation of its members, and without any collision. But to apply expressions which are not clear or evident to interpretations of the parables, such as every one discovers for himself as inclination leads him, [is absurd]. For in this way no one will possess the rule of truth; but in accordance with the number of persons who explain the parables will be found the various systems of truth, in mutual opposition to each other, and setting forth antagonistic doctrines, like the questions current among the Gentile philosophers. (*Against Heresies* 2.27.1, in ANF 1:398)

Interpreters such as the gnostics inquire but never find, according to Irenaeus, because they improperly reject the authoritative “method of discovery” (adherence to the apostolic tradition). Irenaeus points to the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids (Matt. 25:1–13) to explain. If a person’s
lamp is untrimmed and burning with an unsteady light, that person obscures 
the “plain announcements” of the parables and will be excluded from the 
“marriage-chamber.” Not just the parables but also all of Scripture “can 
be clearly, unambiguously, and harmoniously understood by all, although 
all do not believe them” (Against Heresies 2.27.2, in ANF 1:398). Thus the 
secret knowledge allegedly passed by Jesus only to certain disciples and the 
resulting obscure interpretations of the parables by the gnostics actually are 
self-imposed chains that bind them in darkness.

Irenaeus acknowledges that “parables admit of many interpretations” 
(2.27.3, in ANF 1:399), but argues that the solution to this problem is ex-
plained by the parable of the wise and foolish builders (Matt. 7:24–27 // 
Luke 6:47–49): one should build one’s house on the rock that is “certain, 
indubitable, and true”; building “upon the shifting sand,” as the gnostics do, 
is to “act as if destitute of reason” (2.27.3, in ANF 1:399). The gnostics twist 
Scripture “from a natural to a non-natural sense” that supports “any kind of 
hypothesis they fancy” (1.9.4, in ANF 1:330). Irenaeus argues that imperfect 
human beings cannot have perfect knowledge in this life and that some things 
are beyond human understanding (2.28.2). The Scriptures, however, are perfect 
and “perfectly consistent.” Therefore, the sometimes-hard-to-understand 
parables must be harmonized with other, more easily understood passages, 
whose meanings are clear and which can “serve to explain the parables; and 
through the many diversified utterances [of Scripture] there shall be heard 
one harmonious melody in us, praising in hymns that God who created all 
things” (2.28.3, in ANF 1:400).

Most of Irenaeus’s discussions of the parables occur in book 4 of Against 
Heresies. This section seeks to demonstrate the unity of the Hebrew Bible and 
Christian scripture (4.36.1–41.3), and in it Irenaeus discusses nine parables 

1. wicked husbandmen (Matt. 21:33–45; Against Heresies 4.36.1–4) 
2. wedding feast (Matt. 22:1–14; Against Heresies 4.36.5–6) 
3. prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32; Against Heresies 4.36.7) 
4. laborers in the vineyard (Matt. 20:1–16; Against Heresies 4.36.7) 
5. Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9–14; Against Heresies 4.36.8) 
6. two sons (Matt. 21:28–32; Against Heresies 4.36.8) 
7. barren fig tree (Luke 13:6–9; Against Heresies 4.36.8) 
8. sheep and goats (Matt. 25:31–46; Against Heresies 4.40.2) 
9. wheat and weeds (Matt. 13:24–30, 36–43; Against Heresies 4.40.2)
The first three parables signify that “the prophets were sent from one and the same Father” as the God of Jesus (Against Heresies 4.36.5, in ANF 1:516), an argument that strikes directly at Marcion’s claim that the God of the Hebrew Bible is different from the Christian God. The parable of the wicked husbandmen, for example, demonstrates the unity of the God of the “Mosaic dispensation” and the God of Jesus, because it is the same “householder” (Jesus’s Father) who sends both his servants (i.e., the prophets) and his son (i.e., Jesus). God now rejects those who rejected the Son of God—those of the “former dispensation to whom the vineyard was formerly entrusted”—and has given the vineyard to the gentiles (the church), who were formerly outside the vineyard (cf. the denunciation of the “former dispensation” in Irenaeus’s interpretation of the wedding feast parable, Matt. 22:11–13; Against Heresies 4.26.6).

