

Protestant Biblical Interpretation

A Textbook of Hermeneutics for Conservative Protestants

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CHAPTER XI

THE INTERPRETATION OF PARABLES

A. THE NATURE OF PARABLES

The etymological meaning of the word *parable* is "a placing alongside of" for the purpose of comparison. It thus represents a method of illustration so that it could be said: "The kingdom of heaven is illustrated by the following situation." However, historical studies have revealed that the word is really not capable of simple definition, but has been used in many senses.¹ Besides the word *parabolē*, the word *paroimia* is used which means "a saying by the wayside, a proverb, a maxim." The use of *paroimia* is restricted to John's gospel.

Dodd's definition is that a parable "at its simplest . . . is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to rouse it into active thought."² As such a parable differs from a *fable* in that it is neither trivial nor fantastic; from the *myth* in that the parable is not a creation of popular folklore; from the *allegory* which finds meaning at many points in the narrative; and from such *figures of speech* as simile or metaphor although in a qualified sense, as Dodd has indicated the parable is a sort of metaphor or simile. At times too it is difficult to separate the parable from the allegory, especially in the longer parable where several elements have symbolic meaning.

Scholars differ widely in their count of the number of parables in the Gospels,³ and this is due to the difficulty of deciding what is parabolic and what is not. Smith has indicated the different forms that parables may take, and also notes the types of introductions which usually preface parables.⁴ The argument that the account of Lazarus and Dives is not a parable because it is not introduced as a parable is not valid because Oesterly has demonstrated that parables may be given with no typical introduction.⁵ Generally scholars divide the parables into simple utterances, parables, and extended

1 B. T. D. Smith, *The Parables of the Synoptic Gospels*, Chapters I and II.

2 *The Parables of the Kingdom* (third edition), p. 16.

3 Moulton notes that by different countings scholars have suggested 79, 71, 59, 39, 37 and 33 parables. "Parables," *Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels*, II, 313. This is a most valuable article for the study of parables as is Nourse, "Parable," *Hastings Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, IX, 628.

4 Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 30 ff.

5 Oesterly, *The Gospel Parables in the Light of Their Jewish Background*, p. 11.

parables.⁶ It is the extended parable which has similarities to the allegory.

There are about thirty parables usually treated in works on the parables. Luke has the most and John the least. The importance of the study of the parables is to be found in their sheer number representing a large part of the text of the Gospels, and thereby embodying considerable material of a didactic nature. They give us information as to the progress of the gospel in the world, the results of its propagation, about the end of the age, the dealings of God with the Jewish people and the Gentiles, and the nature of the kingdom of God. Any doctrine of the kingdom or eschatology which ignores a careful study of the parables cannot be adequate.

The intention of parabolic teaching is given by Christ in Matthew 13:11-17, Mark 4:10-12, and Luke 8:8-10. First, it is a method of teaching the *responsive* disciple. At the end of the first parable our Lord said, "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear" (Luke 8:8). When the disciples asked him why he said this and taught in parables our Lord answered that it was given unto the disciples to know the mysteries (disclosures) of the kingdom of God. Hence, parables were used by our Lord as instruments of his revelation to those who had ears to hear. Parables contain much that every Christian servant needs to know about the kingdom of God. Some parables teach him not to be depressed at the apparent failure of the gospel or the corruption of the gospel; others tell him not to be ambitious beyond which the gospel promises; and still others tell him not to be discouraged because the success of God is secure. Thus the parables stand as *sine qua non* material for intelligent Christian service.

The second intent of parabolic teaching was to hide the truth from the *unresponsive* and so aid in the hardening of their heart as they continuously rebelled against God. This is the special import of the citation from Isaiah 6. The truth taught in a parable is veiled and so is a test of a person's spiritual responsiveness, of whether he has the spiritual intention to follow through and learn its meaning.

The origin of parabolic teaching has been traced by Smith from Old Testament references, to rabbinical teaching, to New Testament usage.⁷ The method was copiously used among the rabbis. The Greek word *parabolē* is equivalent to the Hebrew word *mashal*. One of the current rabbinic sayings was, "I will parable to thee a parable." Among the Greeks a parable stood for an argument from analogy.

