

Parable

The English word *parable* refers to a short narrative with two levels of meaning. The Greek and Hebrew words for “parable” are much broader. Jesus’ parables are both works of art and the weapons he used in the conflict with his opponents. They were the teaching method he chose most frequently to explain the kingdom of God (see Kingdom of God) and to show the character of God* and the expectations God has for people. Despite the tradition that argues Jesus’ parables have only one point, many parables convey two or three truths, and there may be several correspondences between a specific parable and the reality it portrays.

1. History of Interpretation
2. Definition of *Parabolē* and Related Terms
3. Characteristics of the Parables
4. The Use of Parables Prior to Jesus
5. Distribution of the Parables in the Gospels
6. The Authenticity of the Parables
7. The Purpose of the Parables
8. Guidelines for Interpretation
9. The Teaching of the Parables

1. History of Interpretation

A history of interpretation is virtually a prerequisite for studying Jesus’ parables. That history must be framed in relation to the work of A. Jülicher, a German NT scholar whose two-volume work on the parables (1888, 1889) has dominated parable studies, even though it has never been translated.

1.1. Before Jülicher. Throughout most of the church’s history Jesus’ parables have been allegorized instead of interpreted. That is, people read into the parables elements of the church’s theology that had nothing to do with Jesus’ intention. The best-known example of this is Augustine’s interpretation of the parable of the good Samaritan (Lk 10:30–37) in which virtually every item was given theological significance: the man is Adam; Jerusalem is the heavenly city; Jericho is the moon, which stands for our mortality; the robbers are the devil (see Demon, Devil, Satan) and his angels* who strip the man of his immortality and beat him by persuading him to sin; the priest and Levite are the priesthood (see Priest and Priesthood) and the ministry of the OT; the good Samaritan* is Christ*; the binding of the wounds is the restraint of sin; the oil and wine are the comfort of hope and the encouragement to work; the animal is the Incarnation; the inn is the church; the next day is after the resurrection of Christ; the innkeeper is the apostle Paul; and the two denarii are the two commandments* of love* or the promise of this life and that which is to come (*Quaest. Evan.* 2.19). Similarly, Gregory the Great allegorized the parable of the barren fig tree (Lk 13:6–9) so that the three times the owner came looking for fruit represent God’s coming before the Law* was given, his coming at the time the Law was written, and his coming in grace and mercy in Christ. The vinedresser (see Vine) represents those who rule the church, and the digging and dung refer to the rebuking of unfruitful people and the remembrance of sins (*Hom.* 31).

Some, such as John Chrysostom of the school of Antioch and John Calvin did not allegorize the parables, but until the end of the nineteenth century allegorizing was the dominant means of interpretation.

1.2. Jülicher. Although others before him had argued against allegorizing, Jülicher's two-volume work on the parables sounded the death knell on this interpretive procedure. Jülicher denied that Jesus used allegory (a series of related metaphors) or allegorical traits (where a point in the story stands for something else in reality). Where allegory or allegorical traits occur, such as in the parable of the sower and the parable of the wicked tenants, the Evangelists are to blame. Jülicher viewed Jesus' parables as simple and straightforward comparisons that do not require interpretation. They have only one point of comparison: between the image and the idea being expressed. That one point is usually a general religious maxim. The parables are extended similes, whereas allegories are extended metaphors. Like metaphors, allegories are inauthentic speech and must be decoded. Jesus' purpose was not to obscure, therefore his parables cannot be viewed as allegories.

1.3. After Jülicher. All subsequent studies of the parables have had to deal with Jülicher's views. There were early attacks on Jülicher's arguments, particularly by P. Fiebig (beginning in 1904), who argued that Jülicher derived his understandings of parables from Greek rhetoric rather than from the Hebrew world where allegorical parables are common. Others recognized that Jülicher had thrown out allegory, a literary form, while the problem was *allegorizing*, the interpretive procedure of reading into the parables a theology that Jesus did not intend. Few today would accept Jülicher's descriptions of metaphor or his argument that the parables give general religious maxims. There have been devastating critiques of his description of allegory, but even so, people often still speak of one point for parables and are suspicious of any parts of Jesus' parables that have allegorical significance. In addition, there have been several stages through which parable interpretation has gone.

