

JESUS AS STORY TELLER: LITERARY PERSPECTIVES ON THE PARABLES

Simon J. Kistemaker*

Several literary features of Jesus' parables are noteworthy. In some respects Matthew's recorded parables differ from Luke's in presenting colorless sketches. Luke's parables, on the other hand, are vivid and full of color. Parables in both Gospels, however, are characterized by contrasts. All the parables demonstrate artistry in their unity, coherence, balance, contrast, recurrence, and symmetry. Jesus' repetition of similar parables on separate occasions illustrates His goal of giving emphasis by way of repetition. By using open-ended parables, Jesus drew His listeners into real-life situations and presented them with the need for a decision on their parts. Allegory in Jesus' parables brought people into familiar surroundings and highlighted the mercy of God toward sinners. All in all, the parables of Jesus were in a category all their own and were quite distinct from other parabolic teachings in their timelessness and universality.

* * * * *

Many have appreciated Jesus' parables, but all too often specific literary techniques of those parables have gone unnoticed. Attention to those techniques helps to explain why these masterpieces are unparalleled down through the ages in their impact on the world of humanity.

Characteristics

The parables of Jesus appear only in the three Synoptic Gospels, not in the Gospel of John. The Gospel of Mark features merely six parables and of these six only one is peculiar to Mark, namely, the parable of the seed growing secretly (Mark 4:26-29). While Matthew presents ten parables that are peculiar to him, Luke has a total of sixteen. From the storehouse of Jesus' parables, Matthew has selected those that he presents in black and white sketches. For instance, the pearl merchant is an ordinary person who fails to come to life. By contrast, the parables Luke has selected sparkle in their crispness, are vivid in the portrayal of life, and are colorful in design. In these parables the people talk, as in the case of the rich man who,

*Professor Kistemaker served as Secretary-Treasurer of the Evangelical Theological Society for many years and is currently Professor Emeritus at Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando, Florida.

reaping a bumper crop, built bigger and better barns (Luke 12). Even in the parable of the lost sheep recorded by both Matthew and Luke, this difference is obvious. Upon finding the lost sheep, the shepherd, filled with joy, returns home and calls together his friends and neighbors and says, "Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep" (Luke 15:6). Matthew merely records that the man is happy (Matt 18:13). It almost seems as if Matthew is taking his pictures on film that is black-and-white while Luke uses color.¹

Matthew's style is to present contrast, that is, five virgins are wise and five are foolish. The king forgives his indebted servant who owes him a tremendous sum of money, but this servant refuses to show mercy to a fellow servant whose debt to him is minuscule. A farmer sows wheat but his enemy scatters weeds in that same field. Some workers in the vineyard grumble about their wages, while others are thankful and rejoice because of their master's generosity. The children in the marketplace are either glad or sad, and the fisherman's catch yields fish that are both good and bad.

The parables Luke has chosen also feature contrast. Take for example the parable of the Good Samaritan. The contrast is one of the Jewish clergy of priest and Levite over against a Samaritan. The nameless rich man who suffers in hell is contrasted to Lazarus who occupies a place next to father Abraham in heaven. The picture of the Pharisee who relates his deeds in boastful prayer on the temple grounds is in stark contrast to that of the tax collector who utters the cry, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

Artistry

The parables Jesus told are unique in structure and design. They exhibit artistry with respect to unity, coherence, balance, contrast, recurrence, and symmetry.² To illustrate, take the parable of the lost son that consists of two parts. The first half describes the younger son, the second half his older brother. Although the first part forms a complete unit, yet it needs the second part to finish the story. This parable has unity, for the father is the unifying figure who welcomes home both the prodigal son and his brother. He is evenhanded. He runs toward his wayward son and embraces him. He also leaves the house filled with merriment to invite the older son to participate in the joy of welcoming his brother who was dead but is alive again, was lost but has been found.

The parable also has coherence which becomes evident in the opening line of the lost son parable: "There was a man who had two sons." The two successive parts (Luke 15:11-24 and 25-32) in sequence reveal an inner coherence. The one does not function without the other. Actually Jesus devotes equal attention to all three characters in the parable: the father, the younger son, and his brother. And with a few strokes of his brush He vividly paints the moving scene of the squandering young man, the punctilious older son, and the even-handed father.

¹Simon J. Kistemaker, *The Parables: Understanding the Stories Jesus Told* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002) 225.