Irenaeus’s discussion of the parable of the laborers in the vineyard provides an excellent example of his parable interpretation: the householder is God, and the laborers called at different times of the day demonstrate the continuity between the God of the Hebrew Bible and the Christian God:

The same God is declared as having called some in the beginning, when the world was first created; but others afterwards, and others during the intermediate period [i.e., the time between Moses and Jesus; cf. Against Heresies 4.25.1], others after a long lapse of time, and others again in the end of time; so that there are many workmen in their generations, but only one householder who calls them together. For there is but one vineyard, since there is also but one righteousness, and one dispensor, for there is one Spirit of God who arranges all things; and in like manner is there one hire, for they all received a penny each man, having [stamped upon it] the royal image and superscription, the knowledge of the Son of God, which is immortality. And therefore He began by giving the hire to those [who were engaged] last, because in the last times, when the Lord was revealed He presented Himself to all [as their reward]. (Against Heresies 4.36.7, in ANF 1:518)

Irenaeus’s use of allegory is rather restrained in comparison to other early interpreters, such as the gnostics against whom he writes, and this example does not take interpreters much further down an allegorical path than does the author of Matthew’s Gospel. Irenaeus’s interpretation of the parable of the good Samaritan, however (Against Heresies 3.17.3), lays the foundation for later allegorical interpretations of the parable. Irenaeus implies that the Samaritan represents Jesus, who has compassion on and tends to the wounds of the injured man, who symbolizes the human race. Jesus also pays “two royal denaria” to the innkeeper, who represents the Holy Spirit and is our advocate against the “accuser” (i.e., the devil).
Irenaeus was a pioneer in many ways. He emphasized the harmony of the Hebrew Bible and the Christian scriptures, and he was one of the first writers who cited Christian writings as authoritative scripture on the same level as the Hebrew Bible. As Robert Grant notes, Irenaeus used the traditions of his predecessors to refute the gnostics and, in the process, “built up a body of Christian theology that resembled a French Gothic cathedral, strongly supported by columns of biblical faith and tradition, illuminated by vast expanses of exegetical and logical argument, and upheld by flying buttresses of rhetorical and philosophical considerations from the outside. In his own person he united the major traditions of Christendom from Asia Minor, Syria, Rome, and Gaul” (1997, 1). As we shall see, Irenaeus also influenced the biblical interpretation of many Christian authors who came after him, including their interpretations of the parables of Jesus.

The Gospel of Philip (Late Second–Early Third Century)

The Gospel of Philip, the only extant ancient copy of which was discovered at Nag Hammadi, Egypt, in 1945, appears to belong primarily (but not completely) to the most well-known stream of Christian gnosticism, the Valentinian tradition. Valentinus himself was active in Rome (ca. 140–160), and from the fragments of his writings that survive (mostly via Clement and Epiphanius), it seems that Valentinian Christianity blended Platonic, biblical, and gnostic elements into its version of Christianity.

The Gospel of Philip contains approximately seventeen sayings of Jesus, nine of which are found in some form in the New Testament Gospels, but it also includes additional stories, such as the account that Joseph the carpenter made the cross on which Jesus died (Gospel of Philip 73.8–15). A major theme of The Gospel of Philip is the reunification of soul and spirit in a heavenly union that culminates in the identification of the soul with the “true self.” This reflects the myth of Sophia (wisdom), who is eager to rejoin her spiritual companion, the Logos (the “Word”), and their reunification is often symbolized by the allegory/metaphor of marriage, which is itself a symbol of knowledge, truth, and freedom (e.g., John 8:32; Gospel of Philip 84.8–9; Meyer 2007, 157–60). One such passage about spiritual love, for example, mentions Luke’s parable of the good Samaritan (Gospel of Philip 77.35–78.12):

Spiritual love is wine and perfume. People who anoint themselves with it enjoy it, and while these people are present, others who are around also enjoy it. If the people who are anointed leave them and go away, the others who are not anointed but are only standing around are stuck with their own bad odor.