1.3.1. C. H. Dodd and J. Jeremias. The Dodd and Jeremias era of parable studies extends from 1935 to roughly 1970, although Jeremias' book on the parables is still influential. Jeremias' work was an extension of Dodd's and both were influenced by Jülicher. Both Dodd and Jeremias tried to understand the parables of Jesus in their historical and eschatological context (see Eschatology). Both attempted to remove allegorical elements from the parables. Dodd understood Jesus' message as realized eschatology: the kingdom had already arrived. Parables about harvest are not about a coming end time but about the time of Jesus' earthly ministry.

Jeremias sought to provide historical and cultural evidence for understanding the parables and, under the influence of form criticism, to ascertain a given parable's original form by stripping away allegorical features or other additions supplied by the early church. Typically this led to a reconstruction of the supposedly original form of a given parable. Almost invariably the context in the Gospels, the introductions, the conclusions, and any interpretive comments were considered secondary. Such shortened, de-allegorized forms are close to the versions of the parables in the *Gospel of Thomas*, a collection of sayings of Jesus dating probably from the second century (see Gospels [Apocryphal]). The relation of the *Gospel of Thomas* to the canonical

Gospels, its date and its character are all debated. The fact that Jeremias and others had suggested shorter forms of the parables before the discovery of *Thomas* was made known has erroneously led some to argue that *Thomas* preserves the original form of some of the parables.

While granting the presence of the kingdom in Jesus' ministry, Jeremias described Jesus' message as an eschatology in the process of realization. In his parables Jesus presented people with a crisis of decision and invited them to respond to God's mercy*. Jeremias' influence has been so strong that N. Perrin argued that future interpretation of the parables should be interpretation of the parables as Jeremias has analyzed them (101).

1.3.2. Existentialist, Structuralist and Literary Approaches. Several modern approaches to parables have grown out of philosophical currents and partly out of dissatisfaction with the focus of Dodd and Jeremias on a historical approach. While seeking something more than the merely historical, however, these approaches still follow Jeremias in stripping off allegorical and interpretive additions. The new hermeneutic of E. Fuchs and E. Jünger focused on the power of Jesus' parables to bring to expression the reality to which they point. The parables are viewed as "language events" (*Sprachereignisse*). In the parables Jesus expresses his understanding of his own existence in such a way that this existence is available to his hearers. The parables are a summons to this existence.

Similarly, G. V. Jones, A. N. Wilder and D. Via all have focused on the artistic and existential character of the parables. Especially for Via the parables are not bound by the author's intention. They are aesthetic works which address the present because in their patterns is an understanding of existence that calls for decision.

K. Bailey's work on the parables is noteworthy because of his detailed focus on the rhetorical structure of the parables as well as his interpretation in light of the Palestinian mindset, a mindset he encountered as a missionary in Lebanon.

In the decade between 1970 and 1980 structuralist approaches dominated parable studies. Structuralists were not concerned for historical meaning or the author's intention. Rather they sought to compare both surface and deep structures of various texts; that is, they sought to compare the movements, motives, functions, oppositions and resolutions within texts. At times structuralist analyses have been helpful, such as J. D. Crossan's identification of the categories of advent, reversal and action as basic to understanding the parables. The kingdom of God comes as advent as a gift of God, as a reversal of a person's world, and as an empowering for action. For the most part, however, structuralist studies have been dominated by technical jargon and have not provided much additional insight.

