

Interpreting Jesus' Parables



Henri Rousseau, *The Sleeping Gypsy*

A Brief Introduction to Parables

Outline

- Overview of the history of interpretation
- Key definitions
- Parables in the Old Testament and elsewhere
- The unique aspects of Jesus' parables
- Jesus' storytelling
- Guidelines for interpretation

Parables were interpreted allegorically for most of the past 2000 years

- Going back to Origen (2nd-3rd cent.), likely following the example of parables like the Sower, each element is assigned a meaning, typically relating to salvation history
- Origen's 3-fold interpretation: (literal/moral/spiritual) ~ (body/soul/spirit)
- Example: Augustine's interpretation of the Good Samaritan (3rd-4th cent.)

The man	Adam
Jerusalem	The heavenly city
Jericho	Our mortality
Robbers	Satan and his angels, who strip the man of his mortality by persuading him to sin
Priest and Levite	The priesthood and the Law and Prophets
Good Samaritan	Christ
Binding the wounds	The comfort of hope and encouragement to work
The animal	The incarnation of Christ
The innkeeper	Paul
The two denarii	The two commandments of love

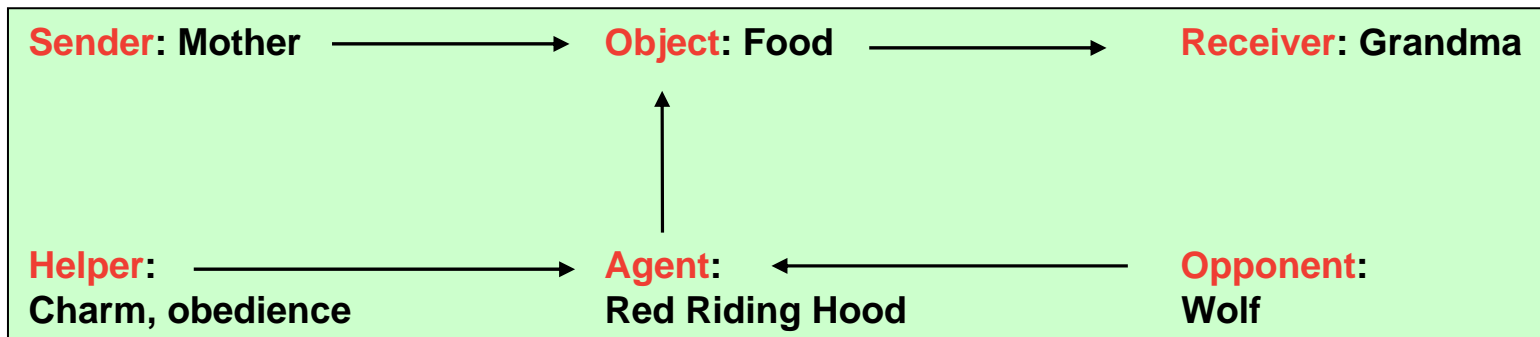
- Some exceptions: John Chrysostom (4th-5th) and John Calvin (16th)
- Calvin and Luther called the allegorizers "clerical jugglers performing monkey tricks"

Jülicher revolutionized interpretation by rejecting allegory

- In 1888, German NT scholar Adolf Jülicher argued that
 - Since Jesus' aim was to teach, he wouldn't have used a "code"
 - So: All allegorization was added by the Gospel writers
 - Parables had one point of comparison, and one conclusion
- This freed interpreters to ask what Jesus intended in his context
- P. Fiebig (in 1904) pointed out that Jülicher's single-meaning view was based on the parables of Greek rhetoric rather than Hebrew parables
- C. H. Dodd (English; 1884-1973) and Joachim Jeremias (German; 1900-1982), influencing 1935-1970:
 - Favored a "historical" approach, seeing the parables as a "realized" eschatological message
 - E.g., a parable about the harvest is about Jesus' own ministry rather than some future time

Various schools of interpretation have come since Jülicher

- Jeremias employed *form criticism*, seeking the “original” parable by stripping away introductions, conclusions and interpretations
- D. Flusser analyzed 2000 rabbinic parables, concluding that (by and large) the introductions and conclusions were original with Jesus
- E. Fuchs & E. Jungel: The parables bring about the reality to which they point
- John Dominic Crossan & “the structuralists”: analyze the parables as stories, looking for movements, functions, motives, etc.



