

Preaching Gospel Parables: Some Guidelines.

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ABSTRACT

Jesus taught in many different situations and used various form of teaching, including often parables. This article discusses the nature of parables and the history of their interpretation. This history outlines early allegorical interpretation, the Middle Ages, the time of the reformation, and their treatment in modern Biblical scholarship in the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first century. With modern approaches to the study of the text we find recent existentialist, artistic and literary approaches to the parables. Often the reconstructing of any historical context for the parables is understood as a misguided goal since the parables ought to be understood solely as units of literature. Yet this article still wishes to hold to authorial intent, to place the story in the culture and context of the life of Jesus and to endeavour to look for the point of the parable which Jesus intended it to make. All this leads to guidelines as to how these Gospel parables ought to be approached today.

KEY WORDS

Parables, allegory, the new hermeneutic, Palestinian culture, preaching.

JESUS' PREACHING

Jesus taught in many different situations; in the synagogues, (Mark 1:21); the temple, (Mark 11:15-17; Luke 21:37-38); in cities and villages, (Matthew 9:35); by the sea, (Mark 2:13); in the street, (Luke 13:26); on a mountain, (Matthew 5:1-2); in a home, (Mark 14:3; Luke 22:11; John 13:1-14:31). His teaching was arresting, simple and intelligible, permanently memorable. The common people thronged to hear him, (Mark 12:37).

His teaching reflected arresting forms. He used sharp black and white contrasts, hyperbole, shocking statements to awaken men, e.g., speaks of hating father and mother, (Luke 14:26), which was an overstatement typical of Eastern speech (the parallel in Matthew 10:37 uses "more than me" i.e., loving Jesus less). He speaks of things which would be ridiculous e.g., the speck and the log in

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Matthew 7:3. He did not dilute uncompromising statements e.g., “Sell all” in Luke 18:22 does not mean 50%.

He used proverbs, e.g., Matthew 7:6 “Do not cast pearls before swine”; Mark 3:25 the house divided against itself; Matthew 26:52, “all who take the sword will perish by the sword.” There is poetic parallelism, e.g., Mark 8:35, saving one’s life but losing it; losing life to save it. Luke 6:27f. loving enemies, doing good to those who hate you, blessing those who curse, praying for those who abuse. There are Epigrams, unforgettable sayings which stay in the mind, e.g., Luke 9:62 “No man who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” There is the use of paradoxes where a statement seems incredible until it is thought through e.g., in the Beatitudes, the poor in spirit have the kingdom of heaven, (Matthew 5:3), where the world’s standards are contradicted. Or we find *reductio ad absurdum*, where Satan casts out Satan, (Mark 3:23-26; a *fortiori* argument, using “How much more...” Matthew 7:11. But on many occasions, one finds with Jesus the use of Parables.

THE NATURE OF PARABLES

“Parable” comes from the Greek word *parabolē* which generally is defined as a comparison or an analogy.² It is derived from two Greek words *para*, “beside” and *ballō* “to throw” meaning literally, “to place alongside” suggesting a comparison in some way between the two; between something commonplace, well known and a spiritual reality i.e., to teach a spiritual truth.³ Wenham⁴ points out that the equivalent word in Hebrew is *mâshâl* stating that “the Greek word ‘parable’ (*parabole*), and particularly the Hebrew and Aramaic word (*mashal/mathla*) are very broad terms, which can be used of pictorial sayings and stories of all sorts.” Parables were used in the OT also, e.g., 2 Samuel 12:1-14 (Nathan to David) and by the Jewish rabbis.

Parables occupy up to one-third of Jesus’ recorded teaching. Some claim there are 60 parables but others only 30. The issue concerns how many of Jesus’ figurative sayings are really identified as parables. Jesus used nature and

² The word *parabolē* used in the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, is found 50 times in 48 verses. Twice it appears in Hebrews for the tabernacle as a symbol “for the present age” (9:9) and for Abraham’s belief that God could even raise Isaac from the dead, “from which figuratively speaking he did receive him back,” (11:19).

³ Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Mark*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, (Downers Grove Il.,: InterVarsity Press; London: InterVarsity Press, 2017), quotes the definition of parables published in BDAG, 759, “a narrative or saying of varying length, designed to illustrate a truth especially through comparison or ‘simile.’” It can be translated as “comparison, illustration, parable, proverb, maxim,” 93.

⁴ D. Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 12.

incidents in daily life to illuminate spiritual truth thus going from known to the unknown. Each parable challenges men to think out and then apply its meaning, as Jesus said in Mark 4:9, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” A verdict is demanded.

Many of Jesus’ parables follow the rules of popular story telling; (1) the rule of contrast, e.g., Five wise and five foolish virgins; (2) The rule of three, e.g., three travelers in the Good Samaritan, and the three excuse makers in the parable of the Great Banquet; (3) Rule of end stress e.g., the last servant in The Talents, the son in the Wicked Husbandmen. The Gospel parables are either similitudes or story parables. The similitude bases itself on some familiar truth or process but the story parable describes not what men commonly do but what one man did. We think in pictures and their meaning is easier to understand than abstract truths. They can employ the use of metaphor, a simile, proverb; and may even have some elements of allegory, as we will explain. They will include true to life illustrations which can in fact happen in the culture of the day. So, they can be a means through the power of the Holy Spirit of helping men to discover truth.

