

GCE AS/A LEVEL



# RELIGIOUS STUDIES

WJEC Unit 6  
Textual Studies  
(New Testament)



Theme 1 Specification: Testament Literature - Parables

Notes on John Dominic Crossan - *Crossan, J. D. (2012) – The Power of Parable: How Fiction by Jesus Became Fiction about Jesus, HarperOne, ISBN:0061875694*

Prologue

While attending a Passion Play John Dominic Crossan (JDC) began to consider not only the parables *by* Jesus but parables *about* Jesus e.g. The Good Samaritan compared to The Road to Emmaus and why one is considered fiction and the other non-fiction.

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JDC sees Emmaus as a parable not history because Christian liturgy involves Scripture and the Eucharist which are the twin components of Emmaus.

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An introductory definition of a parable: 'A story that never happened but always does'. This leads to the question of where does factual history end and fictional parable begin.

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Do brevity and narrativity constitute a parable?

For JNC a parable = Metaphoricity + Narrativity. Length does not matter. Metaphor comes from 'over/cross' and 'to bear/carry' and so 'carrying something over' or 'seeing something as another'. As such we can all recognize small metaphors but when they are big e.g. tradition or bigger e.g. reality or biggest e.g. evolution or God then we tend to forget or ignore their presence.

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A story has a beginning, middle and end.

A Metaphorical Story, an ordinary story which wants you to focus internally on it to follow the development of character and plot; to wonder what will happen next and how it will all end.

A Metaphorical Story as parable always points externally beyond itself, whatever the actual content is a parable is never about 'that' content.

## Part 1. Parables Told by Jesus

### Chapter 1 - *Riddle Parables*: So that they may not understand.

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JDC asks four questions:

**i) Whether lethal ‘Riddle Parables’ existed in the Mediterranean before Jesus?**

Yes e.g. Oedipus and the Sphinx.

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As such they are not childish games but lethally serious adult contests e.g. Samson and the lion (Judges 13-16).

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**ii) Are some, most or all of Jesus’ parables to be understood as Riddle Parables?**

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In Gospel according to Mark – Yes. Mark gives Jesus’ parable of the Sower and interprets it item by item as a riddle (4.1-20). Mark cites it as a model or paradigm for the further parables of Jesus and so all are taken to be Riddle Parables. Those parables have profoundly important consequences as success in understanding gains you the Kingdom of God, failure results not in physical but spiritual death. *Jesus taught them many things in parables* – plural – so Mark is emphasizing that this single parable of the Sower is a paradigm for all parables; if you understand this parable then you understand them all.

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In private Jesus disciples ask him about the parables. Jesus’ answer is that, to you has been given the secret of the Kingdom of God but for those outside parables are given so that they ‘*may look and not perceive, listen and not understand, so that they may not turn again to be forgiven*’ (quote Isaiah 6. 10).

Then Jesus asks them *Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables? (4.11-13).*

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Jesus is saying that incomprehension is already there and Jesus is using Riddle Parables to increase and punish incomprehension.

**iii) Why did Mark interpret Jesus’ parables as punitive Riddle Parables for his opponents that required private interpretation for his followers?**

Mark 3 contains Mark’s vision of the Gospel. After John the Baptist was arrested Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the Good News of God saying, *The time is fulfilled, the Kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe in the Good News.* But from 2.1 Jesus meets with repeated opposition, *the Pharisees went out and conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him. (3.6`)*

Next comes the incident of Jesus' family wanting to restrain him and the Scribes saying that *He has Belzebel and as ruler of demons he casts out demons.*

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It is in response to this that Mark first mentions Jesus' use of parables (3.23) and so it is not hard to understand in Mark 4 Jesus' rejection of rejection as Riddle Parables intending to extend and condemn prior rejection.

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Furthermore, even if one guessed that in Parable of the Sower sowing was teaching how could one ever get the details correct? Birds = Satan, Rocks = temptation, Thorns = desires. A Riddle Parable demands that you get ALL details correct. Mark 7 is again evidence because disciples again ask in the house about a parable – Parables intend to reject those who reject Jesus. Likewise Mark 12 Jesus again uses parables in the midst of lethal confrontation – The Parable of the Vineyard (12. 1-12).

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**iv) Where the incomprehensible riddles parables Jesus' deliberate punishment for prior incomprehension, his counter rejection for prior rejection? Was this Jesus' intention or Mark's (mis)understanding?**

JNC does not consider counter rejection was Jesus' purpose for the parables. The main reason is, Mark contradicts himself on the function of the parables as creating incomprehension and thereby guaranteeing condemnation.

Five examples from Mark 4:

**a) Jesus began to *teach*** – what teacher educates in order to create incomprehension? Teaching may result in incomprehension but that is not the intent of it. Mark opens with 'Listen' and closes 'Let anyone with ears to hear listen' so why emphasise listen if incomprehension was the goal?

