

## Making Sense of Jesus' Parables

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### I. How to Interpret Jesus' Parables

#### I. Jesus as Storyteller

- Total of 38 parables of Jesus are reported in the Synoptic Gospels: 8 in Mark (2 unique), 23 in Matt (11 unique), 24 in Luke (18 unique) and 3 in the Gospel of Thomas.
- J. Neusner: One thing that distinguishes Jesus from other rabbis is his frequent and masterful use of parables.
- J. Jeremias: Parable is Jesus' favorite form of teaching, concerning his most important message, i.e., the coming of the Kingdom of God that reveals God's powerful salvation and demands human immediate response.

#### Power of Parable

- King David committed adultery with Bathsheba and murder her husband, his loyal general, Uriah the Hittite (2 Sam 11).
- Prophet Nathan was sent to condemn David (2 Sam 12).
- Nathan told David a "parable of the rich man" robbing the lamb of his poor neighbor (2 Sam 12:1-4, 5-13).
- David realized and repented. Then he wrote the famous Ps 51.

#### Psalm 51, by King David

Psalm 51<sup>1</sup> Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions.

<sup>2</sup> Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.

<sup>3</sup> For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.

....

<sup>10</sup> Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.

<sup>11</sup> Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.

<sup>12</sup> Restore to me the joy of your salvation and sustain in me a willing spirit.

....

<sup>15</sup> O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.

<sup>16</sup> For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.

<sup>17</sup> The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

#### II. Definition of Parable

- Aristotle: "The παραβολή (*parabolē*) is the sort of argument Socrates used: e.g., 'Public officials ought not to be elected by lot. That is like using the lot to select athletes, instead of choosing those who are fit for the contest. ...' (*Rhetorica*, 2.20). [illustrative]

- In the NT: the Greek word for parable is *παραβολή* (*parabolē*), meaning to set aside, to compare. It appears 50x in the NT, 48x in the Synoptic Gospels, a distinctive method of Jesus' teaching.
- In the OT: the Hebrew word for parable is *māšāl*, meaning to be like or to parallel.
- It is important to remember that the Hebrew idea of *māšāl*, has a much wide range of literary genre, including a short comparison, simile, metaphor, symbol and a long narrative of parable, fable, and allegory.

### Characteristics of Jesus' Parables

- C.H. Dodd: "At its simplest the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought." (Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable*, 5) [provocative]
- B. Scott, "A parable is a *mashal* that employs a short narrative fiction to reference a transcendent symbol." (*Hear Then the Parable*, 8). [referencing]

### III. How to Interpret Jesus' Parables? 4 time periods & 4 recent approaches

#### Meaning of Jesus' Parables in four time periods

OT	1.JC	2.Gospels	3.Church History	4.Today
-----	(parable)	-----	(narrative)	-----
			(sermon, commentaries)	-----
				-----?

OT *mashalim* are often used as a major source.

- Isa 5.1-7 "Vineyard" (Mt 21:33-39, 40-41); Psalm 23 "The Lord is my Shepherd" (John 10:11); Eze 34.1-16 "Shepherd" (John 10:12-13); 2 Esdras 4.26-32 "Seed Sowed by the Evil" (Mt 13:24-30)

#### 1. Meaning in Jesus' Ministry: Jesus' Messages and Ministry as historical context.

- Preaching the "Kingdom of God" (Mk 1:15)
- Healing the sick (Mk 1-2)
- Debating with Pharisees (Mk 12)
- Convicted by priests, killed by Romans (Mk 14-15).

#### 2. Meaning in Gospel Narrative: Gospel Narrative as literary context.

- Kingdom of Heaven parables in Mark (Mt 13)
- Salvation History parables in Matthew (Mt 21-22)
- Eschatological parables in Matthew (Mt 24-25)
- Joy parables in Luke (Lk 15)

#### 3. Meaning in Church History: Church History as theological context.

##### 3.1 Patristic period (Typology, Christological-centric)

- 1) Alexandrian School

- Clement of Alexandria: “All theologians, barbarians and Greeks, hid the beginnings of things and delivered the truth in enigmas and symbols, allegories and metaphors, and similar figures.” (Froehlich, *Biblical Interpretation*, p.15)
- Philosophical and symbolic, Gnostic; Origen (allegorical, see Froehlich, *Biblical Interpretation*, p.15)
- Philosophical and symbolic, Gnostic; Origen (allegorical), Augustine (spiritual)

## 2) Antiochian School

- Basil of Caesarea, “There are those who do not admit the common sense of the Scriptures, for whom water is not water, but something else, who see in a plant, in a fish, what their fancy wishes, ... For me grass is grass, ... I take it all in the literal sense.” (Froehlich, 120)
- Historia and lexis; rhetorical more than philosophical.
- Chrysostom: “We must press the interpretation of the parables to every detail of expression; else many are the absurdities that will follow.”

