



The Parables of Jesus in Recent Study

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I. THE TRADITION OF ALLEGORICAL INTERPRETATION

The history of parabolic interpretation can be divided into four relatively distinct periods. During the Period of the Early Church (to 540) a tendency toward allegorical interpretation was firmly established. Despite certain protests the three-fold method of allegorical interpretation championed by Origen dominated the exegesis not only of the parables but of the whole of Scripture. Even as the human was thought to consist of a body, a soul, and a spirit (cf. 1 Thess 5:23), so Scripture was seen as containing a body (the literal meaning of the text), a soul (the moral meaning), and a spirit (the spiritual meaning). In searching for the spiritual meaning of the parables, the allegorical method of interpretation was used, and the interpretation of a parable such as the good Samaritan became for Origen an allegory of the history of the world:

the man going down to Jericho	= Adam
Jerusalem from which he was going	= paradise
Jericho	= the world
robbers	= hostile influences and enemies such as the
wounds	= disobedience or sins
priest	= law
Levite	= prophets
good Samaritan	= Christ
inn	= church
return of the good Samaritan	= second coming of Christ ¹

During the Middle Ages (540-1500) the main concern lay not so much in biblical exegesis as in the construction of systematic theologies. In general the scholastics build upon the work of the early church exegetes. Thus the threefold method of interpretation was not only accepted but “improved,” and Scripture was seen as having not three but four meanings or senses: the literal, the moral,

¹For other examples of how the parables were interpreted during this period see Robert H. Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981) 42-47.

the spiritual, and the heavenly. As a result the parables continued to be interpreted allegorically.²

The Reformation brought with it new insights into the interpretation of Scripture. Both Luther and Calvin renounced the allegorical method of interpretation, calling the allegorizers “clerical jugglers performing monkey tricks (*Affenspiel*)!” For the reformers Scripture had only one meaning and was to be interpreted literally, i.e. grammatically, not allegorically. In practice, however, Luther still applied the allegorical method of interpretation to the parables, and the parable of the good Samaritan was interpreted by him as follows:

the man going down to Jericho	= Adam and all humankind
robbers	= devils who robbed and wounded us
priest	= fathers (Noah, Abraham) before Moses
Levite	= priesthood of the Old Testament
good Samaritan	= Lord Jesus Christ
oil	= grace
and so on ³	

Even Calvin (although to a lesser extent) interpreted certain parables allegorically, and he tended to be quite careful in this regard. In the Reformation and Post-Reformation period (1500-1888) the allegorical method of interpretation was dealt a severe blow, at least with regard to the expository sections of Scripture. Yet with regard to the parables the allegorical method continued to dominate, and unfortunately the many excellent insights of Calvin on the interpretation of parables were forgotten. Even in the nineteenth century R. C. Trench in his famous *Notes on the Parables of Our Lord* (1835) allegorized the parable of the good Samaritan in the following way:

the man going down to Jericho	= human nature or Adam
Jerusalem from which he was going	= heavenly city
Jericho	= profane city, a city under a curse
robbers	= devil and his angels
stripping him	= stripping him of his original robe of
priest and Levite	= inability of the Law to save
good Samaritan	= Christ
binding of wounds	= sacraments, which heal the wounds of the
and so on ⁴	

II. THE MODERN BREAK WITH ALLEGORY

The modern period of parable interpretation can rightly be said to have been inaugurated by Adolf Jülicher’s two-volume work on the parables, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* (1888). With this

work the Babylonian captivity of the parables to the allegorical method of interpretation came to an end. Jülicher demonstrated once and for all that parables are not allegories, for whereas the latter consists of a

²For additional examples see *ibid.*, 47-48.

³*Ibid.*, 49.

⁴*Ibid.*, 51-52.

string of metaphors, each having its own point of reference, a parable is essentially a single metaphor with one basic point of reference. Since the parables of Jesus are parables rather than allegories, they have only a single point of reference. The details of the parables therefore should not be pressed for meaning because they are not separate metaphors but simply local coloring and background for the picture. By pointing out the difference between a parable and an allegory Jülicher performed an invaluable service, and since his work the allegorical interpretation of the parables has not found a great following among New Testament scholars.

