

The Point of the Parables

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THE ENGLISH thinker, Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1626), once noted: 'As hieroglyphics are older than letters, so parables are older than arguments.'¹ This intriguing statement suggests that, whatever else they may be, parables are ways of trying to communicate meaning, which is also what arguments attempt to do. And as early as the sixth century, a similar point was made specifically in relation to the gospel parables by the mystical thinker known to history as the Pseudo-Dionysius, when he wrote: 'Jesus taught theology in parables and handed down the deifying sacraments through a symbolic setting of the table.'² And a few centuries after Bacon, Abraham Lincoln said: 'God tells the truth in parables, because they are easier for the common folk to understand and recollect.'³ Now whether parables are ultimately simpler to grasp than arguments, as many often think, like Abraham Lincoln, is perhaps a moot point. But that both have to do with trying to convey meaning seems beyond dispute

If quantity is anything to go by, parables are a fairly important element of communication in the gospels, in that they 'comprise roughly one-third of [Jesus'] recorded teaching.'⁴ And Pope Benedict certainly considers them to constitute the essence of the preaching of Jesus.⁵ They are located almost entirely in the synoptic gospels (Matthew,

1. Francis Bacon (1561-1626), quoted by Hamann, 'Aesthetica in Nuce', in Ronald Gregor Smith, *J. G. Hamann: A Study in Christian Existence* (London: Collins, 1960), 196, n. 3.

2. Pseudo-Dionysius (sixth century), Ep. 9.1, [PG 3:1108], quoted by Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, Vol. 1: *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 346.

3. A. M. Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables* (London: SCM, 1966), 13, quoting Adlai E. Stevenson, *The Observer*, February 8, 1959.

4. Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables*, 7.

5. Joseph Ratzinger, Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, tr. Adrian J. Walker (London-Berlin-New York-Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2007), 183

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Mark, Luke), and are absent, or at least the term 'parable' itself is absent, from John.

The famous Dean of St Paul's Cathedral in London, William Ralph Inge (1860-1954), asserted that '[a]lmost all teaching consists in comparing the unknown with the known, the strange with the familiar.'⁶ This dictum is a helpful guide to what parables are. For at bottom they are based on the notion of comparison. Indeed, the Greek term, from which the English word is derived, namely *parabolé*, shows that the word's 'root connotation involves the placing of things side by side for the sake of comparison' (p. 984).⁷ In Pope Benedict's approach to the gospel parables,⁸ the notion of comparison as a road to understanding takes on a more active, a more dynamic significance. If the gospel parables are meant to bring a new reality to the hearers' understanding, this can only happen, Benedict appears to suggest, if they also move the hearers to abandon their former 'comfort zone,' we might say, and embrace or rather let themselves be embraced by, a new reality. But this is to anticipate.

HOW ARE PARABLES TO BE CLASSIFIED WITHIN LITERARY THEORY?

We can now look quickly at the context of ancient oratory out of which the term parable emerged. Jesus didn't invent parables. He used a tradition that was already well established, but he did put his unique stamp on it. And the tradition he was working within was actually Jewish or biblical, rather, of course, than Greek or Hellenistic. But the term itself comes from the Greek world. The term parable 'was a technical term for a figure of speech in ancient oratory' (p. 984). Comparisons were made in ancient rhetoric, and indeed still are, by two main devices: 'the simile and the metaphor' (p. 984). As is well known, the simile involves saying that something is like something else, whereas the metaphor is 'a compressed simile in which one thing is identified or equated with

6. In *The Gate of Life*, 73, quoted in Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables*, 8.

7. Except where otherwise stated, page numbers in round brackets in the text refer to R. E. Brown, art. 'Parables of Jesus,' in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 10 (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), 984-88.

8. See *Jesus of Nazareth*, 191-2

another, or the qualities of one thing are directly ascribed to another' (p. 984). An example of a simile in the teaching of Jesus would be, to give just one instance: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you are like whitewashed tombs" (Mt 23.27)' (p. 984). And examples of metaphor in Jesus' teaching would be the following: "You are the salt of the earth" (Mt 5.13); or, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees" (Mk 8.15)' (p. 984). Metaphors are, thus, slightly more elevated in register than similes, or more poetical, in a sense.