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**b) Parable of the Lamp** (4.21-23) not incomprehensible and ends *Let anyone with ears to hear listen.*

**c) Mark ends the chapter of parables with a summary.** *With many such parables he spoke the word to them as they were able to hear it, he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples (4.33-34).* So the crowd were able to hear.

**d) The Parable of the Sower** 4. 3-9 and its interpretation 4. 14-20 contradict Mark's reading of Jesus' purpose for this particular parable as a paradigm for all parables.

Jesus gave three types of good soil, not just three bad soils, *These are the ones in the good soil, they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit 30, 60 and one hundred fold.* Why no mention of the good soils?

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Luke read Mark's parable and edited it so that *some fell in the good soil and produced one hundred fold*. Luke gave three bad soils and one good.

JNC asks whether the balance of three modes of failure and three of success inside the parable negate the outside interpretation of its purpose as incomprehension?

Jesus' parable seems quite ready to expect and accept degrees of failure and success.

JNC concludes that Mark's interpretation of Jesus' parables as Riddle Parables intending to incomprehension and thereby generating condemnation is not appropriate or adequate to the intention of Jesus.

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Synopsis – Granted that Jesus' parables were not intended as Riddle Parables for punitive incomprehension, were they intended as Example Parables for ethical admonition?

## Chapter 2 - Example Parables: go and do likewise

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A Wikipedia definition of parables *illustrates a moral or religious lesson*. JDC maintains that a differentiation between parables and fables is unrealistic and impossible. He would call Aesop's Fables – Example Parables.

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The Wikipedia definition would equate all parables as Example Parables but JDC sees Example Parables as one type i.e. moral models or ethical stories that consciously and deliberately point metaphorically beyond themselves – from literal microcosm to macrocosm.

Four questions to help:

### **i) What exactly are Example Parables?**

JDC uses Talmud story used to answer question of what God would do at judgement if body blamed soul and soul blamed body for sin. A king appointed a blind guard and a lame guard to guard fig tree. The lame climbed on shoulders of the blind and they ate the figs. When the king discovered this the blind said he could not see and the lame that he could not reach so both innocent. The king's solution was to put the lame back on the shoulders of the blind and punish them both at the same time. What the king did illustrates what God will do.

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Second study from Hasidic Judaism – parable of the Rooster Prince – a prince went mad and believed he was a rooster. A rabbi visits and goes naked under the table with him as another rooster and piece by piece puts clothing on and the Prince protests but follows and is cured.

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JDC says both of these are Example Parables.

- The first is explicitly framed with application and interpretation; it uses human action as an illustrative example of divine action.
- The second does not give a framing interpretation but offers a case of human action and leaves it open for hearers / readers to apply across a wide spectrum of how anyone could and should act.

### **ii) Did example Parables exist in biblical tradition before Jesus?**

JDC says – Yes.

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a) Judges 9. 1-15 Jotham counters Abimelech's proposition to kill all Canaanites by the parable of the Trees. Trees invited first the olive, then the fig and then the vine to 'reign over' them. They all refused as producing oil, fruit or wine was a more important function, so the trees appealed to the bramble which replied *If in good faith you are anointing me king over you, then come and take refuge in my shade, but if not, let fire come out of the bramble and devour the cedars of Lebanon*. The

understanding is clear – those who are gracious and productive are too busy to rule over others, only those who are unproductive and dangerous have time to do so.

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The driving force behind the parable is antimonarchical, in favour of the charismatic tribal leaders.

b) 2 Samuel 12. 1-4 when kings now rule – incident of King David wanting Uriah's wife and ensuring his death in battle so Bathsheba could be his. The prophet Nathan delivers the Parable of the Poor Man's Lamb. David judges himself in his response to the parable which is easily decoded.

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c) Daniel 1-6. The 3 youths in the furnace and Daniel in lions' den. The moral message is clear – Jews who remain faithful are rewarded. A message by example.

d) Books of Judith, Tobit and Esther – all example parable books showing that living with courage, covenantal fidelity and traditional piety result in happy ending.

### **iii) Are example parables the best model for Jesus' parables – for some, most or all of them?**

If Mark thinks of Jesus' parables as riddle parables, Luke thinks of them as example parables – of how God or Jesus does or does not act. They can be models of how we should or should not act. *Go and do – or do not do – likewise.*

Luke 15 – all the tax collectors and sinners are listening to Jesus and the Pharisees and Scribes grumble leading to:

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Parable of the Lost Sheep and Lost Coin – Jesus saying that I am finding and saving the lost and once found no one should grumble but rejoice.

