

PARABLES

I. Basic facts about the parables

- a. The Greek word *ἡ παραβολή* (*parabole*) has a broad scope, and can mean: A proverb (Lk 4:23); A riddle (Mk 3:23); A comparison (Mt 13:33); A contrast (Lk 18:1-8); Simple stories (Lk 13:6-9); Complex stories (Mt 22:1-14). Comes from the Greek roots meaning “to throw together.”
- b. *Parabole* is the word used in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the OT used in Jesus’ time, abbreviated LXX) to translate the Hebrew word *masal* (in 28 of 39 occurrences).
- c. *Masal* also has a broad range of meanings; in addition to the above, it can mean a taunt, prophetic oracle or byword—any dark saying intended to stimulate thought.
- d. Approximately 1/3 of Jesus’ teaching is in parables. ~60 parables are preserved in the synoptics.
- e. John identifies no parables per se, and has only a few allegories, such as the vine and the shepherd.
- f. Characteristics [DJG]
 - i. Parables are brief and symmetrical, often using balanced structures of two or three movements
 - ii. They are usually taken from everyday life but aren’t necessarily realistic. E.g., it is unlikely anyone in 1st cent. Palestine would owe a debt of 10,000 talents ~ several million dollars as in the parable of the unforgiving servant.
 - iii. They often start with a question to elicit thought, e.g. “Who from you...?” or “What do you think...”
 - iv. They often require a reversal in one’s thinking, such as making a despised Samaritan one’s neighbor, or the tax collector, not the Pharisee, righteous.
 - v. The crux of the parable typically comes at the end.

II. Jesus’ parables and parables in other sources

- a. *The OT* Contains seven parables: Nathan’s parable to David about the poor man and his lamb (2 Sam 12:1-10); The prophet’s acted parable condemning Ahab (1 Kings 20:35-40); The woman from Tekoa’s story about her two sons (2 Sam 14:5-20); The song of the vineyard (Is 5:1-7); The eagles and the vine (Ezek 17:2-10—the only one explicitly called a *masal*); The lioness and her cubs (Ezek 19:2-9); The vine (Ezek 19:10-14); In addition, Judg 9:7-15 and 2 Kings 14:9 contain fables.
- b. *Rabbinic writings*: The closest formal and linguistic parallels to Jesus’ parables are in Palestinian rabbinic texts, that is, later records of how Jewish teachers customarily reasoned and taught (e.g. Mishnah, Sota 9:15, Mek. Pisha 1:82-84, Babylonian Talmud Ber. 61b). [Keener 373]
 - i. There are many parables in the Talmud. (The Talmud is the Mishnah, a compendium of Jewish law, and the Gemara, a commentary on the Mishnah and the Hebrew Bible. The Mishnah was compiled ~200 A.D.) The one passage identified as a *masal* in the Mishnah is in the Bavli (Babylonian Talmud) on Sukkah (the laws concerning the feast of Tabernacles), 28a:

All the seven days [of the festival] a man must make the sukkah his permanent abode and his house his temporary abode. If rain fell, when may one be permitted to leave it? When the porridge would become spoiled. They propounded a parable. To what can this be compared? To a slave who comes to fill the cup for his master, and he poured a pitcher over his face. (M. Sukkah 2:9)

- ii. Here is another rabbinic parable, also from the Babylonian Talmud. This is from the Midrash Mekilta Rabbi Ishmael (finished ~400-500 A.D.) in a section interpreting Exodus 14:1-9:

A parable: To what can this be compared? To one who said to his slave, "Go and get me a fish from the market." The slave went and brought him an ill-smelling fish. He said to the slave: I decree that you eat the fish or receive a hundred lashes, or you pay a hundred maneh." The slave said, "I will eat it." He began to eat, but could not finish. He, therefore, said: "I will take the lashes." After receiving sixty lashes, he could stand no more. He therefore said: "I will pay the hundred maneh." The result was that he ate the fish, received the lashes, and paid a hundred maneh... So also it was done to the Egyptians. (Mek. Beshallah 2; see Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, translated by Jacob Lauterback, Vol I, line 110.)

- iii. The rabbinic writing (we have) came after Jesus and was probably not influenced by him, so probably they both drew from and adapted standard Palestinian Jewish teaching techniques of their day. [Keener 373]
- iv. Differences between his parables and rabbinic parables: [Keener]
 - 1. They often focused on such settings as royal courts; his most often told stories about agriculture and the daily life of his listeners.
 - 2. Jesus' parables tended to subvert conventional values, whereas those of the rabbis tended to reinforce them.
 - 3. Jesus' parables are far more apt to emphasize eschatology, though that might be the time period more than Jesus himself.
- c. 14 parables occur in the 2nd century apocryphal Gospel of Thomas, three of which are not recorded in the canonical gospels. E.g., the Gospel of Thomas, Saying 60:

A Samaritan was carrying a lamb as he went into Judaea. He said to his disciples, "What will this man do with the lamb?" They said to him, "So that he might slaughter it and have it to eat. He said to them, "He will not eat it while it (or he) is alive, but rather when he has slaughtered it so it becomes a carcass." They said, "Otherwise, he cannot do it?" He said to them, "You, too, seek for yourselves a place of repose, lest you become a carcass and be devoured."