There are four elements to a parable: (i) A parable is some commonly known *earthly* thing, event, custom, or possible occurrence. The emphasis is on the word *earthly*. Parables are about farming, marriages, kings, feasts, household relationships, business arrangements, or customs of the people. It is this concrete and pictorial grounding which makes them such remarkable instruments for instruction. (ii) Beyond the earthly element is the spiritual lesson, or theological truth which the parable *intends* to teach. (iii) This *earthly* element bears an *analogical* relationship to the spiritual element. It is this analogical relationship which gives the parable its illustrative, or argumentative force. (iv) Because a parable has two levels of meaning, every parable stands in need of interpretation. The actors, elements, and actions need to be identified. One of the tributes paid to Jülicher's famous work on the parables is that he freed the interpretation of parables from allegorization. Whenever any interpreter seeks an elaboration of meaning in a parable, and commences to find meaning in far more points than the

6 Dodd gives *Gleichnis*, *Parabel*, and *Nowellen* (*op. cit.*, pp. 17-18), and cites Bultmann's division of *Bildwörter*, *Gleichnisse*, and *Parabel* (p. 18 fn.).

7 Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 3 ff. Also, Oesterly, *op. cit.*, p. 3 ff. Cf. also the work of Feldman, *The Parables and Similes of the Rabbis*.

parable can hope to make, that interpreter has returned to the reprehensible method of allegorizing the parables.

B. RULES FOR THE INTERPRETATION OF PARABLES

A study of the literature of the parables reveals that the parables are not as easy to interpret as their simple nature would seem to indicate. We propose to discuss the interpretation of parables from the viewpoint of four principles: perspective, cultural, exegetical, and doctrinal.

(1). The *perspective principles* inform us that to adequately interpret the parables we need to understand them in their relationship to Christology and the kingdom of God.

One of the factors in which recent studies differ somewhat from older studies in the parables is that the recent studies indicate the *Christological nature* of parabolic teaching.⁸ In these studies it is indicated that we have more than the *marshal* teaching of the rabbis, more than apt illustrations of moral or spiritual truths. In the Gospels it is the Christ who is teaching about *his* kingdom, and in some measure is reflectively teaching truth about *himself*. In some parables Christ is the leading figure, or the parable has meaning only as related directly to Christ or his word. Thus in approaching any parable we must ask ourselves this: *how does this parable relate to Christ?* Are any of the persons in the parable Christ? Does the parable concern the word or teaching or mission of Christ? Only when we thus approach each parable Christologically do we obtain the correct perspective.

The second perspective principle is *the kingdom principle*. Christ came preaching a gospel of the kingdom and announcing that a kingdom was at hand. Many of the parables directly state that they are about the kingdom, and others not specifically stated cannot be divorced from the kingdom. Adequate interpretation of the parables must now be based upon an understanding of the kingdom of God and the relationship of Jesus Christ and His gospel to that kingdom. This Hope stated when he wrote that "it must be borne in mind that all of [the parables] deal with one great subject, and one great subject only, namely, the kingdom of God."⁹

(i). First of all, *the kingdom has come*. In some sense it is in existence from Christ's first preaching, and men are entering it. This is the kingdom in its *actualized* sense. It is entered by the new birth (John 3::3) and our Lord stated that the tax collectors and harlots were entering the kingdom (Matt. 21:31).¹⁰ And whatever be the interpretation of Luke 17:20-21, the passage indicates that in some

8 Cf. Hoskyns and Davey, *The Riddle of the New Testament*, p. 132, and, Wallace, "The Parables and the Preacher," *The Scottish Journal of Theology*, 2:13-28, March, 1949.

9 Hope, "The Interpretation of Christ's Parables," *Interpretation*, 6:303, July, 1952.

10 Modern scholarship on purely lexical grounds has asserted that there is no difference between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven. Concentration on these two terms has obscured the fact that there are *several* terms used interchangeably as a study of the harmony of the Gospels in the Greek will reveal. Cf. Oesterly, *op. cit.*, pp. 19-20; Dodd, *op. cit.*, p. 34; Berkhof, *The Kingdom of God*, p. 166; Ladd, *Crucial Questions about the Kingdom of God*, p. 106 f. For a stout defense of the dispensational interpretation cf. Feinberg, *Premillennialism or Amillennialism?* (second edition), p. 286 ff., and p. 297 ff.

sense the kingdom is *here*.¹¹

Being *here* the kingdom continues through this age. The parables of the kingdom were also *prophecies* of the kingdom. They describe the fortunes of the kingdom through the centuries. They tell of the sowing and the reaping of the word of the kingdom; they tell of the great net let down into the sea and not pulled in until the end of the age; they tell of the grain growing until it is ripe. There can be no clear understanding of many of the parables unless we understand the continuing character of the kingdom.

