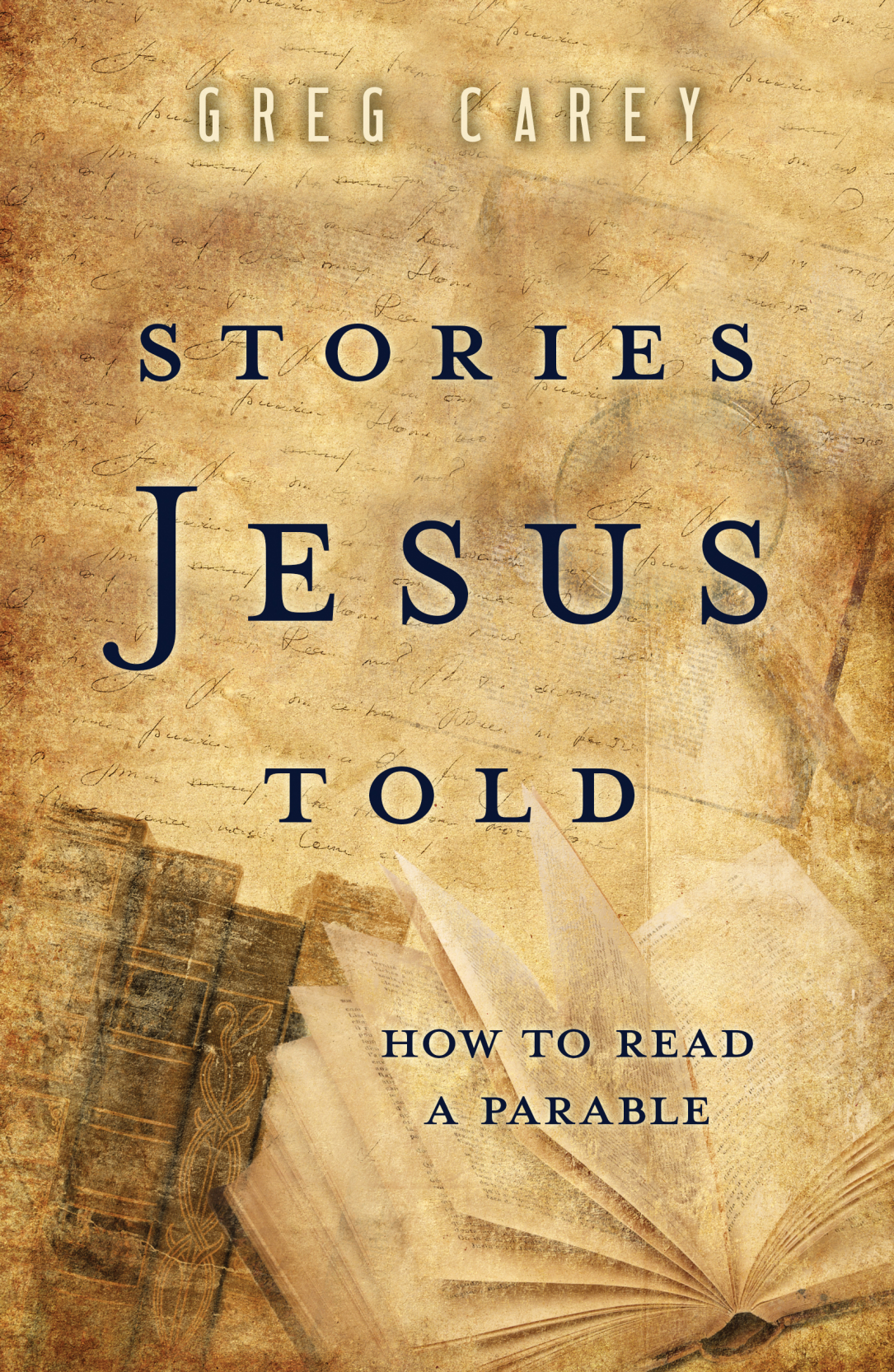
GREG CAREY
STORIES JESUS TOLD
HOW TO READ A PARABLE

Contents

Chapter 1
Divine Inefficiencies

The Parable of the Soils

Jesus began to teach beside the lake again. Such a large crowd gathered that he climbed into a boat there on the lake. He sat in the boat while the whole crowd was nearby on the shore. He said many things to them in parables. While teaching them, he said, "Listen to this! A farmer went out to scatter seed. As he was scattering seed, some fell on the path; and the birds came and ate it. Other seed fell on rocky ground where the soil was shallow. They sprouted immediately because the soil wasn't deep. When the sun came up, it scorched the plants; and they dried up because they had no roots. Other seed fell among thorny plants. The thorny plants grew and choked the seeds, and they produced nothing. Other seed fell into good soil and bore fruit. Upon growing and increasing, the seed produced in one case a yield of thirty to one, in another case a yield of sixty to one, and in another case a yield of one hundred to one." He said, "Whoever has ears to listen should pay attention!"

Mark 4:1-9

The Parable of the Soils (Mark 4:1-20) offers a promising starting point for several reasons. First, most scholars believe Mark is the earliest of the Gospels, and Mark 4:1-9 is the first parable to appear in

Mark. Second, Mark 4:13-20 presents an interpretation of the parable itself—how convenient! Third, in Mark 4:10-12 the disciples ask Jesus why he teaches in parables, and he provides an answer.

In short, we have the first major parable to appear in the earliest Gospel, a fully developed interpretation of that parable, and an account for why Jesus teaches in parables. Imagining this study of Jesus' parables as a medium-range hike, surely we are getting off on the right foot.

In important ways, that is precisely the case: for all these reasons the Parable of the Sower is well-suited to launch our conversations, but it comes with hidden benefits. The parable also opens vexing questions of its own. Jesus' explanation concerning the purpose of his parables not only continues to spur debates among commentators, it also provokes the authors of Matthew and Luke. Even the interpretation Jesus provides for this parable gives us lots to talk about.

Allegories