- d. Most other NT writers, addressing non-Palestinian urban communities, don't use parables, and therefore would have been unlikely to invent Jesus', which supports their authenticity. (Though they may have been adapted by the gospel writers.)

III. History of Interpretation of Parables: Some Highlights [DJG]

- a. Until the end of the 19th cent. allegorizing was the primary way to interpret parables, though some, such as John Chrysostom and John Calvin didn't follow this practice.

- i. E.g., the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:29-37) was interpreted by Augustine as an allegory of salvation; see Table 1 (*Quaestiones Evangeliorum*, 2.19; see DJG).
- ii. Note that this, while ingenious, is arbitrary. Plus, the beginning and end of the parable show that it is meant to tell the listener how to live and behave towards others.
- b. Julicher (1888): They aren't allegories!
- c. C. H. Dodd & J. Jeremias (influencing 1935-1970): Look for the historical and eschatological context—the “historical” approach.
- d. J. Jeremias: Remove the stuff which wasn't original with Jesus, typically the intro and conclusion and any explanations or allegory. Note how similar this, the original parable, is to those in the 2nd-cent. Gospel of Thomas—which must be preserving the original versions.
- e. D. Flusser: After analyzing over 2000 rabbinic parables, concluded that the introductions and conclusions are original with Jesus. [See DJG]
- f. E. Fuchs & E. Jungel: The parables bring about the reality to which they point.
- g. G. V. Jones, A. N. Wilder, D. Via—the existentialist approach: The parables are artistic and existential and not bound by the author's intention.
- h. J. D. Crossan & the structuralists: Look at the surface and deep structure, analyze movements, functions, motives, etc. “For the most part, however, structuralist studies have been dominated by technical jargon and have not provided much additional insight.” [DJG]

Table 1: Augustine's interpretation of the parable of the good Samaritan

Element	Meaning
The man	Adam
The city	Jerusalem
The moon	Jericho—stands for our mortality
The robbers	The devil and his angels—who strip the man of his immortality by persuading him to sin
The priest and the Levite	The priesthood and the Law and the prophets of the OT
The good Samaritan	Christ
The binding of the wounds	The comfort of hope and the encouragement to work
The animal	The incarnation of Christ
The innkeeper	Paul
The two denarii	The two commandments of love, or the promise of this life and the life which is to come

IV. Kingdom parables [DJG]

- a. In Judaism there were two trends in thinking about the kingdom:
 - i. “An earlier, political, this-worldly conception of a temporary Davidic kingdom with Jerusalem as the center and the Jews as the primary beneficiaries (though sometimes encompassing the whole world).
 - ii. “A later, apocalyptic conception of an ultramundane, transcendental and everlasting kingdom, conceived in universalistic terms.”
- b. Thought by form critics to be the most authentic element in Jesus' teaching.
- c. Mostly in Mk 4 & Mt 13.

- d. They illustrate different aspects of the koG:
 - i. Peoples' responses (the sower, Mt 13:3-9)
 - ii. Its unobtrusiveness (the seed growing quietly)
 - iii. The immense growth from an insignificant beginning (mustard seed)
 - iv. The mixed nature of the saved and the damned (weeds)
 - v. Its inestimable value (pearl of great price)

V. The purpose and function of parables [JVG]

- a. Most of Jesus' parables
 - i. "portray a type of human character or disposition for warning or example" – i.e., show how to live or not live; or
 - ii. "reveal a principle of God's government of the world and men." – i.e., tell about the character of God and his relation to men
- b. *Jesus' and the prophets' parables weren't trying to replace a worldview with a totally new one, but re-orient or re-envision it:* "They are not totally new; their message sounds in some ways familiar; yet they tend to have new twists within the uncomfortable familiarity. They seem designed, within the worldview of the Jewish village population of the time, as tools to open the prevailing worldview and replace it with one that was closely related but significantly adjusted at every point." [JVG p. 175]
- c. *"The parables are not simply information about the kingdom, but are part of the means of bringing it to birth...* They do not merely give people something to think about. They invite people into the new world that is being created, and warn of dire consequences if the invitation is refused... The parables do not merely talk about the divine offer of mercy; they both make the offer, and defend Jesus' right to make it." [JVG p. 176]
- d. *"The parables functioned the way all (good) stories function, by inviting hearers into the world of the story.* They were designed to break open worldviews and to create new ones, encouraging listeners to identify themselves in terms of the narrative. To see the point of the parable was to make a judgment on oneself." [JVG p. 181]

VI. Some Useful References on Parables

- a. DJG: Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight Eds., *The Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (IVP, Downer's Grove) 1992.
- b. Bruce Metzger, *The New Testament, Its Background, Growth and Content* (Abingdon) 2003.
- c. JVG: N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Augsburg Fortress) 1997.
- d. PoK: Robert Farrar Capon, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids) 1985.
- e. Keener: Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids) 1999.