## 3.2 Reformed period: Historical and Christological interpretation

- Early Middle Age (four layered):
  - (1) literal or historical,
  - (2) allegorical or mystical,
  - (3) moral or topological,
  - (4) eschatological or anagogical
- Reformers: Luther, Calvin (biblical language, historical context, *scriptura scripturum*)

## 4. Meaning for Today: Recent Approaches that shape modern perspectives.

- 1) German historical approach: single point theory
- 2) American literary approach: multivalent theory
- 3) Gospel narrative approach: redactional (Gospel author) theory
- 4) History of Effects approach: contextual theory, discerning “kernel of meaning” and “directive meaning” of the scripture (including liberation, feminist, postcolonial, etc.)

### 4.1 German historical approach: single point

- Parable as repository of truth and window to divine reality. *Die Sache* and *Das Bild*. Q: What is the one point, one theme, or one situation?
- A. Jülicher: A parable consists of two parts, *die Sache* (the reality being represented) and *das Bild* (the figure representing the reality). The *tertium comparationis* (the third item of comparison) bridges these two and constitutes a parable’s point.
- C. H. Dodd: realized eschatology is the consistent theme.
- J. Jeremias: “already and not yet” eschatology.

### 4.2 American literary approach: multivalent

- Parable as tapestry of beauty and mirror of human existence. Metaphor. Q: What are the polyvalent and multiple interpretations to the modern readers?

- A. Wilder: “A simile sets one thing over against another: the less known is clarified by that which is better known. But in the metaphor, we have an image with a certain shock to the imagination which directly conveys vision of what is signified.” (*Language*, 80).
- J.D. Crossan: paradoxical, polyvalent.
- R. Funk: Simile is only illustrative, but metaphor is creative of meaning. The juxtaposition of two discrete elements produces an impact upon the imagination and induces a vision of reality that cannot be conveyed by discursive speech.

#### **4.3 Gospel narrative approach: redactional**

- Parable as knot of a web. Gospel narrative as the context. Q: What does it mean in the literary and theological contexts of the Gospels?
- J. Drury: The parables is to be interpreted in the context of the Gospels.
- J. Donahue: The parables offer the gospel in miniature and give shape, direction, and meaning to the Gospels.
- P. Ricoeur, “The insertion of the parable into the Gospel-form is both a part of its meaning for us who have received the text from the church, and the beginning of its misunderstanding. This is why we have to interpret the parables both with the help of and against the distortions provided by the ultimate context.” (*Biblical Hermeneutics*, 106).

#### **4.4 History of Effects approach: Contextual**

- Parable as source of a river, not a cistern or reservoir. *Wirkungsgeschichte* (history of effects and influence). Q: What is the new directional meaning does the parable provide for us?
- U. Luz, *Matthew in History: Interpretation, Influence and Effects* (1994)

##### (1) Exegesis and Interpretation

“A biblical text is not a reservoir or a cistern, with a fixed amount of water in it that can be clearly measured. Rather it resembles a source, where new water emerges from the same place.” (*Matthew in History*, p. 19)

“The meaning of a biblical text [is] an interaction of a ‘kernel of meaning,’ which corresponds to the given structures of a text, and a ‘directional meaning,’ which gives a present direction to the readers on their way to new lands.” (*op. cit.*, p. 20)

- ##### (2) Hermeneutics of correspondence and consequence
- oHistorical-critical, that is, to be correspondent to the living Christ and the reality of the church as reflected in the biblical texts, and at the same time, open to diversity of interpretations for new situations with the view to building up the church in love.

#### **Further Reading**

- Kissinger, Warren. *The Parables of Jesus: A History of Interpretation and Bibliography*. Metuchen: Scarecrow, 1979.
- John Donahue. *The Gospel in Parable*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988.
- Richard Longenecker ed. *The Challenge of Jesus’ Parables*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000.
- Richard Lischer. *Reading the Parables*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014.