

Hebrew Bible

Genesis 18:1-8

Gospel

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Contemporary reading

From “short stories by Jesus”

By © Amy-Jill Levine, p.304

The parable should disturb. If we hear it and are not disturbed, there is something seriously amiss with our moral compass. It would be better if we perhaps started by seeing the parable not as about heaven or hell or final judgement, but about kings, politics, violence, and the absence of justice. If we do, we might be getting closer to Jesus.

When I moved from the UK to Baghdad in the early 1980s, one of the first things I did was explore my new neighbourhood. The Tigris River flowed past one end of our short street; a busy road bustling with people and shops of every variety ran past the other end. On my first exploratory wander, a delicious aroma led me to the local bakery, a hole-in-the-wall belting out heat from the roaring fire inside a dome-shaped oven, like a giant pizza oven. The bakers flopped the diamond-shaped lumps of dough onto large wooden paddles, slid them into the fire, and a little later retrieved the crisp baked golden loaves to sell for a few dinars to waiting customers. The bread was leavened, like that in the parable, not the flatbread we generally associate with Middle Eastern cuisine.

As I joined the shortest of the three queues stretched over the dusty yellow clay footpath, shouting broke out around me. I quickly realised they were shouting and gesticulating at me. I glanced around. I'm not sure how I missed the fact that of the three queues, one comprised women, another men in civvies, and the other – soldiers in uniform, many with their weapons slung over their shoulder. This was at the height of the Iran-Iraq war. Soldiers were served first, hence it was the shortest queue.

My face burned in embarrassment; I apologised in probably incomprehensible Arabic and joined the longest queue – women only – and waited my turn. Lesson learned. It was worth it – that was some of the best bread I've ever eaten!

I remembered that experience when I read and researched the parable of the leaven before today's service. It shaped my decision to talk about this parable out of all the others we have heard today, together with the more recent reason – that many people took up bread making during our stage 4 lockdown.

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But why parables? In the set of parables Ann read today, Jesus uses them to describe the kingdom of God – the future realm promised to listeners if they follow Jesus’s way. But they are puzzling, and often leave us scratching our heads in confusion. Earlier in Matthew’s Gospel the disciples ask Jesus why he spoke in parables to the crowds gathered beside the Sea of Galilee. His response is as much an enigma as the parables themselves. He paraphrases Isaiah chapter 6 in which God tells Isaiah he should continue to preach even though the people refuse to hear his message. Like the sower who spreads seed on the hardened, rocky and weed-infested soil as well as the fertile ground, Jesus continues to teach the crowds, knowing that many listeners reject his teaching or simply do not listen.

As far as we know, they are not Jesus’s words, although the Jesus Seminar which lays much stress on identifying what they think are his original words, deem the parable of the leaven the most likely to be original. Perhaps the gospel writers knew of Jesus’s story-telling and used the parables to try and explain something they also had difficulty understanding. Jesus had promised a new world that had not yet come to pass. They wanted to continue to attract new followers so they used an old Jewish teaching tradition of *masbal* or parables and *chidot* or riddles (Psalm 78:2), or *problemata* translated as riddles (Psalm 77.2).

Jesus and the gospel writers used parables because they knew we respond to stories. I sense a playfulness about them, perhaps another strategy to engage the listener. But parables are more than just stories.

Parables are meant to change us, not reassure us. They are intended to enhance our consciousness of our own ignorance. We could say they encourage us to think outside the box and to listen to others to broaden our thinking. Jesus told parables in community because it is only in diverse community that we are exposed to other people’s thoughts, conclusions and experiences, challenging us to reassess our own.

As Amy-Jill Levine said in the quote Ann read just now, the parable is not about heaven or hell, or final judgement in some vague romanticised or fear-filled future. It is about power, violence, and the absence of justice in the present – in the place where we are. In the here and now. Levine asserts that if we hear a parable and are not disturbed, there is something seriously amiss with our moral compass.

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The parable of the leaven appears in Luke and the secret Gospel of Thomas as well as Matthew. Luke and Matthew pair it with the parable of the mustard seed. The two reflect the gendered division of labour that was the tradition in Biblical times – men worked outside, women inside, men sow, women bake. Here, women and their work are valued.

The Gospel of Thomas's writer compares the kingdom of God to the woman who mixes the dough, rather than like the leaven, giving it a slightly different emphasis: the kingdom of heaven – the promised future realm – is like the woman, reminding us that women are connected with the sacred in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

A popular interpretation of this parable is that the leaven represents increasing numbers of Jesus's followers spreading the gospel. The small amount of leaven in the dough increases the size of the bread, in the same way that Jesus started with a few followers and the movement grew as those followers spread the word.

A confusing problem with this parable lies in translations of the verb *enkrypto* from the root meaning hide, or to do something secretly so that it can be revealed as something wonderful. *Enkrypto* is often translated as 'mix' in this parable but that obscures its true meaning. The leaven is not mixed – it is hidden so it can be revealed as something transformative and marvellous.¹

Using a humble, everyday symbol of leaven and the woman who bakes it into bread, this parable stands in a long line of biblical stories about God providing food for people in times of trial. And the measures of flour are images of abundance. The quantity is the same amount of flour Sarah used to bake for the messengers in Genesis – it would have made enough bread to feed a whole village! Such abundance recalls other examples of abundance and generosity in the Judeo-Christian tradition – God feeding the Israelites with manna in Exodus, the wedding at Cana, and the feeding of the five thousand. These stories, as with this parable, reassure the growing community of Jesus's followers that God will continue to provide.

And of course, Mary and Joseph laid Jesus in a manger – an eating trough – after his birth. And by the time of John's Gospel, Jesus is the bread of life.

¹ Amy-Jill Levine, "Short Stories by Jesus", pp 132,3.

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So there we have it – the valuing of women’s work, something secretive and potentially transformative if uncovered, links back to key Jewish bible narratives and connections with notions of abundance, generosity, food and Jesus as the bread of life.

Those years ago, when I lived in Baghdad, I was acutely aware that I was close to locations of the bible stories. I walked along the street of the processions in Babylon where Nebuchadnezzar led the Jews into captivity more than 1500 years earlier. I worshipped in a Catholic church next door to a mosque, that meant we would sometimes be consuming the bread and wine of communion to the background sound of the muezzin calling the faithful to prayer next door. I loved the warm, diamond-shaped bread from the little bakery between the church and my street – but I don’t recall that I ever stopped to reflect on the parable of the leaven and what that might mean for my community and me.

But here it is: like a riddle, shrouded in mystery and secrecy – perhaps intended not to reassure us but to unsettle us, to encourage us to be activists for change when we see an absence of justice.

As Amy-Jill Levine writes,

one does not need to worship Jesus as Lord or Saviour for the parables to have meaning. The people who first heard him did not, at first worship him. Yet they paid attention, because for those with ears to hear and some patience to ponder, the parables spoke to their hearts.<sup>2</sup>

Whether you believe Jesus is the Christ, the son of God, or whether you believe he is a rabbi who told stories containing important messages, or a Jewish man from Nazareth who spoke wise words, there’s something in the parables for you.

In the end, a parable is a mystery with multiple possible meanings. Maybe it’s a reminder to us that the realm of God or promised future Jesus speaks of is present when everyone in our community has enough to eat, or to extend it even further – when everyone has adequate housing, food, clothing, medical care, education and time to enjoy one another. Maybe it’s that simple.

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<sup>2</sup> Levine, p305.

## **Key works consulted**

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