Jülicher was not without his own weaknesses. Because of his dependence upon Aristotle and Greek theories of rhetoric rather than upon the Old Testament definition of a parable (*mashal*), Jülicher concluded that there was *never* any allegorical significance in Jesus' parables. It is clear, however, that in a parable such as the wicked husbandmen (Mark 12: 1-12) some of the details do have allegorical significance, but in all such instances Jülicher attributed these details to the reworking of the parables by the early church. Such an overreaction against finding allegory in the parables of Jesus is quite understandable in light of earlier excesses, but it is nevertheless an error. The very fact that the early church could add allegorical details to the parables should have revealed that Jesus could have done the same! And through subsequent investigation, it became clear that various rabbinic parables contained allegory. Although some scholars continue to deny the presence of any allegorical details in the parables of Jesus, there is a growing consensus today that Jesus did at times include such details in his parables. As a result, although Jülicher's basic distinction between the parables of Jesus and allegory still holds, one must allow room for the occasional use of allegory by Jesus in the details of the parables.⁵

A second weakness of Jülicher is that he always found in the one main point of Jesus' parables a general moral truth. Jülicher was a liberal, and he wrote during the heyday of nineteenth-century German liberalism. It is not surprising therefore that the main point of Jesus' parables for Jülicher was always a general tenet of nineteenth-century liberalism. Today, however, it is clear that far from being a liberal "apostle of progress," Jesus came proclaiming the coming of the Kingdom of God. Contrary to the liberal denial of the eschatological dimension in Jesus' parables, it is now clear that the parables are thoroughly eschatological and proclaim the inbreaking of the reign of God into history. Despite these weaknesses, however, investigators of the parables will be forever indebted to Jülicher for having once and for all broken the chains by which the allegorical method of interpretation had imprisoned the parables of Jesus.

The second major contribution to the interpretation of the parables can be credited to C. H. Dodd's book, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (1936). Although other scholars had argued in a similar way, it was Dodd, more than anyone else, who pointed out that the parables should be interpreted in light of their original context or *Sitz im Leben* (situation-in-life) of Jesus. Through the centuries Christians

have been so concerned about the theological significance of the parables that they have lost sight of the meaning Jesus intended. To understand the parables, Dodd argued, one must seek to understand the situation in which Jesus uttered them. As a result of this insight, instead of being altruistic similes teaching general moral truths, the parables now could be seen as "weapons of warfare" in which Jesus sought to defend himself and attack his audiences' prejudices.

An example of this can be seen in its application to the parable of the good Samaritan. If we were to ask the average Protestant church member to associate words with the terms "Samaritan," "priest," and "Levite" what would he say? Probably for the first term he would give such words as "loving," "kind," "compassionate," "Jesus," "Christian," etc. And with the latter two terms the words might well be negative. How can such a person really understand the meaning of Jesus' parables when in his *Sitz im Leben* the terms elicited the opposite reactions! Far from being delighted over a "beautiful and touchingly sweet example of human compassion" many in Jesus' audience would have been shocked and enraged that God's servants (the priests and Levites) were defamed and debased whereas the "damned" Samaritan (this would have been meant quite literally) was exalted.

It is evident that Dodd's interpretation of the parables brings life into them once again and helps us to understand what Jesus really meant. In his interpretation of the parables, however, Dodd consistently overemphasized their realized eschatological dimension at the expense of their futuristic dimension. According to Dodd Jesus taught that the Kingdom of God was completely realized in his ministry, so that there was essentially no unfulfilled future dimension. Consequently such parables as the fig tree (Mark 13:28-30), the wise and foolish servants (Matt 24:45-51), the wise and foolish maidens (Matt 25:1-13), etc., which refer to a future eschatological consummation of the Kingdom of God, were interpreted as originally referring to the realization of the kingdom in Jesus' ministry. Joachim Jeremias' *Die Gleichnisse Jesu* (1947) is therefore a more valuable source for seeking to understand the meaning of the parables in the *Sitz im Leben* of Jesus.