These two basic figures of speech are considerably developed in two more extended figures, the parable and the allegory. And both parables and allegories are to be found in the New Testament. 'A parable is a developed simile in which the story, while fictitious, is true to life' (p. 984). This 'differentiates a parable from a fable' (p. 984). In fables animals often feature as the chief characters, as in the most celebrated modern European fables, those of the seventeenth-century French classical writer, La Fontaine (1621-95). They are thus not obviously true to life, for all the sharp insight they reveal into human nature, in the way that parables clearly are. The parable often also has a final 'moral or punch line' (p. 984), which underlines the basic point it wishes to make.

'An allegory', on the other hand, 'is a developed metaphor prolonged into continuous narrative' (p. 984). A very famous example of this from antiquity is the allegory of the cave in Plato's *Republic* (Book VII). Whereas in an allegory each detail of the narrative conveys important meaning for the allegory's overall interpretation, in a parable the details don't have the same significance. They don't have any 'hidden meaning,' as is the case with an allegory. It is the general point the parable wishes to make that is of overriding significance. The allegory is a more literary form than the parable, which 'like the simile, is a popular and less literary figure of speech' (p. 984).

While the details of a parable, unlike those of an allegory, may not be filled with 'hidden meaning,' that is not to say that the parable as a whole may not have hidden meaning. Parables partake of what the great literary critic, Frank Kermode (1919-2010), called 'the radiant obscurity of narratives.'⁹

9. Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy. On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), 47.

It is important to highlight these two different figures of speech, the parable and the allegory, in a discussion of biblical literature for two reasons. Firstly, because both are found within the New Testament; but, more importantly, because in church tradition the parables themselves have been frequently 'allegorized.' Indeed, the process begins within the New Testament itself, though it 'is not commonly employed – except in Hebrews which may have had Alexandrian affiliations.'¹⁰ And Alexandria was the principal intellectual centre where Hellenistic writers developed allegorical techniques of interpretation in order to make sense of their own literary inheritance. Jewish and Christian intellectuals were to follow in their footsteps in due course.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE INTERPRETATION OF THE GOSPEL PARABLES

While an incipient allegorizing tendency is present within the New Testament itself, the more full-blown use of allegorization in the church fathers was influenced, as has just been said, by way pagan Hellenistic scholars developed this literary method to interpret their own classical texts. They had to try to find acceptable interpretations of possibly offensive passages in their own foundational literary texts, especially those attributed to Homer, 'whose works became a kind of Bible for the Greek races,' and who 'was the first author to receive allegorical treatment.'¹¹

For Christian theologians, a very important figure in this whole area was the Jewish thinker, 'Philo of Alexandria, whose allegorizing ingenuity in the first century AD enabled him to reconcile the faith of Israel with Greek philosophy.'¹² His example helped the later Christian theologians to apply the allegorical method to their own Scriptures in order to be able to present an up-to-date version of their faith for a new Greek-speaking and sophisticated audience. And the parables were an important element in the New Testament writings that seemed to the early Church theologians to require allegorizing treatment. This, in turn, suggests that, by the patristic period at the latest, the original

10. Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables*, 23.

11. Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables*, 23.

12. Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables*, 23.

meaning of the parables, to say nothing of their original context, was perhaps already beginning to fade away, or at least was not leaping off the pages of the gospels any longer at the reader or hearer. Indeed, the fact that the parables so often seem to stump even Jesus' own disciples and had to be explained to them, suggests that their meaning might have been somewhat of a puzzle right from the very outset.

In practice, the patristic allegorizing exegesis of the parables seeks to find a significance in each element of the parable, rather than trying to discover what was the parable's main thrust. Already within the New Testament itself, fairly clear examples of allegorization can be found in the case of the parables of the Sower, the Weeds among the Wheat, and the Dragnet. And, interestingly, 'Origen was to justify his allegorizing by appeal to the example set by the evangelists.'¹³

To look briefly at the three examples just mentioned – which can all be found in Matthew – we can see that the parable of the Sower (which also occurs in Mark and Luke) occurs in Mt 13: 3-9 as a parable, and then a little later, in Mt 13:18-23, as what could be termed an allegorizing explanation of the parable. A similar procedure can be found in Mark (the parable is narrated Mk 4:3-9, the allegorizing interpretation is given a little further on at Mk 4:13-20) and in Luke (the parable is narrated Lk 8:5-8, the allegorizing interpretation is given at Lk 8:11-15).