The Parable of the Sower, labeled the Parable of the Soils in the Common English Bible, is an allegory. Key elements of an allegory correspond to other realities beyond the world of the story. The United States flag provides an example: thirteen stripes for each of the original colonies, fifty stars for each of the fifty states. In the Parable of the Sower, the seed corresponds to the "word," while each kind of soil indicates different responses to the word.

My college required almost every student to take the same two-year interdisciplinary humanities class. A common rite of passage for first-year students involved an encounter with the "Allegory of the Cave" from Plato's *Republic*. Plato imagines people who are trapped in a cave. They can see only figures on a wall, shadows of objects that pass between a fire that is lit behind them and themselves. They have no other access to reality. Imagine, Plato challenges us, that one of these people should escape their chains, pass out of the cave into broad daylight, and try to report reality as it is beyond the cave to their fellow lifelong cave dwellers. Should that person try to drag their companions out of the cave, their former companions might even kill them.

Plato's example reveals that the basic terms of an allegory may be

fairly simple: one set of terms corresponds to another set of ideas in straightforward ways. But as generations of philosophers and college students will attest, the significance of those allegories often proves far more subtle.

Many of us grew up hearing that Jesus used parables as simple teaching lessons. What if he didn't? Having read the Gospels and mounds of research on the historical Jesus, the journalist Adam Gopnik describes Jesus as "verbally spry and even a little shifty," prone to "defiant, enigmatic paradoxes and pregnant parables that never quite close, perhaps by design."[1]

Gopnik characterizes a Jesus who engages in high-stakes verbal combat with his opponents, often using parables and snappy one-liners as weapons in such hostile exchanges. Seminary students frequently notice how rarely anyone understands Jesus in the Gospel stories. Remarkably, the people most likely to understand Jesus are the ones who, speaking theoretically, should struggle to do so. Sinners and tax collectors follow along just fine (Luke 15:1-2), and the people he heals generally understand without much problem. The struggling comes from would-be disciples and from the supposedly righteous. But Jesus rarely comes off as easy to understand.