The third contribution to the study of the parables came as a result of the work of redaction critics. With the publication of Hans Conzelmann's *Die Mitte der Zeit* (1954) and Willi Marxsen's *Der Evangelist Markus* (1959) interest in the study of the Gospels shifted to what Marxsen called the third *Sitz im Leben*. Previously gospel research had concentrated on the first *Sitz im Leben* (the situation of Jesus) or the second *Sitz im Leben* (the period between Jesus and the written Gospels), but redaction criticism demonstrated that far from being mere editors and collectors of the traditions the evangelists were theologians who arranged, shaped, and interpreted the traditions in the light of their own theological emphases. As a result it became apparent that the parables could be studied in order to ascertain the particular understanding of the individual evangelists and what this might reveal about the situation in which they wrote.⁶

⁶Two important works dedicated to the redactional investigation of the parables are Jack Dean Kingsbury, *The Parables of Jesus in Matthew 13* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1969) and Charles E. Carlston, *The Parables of the Triple Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).

The redactional investigation of the parables has proved most helpful in calling our attention to the canonical meaning of the gospel parables. It is now clear that each of the evangelists in composing their gospels sought to teach something by his inclusion of these parables and that the meaning of the parables as they now stand is dependent upon what the evangelists in their *Sitz im Leben* meant to teach by them. It is therefore crucial that we seek to understand what they mean by them.

The attempt to understand what Jesus meant by the parables, as advocated by Dodd and Jeremias, is both legitimate and valuable, but the attempt to reconstruct the original form of the parables and their *Sitz im Leben* is always hypothetical and problematical. At times we must confess that we cannot reconstruct the particular form which the historical Jesus gave to a particular parable. Yet we do have the canonical form of the parable! Here no reconstruction is necessary, for we possess the parables as the evangelists wrote them and in the context in which they placed them. Consequently we can investigate the parables directly as they are in order to ascertain the meaning which the evangelists gave them. Furthermore, if we maintain that the evangelists were “inspired by God” in writing their Gospels, we can by redactional investigation learn the inspired and authoritative meaning of the parables as they presently stand in the canonical text. In light of the hypothetical nature involved in the “archaeological” reconstruction of the original form of Jesus’ parables this is both comforting and reassuring. The present-day investigator of the parables still possesses a divine “Thus saith the Lord” in the meaning of the parables as they now stand.

III. ALLEGORY REVIVED?

In the last two decades two different disciplines have given impetus to parable research. Both of these have shifted the focus away from the “intentional” study of the parables to its literary-aesthetic interpretation. One of these disciplines is structuralism. Structuralistic analysis has, of course, not been limited to the parables but has been applied to all kinds of texts. This new discipline comes in several shapes and forms, but in general structuralism rejects all knowledge of and interest in the historical situation which produced the text, the transmission of the text, and the history of its interpretation. This “diachronic” dimension is rejected in favor of the parable’s “synchronic” dimension, i.e, the present form of the text. Every present form of a parable is like looking at a chessboard in the middle of a game. What has preceded and who moved the pieces is irrelevant for understanding the present state of the board. In a similar way what has preceded the present state of a parable is irrelevant for understanding its present form, and the purpose of studying the present form is to uncover the timeless underlying substructural (and usually existential) primordial concepts characteristic of all humanity found in the parable.

Structuralism has been useful in focusing the exegete’s attention on the text rather than upon various hypothetical reconstructions of the original form of the text. This is helpful, for all too often such reconstructions have been extremely hypothetical (Paul is dependent on the mystery religions or on apocalyptic

Judaism or on gnosticism or on a pre-Christian hymn, etc.) and have lost sight of the present

meaning of the text. Yet structuralism has tended to reduce the meaning of all literature to universal anthropological truths, and it is interesting to note that these are usually the particular anthropological truths of the structuralist interpreting the text. The parables, however, teach “revelatory” truths. The teachings of Jesus and the apostles, the Christian church has always maintained, transcend the substructural limitations of other writings because these men were led by the Holy Spirit. What the church seeks in the parables is not some word from the labyrinthian depths of man’s inner psyche but rather a word from outside, a Word from the very heart of God, himself. The parables of Jesus are not simply parables. They are parables of *Jesus*. The church can never and will never simply lump the gospel parables together with all other parables and seek in all equally their substructural anthropological meaning. The parables of Jesus are precious to the church because they are Jesus’ parables and because they have been recorded (and interpreted) by his apostles. In the secular study of the parables one may reject the historical background and origin of these parables but the church cannot. Consequently, while some of the individual techniques of structuralism may be useful for the study of the parables, as a system of interpretation the church will always find it wanting.