Some scholars claim that as the parables were handed down orally, the early church influenced the parables by providing a different context or by supplying some details of interpretation i.e., the early church reaudied and reapplied the parables. But Jesus can use a parabolic story in a different context e.g., the story of lost sheep in Matthew 18:12-14, seeking the recovery of an erring brother. It can be maintained that we have the parables as Jesus told them. This is clear because of their Palestinian background and Aramaic idiom, and because they reflect Jesus’ highly individual way of thinking and speaking. Furthermore, great parables are so hard to create that it is difficult to name another person in history with more than one or two good ones to his credit.

HISTORY OF THE INTERPRETATION OF THE PARABLES

There have been many diverse answers with regard to interpretation depending upon one’s theology. By way of summary, from the end of the Apostolic Age to the end of the Middle Ages, allegory was the usual method of interpretation. Irenaeus (130-200 CE) in his teaching on the Parable of the Hid Treasure saw the field as the Scriptures and the treasure as Christ.⁵ Tertullian (160-220 CE) interpreted the Prodigal son as follows, “The parable of the prodigal shows us the Jew and the Heathen - the heathen becoming a believer, and receiving the ring of salvation, whereas the elder brother symbolises the upright Jew who envies the return of the heathen.” The citizen is the devil and the robe, sonship

⁵ *Adversus Haereses* Book IV. 26. 1.

lost at the fall. The salvation in the ring was through baptism and the feast, the Lord's supper, the fatted calf being Christ!⁶

As an individual person was thought to consist of a body, a soul, and a spirit (cf. 1 Thessalonians 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). Robert Stein⁷ explained concerning Origen (185-253 CE), "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." So, the man going down to Jericho was Adam. Jerusalem from which he was going was paradise, while Jericho was the world. The robbers he saw as hostile influences, wounds pointed to disobedience or sins. The priest was the law and the Levite the prophets. The good Samaritan was Christ and the inn, the church, the return of the good Samaritan pointed to the second coming of Christ. During the Middle Ages (540-1500 CE) the main concern focused not so much on Biblical exegesis as in the construction of systematic theologies. In general, the scholastics were building upon or following the work of the early church exegetes. Stein states, "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, the spiritual, and the heavenly. As a result, the parables continued to be interpreted allegorically."

Augustine (354-430), as Origen, said he enjoyed the ingenuity which this sort of exegesis involved and commented that it gripped the hearers' attention. Every detail of the story was given special meanings by the readers; indeed, these special meanings kept accumulating over time. Stein⁸ gives a list of Augustine's allegorizations:

The man going down to Jericho is Adam.

Jerusalem, from which he was going, was the City of Heavenly Peace.

Jericho is the moon which signifies our mortality (this is a play on the Hebrew terms for Jericho and moon which both look and sound alike).

The Robbers are the Devil and his angels.

⁶ *De pudicitia*, Ch. 9.

⁷ Robert H. Stein, "The Parables of Jesus in Recent Study," 248-57, *Word & World*, 5/3 (1985), 248.

⁸ Stein's *The Method and Message of Jesus' Teachings*. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster, John Knox Press, 1981), 46.

Stripping him is taking away his immortality and beating him is persuading him to sin.

Leaving him half dead because of sin, means he was dead spiritually, but half alive, because of the knowledge of God.

The Priest represents the priesthood of the Old Testament, (the Law), the Levite is the ministry of the Old Testament, (Prophets).

The Good Samaritan is the Christ and the binding of wounds, the restraint of sin.

Oil is the comfort of good hope and the wine the exhortation to spirited work.

The Animal represents the body of Christ and the Inn is the church.

The Two denarii are the two commandments to love and the Innkeeper is the Apostle Paul.

The Return of the Good Samaritan is the Resurrection of Christ.

Allegorizing was popular among the exegetes of Alexandria, while those in Antioch were concerned with the intention of the Biblical writer and rejected allegorization. However, the Alexandrian method was more popular. Generally, this kind of interpretation actually made no attempt to see parables in the purpose of Jesus or the life setting of his ministry.

The Protestant Reformation made Scripture the supreme authority and interpretation was liberated from church tradition. There was a new stress being laid on the plain and obvious meaning of Scripture. There should be no interest in subtle meanings which would not be in Jesus' mind. Martin Luther called the allegorizers "clerical jugglers performing monkey tricks." But the fact is that he himself sometimes allegorized. Stein⁹ points out that Luther "tended to allegorize the parables and find in them examples of the doctrine of justification by faith," propagating that which had been revealed to him. Calvin¹⁰ also, (1509-64) would emphasise the need to have a deeper reverence for Scripture than to allow ourselves the liberty to alter its natural meaning. "Some commentators, I am aware, carry their ingenious inquiries into every minute phrase; but as there is reason to fear that subtleties, which rest on no solid grounds, may lead us into idle fooleries, I choose to philosophize more sparingly, and to rest satisfied with the plain and natural meaning." The author must speak for himself and we must

⁹ Stein, *The Method and Message of Jesus' Teachings*, 48-49.

¹⁰ See John Calvin, "Commentary on Matthew 13:42." in "Calvin's Commentary on the Bible." <https://www.studydrive.net/commentaries/cal/matthew-13.html>. 1840-57. Accessed October 2022.

seek to find the plain and obvious meaning. He set out in his own expositions in one short sentence what he considered to be the central point. He did not look to interpret every detail, endeavouring to interpret the Bible grammatically and historically to focus upon the plain or literal sense.