I have dedicated this study to Charles Melchert, one of my best friends. Melchert, a biblical scholar and Christian educator, raises the question, "Why didn't Jesus tell Bible stories?" In other words, why do so many of Jesus' teachings require his disciples to use their own imaginations, draw their own inferences, and make their own judgments? Why does Jesus so rarely tie the bow of learning for his followers like we expect modern teachers to do?[2]

Perhaps our problem lies in what we expect from teaching—and from learning. We often think of teaching in terms of what we teach. Regarding the teaching activity of Jesus, Melchert poses different questions: What is worth learning? How is learning evoked? What is the point of learning in a certain way?

The Parable of the Soils may be an allegory. Most of Jesus' parables are not. And if we keep in mind that Jesus rarely taught in order to deliver straightforward Sunday School lessons, we may find that this parable, too, especially tied to its interpretation, will pose its own challenges for us.

Structure

Mark 4:1-20 presents a fairly straightforward structure. We have a setting: A crowd gathers around Jesus, so he teaches them from a boat while they remain ashore (4:1-2). Then Jesus shares the parable, concluding with an exhortation to understand (4:3-9). During some alone time with his followers, including the twelve, Jesus explains why he teaches in parables (4:10-12), then explains this particular parable (4:13-20).

The parable itself and the interpretation that follows it have four major sections each, and each section is defined by a kind of soil. The final type of soil, called "the good soil," receives a little more attention than do the other kinds. We might represent the passage like this.

Setting: Jesus delivers parables from a boat (4:1-2)
Parable (4:3-9)
- Listen! A farmer scatters (4:3)
- Soil #1: the path (4:4)
- Soil #2: rocky ground (4:5-6)
- Soil #3: among thorns (4:7)
- Soil #4: good soil (4:8)
- Pay attention! (4:9)

Interchange about the parables (4:10-12)
Interpretation (4:13-20)
"Don't you understand this parable?" (4:13) The farmer scatters *the word* (4:14)
- Soil #1: the path (4:15)
- Soil #2: rocky ground (4:16-17)
- Soil #3: among thorns (4:17-18)
- Soil #4: good soil (4:19-20)

The structure of Mark 4:1-20 is simple enough, as the interpretation mirrors the parable, but the larger context raises one problem. Jesus begins the parable by addressing a big crowd (4:1-2). Then he speaks to a smaller circle of his own followers (4:10-20). Jesus goes on with even more parables after explaining this parable to his disciples (4:21-32), and it appears that he is again addressing the large crowd. Mark concludes the section by telling us that Jesus "explained

everything to his disciples when he was alone with them" (4:34)—but Mark has never alerted us to these changes in audience!

Sowers

They say familiarity breeds contempt. In my experience that saying applies with double force to Jesus' parables, for we think we know what to expect when that may not be the case at all. When it comes to the Parable of the Soils, we rarely pause to investigate one detail: the sower/farmer casts seed on a path, on shallow soil, and among thorns. What reasonable farmer would cast most of his seed on unpromising soil?

To a modern reader, it seems our farmer is a model of inefficiency. Sure enough, interpreters grasp precisely upon this point.

Some interpreters regard the sower's apparent carelessness as crucial to the parable, its "hook." Agrarian audiences have no patience with farmers who squander scarce resources like seed. Careless farmless don't survive for long. A sower who scatters seed in unpromising soil opens us to wonder. Does God scatter the good news even in the most unpromising places, regardless of the likely outcomes? Perhaps God is more generous than we might imagine, willing to "waste" the divine resources even among the most unlikely of us. That would be good news indeed.

A second class of interpreters would say that we're making mountains out of molehills. The parable isn't *about* farming, they would say. Instead, the parable *uses* farming to help us think *about* responses to the word. We should leave behind the sowing metaphor and begin to think about responses to the word and the amazing growth that occurs among the good soil. That's where the true wonder lies.