(ii). The kingdom is *eschatological* in character. There is a harvest at the end of the age. The final issues are not settled until the angels of God separate the true from the false. The rightful Heir of the kingdom must come in the power and the glory of his kingdom. Certainly the eschatological element looms large in any parable which mentions the end in the form of a harvest or separation. The parables of the talents (Matt. 25:14 ff.) and the virgins (Matt. 25:1 ff.) are certainly eschatological. This eschatological element is a real and necessary element in understanding the parables and the liberals who pruned it off obscured this depth of meaning in the parable.

In summary, the interpreter must keep in mind that the kingdom in some sense has come; it is continuing; and it will come, and with this in mind he must understand whether the parable under consideration is concerned with one or all of these aspects.

(2). *The cultural principles.* To understand the parables we need not only to see them from the standpoint of the kingdom of God and Christology, but also from the cultural background. Our Lord lived in ancient Palestine amidst the Jewish people, and the parables are drawn from that cultural backdrop.

In general, the parables are drawn from material familiar to a poor, agricultural peasant. The manners, customs, and material culture exhibited in the parables amply substantiate this. Further, the parables were spoken in Aramaic and some helpful information can be gleaned by translating the parables back into Aramaic.¹²

Studies in the local color of the parables have turned up a rich store of information and one is tempted to say that one should never preach again on any parable until he has made himself familiar with this material. Jeremias' book, *The Parables of Jesus*, is filled with the local color which so clearly lights up the parables. *In the interpretation of every parable it is necessary to recover as much as possible the local color employed in it.*

For example, farmers sowed their fields and then plowed them up thus making the parable of the sower

11 Those holding that the expression *entos hymōn* means "within you" are Oesterly, *op. cit.*, p 32 and Dodd, *op. cit.*, pp. 84-85, fn. 1. To the contrary is Fuller, *The Mission and Achievement of Jesus*, p. 28 ff.; Dinkler, *The Idea of History in Near East*, p. 176; Kümmel, *Verheissung und Erfüllung*, p. 27. I am indebted to Dr. Ladd of Fuller Seminary for these *per contra* references.

12 Part of the value of the work of Jeremias (*op. cit.*) is that he has the requisite learning to make this retranslation, and his work is very valuable from this standpoint. It was the necessity of knowing the cultural background for the understanding of the parables which inspired Oesterly to write his work (*op. cit.*).

much clearer. Harvest, wedding, and wine were Jewish symbols of the end of the age. The fig tree is a symbol of the people of God. Lamps were put under baskets to extinguish them, hence to light a lamp and put it under a basket is to light it and immediately put it out. The lamb which strays from the fold lies down and will not move, so he must be carried back. Mustard trees grew from small seeds to trees eight to ten feet tall. One speck of leaven penetrated enough dough to feed 162 persons. What Jeremias is able to deduce about the life of the prodigal from knowledge of Jewish customs is remarkable.¹³

(3). *Exegetical principles.* We have tried to close in on the parables from two sides. Coming from theology we have noted the Christological and kingdom setting of the parables, and coming from background considerations we have noted the necessity of understanding the general cultural background of the parables and the specific matters of local color and customs which figure in each parable. We now come directly to the parable and consider the direct exegetical principles for the interpretation of parables.

(i). *Determine the one central truth the parable is attempting to teach.* This might be called the golden rule of parabolic interpretation, for practically all writers on the subject mention it with stress. "The typical parable presents one single point of comparison," writes Dodd. "The details are not intended to have independent significance."¹⁴ Others have put the rule this way: *Don't make a parable walk on all fours.*

A parable is not like an allegory, for in the latter most of the elements of the narrative have meaning. To be sure, some parables are more elaborate than others and in this regard approach an allegory. But as a general or guiding rule, look for the one central thesis of the parable.