With the rise of modern Biblical scholarship in the nineteenth century, many scholars studied the Biblical books in light of the latest knowledge. We should however mention Archbishop Trench's *Notes on the Parables* (1841) which was a mine of information, but was still influenced by the Fathers as he spiritualized many details. It was Adolf Jülicher¹¹ (1857-1938), Professor of Church History and New Testament Exegesis, at the University of Marburg, who sounded the death knell to allegorizing. He changed the understanding of the parables of Jesus for many scholars, emphasizing that there was usually one central, single point of comparison between the story and what it represented; the rest being only necessary for the sake of the story. The parables functioned more like extended similes (the Kingdom of God is *like*) rather than an allegory and that each parable was concerned to make a point about morals that should be universally practiced. As Wenham¹² explained, Jülicher saw the allegorical details like those found in the parable of the Wheat and the Tares, which was explained to Jesus disciples (Matthew 13:37-43), as deriving "not from Jesus, but from the later Christian church." He reduced parables to prudential platitudes, e.g., he said that the Talents means that a reward is only earned by performance! Wenham¹³ however, maintained, "the view that Jesus never used allegory is seen to be arbitrary and improbable. Jesus was a Jew steeped in the Old Testament, and both in the Old Testament and later Jewish writings allegory is an important rhetorical/literary form."

In the twentieth century it was C.H. Dodd¹⁴ with his *Parables of the Kingdom* (first published in 1935) which made exegetical history, supported by Jeremias' work also on the Parables (1947).¹⁵ Dodd's achievement was to put parables back into their true setting – the ministry of Jesus which was concerned to stress in-breaking of the kingdom of God. So, the Gospel parables must be related to the kingdom and understood in the light of its coming in Jesus Christ. As

¹¹ Adolf Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* (2 vols; Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1888, 1899).

¹² Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus*, 228.

¹³ Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus*, 228. He mentions C. A. Bugge, *Die Haupt-Parabeln Jesu*. (Giessen: J. Rickerische Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1903) and Paul Fiebig, *Alt-jüdische Gleichnisse und die Gleichnisse Jesu*. (Tübingen, Leipzig: Mohr, 1904) who also highlighted this fact.

¹⁴ C.H. Dodd, *Parables of the Kingdom*. (London: Nesbet, 1935, rev. 1961). In Dodd's view, Jesus explicit teachings of the kingdom all supported realized eschatology.

¹⁵ J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*. Tr. S. H. Hooke. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955).

Wenham¹⁶ stated, “The kingdom of God was the central theme of Jesus’ preaching and indeed of his whole ministry and the parables should all be seen and understood in that context.”

Dodd advocacy of realized eschatology was applied fully in his interpretation of the parables. Those that were generally accepted as eschatological parables like the Fig Tree (Mark 13:28-30); the Wise and Faithful Servant (Matthew 24:45-51); the Wise and Foolish Virgins (Matthew 25:1-13); and the Watchful Servants (Luke 12:35-38), were denied their futuristic import. He repeatedly argued that Jesus was not expecting a future apocalyptic kingdom, and re-affirmed his belief that the apocalyptic interpretation of these parables is a secondary addition developed by the early church. Many scholars came to reject this view, which saw parables which seem to be “apocalyptic” as later additions and not from the historical Jesus. Stein¹⁷ clarifies the point:

It is evident today that Dodd’s interpretation of the eschatological teachings of Jesus is only partially correct. Jesus did not teach either a purely “realized” eschatology or a purely “consistent” eschatology. Rather, he taught both! For Jesus, the kingdom of God had both come in the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises and was at the same time a future reality that awaited consummation.

Jeremias’ contribution was also an important and influential work since it took the historical setting of Jesus’ parables seriously, seeking to establish each parable in the world of first-century Judaism. This is something that still remains the first step in accurately reading a parable. Jeremias employed form criticism, seeking the “original” parable by stripping away introductions, conclusions and interpretation. He attempted to detect the “transformation” of the parables from their original form to the form found in the gospels. So, the early church had adapted the parables, placing them in a new context to better fit the Gospel author’s theological tendency.

The interpretation of parables was affected by the theological perspectives which developed in twentieth century thinking generally in the movements from form criticism to redaction, narrative and literary criticism. Form criticism, as we have just noted, examined the forms or units of text found in the Gospels, e.g., pronouncement stories, miracle stories, parables, proverbs, wisdom sayings, etc. The writers were “scissors and paste men,” who put the Gospels together. This approach was often linked with historical scepticism

¹⁶ Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus*. 20.

¹⁷ Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus*. 60. Dodd came eventually to concede that the parables reflect “an eschatology that is in the process of realization”.

which accepted that the origin of the Gospels is to be found in the faith of the early church. Redaction criticism saw the individual authors more as theologians in their own right each selecting (for some scholars, creating) material and writing for the needs of the Church to convey a particular message. Also, narrative criticism gave full weight to the Bible focusing on literary techniques, plot, structure, ordering of events, dramatic tension and the intended impact upon the reader. Again, there has often been discussion as to what type of literature the Gospels represented, biography, poetry or even parable. In addition, often reader response theories shifted the approach to Scripture from “what happened back then” to “what is happening now to me as I read the text.” When the focus on the reader is pushed to the limit it results in deconstructionism. The text then really loses all objective meaning, becoming whatever the reader understands it to mean.