David B. Gowler, The Parables after Jesus
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The Samaritan gave nothing to the wounded person except wine and oil—that is, only ointment. The ointment healed the wound, for “love covers a multitude of sins.” (citing 1 Pet. 4:8; Meyer 2007, 181)

This passage alludes only to the Samaritan giving wine and oil to the wounded person, and it is in a section of The Gospel of Philip that focuses on knowledge (Greek: gnōsis) and love (Greek: agapē) in the context of sharing spiritual love with others: wine and perfume symbolize spiritual love, which is then compared to the wine and oil of the good Samaritan parable (Turner 1996, 195–96).

This allusion to the parable of the good Samaritan is almost the opposite of allegorical interpretations offered by such people as Irenaeus or Augustine, who seek deeper, spiritual meanings in the details of the parable. Instead, The Gospel of Philip uses what Turner describes as “reverse” allegorization. It begins with an abstract quality (spiritual love) that then moves to concrete images (wine and perfume/ointment). Then it places those concrete images into narrative contexts: (1) perfume, which both the one who wears it and those who smell it enjoy, and (2) wine and perfume/ointment, which are used by the good Samaritan on the wounded person. The allusion to the parable is an integral element of the argumentation, but the point is not interpretation of Scripture (Turner 1996, 197–98).

The main point appears to be a vital element of the gnostic message: knowledge of the truth should inspire one to love others who are not yet spiritually freed by truth so as to assist them in gaining this liberating truth and attaining spiritual freedom. The Samaritan, like in the parable itself, serves as an example of how one should act, to “go and do likewise.” Yet this message is given a gnostic slant, because the Samaritan, it seems, becomes an example of a gnostic Christian with advanced knowledge who loves and cares for those people who do not yet have this advanced knowledge. The Samaritan with advanced knowledge offers such “wounded” people the perfume, wine, and oil of the spiritual love inspired by gnōsis. Those who lack such knowledge are “stuck with their own bad odor,” so it is necessary for those who are enlightened to share their perfume/wine/ointment with them (see Roukema 1999, 68).

Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150–ca. 215)

Alexander the Great founded the city of Alexandria in Egypt in 331 BCE. During the Roman era, the city was the second largest of the empire, next
to Rome, and it housed the world’s most illustrious library. It also was home to a million Jews and, in the Christian era, became one of the great centers of Christianity.

According to the church father Jerome (ca. 347–420), Clement was a presbyter in the church at Alexandria, was “the author of notable volumes, full of eloquence and learning, both in sacred Scripture and in secular literature,” and succeeded Pantaenus as the head of the Christian catechetical school in Alexandria (Lives of Illustrious Men, chap. 38, in NPNF² 3:371).

The Christian “school” in Alexandria is known for using typology or allegory to interpret Scripture, an approach also taken by Philo of Alexandria and similar to that of many Greek interpreters of Homer and other ancient works. More than other Alexandrian interpreters, however, Clement can show much interest in the literal words of the biblical text (Cosaert 2008, 23).