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Parable of the Prodigal Son – younger son = tax collectors lost and found hence the celebration. Older son = Pharisees and Scribes. All 3 parables defend the incident in Luke 5.29-32 when Pharisees and scribes protesting about the banquet that Levi / Matthew the tax collector gave Jesus, *I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.*

### **iv) Is this Luke's interpretation or Jesus' intention?**

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Parables of lost sheep, coin, son are only found in Luke.

Lost Sheep is found in Matthew but the context is different – not external grumbling but an internal one of stumbling blocks so, be like a child, not a stumbling block. Do not despise them – parable of the 100 sheep and one lost – so it is not the will of the Father that one of these little ones be lost. For Matthew the Lost Sheep is not about community outsiders criticizing Jesus as in Luke 15, but Jesus criticizing community insiders. Both uses are fine but this does not help Luke's case in Luke 15 of a precise scenario for Jesus as compared to Luke's best fit.

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JDC refers to the gnostic Gospel of Thomas which also contains a version of this parable.

### Chapter 3 - Challenge Parables: Part I: Down from Jerusalem to Jericho.

p.45-7

JDC uses Gide's re-work of the Parable of the Prodigal Son to introduce Challenge Parables.

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Parable of the Good Samaritan – question of the 4 interchanges between Jesus and the lawyer showing that the text has been framed.

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Parable of the Good Samaritan as a Riddle Parable based on St. Augustine of Hippo whereby: Man = Adam. Jericho = the moon signifying our mortality. Thieves = devil & angels. Who strip him = of his immortality. Beat him = by persuading him to sin. Left him half dead = insofar as a man can understand and know God he lives but insofar as oppressed by sin is dead, therefore, half dead. Priests & Levites = priesthood and ministry of the Old Testament. Samaritan = guardian = Lord himself. Binding of wounds = restraint of sin. Oil = comfort of hope. Wine = exhortation to work with fervent spirit. Beast = the flesh in which Jesus deigned to come to us. Being set on a beast = belief in the incarnation of Christ. Inn = the Church. Morrow = resurrection of Lord. 2p = 2 precepts of love or the promise of life and of that which is to come. Innkeeper = Apostle Paul. Whatever you spend = his counsel on celibacy or the fact that he worked with his own hands.

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Questions – Does St. Augustine think we could or should read all Jesus' parables allegorically as Riddle Parables? Or, was St. Augustine aware that his reading is brilliantly clever but also exegetically playful?

Parable of the Good Samaritan as example parable as also outlined by St. Augustine of Hippo in *On Christian Doctrine*. Interpreted as ethical, an example parable.

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Jesus was teaching us that he is our neighbour whom it is our duty to help in his need or help if he were in need. Augustine shows the mutual nature of 'neighbour' i.e. the man in the dirt and the man on the road – the one who helps and the other who is helped and so it is an example parable.

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Parable of the Good Samaritan as a Challenge Parable. JDC looks at Henry Fielding's re-working of the parable with six figures of whom only the lowliest servant would share his cloak to cover the naked victim and allow him aboard the coach to get him to the inn.

Both Jesus & Fielding see that the man should be helped hence ethical but is this the main point?

For both Jesus & Fielding it is the respected ones who refuse help and the disreputable one who does as necessary. This makes it a Challenge Parable because it reverses expectations and judgments. What happens to your world if a story records that your best people act badly and only your worst person acts well?

JDC believes that St. Augustine got the parable wrong twice – Fielding got it right.

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So how to show that Luke changed Parable of Good Samaritan from a Challenge to an Example Parable?

i) Literary context – parable is only in Luke but the dialogue about ‘love one’s neighbour’ is also in Mark and Matthew. Mark places it in the debates in Jesus last week in Jerusalem, as does Matthew but not Luke.

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Therefore it is Luke not Jesus who adopted the dialogue about the double command of loving God and neighbour from Jesus in Mark as the context for the parable. He also adapted it so it became Jesus applauding the questioner, not the questioner applauding Jesus.

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Therefore, Luke brought two independent units of tradition – dialogue about the double commandment and the parable of the Good Samaritan and used the former to interpret the latter and thereby changed a challenge parable into an example parable.

That is easy because almost any Challenge Parable presumes its core action is moral. Jesus & Fielding take it for granted – one should stop and help.

But, the point of a Challenge Parable is that within its own culture, social, political or religious expectations it is the ‘good’ people who fail to help and one of the ‘bad’ who do.

Challenges are made to the given normalcy the audience expect, hierarchical prejudices and ethical presuppositions.

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ii) Replace it into the social context of the world of Jesus.

In Jewish homeland the priest and Levite were the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> level of clergy = ‘good guys’

-v- Samaritan and therefore representing positive and negative polarities. Jesus could have made it an Example Parable but as soon as introduced the positive and negative characters it was a Challenge. Not so obvious to us because the ‘Good Samaritan’ has become a redundant cliché – a standard term of the helper to the distressed, long lost any sense of oxymoron.