The parable of the Weeds among the Wheat it occurs in Mt 13:24-30 (it is unique to Matthew, in fact), while its allegorizing interpretation is given shortly afterwards at Mt 13:36-43. Commenting on this parable, which contains the detail, 'But while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went away' (Mt 13:25: New American Standard Bible), the sixteenth-century Spanish Jesuit Juan Maldonado, known in Latin as Maldonatus (1533-83), who taught in Paris and 'did excellent work on the parables,'¹⁴ rather mischievously and somewhat disingenuously pointed out: 'Older commentators often identify the sleeping men in it with the bishops.'¹⁵ He himself was not a supporter of the allegorizing treatment of the parables, but was much closer to what was to become the modern approach to the interpreta-

13. Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables*, 23.

14. Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables*, 34.

15. Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables*, 34.

tion of the parables, seeing them as stories making just one main point.

Finally, the parable of the Dragnet or the Fish Net occurs at Mt 13:47-48, and its allegorical interpretation follows immediately (Mt 13:49-50). It, too, is unique to Matthew's Gospel.

THE FATHERS OF THE CHURCH

It was the Church Fathers who gave most free rein to their desire to allegorize. This is especially the case of the Alexandrian school of scriptural exegesis, already alluded to. Although it is nowadays frequently regarded as too subjective and even 'fanciful' (p. 984), allegorical interpretation of the parables was the method used by the Church's earliest teachers in order to try to provide a serious religious meaning of the parables for their own time. And indeed, sometimes, it has been noted, the early patristic theologians 'often came to a valid basic interpretation of the parable involved' (p. 984). For the exercise of simply providing an understanding of what the parable might have meant to a first-century Palestinian audience, while undoubtedly of scholarly and historical interest, might not have been of too much use for people's religious or spiritual life at a later time.

The interpretations, for example, of the parables by St John Chrysostom (347-407) – his name means 'golden-mouthed' – were so impressive that St Thomas Aquinas 'said that he would rather possess Chrysostom's *Homilies* than be master of Paris.'¹⁶ Admittedly, Chrysostom represented the Antiochene school of exegesis, which was less sympathetic to the allegorical interpretation of scripture than the Alexandrian school. But perhaps in the past too much has been made of this old divergence. The main point to keep in mind is that the patristic writers were all trying to unearth the religious meaning of scripture. They were not antiquarian historians.

Thus, Chrysostom's advice about the parables was as follows: 'Interpret the elements in the parables that are urgent and essential . . . do not waste time on all the details . . . seek out the scope for which the parable was designed . . . and be not overbusy with the rest.' And as Hunter indicates:

16. Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables*, 28.

In his *Homilies* he practised what he preached. Discoursing on The Marriage Feast [*Matt. Hom. lxiv, 3*], he says there is no need to seek out special meanings for 'the dinner, the oxen and the fat calves', since these but provide the necessary background to the tale. And he has a refreshing way of going for the main point of each parable. Thus (he says) The Mustard Seed and The Leaven deal with the divine power of the Gospel [*Matt. Hom. xlvii, 2*], as The Hid Treasure and The Costly Pearl suggest its great value.¹⁷

RAISING QUESTIONS

The popular allegorizing tradition of interpreting the parables for most of the Church's long history was called abruptly and radically into question by modern scriptural exegetes. The most important name to retain in this regard is that of the German scholar Adolf Jülicher (1857-1938). In 1888-89 he published a large, two-volume study of the parables which overturned, or at least sought to overturn, a long tradition of allegorizing that had lasted eighteen centuries. Jülicher 'insisted that the parables of Jesus were simple, moralizing stories. The parables had one point, and no one should seek hidden meaning in the details or characters of the parables; allegory is a literary figure, and Jesus was a simple preacher' (p. 984).

Yet Jülicher's position, if adopted in its totality, would seem to fly in the face of what the Gospel texts themselves seem clearly enough to be saying. Apart from the few examples already mentioned, which are actually given an allegorical interpretation by Jesus within the gospels themselves, if one takes a parable like that of the Wicked Husbandmen (also known as the parable of the Tenants in the Vineyard) which occurs in all three synoptic gospels (Mt 21:33-41; Mk 12:1-9; Lk 20:9-16), it seems to have undeniable allegorical features in all three versions.

The American exegete, Raymond Brown, commenting on Jülicher's approach, wrote: 'If one were to follow Jülicher's principle strictly, the allegorical features would indicate that the parable could not be attributed to Jesus but would have to be regarded as a literary creation of the early Church' (p. 984). In other words, an allegorical dimension to any parable would, for Jülicher, indicate that the parable, as narrated

in the Gospels, could not be regarded as stemming from Jesus. How damaging this would be, if it were the case, can perhaps be exaggerated, it should be said.