A third option presents itself. Modern farmers have soil down to a science. They can send their soil samples to the labs at Penn State, Auburn, or Texas A&M, and they know what kinds of seed will grow in what kinds of soil. But ancient farmers lacked that kind of technology, as farmers in some less technologically advanced societies do today. They might not know whether soil was good or bad until their crops came in.

We can appreciate this parable without specialized information about ancient farming practices. Sometimes cultural information from

the biblical world will greatly enhance our appreciation of the parables. With the Sower and the Soil, however, the audience does not have to wait until the harvest to see how things turn out. Jesus tells us right from the top what to expect: the sower sows on the path, on rocky soil, and among thorny plants. More precisely, Jesus says, the seed "falls" in these places: the visual image is that the sower is just tossing seed around.

How fortunate that some of the seed "fell into good soil and bore fruit" (4:8). As readers we are left to ponder twin mysteries: a Sower who scatters seed that has little chance of bearing good fruit, along with the wonder of a bountiful yield.

Secrets, Mysteries, and the Nature of the Kingdom

What if Mark had shared Jesus' parable alone with no reaction from the disciples and no explanation from Jesus? Chances are, the Parable of the Sower and the Soil would not stand among those we remember particularly well.

We remember this parable especially because of the interchange between Jesus and the disciples. Mark's version of that conversation stands out in particular, but we should consider it alongside those of Matthew and Luke.

Matthew 13:10-17	Mark 4:10-12	Luke 8:9-10
Jesus' disciples came and said to him, "Why do you use parables when you speak to the crowds?" Jesus replied, "Because they haven't received the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but you have. For those who have will receive more and they will have more than enough. But as for those who don't have, even the little they have will be taken away from them. This is why I speak to the crowds in parables: although they see, they don't really	*When they were alone, the people around Jesus, along with the Twelve, asked him about the parables. He said to them, "The secret of God's kingdom has been given to you, but to those who are outside everything comes in parables. This is so that they can look and see but have no insight, and they can hear but not understand. Otherwise, they might turn their lives around and be forgiven.*	*His disciples asked him what this parable meant. He said, "You have been given the mysteries of God's kingdom, but these mysteries come to everyone else in parables so that when they see, they can't see, and when they hear, they can't understand."*

see; and although they hear, they don't really hear or understand. What Isaiah prophesied has become completely true for them: You will hear, to be sure, but never understand; and you will certainly see but never recognize what you are seeing. For this people's senses have become calloused, and they've become hard of hearing, and they've shut their eyes so that they won't see with their eyes or hear with their ears or understand with their minds, and change their hearts and lives that I may heal them. *"Happy are your eyes because they see. Happy are your ears because they hear. I assure you that many prophets and righteous people wanted to see what you see and hear what you hear, but they didn't."*		

A lot is going on here. Most obviously, Matthew presents us with many more words than Mark does, while Luke offers fewer.

But let's start with Mark. The disciples ask Jesus why he speaks in parables, and Jesus replies that he uses parables so that those outside will fail to understand. The parables, then, discriminate between insiders and outsiders. Insiders should understand what Jesus means, but outsiders will find the parables frustrating or confusing.

This passage may pose a problem for many of us. For one thing, we've often heard that Jesus used parables to help people understand his message. We're used to thinking of parables like nifty teaching illustrations that make a point simple—if not simple, then at least easy to understand. We know George Washington was honest because he

confessed to having cut down the cherry tree as a child. Maybe Parson Weems made up the story, but it conveyed a simple point and it was memorable. "I cannot tell a lie," said little George. Surely parables work like that. But, Mark says, parables do not work like that. They raise barriers that prevent outsiders from understanding.

Unlike ancient people, modern readers assume that important truths should be shared. Meditation lowers blood pressure, raises happiness levels, and extends life expectancies: we should start a marketing campaign and promote mindfulness in the workplace! Not everyone holds this value, whether around the world or throughout history. Some cultures regard wisdom as appropriate only for the worthy, and so it is with much of the biblical tradition. In Proverbs, Lady Wisdom warns potential instructors not to waste their efforts on unworthy students who will only hurt their teachers; instead teachers should devote themselves to the wise, who will take advantage of their instruction (9:7-9). Jesus himself warns disciples against tossing holy things to dogs and throwing pearls in front of pigs (Matthew 7:6).

