

THE PARABLES OF JESUS

Introduction

One of the most memorable things about the teaching of Jesus was his use of parables. Indeed, Matthew says, “He [Jesus] did not say anything to them without using a parable” (Mt. 13:34b//Mk. 4:33-34). Obviously, this reflection is a bit of hyperbole, but it is quite remarkable, especially since the Gospel of John has no parables. The Synoptic Gospels, on the other hand, are replete with them.



A farmer went out to sow his seed...

So, what are parables? Parables, first of all, are stories, but stories of a special kind. Parables draw comparisons between some feature of ordinary life which illustrates a spiritual truth. As such, they are extended metaphors or similes. Parables are generally fictional, but they reflect upon God’s expectations, explaining how God’s people ought to think about things. They are drawn from real life, such as, farming, fishing, and village life. They often seem extemporaneous, but there is good reason to think Jesus may have used them on more than one occasion (all good teachers draw from their reservoir of illustrations and explanations to different audiences). Luke, for instance, in speaking of the Parable of the Sower, says, “While...people were coming to Jesus from town after town, he told this parable” (Lk. 8:4b).

What is distinctive about the parables of Jesus is that they stimulate the listener to think about things from a new perspective. Often enough, they are subversive to conventional ways of thinking. They implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) strike for a verdict: “What do you think?” Jesus sometimes ended his parables with the directive, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (Mt. 13:9//Mk. 4:9//Lk. 8:8b). Still, they are more indirect than direct. Jesus’ own disciples sometimes had difficulty understanding them so that they came to Jesus privately, asking, “Explain to us the parable...” (Mt. 13:36//Mk. 4:10//Lk. 8:9).

Old Testament Background

The Hebrew prophets used language that is described by the Hebrew word *mashal* (משל), which can be translated as “allegory” or “parable” or “proverb.” In their sermons, they confronted their listeners with comparisons and figurative sayings that threw new light on contemporary situations, often in the midst of crisis. As such, the psalmist describes these as “dark sayings” by which God would reveal the significance of Israel’s role in the larger context of God’s purposes (Ps. 78:2b). Indeed, Jesus himself would quote this very passage in explaining his own use of

parables (Mt. 13:35). One of the most powerful parables in the Old Testament, and the one that is probably the closest in form to the parables of Jesus, is the one told by Nathan the prophet to David after David's adultery with Bathsheba. He told the story of a rich man who took advantage of a poor man by slaughtering his one small ewe lamb to prepare a meal for a traveler. David was furious at this offense, but Nathan then said to him, "You are the man!" (2 Sa. 12:1-7).

Jesus' Parables and Their Interpretation in the Church

Jesus was a master in the use of parables, which is not only why they were so memorable, but why the early church collected so many of them, first in oral tradition and then in the four canonical gospels. It is telling that no other New Testament writer uses this form to imitate Jesus. As the early Christians moved from the apostolic period to the later centuries, a common way of reading the parables was allegorical, which is to say, finding as many symbolic points as possible, often extending these various interpretations well beyond what was apparent. Today, scholars treat often each parable as having one primary meaning, a sort of

existential universal principle. This is not to say that all allegory must be eliminated (as though Jesus was incapable of allegory) or that there are no universal principles in the stories (as though Jesus was trapped in his own world). Rather, it means one must take a more historically sensitive approach. Much more attention should be given to the Near Eastern features of Jesus' parables in order to read them in their original context.

St. Augustine's Allegorical Approach to the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:25-37)

- *The man going from Jerusalem to Jericho was Adam, who left Eden, the city of heavenly peace.*
- *The bandits who attacked him were the devil and his angels, leading him to sin.*
- *The priest and the Levite represented the law and the prophets.*
- *The Samaritan was Christ.*
- *The oil and wine were Christ's comfort and exhortation.*
- *The beast upon which the man rode was the body of Christ.*
- *The inn was the church.*
- *The innkeeper was St. Paul.*

Quaestiones Evangeliorum ii.19

Jesus' Own Explanation for His Use of Parables

One of the common phrases Jesus used as a preface to his parables was, "The kingdom of God is like..." Clearly, Jesus used parables to illustrate and clarify the nature of the kingdom of God. In turn, however, this begs the question about how Jesus' original listeners understood the kingdom of God and how Jesus' parables called for a reevaluation of their conventional points of view. After the Jewish exile and return, the Jews never satisfactorily achieved a kingdom comparable to what had existed before the exile. To be sure, the Maccabees attempted to recover what had been lost, but this was largely unsuccessful and hindered by Maccabean infighting, so much so, that Rome eventually took over in 63 BC. Nonetheless, all Jews anticipated the day when God would be King. The perceptions of this future were not monolithic, and there were different visions as to how it might happen, but many, at least, envisioned some sort of military uprising against Roman autonomy. In all versions, the kingdom of God would be very Jewish and very observable. Hence, when Jesus used parables to announce, "The kingdom of God is like...", he was offering a vision of the kingdom of God that was quite distinct from what was popularly

conceived. In this way, his parables suggested a new and different way to understand the kingdom of God, and especially, a kingdom that was not so outwardly observable.