An essential element of Clement’s biblical interpretation is that he envisions the divine Word (Greek: logos) as being active in all nations to prepare the world for the coming of Christ. Thus Clement attempts to integrate faith and reason; Christianity is the fulfillment of both Greek philosophy and the Hebrew Bible. As a result, Clement alludes to a multitude of writings (e.g., Homer, Euripides, and Plato) and argues, as did Philo and Josephus before him, that the best Greek philosophers derive their ideas from Jewish scriptures (see Miscellanies 1.5.14, 1.29.1). Clement therefore can discern a divine message in any author, although the divine voice is heard only indirectly in pagan literature or philosophy (see Miscellanies 6.8, in ANF 2:495, where Clement says that Greek philosophy can be “a stepping-stone to the philosophy which is according to Christ”). The logos of God is found more directly in the Hebrew scriptures, but the epitome is, of course, Christian scripture (Cosaert 2008, 21), where Jesus is explicitly declared the Word of God (e.g., John 1:1–18). Thus, like Irenaeus, Clement argues that the Hebrew Bible and the Christian scriptures point to one and the same God.

Clement’s interpretations of parables are more understandable after one has read his discussion of the “symbolic” style of poets and philosophers (Miscellanies 5.8). Symbolism, including “concealment” and enigma, is used by all who seek the truth—whether Hebrew, Egyptian, Greek, or even “barbarian.” Similar to how the secrets of the Jewish temple were restricted to a few, Egyptians, for example, “did not entrust the mysteries they possessed to all and sundry, and did not divulge the knowledge of divine things to the profane” (5.7, in ANF 2:454). They instead divulged those mysteries only to royalty and the “worthiest” among the priests.

Symbolism is important, Clement argues, because truth must be concealed from those who might abuse or pollute it. Symbolism also contains more
power than simple, direct statements of truth and permits more than one layer of meaning. When Scripture “hides the sense” by using parabolic, symbolic language, it stimulates one to be inquisitive: “ever on the watch for the discovery of the words of salvation” (Miscellanies 6.15, in ANF 2:509). Therefore, teachers who understand symbolism must be sought so they can discern and explain the truth within it, because God’s prophetic Scriptures, which contain the plan of salvation, are filled with metaphors and parables, and Christ the incarnated logos gives us the knowledge by which we can reach the spiritual world beyond our senses. Some people will remain ignorant and unable to understand such enigmatic parables (Matt. 13:13–15, 34; cf. Mark 4:10–12, 33–34), but for those “who have ears to hear,” the truth of the Scriptures will be explained (Hägg 2010, 180). So, unlike the gnostics, Clement views gnōsis not as a secret teaching revealed and passed on to only a select few; it is a collective truth contained in the Scriptures and the apostolic tradition.

Clement’s use of allegory is amply demonstrated in an oration on Passover in which he discusses the prodigal son parable. The prodigal son designates those who have squandered their inheritance from God in a “profligacy of debauchery” (Fragments 11, in ANF 2:582). These prodigals, however, can return to God, and, in response, God is moved with compassion and bestows glory and honor upon them. The actions of the father in the parable are also symbolic: the best robe denotes the robe of immortality; the ring is a royal signet ring and divine seal of “consecration, signature of glory, pledge of testimony” (citing John 3:33); the shoes are “suited for the journey to heaven,” such as the ones put on by those whose feet have been “washed by our Teacher and Lord” (an apparent allusion to John 13:13). Thus the shoes given to the repentant son “are buoyant, and ascending, and waft to heaven, and serve as such a ladder and chariot as he requires who has turned his mind towards the Father.”

Clement then argues that the fatted calf killed to celebrate the son’s return may be “spoken of as a lamb (not literally)” because it is “the great and greatest” (Fragments 11, in ANF 2:582). Christ, then, is the fatted calf (lamb), because he is “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29) and who “was led as a sheep to the slaughter” (Acts 8:32; cf. Isa. 53:7). The sacrifice of the lamb symbolized in the killing of the fatted calf is also symbolic of the Eucharist, because Christ “is both flesh and bread and has given himself as both to us to be eaten.” To the “sons” who return to God as Father, God gives them the calf, “and it is slain and eaten.” But those who do not return to God, God “pursues and disinherits, and is found to be a most powerful bull,” whose “glory is as that of an unicorn” (Num. 23:22) and who gives this strength to those who partake in the Eucharist and are given the power to “butt [their] enemies” (Ps. 44:5).