A parable is a truth carried in a vehicle. Therefore there is the inevitable presence of *accessories* which are necessary for the drapery of the parable, but are not part of the meaning. The danger in parabolic teaching at this point is to interpret as meaningful what is drapery.

(ii). *Determine how much of the parable is interpreted by the Lord Himself.* After reciting the parable of the Sower (Matt. 13:18 ff.) our Lord interprets it. After stating the parable of the enemy's sowing dandel among the wheat, our Lord interprets it later in the house. After setting forth the parable of the virgins he says, "Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh" (Matt. 25:13). In such instances we have the definite word of Christ concerning the meaning of the parable, which further conveys to us the spirit of his teaching for help in parables that are not interpreted.¹⁵

(iii). *Determine whether there are any clues in the context concerning the parable's meaning.* The context may include what follows as well as what precedes. In Luke 15 occurs the triadic parable of the lost sheep, lost coin, and lost son. The interpretative context is Luke 15:1-2: "Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners for to hear him. And the Pharisees and scribes murmured saying,

13 Jeremias, *op. cit.*, pp. 103-104.

14 *Op. cit.*, p. 18.

15 Williams has written specifically on this point of noting how our Lord interpreted his own parables. "Jesus' Method of Interpreting Parables," *Review and Expositor*, 14:210-222, April, 1917.

"This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them." The parables that follow are a justification for eating with sinners and publicans. Therefore, the shepherd, the woman, and the father represent the attitude of love, forgiveness, and redemption in Christ; the lost sheep, lost coin, and lost son represent the publicans and sinners who gathered round our Lord.

The parable of the Tower and the King (Luke 14:25 ff.) is a parable of Christian service, not of salvation, as indicated by the context (note v. 33, "He cannot be my disciple"). After giving the parable of the unjust steward Luke adds: "And the Pharisees also, who were covetous, heard all these things and derided him" (Luke 16:14). Therefore, the point of the parable must be taken as aimed at them.

(iv). *The comparative rule*--compare the parable with any possible Old Testament association, and with the parable as recited in one or more other of the Gospels. Both our Lord and his listeners were familiar with much of the content of the Old Testament. We must attune our thinking to be sensitive to possible Old Testament references in the parables.¹⁶ Dodd¹⁷ notes that such things as vineyards, fig trees, harvests, and feasts have Old Testament referents, and the Old Testament referent must be understood if we are to better understand the parable.

Further, the interpreter must take a harmony of the Gospels in hand and study every version of each parable if it occurs in more than one Gospel. He must note concurrences and divergences, parallels and synonyms. The truest interpretation will arise out of such a comparative study.¹⁸

(4). *Doctrinal principles.* Any use of a parable for doctrinal purposes must observe historical sense. We ought not to read our theological debates back into the parables. Primary consideration should be given to what we judge to be the meaning which the immediate listeners garnered from the parable. There could well be more in the parable than was evident at that time but we must lay that bare with great care. We must not unceremoniously intrude into parabolic interpretation arguments about Calvinism, Arminianism, or millennialism.

Parables do teach doctrine, and the claim that they may not be used at all in doctrinal writing is improper. But in gleaning our doctrine from the parables we must be strict in our interpretation; we must check our results with the plain, evident teaching of our Lord, and with the rest of the New Testament.¹⁹ Parables with proper cautions may be used to illustrate doctrine, illumine Christian experience, and to teach practical lessons.

The modern debates on the millennial question have frequently centered around the interpretation of some of the parables. In general, amillennialists and postmillennialists have interpreted certain parables optimistically whereas premillennialists and dispensationalists have interpreted the same parables pessimistically. For example, the growth of the mustard seed to a tree, and the permeation of

16 Cf. Wallace, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

17 *Op. cit.*, p. 32.

18 The thesis of Dodd (*op. cit.*) and Jeremias (*op. cit.*) is that the Church has elaborated and altered the parables. A summary of Jeremias' seven laws of transformation will be found on page 88 of his work. Needless to say this view does not reflect a substantial doctrine of inspiration by either Dodd or Jeremias.

19 Dodd, *op. cit.*, p. 32. Wallace, *op. cit.*, p. 306. Kirk (*Lectures on the Parables*) gives more attention than most writers on parables to the matter of doctrinal teaching. Cf. pp. v-vi.

the meal by the leaven is taken by the former to be a teaching of the powerful growth and spread of Christianity, and by the latter of the corruption of the professing Church. Further, some premillennial expositors interpret the pearl to be the Church, and the treasure, Israel, whereas previous interpreters took these parables as teaching how men found the Saviour.