It is here in these modern approaches to the study of the text that we find recent existentialist, artistic and literary approaches to the parables, involving scholars, for example as Ernst Fuchs, Eta Linnemann and Eberhard Jüngel.¹⁸ The parables are actually “language events” (*sprachereignisse*). Language is not merely a tool that describes, it actually enacts and imparts, bringing into being something that was not been there before the words were spoken. Jesus’ parables have the potential and power to bring about the desired change in the hearer’s existence and his relationship to reality. There is an “interlocking” where in the parable the verdict of the narrator on the situation in question “interlocks” with that of the listener.¹⁹ Eberhard Jüngel followed the tradition of new hermeneutics like Fuchs and Linnemann when he discussed the parables of Jesus in his book *Paulus und Jesus*. Jesus, though he never defined the kingdom of God, brought it to speech and that most clearly in the parables. His main contribution to the interpretation of Jesus’ parables is his insistence that the kingdom of God is their central message and that parables are language events.

Just to be clear, this New Hermeneutic was based on the presupposition of the timelessness of the text and claims that this timelessness necessarily means that it holds new meaning for each new reader. In this way it is similar to “reader-response criticism” which focuses on how a person will experience the text in

¹⁸ Ernst Fuchs, “The New Testament and the Hermeneutical Problem,” in *The New Hermeneutic*, Vol. II of *New Frontiers in Theology*, James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, Jr., eds. (New York; Harper & Row, 1964); *Studies of the Historical Jesus* (Naperville: Allenson, 1964); Eberhard Jüngel, *Paulus und Jesus* (Tübingen: J.C.B.Mohr, 1962).

¹⁹ This was the particular contribution of Eta Linnemann, *Parables of Jesus* (London: SPCK, 1966), 27.

question.²⁰ This timelessness also means that the text transcends original historical context, authorial intent, or other dimensions across which a text is evaluated. It is incomplete until a listener hears the text and discovers the meaning in some way. The act of listening to a parable, therefore, creates meaning out of the text. Since meaning is grounded in the act of listening, each listener may discover a unique meaning as they encounter the text.

Taking this approach means that the possibility of reconstructing any historical context for the parables is a misguided goal since the parables ought to be understood solely as units of literature. There is clearly a marked trend away from authorial intent as a valid goal of interpretation. Simply put, the original author and historical context no longer have a bearing on the interpretation of the parable. But, at least today's readers and interpreters are being pushed to consider the parables of Jesus not as mere artifacts of the first century but as also contemporary events with power to force them to a decision about the kingdom of God and a new experience which can transform them.

Other artistic, and literary approaches can be noted with Jones,²¹ Via²² and also Crossan.²³ Hultgren²⁴ asks us to remember that that the term "literary" should be understood to include a number of methodologies that go by other names as well: rhetorical criticism, structural analysis, reader response criticism and more. First, Jones focused on the artistic and literary form of the parables and their existential significance as appealing universally to the human condition. Via's quest, like that of Jones, is to recover the humanity of the parables, to demonstrate their universal appeal to the human condition and make them

²⁰ There are significantly different approaches in the whole discussion of reader-response criticism, yet all are unified in their belief that the meaning of a text is derived from the reader through the reading process, i.e., it is the recipient, not the author who creates the meaning of any text or narrative. Some scholars mention the following books as useful for understanding this approach: Edgar V. McKnight, *Postmodern Use of the Bible: The Emergence of Reader-Oriented Criticism*. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988); Robert M. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand: Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark*. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991);

²¹ Geraint V. Jones, *The Art and Truth of the Parables*. (London: S.P.C.K., 1964).

²² Dan Otto Via, Jr. *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967).

²³ John Dominic Crossan, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1973); *The Power of Parable: How Fiction by Jesus Became Fiction about Jesus*. (New York: HarperOne, 2012).

²⁴ Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus, A Commentary*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing House, Cambridge, UK, 2000), 16. He mentions also that the methods in reference to parable study are surveyed by William A. Beardslee, "Recent Literary Criticism," in *The New Testament and its Modern Interpreters*. ed. Eldon J. Epp and George W. MacRae (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 177–83.

communicate to the present or modern man.²⁵ He maintains that the parables partake of the criteria of an adequate metaphysical system and have a high potential for becoming language events able to place the hearer or reader in a position of faith or evoke the willingness to take a risk.²⁶ For Crossan, famous in the theological world for his work on the historical Jesus, his treatment of the parables has led to some provocative interpretations. In “*The Power of Parable*” he begins by noteworthy statements of his understanding of what he considers to be Jesus’ most distinctive teaching vehicle, i.e., the parable. He suggests that the Gospel authors did something very similar to that of Jesus: Jesus made up stories about ordinary people and situations to convey his counter-cultural vision of the kingdom of God. The Gospel authors made up stories about Jesus to convey their compelling visions of who Jesus was and why he was significant. Jesus’ stories involved “*fictional* events about *fictional* characters”; the Gospels include “*fictional* events about *factual* characters.”²⁷ Not many scholars are prepared to concede that in the Gospels in the teaching of Jesus in the parables, as Crossan proposes, one can only find fictional stories from the historical Jesus, a peasant, who is no more than equivalent to a Cynic teacher and not the Son of God.

Robert Plummer²⁸ gives us insight into the prevailing situation regarding interpretation of parables among modern scholars.

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, there has been somewhat of a regress towards early allegorical tendencies. On one front, some reader-response and “aesthetic” critics insist on reading the parables apart from the original historical context. The parables are taken as having a dynamic meaning-producing polyvalent life of their own. While this description may sound somewhat appealing in the abstract, in real life it means parables can mean whatever the reader wants them to mean. Clearly, however, Jesus used parables to convey specific, definable truths.