²Compare Leland Ryken, *The Word of God in English: Criteria for Excellence in Bible Translation* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2002) 161.

Next, the recurrence of the same phrases and clauses predominates in the parable of the lost son. The young man comes to his senses in a pigpen and formulates his thoughts as to how he is going to address his father: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son, make me like one of your hired men" (Luke 15:18-19). When he meets his father, he utters the exact same words with the exception of the clause, "make me like one of your hired men." He could not utter these words after the father embraced and accepted him as his son. The phrases *kill the fattened calf*, *dead and is alive again*, and *lost and is found* appear at the end of the first part and emerge again at the end of the second part.

The symmetry in this parable is striking indeed as is evident in the inverted sequence of the son who left, squandered his goods, was rejected, repented, was accepted, received goods, and was restored.³

Emphasis

Some parables highlight only two persons or groups. They are the two builders: one built his house on the rock, the other on sand. The one son told his father that he would not work in the vineyard but later changed his mind and worked. The other son said he would work but never did. The generous landowner is placed over against the grumbling workmen. The five foolish virgins are a contrast to the five wise virgins.

Other parables include three people: the king, the debtor, and fellow servant (Matthew 18); the priest, the Levite, and the Samaritan (Luke 10); the father, the younger son, and his brother (Luke 15); the servant who received five talents, his companion who received two, and the lazy servant who received only one talent (Matthew 25). The emphasis in these parables falls on the last one who is portrayed as an example that must be either followed or avoided.⁴

Then Matthew and Luke have the so-called double parables that differ in respect to setting, time, and audience. Jesus told the wedding banquet parable a few days before His death (Matthew 22), but He delivered the great supper parable as an after-dinner speech in the home of a prominent Pharisee (Luke 14). He educated His disciples with the parable of the lost sheep (Matthew 18) and repeated it when He addressed Pharisees and teachers of the law (Luke 15). Jesus taught the parable of the talents in the context of eschatology (Matthew 25), but He told the story of the pounds or minas on the way to Jerusalem where He celebrated His last Passover feast (Luke 19). Teaching orally by way of repetition, Jesus was at liberty to use the same material at different occasions. His method of repeating the same material exhibits emphasis. In fact, the Hebrew verb למד (*lmd*) means *to teach* and conveys the inherent meaning of *to repeat, exercise, or become accustomed to*. In other words, the implication is to teach by repetition.

³Refer to Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* (reprint; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) 160.

⁴Compare A. M. Hunter, "Interpreting the Parables. I. The Interpreter and the Parables. The Centrality of the Kingdom," *Interpretation* 14 (1960):71-76. Also see Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 272.

Reality

Some of Jesus' parables seem to have a conclusion that is open-ended as in the case of the parable of the lost son. We are not told whether the older son stayed outside or entered the home to join the festive gathering. The immoral woman who anointed Jesus feet went home in peace because her sins were forgiven. We do not know whether Simon the Pharisee acted on Jesus' words and confessed his sin (Luke 7). But these omissions reveal the express purpose of the parables, namely, to confront the reader with hidden sin that must be uncovered to bring him or her to repentance. Jesus engages His listeners by proposing a hypothetical situation or asking them questions at the outset of a parable: "Suppose one of you" (Luke 11:5; 14:28; 15:4; and 17:7); "Suppose a woman" (Luke 15:8); "Which of you fathers?" (Matt 7:9; Luke 11:11); and others.⁵

Jesus' teaching method involves the hearers or readers in the context of the parables. It removes them from their comfort zones and places them in the story to become active participants. The hearers of the parable of the lost son are the Pharisees and teachers of the law who are portrayed by the older son. They are invited to come and participate in the joy of the forgiven son who personifies the tax collectors and moral outcasts. But if they refuse to come, they in effect are the ones who are lost and dead.

All ten virgins fell asleep, but when the bridegroom came and the procession started, only the five wise virgins entered the banquet room. After buying oil to replenish their lamps, the five foolish knocked on the door but were refused entrance. They were not accused of falling asleep but of failing to make adequate preparations for an appointed task.⁶ The lesson of the parable is that a person's intended or unintended neglect makes him or her unfit for Christ's service. In the end, this person is excluded from God's kingdom. Hence, the ending of a parable often seeks to bring people to repentance.

Take the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10) in which the intended message is to love the neighbor as oneself. It is a call to show mercy to people who lie wounded alongside the Jericho road of human suffering. The concept *neighbor* is not limited to friends and acquaintances, but includes people who are deprived of essential needs, including food and clothing. Jesus' message to the teacher of the law, "Go and do likewise," is echoed by James who wrote in his epistle, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says" (James 1:22).