More influential at present than structuralism is the discipline called “aesthetic criticism.” Here the parables are seen as self-standing creations of art possessing a beauty and power in and of themselves, independent of their author and having a life of their own. The parables are not to be viewed as artifacts of the past, out of which we must dig what the original author (or authors) meant. As metaphors, parables have a life of their own. Therefore we are not to investigate the parables in order to ascertain what Jesus or the evangelists meant by them, but allow the parables to make their own impact upon us apart from any authorial intention. In this regard it is also incorrect to speak of “the” meaning of a parable, since a parable is capable of effecting numerous and equally valid meaning experiences or “language events.” Each individual must hear the parable in his or her own way. In this approach we have also been introduced to a whole new vocabulary. The independent, self-standing nature of the parables is described by such terms as “autonomous” and “autotelic” and the quality of multiple meaningfulness of the parables for its various readers is described as “polyvalence” or “plurisignificance.”⁷

It was Amos N. Wilder’s *Early Christian Rhetoric* (1964) which most effectively introduced this new approach to parable research in America. In contrast to treating the form (the parable) as simply a vehicle for the content of its author (the message) as is done in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, Wilder argued that there was an inseparable relationship between the form and content of a parable. The traditional view saw the parable as simply a “tool” for persuasively communicating a particular message. This message could furthermore be separated and stand independently of its parabolic form. Such a view is condemned by the aesthetic

⁷There exists a whole vocabulary of other items such as comic and tragic parable, metaparable, mimetic and ludic allegory, trope, etc., which the tyro of aesthetic criticism must also be initiated into.

approach, for this older view ignores the aesthetic nature of the parables. Parables do not seek to add information to the memory bank of the hearer or reader. They are rather autonomous, self-standing, aesthetic works which make their impact directly upon the reader.

Intimately associated with this aesthetic view is the existential theology of the new hermeneutic and the idea of the “regenerating” capacity of the metaphor. In contrast to a simile,

which is primarily illustrative in nature, a metaphor (and parables are metaphors) is seen as “creative.” Parables are not merely signs or examples illustrating meaning but are bearers of the very reality contained in them. Scholars refer to the “creative power” of metaphor in the parables of Jesus and how they “grasp” the reader. It is not therefore the reader who interprets the parables but rather the parables which interpret them! Because of being metaphors they compel us to respond, so that the result of reading a parable is a language-event in which the parable itself, and not the message contained in the parable, enacts an event.

It is evident that the interpreter of the parables who has followed Jülicher, Dodd/Jeremias, and the redaction critics has entered into another world when he reads these literary critics. One feels as if he is being initiated out of the scientific world of historical-critical studies into a new gnostic mystery religion! Having experienced the death of Origen and allegorizing at the hands of Jülicher, having caught a glimpse of Jesus teaching along the Galilean shore under Dodd/Jeremias, and seeing the evangelists interpreting the parabolic traditions for their churches through the redaction critics, one now feels that Origen is once again alive in existential garb and that Jesus and the evangelists are being covered with the smoke of aesthetic incense. At times one cannot be certain whether the aesthetic critics are to be interpreted literally in what they say or whether they are defining the metaphorical function of metaphor metaphorically. To speak of metaphor “interpreting” us does not make a great deal of sense, interpreted literally. Interpretation is an activity of persons. People interpret. Parables cannot. Throughout history Christians have believed that the “truth” of the parables could change lives, but the power to change lives was not seen as lying in some mystic power residing in the metaphorical form but in the Reality of which the parables speak, i.e. the God of the parables. It may be a literary necessity for some literary critics to speak this way, for in their secular situation to speak about what the God of the New Testament says may not be permissible, but the fact remains that metaphors do not possess any “regenerating” power. One is born again by the Spirit of God, not by a literary form!