Thy Kingdom Come

1st Century AD responses to the messianic vision of the kingdom of God:

- *The Herodians and Sadducees* deemed collaboration with the Roman occupation a temporary, but necessary, expedient.
- *The Pharisees* urged intensifying devotion to the Torah as the way to usher in God's kingdom.
- *The Essenes and the Qumran Community* withdrew into the desert to await an apocalyptic divine intervention.
- *Zealots* urged that only immediate armed resistance to Rome was acceptable.
- *All sects* still embraced the memories of the Maccabean success.

One thing seems clear: the parables of Jesus would mean something different for insiders as opposed to outsiders. For insiders (those who believed in him), he said, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but not to them" (Mt. 13:11//Mk. 4:11//Lk. 8:10a). For outsiders (those who were skeptical), Jesus said, "...for those outside everything is in parables; they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand; lest they should turn again and be forgiven" (Mt. 13:13-15//Mk. 4:11//Lk. 8:10b). In this explanation, Jesus appealed directly to Isaiah 6:9-10. Hence, Jesus' parables were used both to reveal as well as to conceal, which in turn is why the stories are indirect rather than direct. They call for reflection and interpretation. Jesus confronted his audience with radical demands, and many were not willing to comply. The issue, then, was not merely intellectual but also volitional.

Categorizing the Parables

A number of attempts have been made to categorize the parables according to their content. Following is one approach that may be helpful:¹

- Nature Parables: Here, the parables illustrate the coming of God's kingdom using agricultural imagery. (Examples include: the Sower, the Mustard Seed, the Yeast)
- Discovery Parables: Here, the parables show that the value of God's kingdom is so great that those who discover it will abandon everything to gain it. (Examples include: the Hidden Treasure, the Pearl, the Dragnet)
- Contrast Parables: Here, the parables compare negative attitudes with positive ones, all illustrating God's surprising mercy for the outcasts. (Examples include: the Prodigal Son, the Talents, Lazarus and Dives, the Two Debtors, the Wheat and Tares, the Ten Virgins)
- A Fortiori Parables: Here, the parables compare the lesser with the greater. Often, the phrase "how much more" is employed. (Examples include: the Friend at Midnight, the Unjust Judge, the Shrewd Manager)

¹ C. Blomberg, "Parables," *ISBE* (1986) 3.658.

Middle-Eastern Context

It should go without say (but probably needs to be said anyway) that Jesus' parables were given to a middle-eastern audience, not 21st century Americans or Europeans. This means, at the very least, that the reader should do diligence to allow that ancient context to frame the way he/she interprets the parables. This is not to undermine their relevance—Jesus' words are relevant in any age—but it is to say that one must not relocate the parables into a foreign context. No doubt there are modern implications from Jesus' stories, and all Jesus' teachings have relevance to all humans, no matter when or where they live, but before making a modern

Transliterated Aramaic words of Jesus in Mark:			
	TRANSLATION	TRANSLITERATION	PRONUNCIATION
Mk. 3:17	"Sons of Thunder"	βοανηργές	<i>bene-re'<u>am</u></i>
Mk. 5:41	"Girl, arise!"	ταλιθαῖ κοῦμ	<i>telithah <u>qum</u></i>
Mk. 7:11	"Offering/sacrifice"	κορβάν	<i>qorban</i>
Mk. 7:34	"Be opened!"	ἐφφαθά	<i>effathah</i>
Mk. 14:36	"Father..."	ἄββᾶ	<i>ebbah</i>
Mk. 15:34	"My God, my God, why have you left me?"	ἐλὸὶ ἐλὸὶ λιμὰ σαβαχανι	<i>elahi elahi lemah sevaqtani</i>

application, one should work to read the parables in their original setting. Jesus, himself a Torah-observant Jew, delivered his parables within both a Jewish and a Greco-Roman cultural environment. He taught in the Aramaic language (at least Mark's Gospel at various places has Aramaic as the language of Jesus), though his words necessarily were later translated into Greek by the time the canonical gospels were written.

Further, an important social factor is

that Jesus' parables, for the most part, seem to have been offered to the village people in Galilee, which is to say, the lower classes who felt most keenly Roman oppression and were fighting a losing battle for survival in the midst of oppressors and elites. To a large degree, it was an honor and shame culture. In addition, since Jesus was himself a village craftsman (a carpenter or mason), many in his audience would have perceived him as "one of their own," though it is also clear that he had contacts and familiarity with the social circumstances of elites as well as the behaviors of servants/slaves and overseers. Obviously, all these factors are only partial contextual pictures, and the modern reader must concede that people in the Two-Thirds World today might actually understand Jesus' parables better, given their own cultural-economic limitations, than the intellectuals in the Western World.

The interpretive challenge, then, is to recapture the culture in which the stories were first told. This is the science and art of responsible biblical interpretation. The original audience of Jewish peasants would have found identity in Jesus' stories precisely because they could see their own culture reflected in them. For the modern interpreter, which is to say most Christians from other parts of the world which are not middle-eastern, the tendency is either to universalize the stories (which strips them of their original context) or to see them as stories about foreigners (which alienates them from ourselves). To a large degree, this is what happened within the early Christian centuries when the allegorical approach to the parables was in vogue and continued for many centuries. Modern scholars have largely abandoned allegory, but instead they have tended to read the parables as broad, universal moral principles, again stripped of their original context. For the former, Jesus tends to look like a Greek, not a Jew. For the latter, he tends to look like a German philosopher.