Therefore, in sum, we can note that some reader response approaches tend to emphasize or overemphasize the literary, existential, artistic qualities of the parable and the power of language. Some of them also argue in favour of polyvalence – that Jesus intended to convey several different messages to his hearers in his parables. But often the end result is actually to reduce the parables

²⁵ Via, Jr. *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension*, 21-24,32-56.

²⁶ Via, Jr. *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension*, 68.

²⁷ Crossan, *The Power of Parable: How Fiction by Jesus Became Fiction about Jesus*, 5.

²⁸ Robert L. Plummer, “Parables in the Gospels: History of Interpretation and Hermeneutical Guidelines,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 13.3 (2009), 6.

of Jesus to banal explanations.²⁹ A number of most recent works have gone back to reassess the scholarly positions on the allegorical nature of the parables of Jesus and the need to take seriously historical and scriptural contexts. They are also directing attention back to the context of Jesus' ministry and to parallels that exist in the Jewish parables. Such reassessments are important and timely.

In the existentialist, artistic and literary approaches scholars who advocate such lay emphasis on what the parables mean to the present reader rather than on what they meant for Jesus, his audience and the Gospel authors themselves. For them, the original author and historical context no longer have a bearing on the interpretation of the parable. Philip Long³⁰ affirms that one ought rather to hold to "authorial intent" when we approach the parables. We must endeavour "to place the story in the context of the Life of Jesus. The point of the parable is exactly the point which Jesus intended." This is where we ought to start. The parables of Jesus certainly have aesthetic, poetic and artistic beauty, but that should not rob them of their historicity. Indeed, these qualities can only be better appreciated when the parables are interpreted in their historical, biblical contexts and the context of Jesus' ministry. G.B. Caird's³¹ definition and distinction between parables is helpful. Parables either are in the form of (1) Simple simile, "the kingdom of heaven is like..." (Matthew 13:33); (2) Simple metaphor, "do not throw your pearls before swine," (Matthew 7:6); (3) Simile story, "the kingdom of heaven is like a master who went out early...to hire laborers..." (Matthew 20:1-16); (4) Metaphorical story, e.g., the prodigal son, (Luke 15:11-32); Example story, e.g., the Good Samaritan, the Rich Fool, Dives and Lazarus, the Pharisee and the Publican, (Luke 10:25-37; 12:17-21; 16:19-31; 18:9-14).

²⁹ E.g., Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989). The second part of Scott's work, which deals with the actual interpretation of the parables, brings out more clearly his tendency to reduce the parables to rather simplistic statements, which are often reminiscent of Jülicher's reduction of the parables to pious moralisms. Charles Hedrick, *Parables as Poetic Fictions* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), explicitly states that Jesus' parables were banal but the evangelists have inserted theological and kingdom significance into the parables to make them relevant. They were not metaphors/symbols, but radical poetic fictions. The specific situation in life where they were told is irretrievably lost. The original stories were meant to be open to a wide range of possible meanings, 3-8, 27, 35.

³⁰ Philip Long, "The Parables of Jesus: Literary Approaches," in <https://readingacts.com/2010/10/14/the-parables-of-jesus-literary-approaches>. Accessed October 2022.

³¹ G.B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*. (London: Duckworth, 1980), 162-63. Some scholars will question the inclusion of Dives and Lazarus among the parables as a actual person is named.

Another scholar we should take note of is Kenneth Bailey.³² He was formerly Theologian in Residence in the Episcopal Church in Jerusalem and the Middle East (Cyprus) and Research Professor of Middle Eastern NT Studies (Jerusalem). Therefore, he has had personal experience of living within Middle Eastern peasant culture for over twenty years. This extensive experience of Middle Eastern life means he was admirably equipped to examine the culture and traditions that lie behind the Synoptic Gospels. Bailey maintains that cultural assumptions and values which informed the first century CE Palestinian context of the parables can still be found today in peasant communities in Egypt, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq. Bailey contends that informal oral controlled tradition is an oral methodology employed historically by Middle Eastern societies to preserve and transmit accurately the essential, fundamental components of their oral traditions. This methodology was to be expected of the followers of Jesus throughout his public ministry in order to preserve accurately and transmit faithfully among other teachings, the parables of their Master and Lord. There are various scholars which have been unconvinced regarding his comparisons between the culture of first century peasant communities and such societies in the present day. For example, Snodgrass³³ comments, “Unfortunately one cannot always assume that the attitudes and practices of modern, peasant life in either Lebanon or Palestine are the same as they were in Jesus’ day, or that such modern contexts should be taken as keys to the interpretation of Jesus’ parables.” But why should we deny the evidence of this comparison when it still exists? Certainly, the Palestinian and Middle Eastern context remains the closest and best illustration of the cultural situation where the parables of Jesus were told.

Note Bailey’s example of what was told of John Hogg, a Scottish missionary who was the founder of many of the Protestant churches in the south of Egypt in the nineteenth century. A biography of John Hogg was published by his daughter in 1914, primarily from his letters and papers, but also using oral sources. Each village had and has its own stories of what he said and did. The more dramatic of these stories have moved from village to village among evangelicals, but each account is primarily preserved in the village of origin. In the late fifties Bailey encountered this same tradition. He could comment “Rena Hogg dipped into that tradition in 1910. I dipped into the same tradition in 1955-65 and found the same stories told in almost the same way. The tradition will last in those villages

³² Kenneth E. Bailey, “Informal Controlled Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels,” in *Themelios* 20.2, 1995, 4-11. This article was originally published in the *Asia Journal of Theology* 5 (1991), 34-54.