Even the literary power of the metaphor seems to have been overly romanticized by the literary critics. The sharp distinction between metaphor and simile, parable and allegory is exaggerated. To say that simile and allegory merely illustrate and provide information but that metaphor and parable contain the ability to mediate a “language-event” and compel a decision from their hearers sounds interesting, but this is at best an overstatement. Many a person in the history of the church has experienced a life-changing conversion under the allegorical preaching of the parables and surely such a conversion qualifies as a “language-event.” This does not demonstrate the correctness of such preaching, of course, but it does demonstrate that the sharp distinction between

parable and allegory, metaphor and simile is overdrawn. In this regard it should also be noted that many of the parables are introduced analogously by a “the kingdom of God/heaven is like...” Funk describes the function of metaphor as seeking “to rupture the grip of tradition on man’s apprehension of the world,”⁸ but metaphor can also be used to defend the status quo. It certainly would be wrong to think that propaganda cannot use metaphor. Metaphor can seek to rupture the grip of tradition or to strengthen it. It simply depends upon who is wielding this “tool.”

It must be acknowledged that the metaphor/parable form is an extremely useful one for

several reasons. For one, it is useful in illustrating certain truths. One does not need to deny that parables can aid in effecting change in order to acknowledge that the parable of the prodigal son illustrates the great love and compassion of God for sinners. To see it as only revealing this would be wrong, but it would be even more wrong to deny that it does reveal this! A second feature of the parabolic form is that it involves the hearer in its interpretation. To understand a parable one must think, and, since most people are naturally curious and seek to make sense out of their experiences, the hearing of a parable brings about an intellectual process by which the hearer seeks to understand the parable. Such an experience will also help the hearer retain the parable and its interpretation in the memory far better than a self-explanatory story. A third feature of this literary form is that it enables the reader to assimilate the material's content better. It does this by disarming him. A good example of this is found in 2 Samuel 12:1-4. How was the prophet Nathan to confront David with his sin? Was he to seek an appointment in order "to talk about his adultery with Bathsheba and his murder of Uriah"? By his use of the parable Nathan disarmed David and when the parable was interpreted (note that not all parables are self-evident!), it was too late for David to harden his heart in self-defense, for the parable had struck home. It should be observed in this regard, however, that it was not the parable that brought about David's "language-event" but the truth of which the parable spoke, for David states, "I have sinned against the Lord" (1 Sam 12:13), i.e., I acknowledge the reality [adultery and murder] about which the parable speaks. He does not respond, "I have experienced a parable." The parable is an effective tool for disarming its hearer, but it is the message/truth found in the parable that brings the divine experience, not the parabolic form itself. The form is valuable because it is able to elude the defense of the hardened heart and enables the message to fall upon the naked conscience. It is the divine message illuminated by God's Spirit, however, that brings renewal and conversion.

In the discussion of these two new directions in parabolic interpretation, how one evaluates the structuralistic or aesthetic approach will be determined ultimately on the basis of where one finds the meaning of a text. Does the meaning of the gospel parables lie in their authors' (Jesus and the evangelists) meaning, the text itself, or in the interpreter? To claim that it lies in the text itself simply will not do, for to attribute meaning to a sequence of verbal symbols is to attribute a conscious function of the mind to ink, paper, pencil, etc. If meaning is

⁸Robert W. Funk, *Language, Hermeneutic, and the Word of God* (New York: Harper, 1966) 158.

a property of the mind, however, then in whose mind should we find this meaning? If it is the mind of each interpreter, then we shall wallow in a sea of subjectivity, where each interpreter gives to the text his own meaning. Yet the very expression "the parables of Jesus" shows where the church should seek for its meaning. The meaning is to be found in the intention of Jesus and his apostolic interpreters, as this is revealed through the written text. Being confident that Jesus and the evangelists were capable of expressing their intentions in the words of the parables, the exegete should seek to have the "mind of Christ" in interpreting them. In so doing he will discover the meaning of the parables.