The authors of Matthew and Luke apparently had reservations. Most agree that the authors of Matthew and Luke based their Gospels on Mark's. Matthew and Luke include most of Mark's stories, tell the stories with largely the same words, and share the stories in basically the same order. In other words, Mark's account provides the common structure upon which the stories of Matthew and Luke build—Matthew more so than Luke.

However, Matthew and Luke will change Mark's version for various reasons, some stylistic and some thematic or even theological. In this case, Luke basically follows Mark's wording but shortens Mark. This is a trend: If we follow Mark story by story, it seems Matthew and Luke find Mark too wordy: they tend to shorten Mark's accounts. Luke shortens Mark's version but keeps Mark's basic logic: the parables allow outsiders to hear Jesus' words without understanding their full meaning. Luke makes one omission, however, that may be more significant than it looks. Mark is drawing from Isaiah: "Otherwise, they might turn their lives around and be forgiven" (see Isaiah 6:9-10). Luke omits this line, perhaps leaving open the possibility that even outsiders might find forgiveness. Indeed, the larger story of Luke's Gospel seems a little more open to that possibility than Mark does.

But Matthew seems a lot more concerned about Mark's account. Matthew's main change involves substituting one three-letter Greek word for another. In English, where Mark says Jesus uses parables "so that" outsiders will not comprehend, Matthew says "that is why" Jesus resorts to parables. Matthew shifts the responsibility for the misunderstanding from Jesus to the outsiders. Then Matthew does what Matthew typically does. Where Mark may mention or even quote from the Hebrew Scriptures, Matthew provides a full citation: Isaiah predicted this is what would happen. About a dozen such citations occur in Matthew. In their own ways, Matthew and Luke both show some discomfort with the explanation Jesus provides for the parables in Mark.

But a funny thing happens. Although they are now insiders who have received the secret of God's kingdom, the disciples still don't understand this parable. They need Jesus to explain it to them. They're not such great insiders after all.

All four Gospels characterize the disciples as a mixed success. They leave everything to follow Jesus. Sometimes they follow his instructions. Sometimes their fear overwhelms them. Sometimes they act impulsively. Often they will fail to understand Jesus. For his part, Jesus will never fail the disciples whether they succeed or fail. In Mark the disciples will go out on mission; they will even perform healings and exorcisms. But Mark goes especially tough on the disciples. In the end the disciples all abandon Jesus, running away frightened—and Mark describes no moment at which the risen Jesus appears to them. Mark simply concludes with the promise that Jesus will appear to them and they will bear the gospel (13:9-13; 14:28; 16:7). All of that lies beyond the boundaries of Mark's story. At the end of the Gospel they have failed, and only the promise abides.

Explaining a Parable

It's terrible when we have to explain our jokes. I know the pain more than most. My humor is always half a step off, so I often have to retrace my steps. Pride wounded, I console myself with the thought that my friends just sometimes can't keep up with my fast-paced wit. Yeah, that's it.

Unfortunately, I have children who interpret things differently.

Jesus seems to find it frustrating that he must explain the Parable of the Soils to his disciples: "Don't you understand the parable?" Mark's Gospel sometimes explains Jesus' emotions to us. He can be angry (1:41; 10:14), appalled (6:6), compassionate (6:34; 8:2), frustrated (7:24), impatient (8:12), loving (10:21), and distressed (14:33). In this way Mark stands out among biblical storytellers, who rarely give away the emotions of the characters in their stories—yet Mark does so less than many modern writers would. In Mark 4:13 we are reading between the lines when we attribute frustration to Jesus. He has just congratulated the disciples for receiving the secret, yet he must explain his parable to them.