³³ Snodgrass, “From Allegorizing to Allegorizing: A History of the Interpretation of the Parables of Jesus,” in *The Challenge of Jesus’ Parables*, 17.

as long as the community he founded survives or until they acquire electricity and television.”³⁴ So, whether it was the twentieth century or the first century oral tradition, the comparison ought to be considered valid.

The good thing about this is that it takes seriously the relevance of the word of God to all generations of people. The word of God is the word of God no matter when it was spoken and it has the power to address people of different ages anew in their different situations. It has the power to change people lives today just as when it was first spoken. It possesses a beauty that abides for all time. But the main weakness evident in modern, particularly literary approaches is that they ignore the significance of this historical context in which the parables were spoken. They either take that context for granted or they completely undermine its importance. However, knowledge of the historical contexts in which the parables were told and written and of how they were understood by the first century speaker, writer and audience, is essential. Understanding that will enable the reader and student to appreciate their own perception of the parables in the situation today. The historicity and the contemporaneity of the parables need to be held together. Recently Lee-Barnewell³⁵ in her work *Surprised by the Parables: Growing in Grace through the Stories of Jesus*, seeks to distract the didactic elements from the parables she has chosen hopeful to bring about their “transformative impact.” She stresses that a study of the parables is a “most powerful means of spiritual formation, since they were intended not just to teach a lesson but also to confront and challenge the audience.” Schnabel³⁶ goes back to Jülicher’s approach to one point per parable. “This theory has been critiqued and abandoned by many if not most scholars today, both in the light of modern literary study of metaphors and in the light of more than three hundred rabbinic parables which usually contain allegorical elements and application of more than one ‘point’ that the parable teaches.” He points to the work of Weder³⁷ and also Blomberg³⁸ who suggests that these allegorical elements could be related to the

³⁴ Bailey, “Informal Controlled Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels,” 9.

³⁵ Michelle Lee-Barnewell, (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020), 1-2, 6. Her book is a study of ten parables said to have an overall emphasis on the grace of God. This exploration serves not only as a means to extract the didactic element of a parable but, more importantly, as a tool to assist readers in discovering an appropriate response to the parable, which she understands as grace-oriented transformation. We must remember of course that not every parable has grace as a central theme.

³⁶ Schnabel, *Mark*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, 99.

³⁷ Hans Weder, *Die Gleichnisse Jesu als Metaphern*, 3rd edition, FRLANT 120 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht), 1984), 11-98.

³⁸ Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 13-167. In the second edition (Apollos, IVP Academic, 2012) of this work, Blomberg covers interpretative methods and controversies, including Structuralism, Postmodernism, Marxism,

main characters of a parable; they are also found in the rabbinic parables. For Bloomberg one discovers in parables generally two or three main characters i.e., the wise and the foolish, with God as the third evaluating or judging their actions. By way of comment, if one interprets any of the parables with a specific rule, such as finding only three key points from each character, it will certainly control excesses of the allegorical method. But is this being over restrictive? Could we still miss out on what the true meaning of the parable may have been? Each parable must be considered in light of what Jesus meant by it, in the context in which he was speaking and also by considering that Jesus' central message was the Kingdom of God. There may be several ways to interpret a parable and Blomberg's method for some scholars will appear too rigid. Should we not rather approach the parables with an open mind that will objectively take all the facts, culturally or otherwise and not come at a passage with preconceived formulas for how to interpret any section of scripture?

Therefore, as Schnabel³⁹ affirms:

the specific elements of Jesus' parables, including the allegorical elements, must be related to the context of Jesus' ministry and of the message of the kingdom of God, not to the context of the later church or the church today. We can apply Jesus' parables to the church today only *after* we have interpreted them in the context of Jesus' ministry.

To emphasise, parables should be interpreted from the perspective of first-century Jews and disciples hearing the parable - from the context of the culture of the day. As Culpepper,⁴⁰ many scholars are prepared to follow the traditional interpretation of the parables and find each "as an allegory." Earlier Hultgren⁴¹ in response to Jülicher pointed out that:

Terms like "father" and "servant" have metaphorical meanings in the parables of Jesus that are to be noticed by the interpreter, and as soon as this is done, a given parable may well be seen to have other allegorical elements within it. The figure of a king in a parable of Jesus can surely be a pictorial representation for

Feminism, and more. He expounds the meaning and significance of individual three, two, and one-point parables and evaluates them - including those that appeared in the twenty years since his first edition was published. As far as the views of Dodd and Jeremias, Blomberg argues for a limited allegorical approach to the parables. He provides brief interpretations of all the major parables.

³⁹ Schnabel, *Mark*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, 100.

⁴⁰ R.A. Culpepper, *Matthew: A Commentary*. The New Testament Library, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2021), 253.

⁴¹ Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus*, 13. He mentions also Louis I. Robinowitz, "Parable: In the Talmud and Midrash," *EncJud*, 13:74.

God, as in various OT texts (Exod. 15:18; 1 Chron. 16:31; Ps. 93:1; Isa. 24:23) and in many rabbinic parables.

Therefore, parable interpretation should not be limited to only one theme or three themes or even multiple themes. Each parable should be looked at separately in light of their message in the context of Jesus' ministry and the kingdom of God.