In rediscovering an essential element of the parable (in the sense of a 'short narrated story') as a literary genre, namely that it seeks to make just one significant point, Jülicher may, however, have pushed his insight beyond what was really necessary or what the texts themselves would warrant. Like many who have new insights, he may have allowed his own new insight to blind him to other legitimate aspects of the question he was seeking to clarify, or to cause him to dismiss much too cavalierly other, long-established ways of reading the parables. And it must surely give one pause for thought, when any modern interpreter of Christianity suddenly announces that what had been believed about the substance of the Christian message for so many centuries has in effect been a long history of misunderstanding, and that the 'real' meaning of the Christian faith or the Bible, or – in the specific case that concerns us here – the parables, has suddenly come to light, thanks to the illuminating power of the modern interpreter's insight.

This, I think, is a feature of modern theology that would seem to merit closer scrutiny. And it may well be linked to the fact that modern theology is itself, to a great extent, a reaction to the Enlightenment. And the Enlightenment's characteristic instinct is to dismiss most of what went before it, if it appears not to have been produced under the guidance of pure reason. In this perspective, the past tends to be interpreted as benighted and obscurantist, and hence worthy only of rejection. Perhaps it was, then, inevitable that, in trying to take account of the genuine and serious concerns of the Enlightenment, Christian theologians and exegetes should have been inclined almost unwittingly to narrow their own focus and to substitute for a more broadly based understanding of the Christian faith, the Enlightenment's own fundamental act of faith in rationality's unique competence in dealing with human affairs.

To return to Jülicher's theory of the parables, it overlooks the fact that the New Testament concept of parable covers a multitude of literary figures of speech and literary genres. It doesn't just cover the

17. Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables*, 27-28.

fairly strict notion of parable as delineated by classical literary theory. Raymond Brown comments further:

It is clear that, while the parables have one principal point, many of them are not free from allegorical features. This is evident if one approaches the parables of Jesus from a Semitic viewpoint rather than from the technical distinctions of classical oratory. Hebrew has one word for these figures of speech, *mashal*, which covers all the Greek divisions and more. Under *mashal* are grouped, in the OT and the rabbinical writings, proverbs, maxims, symbols, riddles, parables, allegories, and fables. The *parabolē* of the Greek NT is the equivalent of *mashal*. Subsumed under it are proverbs (Lk 4.23), maxims (Lk 14.7-11), riddles (Mk 7.15-17), examples (Lk 12.15-21), figurative speech (Mk 4.33), similes (Mt 13.33), metaphors (Mt 5.14), and, finally, parables, and parables with simple allegorical characteristics (p. 984).

The evidence of the New Testament use of the term 'parable' cannot, then, be adequately interpreted if we rely only on Jülicher's understanding of what a parable is. His theory provides a false or over-rigid grid for reading a text that undoubtedly has features coming from the Jewish literary tradition. Indeed, even in the Gospel of John, while, as was indicated earlier, the term *parabolē* does not occur, another term does, *paroimia*. And it 'also covers a range of figurative speech (16.25)' (p. 984).

DODD AND JEREMIAS

In the last century, the next important exegetical work dealing with the parables after Jülicher's was that of the English scholar, C. H. Dodd (1884-1973) who published what was to become a highly influential book in the history of the interpretation of the gospel parables, called *Parables of the Kingdom* (1935). According to Hunter, this represented a 'revolutionary advance' on Jülicher's contribution to the understanding of the parables. A few years after Dodd published his ground-breaking work, another German scholar, Joachim Jeremias (1900-1979), building on Dodd's work in his own important book entitled *Parables of Jesus*

(1947) – a revised English edition of which was published in 1963¹⁸ – wrote 'that it is unthinkable there should ever be any retreat from Dodd's basic insights.'¹⁹ Both Dodd and Jeremias sought to restore the gospel parables to their original historical context, in order, it was hoped, to allow them to be understood as Jesus first would have taught or spoken them.

A word of caution is in order at this point. For, an interesting sidelight has recently been cast by literary scholar Frank Kermode on the question of how valuable the historical contextualization of a parable really can be. In his book, *The Genesis of Secrecy*, mentioned earlier, Kermode argues that the interpretation of the parable of the Wicked Husbandmen advanced by, for example, Jeremias and Dodd, and which claims that the parable 'reflects the resentment felt by Galilean tenant farmers towards their absentee foreign landlords,' simply turns the parable 'into a somewhat ridiculous fable about current affairs.'²⁰ In other words, it doesn't really advance any profound or religious understanding of the parable, valid for all ages. It doesn't help us to see 'what ensures the survival of meaning after the disappearance of the original historical setting; and that meaning arises from a kind of conversation between the interpreter and the text.'²¹

Yet Kermode's strictures on the approach of scholars like Dodd and Jeremias perhaps only applies to certain aspects of their work, to their attempts to rediscover the historical context of the parables. They still have valuable things to say about the actual religious meaning of the parables.