With reference to the present status of affairs in parabolic interpretation the following may be said: (i) constant check must be made with students of rabbinics to see whether anything in their studies reveals beliefs about controversial matters in parabolic interpretation.²⁰ (ii) Convictions about the nature of the kingdom must certainly be built on a broader basis than two or three parables. The parables may be used to bolster millennial convictions, but the entire edifice cannot be made to rest on them. (iii) Millennial views must certainly contain the balance of optimism and pessimism as contained in the parables, as well as the teaching of the parables that the kingdom is established, is progressing, and is eschatological. A completely futuristic view of the kingdom (that in no sense does the kingdom now exist) and a completely spiritualized view of the kingdom (that the kingdom is solely the rule of God in the heart) are not true to the doctrinal teaching of the parables. The premillennialist must not be blind to the optimism of some parables, e.g., that the corn will ripen in the ear (i.e., God's purposes in this age *will be done*), nor can the postmillennialist be blind to the pessimism of other parables, e.g., the Enemy who sows darnel. Premillennialism does not require *ex hypothesi* that leaven means evil (though most premillennialists interpret it that way),²¹ nor that the Hid Treasure is Israel, nor that the Pearl is the Church. Millennial views are established on broader grounds than these.

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20 For example, with reference to leaven note the remarks of Findlay, *Jesus and His Parables*, p. 24; Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 121, and Oesterly, *op. cit.*, pp. 78-79.

21 Oesterly notes that this parable really shocked the listeners, as to them leaven was uniformly associated with evil. Hence to compare the kingdom of God to leaven would be most improper. *Op. cit.*, p. 78. Cf. Allis, "The Parable of the Leaven," *The Evangelical Quarterly*, 19:254-273, October, 1947, for a thorough examination of the Old Testament usage of the word *leaven*.

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EPILOGUE

The whole system of Conservative Protestant Christianity rests unreservedly on special revelation and the divine inspiration of Scripture. In that the message of God has meaning only when interpreted, it is ever incumbent upon the church to reflect and inquire if she has rightly interpreted the Word of God. A system of hermeneutics is crucial to our theology.

It has been the spirit of this work to endeavor to present a system of hermeneutics that would most faithfully uncover the native meaning of the Sacred Scripture. We have surveyed both the fields of general and special hermeneutics, and have given lists of many principles. Such lists are as good only as the training, intelligence, and ability of the interpreter, and the tools he uses. It is the solemn duty of every interpreter to see if these rules are correct and to equip himself with training and tools to do adequately the task of a faithful interpreter.

There is a prevailing danger to let differences in interpretation interrupt the unity of the Spirit. When differences are sharp, feelings are apt to run high. With foreboding storm clouds of oppression billowing on the distant horizon, it is well for conservative Protestantism to discover bases of fellowship rather than of divergence. If we stand together in the great truths of the Trinity, of Jesus Christ, and of Salvation, let us then work out our interpretative differences in the bounds of Christian love and endeavor to *preserve* the unity of the Spirit. A hermeneutical victory at the expense of Christian graciousness is hardly worth winning.

Finally, we all need a new sense of respect for Holy Scripture. Believing it to be the veritable word of God, we must exercise all the human pains possible to keep from overlaying it with a gossamer pattern of our own spinning. In each of those cases where human error enters, divine truth is obscured. Let us then steer a straight course through the Holy Bible, neither turning to the left side of heresy nor to the right side of unbridled imagination.

Every interpreter, from the professional philologist to the Sunday school teacher, can well take to heart the following words of Barrows:

Foremost among the qualities that belong to the interpreter is *a supreme regard for truth*. . . . He will need a constant and vivid apprehension of the sacredness of all truth, more especially of scriptural truth, which God has revealed for the sanctification and salvation of men. "Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth." These words of the Savior he will do well to ponder night and day, till they become a part of his spiritual life; and to remember always that, if such be the divine origin and high office of scriptural truth, God will not hold guiltless any who tamper with it in the interest of preconceived human opinions, thus substituting the folly of man for the wisdom of God.²²

22 *Companion to the Bible*, p. 522. Italics are his.