PREACHING THE PARABLES: SOME GUIDELINES

Keep in mind from the beginning, as we have noted, there are two great moments dealt with in parables, the fulfillment of the kingdom within history and its consummation at the end of history. Also, look for the meaning of the parable in the "life setting" of the ministry of Jesus. Take for example, how Mark has set out his "Gospel," – not creating stories or sayings of Jesus but drawing upon authentic oral tradition, including what have been called "Peter's memoirs" to set out his own story of the significance of his Master's coming.⁴² First, in his preface he introduces a number of themes which are later spelled out in the rest of the gospel. Scholars⁴³ see it as "theologically loaded," introducing the authority and credentials of Jesus. The preface has the important themes of the forerunner of the Messiah, Jesus' baptism and the gift of the Spirit, the fact that he was the servant Messiah and Son of God and his preliminary victory over the adversary of God and man. Mark's readers are made aware of the significance of Jesus' coming and that God's Kingdom is at hand. The evangelist starts his story of Jesus proper with a report about discipleship. The good news is accompanied by a call to follow. In Mark 1:21-45 we are confronted with Jesus' Authority over demons and disease. the transition and introduction to the conflict stories follow in 2:1-3:12. Mark has included here 5 conflict stories (2:1-3:6) between Jesus and the Jewish authorities. Opposition to Jesus is not from ordinary people but the Jewish leaders. We have recorded two conflict stories regarding Sabbath breaking, one regarding the forgiveness of sins, one eating with sinners and one concerning fasting. Mark 3:6 shows the shadow of the cross already falls across this segment of the gospel. This series of conflict stories presented by Mark emphasize the growth of opposition and here we find typical grounds on which eventually religious leaders and secular authorities combine to destroy Jesus.

⁴² Peter is often associated with Mark in the writing of his Gospel. Eusebius, in his history of the early church completed about 323 CE, *Ecclesiastical History* III. 39. 15-16, refers to the views of Papias on the origin of Mark. "Mark indeed having been the interpreter of Peter wrote accurately but not in order all that he recalled of what was either said or done by the Lord." Some scholars have highlighted internal evidence in the Gospel itself for linking Mark with Peter and this evidence should not be played down.

⁴³ H. Anderson, *The Gospel of Mark*, New Century Bible (London, Oliphants, 1976), 63.

Anderson⁴⁴ comments, “Jewish hostility has reached its zenith. The breach with Judaism that will eventually accomplish Jesus’ death is now irreparable.” This is supported by 3:22-28 where we have the “official” accusation coming from the “scribes who came down from Jerusalem” that he had “an unclean spirit” and was “possessed by Beelzebul.”

Now we can understand why the parables are in chapter 4. Here Mark gives us three parables suitable to the context of the story of Jesus that he is unfolding which is one of rejection at this point. Matthew’s Gospel reveals the same narration of the story of Jesus. The parables in chapter 13 follow the account of Jesus’ rejection in the privileged cities in 11:20-24 and the same conflict stories involving grain on the Sabbath and the healing of the man with the withered hand, leading to the conspiracy to put Jesus to death, (12:1-14), Jesus’ withdrawal, the Isaiah 42 prophecy bringing hope to the Gentiles, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit in the rejection of Jesus’ ministry, the Tree known by its fruit, the sign of Jonah, the repentance of the men of Nineveh and the Queen of Sheba, travelling such a distance to know the truth, while the men of “this generation” did not repent or respond to the far greater revelation which was occurring in their very midst, (12:15-42). Therefore, in both Gospels we can see that by Jesus’ rejection there has been a hardening so that only those who by grace have been “given” ears to hear (Matthew 13:10-17; Mark 4:11-12) understand and respond to him. Writing in the context of Mark 4 Cole⁴⁵ considers that Jesus taught parables as a system of instruction specially designed to sift the wheat from the chaff among his hearers. Other teachers might rejoice when great crowds followed them but not so the Lord. He knew the mixed motives of the human heart. His parables were designed to test not the intelligence but the spiritual responsiveness of his hearers. The basic message of the parables here is that for anyone to see or listen, God’s reign is already discernible in the everyday world men inhabit. His Kingdom is already present in veiled form and will one day reach glorious manifestation and consummation.

Regarding Mark 4:11-12, there have been different interpretations of this statement. Everything hinges on the words “so that ...” We can doubt that the whole statement is from later church theology to explain why the Jews as a whole rejected the Gospel. Also, the suggestion that *Hina* is a mistranslation of the Aramaic *de* which can be both a relative pronoun (“who”) or a conjunction

⁴⁴ H. Anderson, *The Gospel of Mark*, 112.

⁴⁵ R. A. Cole, *The Gospel according to Mark: An Introduction and Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; Cambridge UK Reprinted December 1987 edition (1 Jan. 1990), 88.

("that"). Mark should have written "who" not "that." We can rather note the suggestion that in Hebraic idiom, result can often be expressed ironically as purpose. This is based on Isaiah 6:9f. where the form of a command ironically describes what in fact was the result of Isaiah's ministry. The nation's rejection of Isaiah's preaching of repentance led to a hardening, a judgment. Here in Mark 4 there is a further fulfilment in light of the rejection of Jesus' authority and message of the coming of the kingdom. But is his mercy - while all men deserve judgment – God has in his grace "given" ears for the disciples to "hear," (4:11, 20, 23-24). Hendriksen⁴⁶ affirms:

If God even surrenders to the lusts of their hearts the unenlightened heathen when they hold back the truth in unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18,26), will he not punish more severely the impenitents before whom the Light of the world is constantly confirming the truthfulness of his message?