How, then, did Dodd and Jeremias advance on Jülicher's position? To quote Hunter again:

They put the parables of Jesus back into their true setting, which is the ministry of Jesus seen as the great eschatological act of God in which he visited and redeemed his people.²²

18. Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables*, 39.

19. Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables*, 39.

20. *The Genesis of Secrecy*, 44, commenting on the approach of Paul Ricoeur to the question of interpretation.

21. *The Genesis of Secrecy*, 44.

22. Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables*, 39.

The term 'eschatological' we should pause on for a moment. It refers to the notion of the 'last things', in Greek the *eschata*. And, in the particular context of the late nineteenth century onwards, it became a very important term in Christian theology and church life generally.

The scholars usually associated with the rediscovery, as one could call it, of the eschatological nature of Christianity are Johannes Weiss (1863-1914) and Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965). But before them, Franz Overbeck (1837-1905), who taught in Basel, had stressed the centrality of early Christianity's eschatological claims. Such thinkers argued that Christianity began as a religion stressing the imminent end of the world, and hence it is only from this perspective that concepts like the kingdom of God can be properly understood.

LOOKING TO THE KINGDOM OF GOD

And this is vitally important, because, as Hunter points out, the kingdom of God 'is the central concept of the Gospels and the theme of all the parables.'²³ Yet while it may well be the central concept of all the parables, it is still legitimate to ask if it has to be interpreted from a thoroughgoing eschatological perspective.

In his own interpretation of the parables, Benedict XVI tends to side with Dodd and to see the rule or kingdom of God, incarnate in Jesus, as their essential message, rather than accepting the emphasis of German theology's exegesis of the parables as warnings about, or evocations of, the imminent end of the world. Benedict's own exegesis is marked by a reluctance to force the parables into any preconceived strait-jacket, whether liberal-humanistic (as with Jülicher) or eschatological (as with Overbeck, Weiss and Schweitzer).

Despite their differing emphases, however, what most interpreters of the parables, after Jülicher, seem to agree on is that with Jesus the final or eschatological purpose of God's creative and redemptive outreach to the world has, for Christian faith, been revealed, indeed enacted. In Jesus the whole purpose and justification of world history has been realized. Thus, all Jesus' teaching, and hence the parables, have to be understood against this backdrop, or in this context, or from this

23. Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables*, 39.

perspective. When the parables speak, therefore, of the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven (and this is particularly the case with the parables in Matthew, where the specific theme of the kingdom is prominent and pervasive), they are not speaking of it 'as some moral disposition in the heart of man or as some utopian society to be built by his efforts, but as the decisive intervention of the living God on the stage of human history for man's salvation.'²⁴ And for the gospels, this 'intervention of God in human affairs' has now happened. It is no longer just a hope for the future, but has been realized in the life and ministry of Jesus.²⁵ This is what is sometimes in theological jargon known as 'realized eschatology', a useful enough shorthand way of trying to describe the good news that Christian faith has to proclaim.

In the gospels this divine intervention in human affairs, in the life and ministry of Jesus, is accomplished not with the weapons of the world, the power and assertiveness of human ambition, but with the paradoxical 'weapons' of powerlessness and suffering and service. Jesus, the suffering servant, reveals the human face of God who by his endurance and love can take away the sins of the world and open the way to heaven for his disciples.

Also in the last century, a significant contribution to the interpretation of the parables was made by German theologians like Martin Dibelius (1883-1947) and Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976), often called 'form critics'. Essentially, such scholars attempted to retrace the history of the synoptic tradition, and show how the material as we now have it in the gospels reached its final form after a process of oral development, in which 'the parables circulated singly or in pairs and were used by the early Christian preachers for preaching and teaching.'²⁶ In this long process, the original setting of the various parables often slipped from view. What writers like Dodd and Jeremias then strove to do, among other things, was to relocate the parables in their original setting (*Sitz im Leben*) in the life and ministry of Jesus.²⁷

24. Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables*, 40.

25. See Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables*, 40.

26. A. M. Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables* (London: SCM, 1966), 40.

27. See Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables*, 41.