- Kenneth Bailey has provided insight into the Palestinian Jewish culture, based on time as a missionary in Lebanon

“Parable” can refer to various literary forms

- The Greek word η παραβολη, *parabole*, has a broad scope and can mean:
 - A proverb (Lk 4:23: “physician, heal thyself”)
 - A comparison (Mt 13:33: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman mixed...”)
 - A contrast (Lk 18:1-8: The widow & unjust judge)
 - A simple story (Lk 13:6-9: “A man had a fig tree...”)
 - A complex story (Mt 22:1-14: The king who throws a wedding banquet)
 - An allegory (Mt 13: The Sower)
- Comes from the Greek roots meaning “to throw together”
- *Parabole* is the word used in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the OT used in Jesus’ time) to translate the Hebrew *masal* (in 28 of 39 cases)
- *Masal* has a broad range of meanings. In addition to the above it can also mean a taunt, a prophetic oracle or any dark saying meant to stimulate thought

In addition to the parable's main point, Craig Blomberg proposes associating a sub point with each character

- It's reasonable to associate a single main point with most parables
- 20th century scholarship has unduly emphasized a minimalist approach to interpretation
- It's also often reasonable to associate a "sub point" with each character
- Ex: The Prodigal Son¹
 - Even as **the father** offered reconciliation to his sons, so God offers us forgiveness of our sins.
 - Even as **the prodigal** received this reconciliation when he came home and repented, so we will be forgiven when we confess our sins and turn to God for forgiveness.
 - Even as **the older brother** should not have begrudged his brother's good fortune when he ought to have been rejoicing, so we who are righteous should be glad and not mad that God extends his grace to others as well, even to the most undeserving.

¹Quoted from Craig Blomberg, *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 11, 31 (1984);
See also Blomberg's *Interpreting the Parables*

The Old Testament contains seven main parables

- **The Old Testament 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)—*basis for the Wicked Tenants***
 - **The eagles and the vine (Ezek 18:2-10—the only one explicitly called a *masal*)**
 - **The lioness and her cubs (Ezek 19:2-9)**
 - **The vine (Ezek 19:10-14)**
- **Not an exhaustive list: E.g., Judges 9:7-15 and 2 Kings 14:9 also contain fables**

The closest parallels to Jesus' parables are in Palestinian rabbinic texts

- 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)

The closest parallels to Jesus' parables are in Palestinian rabbinic texts

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

A parable: To what can [the Exodus] 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.

Parables also occur in the apocryphal 2nd century Gospel of Thomas

- Thomas has 14 parables, 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 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."

Jesus' parables are characteristic of his focus on salvation of the lost and the least

Unlike rabbinic parables, Jesus' parables:

- **Most often tell stories about agriculture and the daily life of his listeners; rabbinic parables often focus on such settings as royal courts**
- **Tend to subvert conventional values; rabbinic parables reinforced them**
- **Jesus' parables are more apt to emphasize *eschatology* (though this might be the time period more than Jesus himself)**

Q: What can we infer about the parables as recorded in the Gospels, that only one parable is about fishing?

Jesus' parables taught about his kingdom and about the life of a disciple

- **The kingdom**
 - *In the present:* E.g. Mt 12:24, the Binding of the Strong Man
 - *In the future:* parables of the master's return and judgment: have we shown mercy?
- **Discipleship**
 - E.g. the Tower Builder and the Warring King. Have we counted the cost?
 - *Money:* E.g. Lazarus and Dives
 - *Prayer:* E.g. the Friend at Midnight
- How does this overlap with Paul's theology, and the Gospel of the epistles?

Jesus' parables present a revolutionary view of the kingdom of God

- **There were two trends in thinking about the kingdom: [DJG]**
 1. **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)**
 2. **A later, apocalyptic conception of an ultra-mundane, transcendental and everlasting kingdom, conceived in universalistic terms**
- **In Jesus' Gospel, the kingdom (Mk 4, Mt 13):**
 1. **Is spread via a message, sensitive to an individual's response [the Sower] Cf: The spread of U.S. sovereignty through invasion or by convincing individuals in other countries to support democracy**
 2. **Spreads mysteriously and unobtrusively [the growing seed]**
 3. **Magnifies greatly [the mustard seed, leaven]**
 4. **Doesn't mean the immediate destruction of the wicked [the weeds]**
 5. **Is of inestimable value calling for ultimate sacrifice [the pearl]**

Parables are an integral part of Jesus' ministry and message

- About 1/3 of Jesus' teaching is in parables; ~60 in the synoptics
- Even the skeptical see them as the authentic core of Jesus' teaching
- No one is recorded as using parables to the degree Jesus did, before or since.

Q: Why didn't his followers make use of parables? Why don't the epistles contain any of Jesus' parables?

Q: Why not use them now, with modern contexts? E.g., maybe the Parable of the Yeast could be replaced by "the parable of mildew in your basement".