Allegory

The examples Jesus used in telling His parables are true to life and people relate to them without any difficulty. He relates stories of events that could have happened in the daily lives of the people of that day. Anyone could readily identify with the roles people filled, work that they did, relations that were broken and restored, losses they sustained and happiness they experienced. These parables have no exaggerations, with the exception of the story of the official who had to pay the

⁵Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 8.

⁶Kistemaker, *Parables* 117.

king an amount of 10,000 talents. But notice that Josephus records the story of King Herod the Great who had to pay Caesar the annual revenue of 900 talents from his kingdom.⁷ By comparison, the financial officer responsible for Asia Minor would have had to pay Rome at least ten times as much. In addition, note that the word *debt* (Greek δάνειον, *daneion*) appears in this parable, which is somewhat incongruous because the paying of revenues does not constitute a debt, but a postponement of these payments definitely incurs debt. I interpret the word *debt* to mean that the financial officer had fallen behind in his payments, had asked the king to give him additional time, which was granted, and then gradually, year after year, the official amassed a debt he was unable to pay. In short, the exaggeration of 10,000 talents is based on fact and not on fiction. Nonetheless, the message of this segment of the parable is that God shows incredible mercy toward those indebted to him.

The conclusion must be drawn that Jesus' parables cannot be described as allegories and placed in the same category as John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* or the *Narnia* tales of C. S. Lewis. If we say that certain characters represent someone else, we admit that there are allegorical elements in the parables.⁸ Thus, in the parable of the lost son, the father represents God, the spendthrift son signifies the tax collectors and prostitutes of his day, and the older brother characterizes the Pharisees and teachers of the law. The parable of the wedding banquet associates the king with God and his son with Jesus; the guests who refuse to come are the Pharisees and chief priests, and the common people taken off the streets are God's chosen people who obey him. Interpreting the parables of the sower and the weeds, respectively, Jesus shows the disciples what the components mean: e.g., the sower is the Son of man, the seed is the Word of God, the enemy is the devil, and the harvesters are the angels. Jesus provided an explanation for these two parables, but the rest of them lack interpretation. This points to the conclusion that "the occasional explicit interpretations of parables in the Gospels are additional exceptions to Jesus' usual practice, and that they too are not to be taken as normative."⁹ In brief, when we mention allegorical elements, we admit that we employ the term only in a restrictive sense of an exceptional case and not as a consistent rule.

Other Sources of Parables

In addition to the well-known parable about the poor man's ewe lamb (2 Sam 12:1-4) told by the prophet Nathan in the presence of King David, a number of Old Testament parables are in story form. They are the parable of the trees (Judg 9:8-15), the song of the vineyard (Isa 5:1-7) the story of the two eagles and the vine

⁷Josephus, *Antiquities* 17.11.4 [318-20]. In *Antiquities*, 12.4.4 [176] he writes that Joseph son of Tobias offered to collect 8,000 talents in taxes for King Ptolemy from Coelosyria, Phoenicia, Judea and Samaria. Scott (*Parables* 274 n.25) takes the amount of 10,000 as an exaggeration and should not be taken literally.

⁸Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1990) 17. See also Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretations: Past and Present* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1996) 501; Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 146-47.

⁹Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* 17.

(Ezek 17:2-10), and others.

Jesus was fully acquainted with the Scriptures and had taken note of OT parables to create His own genre. That both the Hebrew Bible and Hellenistic literature lack such a genre is a fact.¹⁰

Numerous rabbinic parables have been collected, but they date from a time that is more than a century after Jesus' ministry.¹¹ The Dead Sea Scrolls contain at least one parable that is older than or contemporaneous with those of Jesus.

Did rabbis in Jesus' days teach by means of parables? Craig A. Evans answers this question by writing, "It seems wisest to assume that at least *some* of the rabbis who taught during the time of Jesus made use of the parables as well."¹² Perhaps rabbinic scholars of later centuries took note of Jesus' parables. Although both Jesus and the rabbis have a similar background rooted in the OT and traditions, they have differences.¹³ One of them is that the rabbinic parables are applications of the Law and interpretations of scriptural passages, while Jesus' parables set forth the theme of God's forgiving love as an extension and further development of God's revelation. For instance, the love of God the Father is depicted in the father of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). Jesus highlights God's grace and generosity in the parable of the vineyard, whose owner deals with his hired men like no other employer ever had (Matt 20:1-16).