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Does it matter what parable it is? St. Augustine of Hippo also asks questions of interpretations.

#### Chapter 4 - Challenge Parables: Part II: The Word against the Word.

p.67

JDC sees Ruth, Jonah and Job as Challenge Parables:

Ruth challenges a part of the Bible

Jonah challenges the whole of the Bible

Job challenges the God of the Bible

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To JDC it is not so much a case of when a story is set but when written that establishes their deliberate purposes as Challenge Parables.

#### Chapter 8 - Rhetorical Violence: The Parable Gospel According to Matthew

p.179

JDC sees the parallel between Moses and Jesus from their birth narratives whereby King Herod becomes the new Pharaoh. Matthews' gospel starts with a Rome appointed king using lethal violence in the slaughter of the innocents – unsuccessfully compared to the Rome appointed governor – Pilate – doing the same *Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, 'This is Jesus, the King of the Jews'.* – Successfully. This raises the question of violence.

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Question – granted the violence *against* Jesus is there also violence *by* Jesus in Matthew?

While depicted as the new 'David' Jesus is not depicted as a warrior prince who would save his people from the Romans militarily as David did from the Philistines.

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Given the parallel with Moses who is law giver rather than waver of war for Matthew the primacy of Moses over David is that of nonviolent law over violent war. Within the gospel Jesus is regularly conducting debates with opponents but he never uses any violence, human or transcendental, against them.

Question – are there various types, dimensions and modes of violence?

JDC sees human violence move through three stages:

Ideological violence – is thinking that persons, groups or nations are inhuman / subhuman.

Rhetorical violence – is speaking on that presumption of dehumanizing others with rude names, crude caricatures and derogatory stereotypes – 'traitors' or 'religious heretics'

Physical violence – even lethal is acting on the above by illegal or if one has attained social power, by legal political action.

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First answer – Jesus is not rhetorically violent:

e.g. sermon on the mount wherein the old law is subsumed and transformed into the newer one:

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On murder – you shalt not murder – but I say – do not be angry, insult or berate.  
On adultery – you shalt not – but I say – do not even have lustful thoughts.  
On divorce – it is permitted – but I say – divorce is only permitted for unchastity.  
On false oaths – you shalt not – but I say – do not swear at all.

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On vengeance – an eye for an eye – but I say turn the other cheek.  
On love – you shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy – but I say love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

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JDC details further ‘on murder’ and ‘on love’ and concludes that for Jesus in Matthew’s new law, the fulfilled and renewed Torah, the positive nonviolence of loving enemies is derived and modelled on the very character of God.  
It seems the answer is clear – Jesus solemnly forbids any rhetorical or ideological violence.

The second answer – Jesus is rhetorically violent:

As soon as Jesus finishes those six commandments he employs the word *hypocrites* repeatedly.

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That may be excused but Matthew later expands this in a whole chapter 23 of: hypocrites, blind guides, blind fools, snakes, brood of vipers.  
Jesus seems to be doing what he forbade in Chapter 5. So – does Jesus change his mind or does Matthew change his Jesus?

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Question – does this represent a random element or a dominant theme in Matthew?  
JDC outlines that Matthew along with Luke uses Mark as a source and both also use Q and so the contention that comparing accounts will help illustrate any direction that is being taken.

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E.g. i) reaction to rejection – Jesus tells disciples that if rejected then shake dust off feet as you leave (6.11-12) but Matthew adds – it will be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah on judgement day than for that town (10.15). Jesus then goes on to name other places that are cursed (11.20-24). This represents a huge increase in rhetorical violence.

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ii) refusal of any proof sign – Again, compare Mark 8. 11-13 to Matthew 12. 38-42

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We see Jesus employing far nastier language.

iii) weeping and gnashing of teeth – 8. 11-12 which is escalated in its use to five parables:

The weeds. The net. The Great Dinner. The servants. Master’s Money / Unforgiving servant.

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That turns these parables into warnings or negative examples of impending punishment.

What is the importance of this escalating invective in Matthew?

JDC looks at the execution of Jesus.

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Matthew changes use of Mark's word 'crowd' for those calling for Jesus' death to 'crowds' and then to 'the whole people' therefore intensifying the rhetorical violence.

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The real question is how can the change from Matthew 5 to Matthew 23 be accounted?

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JDC sees the answer in that Matthew's Gospel is not a Challenge Parable but an Attack Parable.

The problem is that as a consequence Jesus is opened up to Matthew's own favourite accusation – hypocrisy. Therefore, JDC concludes his answer:

*The Jesus of Matthew is regularly and rhetorically violent, but that is not Jesus himself; it is Matthew who is speaking.*

We should nevertheless remain grateful for the Matthew who revealed the Challenge Parable of Matthew 5 before changing him to the Jesus of the Attack parable in Matthew 23.