Hendriksen⁴⁷ explains further that "it was *because* by their own choice these impenitent Pharisees and their followers had refused to see and hear, that, as a punishment for this refusal they are now addressed in parables." They must "endure the blame of their own blindness and hardness (quoting Calvin). God had given these people a wonderful opportunity. It is his sovereign will to remove what man is unwilling to improve, to darken the heart that refuses to hearken. He hardens those who have hardened themselves." Therefore, from what we have set out we learn that the context in which these parables in Mark 4 and Matthew 13 – and of course later parables - were told by Jesus was so important. We should never ignore the context or the life setting in the ministry of Jesus.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Mark*, New Testament Commentary, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), 154.

⁴⁷ Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Mark*, 154. See also Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus*, 244, who sees this as the pattern of Jesus' whole ministry. By God's grace to sinners who only deserve the judgment of God the disciples' understanding of the mystery of the kingdom of heaven, "is not their own achievement but the gift of God. The outsiders' failure to understand is a sign of God's judgment on people's hardness of heart, as it was in the prophetic ministry of people such as Isaiah. Jesus parabolic ministry therefore comes as God's gift to some and as his judgment to others."

⁴⁸ Charles L. Quarles, *Matthew: Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament*, (Nashville. Tennessee: B&H Publishing Group, 2017), 147, sets out "Homiletical Suggestions" for Matthew 13:10-17 setting out God's grace and our responsibility. They could equally be applied to same teaching in Mark 4. 1. God's grace enables hearers to understand the message of the kingdom (13:11,16). 2. Sinner's hardness prevents them from understanding the message of the kingdom (13:13-15). 3. Those who hear the message and reject it often lose their opportunity 13:12; cf. 13:19). 4. Witnessing the ministry of Jesus and hearing the teaching of Jesus is a privilege

Again, we should not miss the fact that there are also often clues as to what the parable is about – at the beginning, (Luke 18:1; 18:9), or at the end, (Matthew 22:14; 25:13), or in both, (Luke 12:15,21), occasionally in the middle, (Mark 12:1-12), where we have “a beloved son.”

We should ask ourselves what we consider is the main point that the parable is trying to teach. We have noted the danger of treating the parables as allegories in which every detail has a spiritual meaning. But we also must not miss elements that we are meant to discern and teach. It must be recognised that there are some “extended” parables in which there can be additional truth to be found, e.g., Mark 4, the Parable of the Sower, 4:3-9; 14-20; the Parable of the Weeds, Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43. In his exposition of the parables of Mark 4 Anderson⁴⁹ maintains that the view of one point per parable has now been held to be excessively rigid. “One should concede that for Jesus’ first listeners around the several items in a story would cluster constellations of images giving rise to various trains of thought in accordance with the customs and traditions of their time and place.” So, while as a general rule a parable may be concerned with one main point, individual features can also have symbolical meaning in the light of OT or Jewish teaching, e.g., a vineyard stands for Israel, a harvest refers to the day of the Lord, and the birds of the air represent Gentiles. We noted above that in Mark 12 it is difficult to avoid the inference that Jesus is the Son in the Parable of the Tenants (cf. Matthew 21:37). Other points in providing guidelines here are:

We should accept that we ought not to make doctrinal statements on the basis of the parables for that is not their purpose. In doing so some, on the basis of the five wise and five foolish virgins, have argued that half the world will be lost and half saved, and others that people can be saved and afterwards lost. Therefore, the purpose of a parable is to amplify a doctrine rather than set it out. But we should not seek to *formulate* a doctrine from a parable. It will rather emphasise a truth taught elsewhere. It should be clear that a parable cannot teach what is contrary to a truth expressed in a didactic passage. As we highlighted, one can find much implicit Christology in a parable. The truths they teach find their perfect illustration in the person, work, teaching and example of Jesus. But these insights will be stated clearly in other parts of scripture. In the parables of the kingdom Jesus is hidden behind the kingdom as its secret content.

coveted by prophets and saints (13:17). These suggestions will be helpful in preaching this passage in context.

⁴⁹ Anderson, *The Gospel of Mark*, 127.

We should beware of reading later theology into the parables. The context shows that the parable of the Good Samaritan was told to explain the meaning of the word “neighbour” and not to teach the plan of salvation – as some of the early Fathers claimed. But we have already acknowledged that the Gospels show that one parable can have several meanings, again, according to context. We pointed out that the lost sheep in Matthew 18:12-17 stresses the need for pastoral care in the recovery of a brother who has wronged another, while in Luke 15:3-7 it explains why Jesus mixed with sinners and answers the criticisms of the Scribes and Pharisees for doing so. Jesus by his ministry is challenging them to ask whether they are not also lost. So, Jesus could use certain elements of a parable to suit the occasion.

Interpret every parable in the culture of the times and not in our culture, e.g., Matthew 25:1-13, the parable of the Ten Virgins and, Luke 15:11-32, the Prodigal Son.⁵⁰

Finally, we must think about how we can apply the parable now – since it was meant to get a response, a reaction. But as Wenham⁵¹ insists, “Base reflection about the contemporary message of the parable on the historical meaning of the parable.”

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⁵⁰ See for example the following insights of Kenneth Bailey, *Poet & Peasant; and, through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1983); *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels*. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2008); *Jacob & the Prodigal: How Jesus Retold Israel's Story*. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2005); *The Cross & the Prodigal: Luke 15 Through the Eyes of Middle Eastern Peasants*. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2005). In spite of the criticisms of various scholars, (e.g., Snodgrass earlier and Hedrick, *Parables as Poetic Fiction*, 45-46), the use of many contemporary cultural observations appear valid.

⁵¹ Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus*, 238.

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