Especially in the Gospel of Matthew and to a lesser extent in those parables of Mark and Luke, the theme of the kingdom of heaven or God is prominent. Matthew has at least ten parables that are labeled kingdom parables. He uses the introductory phrase "the kingdom of heaven is like" for these parables: wheat and weeds, mustard seed, yeast, hidden treasure, pearl, fishnet, unforgiving servant, workers in the vineyard, wedding banquet, and ten virgins. The parable of the talents may be added as a follow-up to the preceding one of the ten virgins. And last, the parable of the sower is placed in the context of "the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 13:11). Even though the theme of king and kingdom appears in rabbinic parables, the Gospel of Matthew develops this theme. It reveals that the kingdom of light has broken into the kingdom of darkness and has demonstrated the liberating power of the Son of God. These aspects are absent in the rabbinic parables. Those of Jesus are placed in a given context; rabbinic parables are not and stand by themselves.

¹⁰Consult Scott, *Parables* 63.

¹¹Klyne R. Snodgrass, "From Allegorizing to Allegorizing," in *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 18. He notes that about 1,500 rabbinic parables have been collected. See also Brad H. Young, *Jesus and His Jewish Parables* (New York: Paulist, 1989); Clemens Thoma and Michael Wyschogrod, eds., *Parable and Story in Judaism and Christianity* (New York: Paulist, 1989); Harvey K. McArthur and Robert M. Johnston, *They Also Taught in Parables* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).

¹²Craig A. Evans, "Parables in Early Judaism" in *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables* 51 [emphasis in the original].

¹³James Breech in *Jesus and Postmodernism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) points to the results of a study of Hellenistic and Greco-Roman periods with respect to parables. He notes that "Jesus' parables were dissimilar from all those extant to three hundred years before his time and three hundred years after him" (25).

Still other aspects illustrate a difference between the parables of Jesus and those of the rabbis. First, as the Son of God, Jesus expanded and developed God's revelation. The parables of Jesus are part of good news of salvation and therefore part of God's Word. This cannot be said of the parables the rabbis taught. Next, in His parables Jesus revealed God's plan of redeeming His people from the power of Satan. The father of the lost son twice mentions the joy of knowing that his son who was spiritually dead was alive again (Luke 15:24 and 32). The rabbinic parables lack this feature. Third, the parables of Jesus stress the great themes of the kingdom of God. They are the love, grace, and mercy of God toward sinners who went astray. Jesus' parables teach that God reaches out to them and displays His loving kindness and compassion.

Jesus taught new truths as the messenger commissioned to make known God's will and Word (John 3:34). He taught His parables to impart the message of salvation in a clear and understandable manner. In the parables, the common people met Jesus as the Son of God who on His own authority brought the message of God's redeeming love.

Jesus' parables are inspired; and therefore have divine authority. They are characterized by the breath of God (θεόπνευστος, *theopneustos*, 2 Tim 3:16), that is, they are inspired by God. Rabbinic parables fall short of divine inspiration. What can be said of them is that they feature interpretations of a biblical text or applications of Israel's tradition. But they fail to inspire the people who read or hear these parables. And as a consequence they are generally unknown.

Conclusion

The kingdom parables in the Synoptic Gospels always display comparisons. The introductory phrase that Jesus uses is, "The kingdom of heaven is like." Hence, the kingdom of heaven is compared to a man, a mustard seed, yeast, a treasure, or a pearl. That is, A (God's kingdom) is compared to B (people or objects). But the question is, "How is B compared to C (the hearers and readers)?" What is the hidden meaning the hearer and reader must discover? This is called the third of comparison, which can be readily seen in the Good Samaritan parable where Jesus told the teacher of the law, "Go and do likewise."

Many of Jesus' parables conclude with an element of surprise.¹⁴ For example, the poor, the lame, and the blind are the guests at the great supper; all the workers in the vineyard receive the same wage; and the tax collector goes home justified. A dishonest steward is commended; a widow receives justice; a shepherd finds his lost sheep and a woman her coin.

The parables Jesus taught are timeless and universal. Throughout the centuries they have addressed and continue to address people of all ages, nationalities, and races. In their crispness, they sparkle; they are novel, pertinent, and always exhibit inherent power.

¹⁴Hultgren, *Parables of Jesus* 10.