Jesus does not need to explain all his parables. He shares several more in Mark 4. Several seem to underscore the message of the Sower and the Soil. Jesus shares a parable about seed that grows "all by itself" (4:26-29), echoing the abundant growth produced by the good soil. The Parable of the Mustard Seed raises questions that vex professional interpreters, but the motif of spectacular growth carries through there as well (4:30-32). Wonder at the process of natural growth and abundance is a prominent theme in Mark 4.

The Mustard Seed: Simple or Complicated?

Through the centuries, interpreters have generally received the Parable of the Mustard Seed (4:30-32) as a straightforward illustration of the Kingdom's bountiful growth. Jesus compares the kingdom of God to a mustard seed, "the smallest of all the seeds on the earth," that grows into an impressive plant, even providing shelter for birds. Mustard may not be the world's smallest seed, but it is small enough, and it does grow into an impressive plant. Naturally, ancient Christians applied Jesus' image to the growth of the church.

Some recent interpreters perceive more subversive elements in Jesus' parable. Mustard can be regarded as a weed, after all, and no farmer wants birds coming to nest in their fields. Jesus *could* have compared the kingdom of God to a giant cedar tree, which evokes wonder in everyone who sees it—but instead he chose a troublesome plant that produces a pungent condiment. Perhaps, these interpreters argue, Jesus is suggesting that the kingdom of God has a way of insinuating itself in inconvenient ways.

Learn how to read and understand the parables of Jesus.

The parables of Jesus—such as the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, and the Laborers in the Vineyard—make up the most distinctive element of his teaching and are essential to our common memory of Jesus. However, almost all of them open themselves to multiple interpretations, which has left interpreters scratching their heads and arguing with one another for centuries.

In this book, Greg Carey explores six of Jesus' stories to understand how to read them, interpret them, and understand what they mean for our own lives today.

"For those who've never read the parables, Carey is an excellent guide on how to read a parable effectively in the first place. For those who have, he turns them around like a diamond in the light, showing us angles heretofore unnoticed or unconsidered. His use of personal stories makes the book especially relatable and grounded in lived reality and allows the reader to make connections that might otherwise remain elusive."
—**Jaime Clark-Soles**, Professor of New Testament, Perkins School of Theology

"If you are engaging Jesus' parables, you will want to consult Greg Carey's study guide first. In clear, lucid, and engaging prose, Carey opens up the complexity of these seemingly simple 'Bible stories,' and invites the reader to wrestle with the riddles that Jesus places before believers."
—**Margaret Aymer**, First Presbyterian Shreveport D. Thomason Professor of New Testament, Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary

"Greg Carey has a rare gift as scholar and teacher, that is, his ability to present biblical scholarship in ways that stimulate critical thinking and also inspire. It is clear the author respects the ministry of local pastors and teachers. Readers will find themselves engaged in conversations about the parables of Jesus that are challenging, refreshing, and sometimes humorous."
—**Nathan D. Baxter,** Retired Episcopal Bishop and former Dean of Washington National Cathedral

"As a gifted scholar-teacher with practical wisdom and prophetic insight, Greg Carey retells in plain language the stories Jesus told. Guiding us to walk into historical and cultural contexts in which Jesus told parables and the literary worlds that the Gospel authors created, *Stories Jesus Told* invites us to encounter sacred realities of God with surprises in our ordinary lives."
—**Jin Young Choi**, Associate Professor of New Testament and Early Christian Origins, Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School

---

Greg Carey has taught at Lancaster Seminary since 1999, having previously taught at Rhodes College and Winthrop University. His publications include numerous studies on the Book of Revelation and ancient apocalyptic literature, rhetorical analysis of the New Testament, and investigations of early Christian self-definition. He is the author of five books, including *The Gospel According to Luke: All Flesh Shall See God's Salvation* and *Sinners: Jesus and His Earliest Followers*.

Abingdon Press®
www.abingdonpress.com

Cover design: Rick Schroeppel | 20/20 Book Cover Design

RELIGION / Christian Life / Spiritual Growth US $16.99
ISBN-13: 978-1-5018-8415-3