In the attempt to find significance in the parables, i.e., meaning-for-me-today, we should avoid confusing this significance with the parable's meaning. In reading this article the reader has sought to understand what the author meant by the various words he used. In a similar way over

the centuries the parables have been investigated by the church in order to understand what Jesus and the evangelists meant by them. To ignore totally who said or wrote them and to treat them as isolated parables divorced from their Lord and his apostles will always be impossible for the church. The church can no more treat the gospel parables as isolated aesthetic forms than it can discuss Christian baptism as an isolated artistic act. The church can never escape the fact that the gospel parables are the parables of her Lord. They are not just a number of parables among the world's many parables. They are unique and special. This unique preciousness is not due to Jesus' parables being artistically superior to all other parables, but because they are Jesus' parables, and in them the church hears the voice of her Lord and his apostles. As a result the purely literary approaches will always be found less than satisfactory as methods for interpreting the parables.

IV. CONCLUSION

The last century of parabolic investigation has seen a number of major advances in our understanding of Jesus' parables. With Jülicher we have seen the foolishness of allegorizing the parables even if we must reject his absolute denial of the presence of any allegorical details in the first *Sitz im Leben*. With Dodd/Jeremias we have seen the importance of seeking the meaning Jesus himself gave to the parables in the first *Sitz im Leben*. The redaction critics have also expanded our understanding. Now we are more aware of the fact that the evangelists were also involved in the interpretation of the parables, so that we should seek to understand their unique interpretation as well. With the new literary/aesthetic approach to the parables we have seen the necessity of a personal application of the parabolic teaching. For the present writer, however, the aesthetic approach holds out little real promise. The church simply cannot sell her birthright (the voice of her Lord and his inspired apostles) for the pottage that literary/aesthetic criticism offers. In fact the whole view of aesthetic criticism which sees the parables as autonomous and polyvalent seems to conflict with the Scriptures. When Jesus said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (Mark 4:9), it is difficult to conceive of his having meant "Let anyone find whatever meaning they can from this metaphor" or "Let this literary form interpret you." It seems reasonable to think that what Jesus meant was "Listen to what I am saying to

you through this parable." The view that the parables are a literary form for conveying the message of Jesus, rather than autonomous metaphors having a life of their own is confirmed by Mark 4:33-34: "With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he explained everything" (RSV). In this summary Mark clearly reveals that the parables were a literary form Jesus used to teach his message, i.e., "the word." The expression "with many such parables" is in the instrumental case in Greek. This means that it was by means of parables, i.e., by this "tool," Jesus taught the "word," i.e., his message! It should also be noted that on numerous occasions Jesus explained his parables to the disciples (Mark 4:33-34; 7:14-22). From this it is apparent that Jesus and the gospel writers did not conceive of the parables as Rorschach tests whose meaning depended upon each hearer's reaction, but that they saw them as a means for conveying the divine message. As a result, although we can appreciate the emphasis upon relevance found in the literary approach to the parables, this new approach will always be found inadequate by the church.

Bible study of Jesus' parables. Fundamental Bible teachings from Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. 26 individual, no-nonsense lessons. Free. No ads. No pop-ups. The parables of Jesus embody much of his fundamental teaching. They are quite simple, memorable stories, often with humble imagery, each with a single message. Jesus, for example, likened the Kingdom of God to yeast (an image usually meant as corruption) or a mustard seed. Like his aphorisms, Jesus's parables were often surprising and paradoxical. The parable of the good Samaritan, for example, turned expectations on their head with the despised Samaritan proving to be the wounded man's neighbor. The parables of Jesus are found in the Synoptic Gospels and some of the non-canonical gospels. They form approximately one third of his recorded teachings. Christians place great emphasis on these parables; which they generally regard as the words of Jesus. Jesus's parables are seemingly simple and memorable stories, often with imagery, and all convey messages. Scholars have commented that although these parables seem simple, the messages they convey are deep, and central to the teachings of Jesus