- Parables were sometimes clear, sometimes obscure. In fact, the one parable which is most clear, the Wicked Tenants, directly preceded his death.

Q: Why was Jesus sometimes obscure, sometimes clear?

Jesus employs common storytelling techniques (Raymond Brown)

- **Characters often come in threes, as in many jokes (“a priest, a pastor and a rabbi walk into a bar...”)**
 - **Ex: Three servants entrusted with talents; the priest, Levite and Samaritan; the owner of the vineyard sends two servants then his son, etc.**
- **Characters usually tell us their thoughts by speaking directly (e.g. the Pharisee and the Publican)**
- **Since only one character can hold the stage at once, you often have interaction repeated three times (e.g. the parable of the Talents)**
- **Some illogical things are allowed for the purpose of storytelling:**
 - **Why would a master allow a dishonest servant to still work the books without supervision?**
 - **Why would a master want the laborers hired last paid first? Because otherwise those hired first wouldn't see and grumble!**
 - **If the wise virgins had been charitable to the foolish there wouldn't have been a story**

Jesus employs common storytelling techniques

- “From the similarity of some of his parables to those of the rabbis we suspect that at times he may have used well-known stories and supplied new [surprising] endings.”
 - The priest and Levite were stock characters but Jesus adds a Samaritan
- Often these endings would have surprised the listeners:
 - The publican being more just than the Pharisee
 - The prodigal son outshining the elder son
 - Given the popular belief that all Jews were to be saved, the picture of a rich son of Abraham enduring torture would have been shocking
- “Jesus constantly sought to involve his hearers personally in the challenge of the parables”, many times asking them what they thought and asking them to pass judgment on the outcome of the story

Q: Parables are story forms rather than logical propositions. What advantages does this have? What disadvantages?

For balanced interpretation, seek first Jesus' meaning in his context

- 1. *Understand the cultural context.***
 - How were Pharisees and tax collectors regarded? Or Samaritans?
 - What was standard behavior at weddings?
 - What were the expectations of Jews regarding salvation?
- 2. *Form guides interpretation.*** Parables can be anything from complex allegories to proverbs.
- 3. *Know the biblical context.*** Who is Jesus addressing? Is this early or late in his ministry? (Unfortunately, we don't always have historical context, since sometimes the evangelists gathered parables topically.)
- 4. *Understand the flow, elements and structure of the story.*** What techniques has Jesus used and why? Are there parallel elements (e.g. the prodigal and older son)?
- 5. *Compare the parable as it appears in different Gospels.*** What differences is each evangelist bringing out, and why?
- 6. *What's the theological significance?*** Don't squeeze it for details. E.g. Mt 18:34, "In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured", doesn't necessarily mean God has sinners tortured after death!

Parables interact uniquely with the listener

- **Mt 13:34: Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables [Mark adds *as much as they could understand*]; he did not say anything to them without using a parable. So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet:

“I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world.”**
- **Mk 4:21: He said to them, “Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don't you put it on its stand? For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open. If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.

“Consider carefully what you hear... With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.”**
- **Mt 13:10: The disciples came to him and asked, “Why do you speak to the people in parables?”

He replied, “The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them... This is why I speak to them in parables:

‘Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.’”**

Parables interact uniquely with the listener

- “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.” (N. T. Wright) *Q: How have you experienced parables as dynamic rather than static?*
- “Above all forms of speech the parable is calculated to have the greatest propensities for suggestion in which with the light and skilled thrust of a rapier Jesus gently touches men to the quick of their soul by the two-edged Word, summoning them to decision without crushing them to the ground by an open display of majesty and might. It is by means of the parable that Jesus pierces to the heart in such a way as not to crush the bruised reed or quench the burning flax. (T. F. Torrance) *Q: Do you think Jesus used parables to deliver his message with a velvet glove? Why or why not?*

Some resources related to the parables

Parable-Specific:

- Robert Farrar Capon, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids) 1985. [As Bob Hann put it, Capon's not always right, but he's always thought-provoking.] Also, *The Parables of Grace* and *The Parables of Judgment*.
- Kenneth E. Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids) 1980. [Bailey's considered a very useful source for cultural background.]
- Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (IVP, Downer's Grove) 1990. [This provides a balanced representation of the minority view reacting to the anti-allegory school which holds sway today.]

General:

- Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight Eds., *The Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (IVP, Downer's Grove) 1992. [Has a good entry on parables.]
- Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids) 1999. [Since the kingdom parables are in Matt 13 (also Mk 4), this is a good resource. Again according to Bob Hann, it's the closest thing to a canonical reference on Matthew.]
- Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew: The Kingdom of Heaven*. [Green is always on the money and this is a useful resource.]