The 1980s witnessed several discernible shifts in parable studies, largely because of the influence of literary criticism (see *Literary Criticism*). Although a concern for redactional emphases of the Gospel writers has been a focus since the 1950s, literary concerns have led to much more attention on the technique and purposes of the Evangelists in the composition of their works. Literary criticism has also tended to emphasize a reader-response approach in which a text's meaning is determined by the interaction of the reader with the text. This approach is highly subjective and yields a variety of meanings, all of which are considered correct. Such a polyvalent

understanding of texts invites the interpreter to be a “trained player” and read texts with as many different associations as desired. For example, the parable of the prodigal son can be read in light of Freudian psychology in which the prodigal, the elder brother and the father reflect the id, the super-ego and the ego. It can be read just as legitimately in other contexts with this method. However, such subjective readings of the parables are not interpretations at all; they are retellings of the stories in new contexts. To understand the message of Jesus one will have to do justice to the historical context in which the parables were told.

1.4. Interpretations Based on Comparisons with Jewish Parables. An alternative trend in recent parable studies focuses on insights gained by studying early rabbinic parables (see Rabbinic Traditions and Writings). Comparing Jewish parables to Jesus’ parables is not new. P. Fiebig had already done this in combatting Jülicher’s approach, and about the same time A. Feldman had collected Jewish parables that made such comparison easier. Now approximately 2,000 rabbinic parables have been collected. In recent years several works have appeared that discuss parable theory in light of rabbinic parables and rethink previous theories and interpretations. Most important of these is the research of D. Flusser, a Jewish NT scholar whose primary work has not yet been translated into English. Flusser’s work, and that of other scholars focusing on Judaism, challenges the conclusions not only of Jülicher, but also of Jeremias, of the reader-response approaches and of much of NT scholarship. Flusser acknowledges a thoroughgoing editing of the parables by the Evangelists, but he is optimistic about the reliability of the Gospel material. He argues that the contexts of the parables are usually correct and that the introductions and conclusions to the parables are necessary and usually derive from Jesus. He views the *Gospel of Thomas* as dependent on the Synoptic Gospels and as unimportant for researching the words of Jesus.

The distance some recent studies have moved from the works of Jülicher and Jeremias is evidenced in C. Blomberg’s treatment of the parables. Blomberg argues that the parables of Jesus, like the rabbinic parables, are allegories and usually have two or three points to make, depending on the number of main characters the parable has.

2. Definition of *Parabolē* and Related Terms.

The Greek word *parabolē* has a much broader meaning in the Gospels than the English word *parable*. It can be used of a proverb (Lk 4:23), a riddle (Mk 3:23), a comparison (Mt 13:33), a contrast (Lk 18:1–8) and both simple stories (Lk 13:6–9) and complex stories (Mt 22:1–14). This range of meaning derives from the Hebrew word *māšal* which is usually translated by *parabolē* in the LXX (28 of 39 occurrences). In addition *māšal* can be used of a taunt, a prophetic oracle or a byword. A *māšal* is any dark saying intended to stimulate thought.

The concept of a parable needs to be clarified beyond distinguishing the wide meanings of the words *parabolē* and *māšal*. Four forms of parables are often distinguished: similitude, example story, parable and allegory. A *similitude* is an extended simile (an explicit comparison using “like” or “as”). It is a comparison relating a typical or recurring event in real life and is often expressed in the present tense. The parable of the leaven (Mt 13:31–32) is a similitude. An *example story* presents a positive

or negative character (or both) who serves as an example to be imitated or whose traits and actions are to be avoided. Either explicitly or implicitly the example story says, “Go and do [or do not do] likewise” (cf. Lk 10:37). Usually only four Gospel parables, all in Luke, are identified as example stories: the good Samaritan, the rich fool, the rich man and Lazarus, and the pharisee and the tax collector. A *parable* is an extended metaphor (an implied comparison) referring to a fictional event or events narrated in past time to express a moral or spiritual truth. The parable of the banquet (Lk 14:15–24) would fit this definition. In this classification system an *allegory* is a series of related metaphors, and the parable of the sower would be an example of an allegory.

Although this fourfold classification is popular, many scholars find it unworkable. Some object to the category “example story,” but as long as one does not overlook that more may be involved in these stories than merely providing an example, this is a helpful classification. Clearly these stories are different from other parables in some respects. More troublesome is the supposed distinction between *parable* and *allegory*, which is among the most debated issues in NT studies. For some, such as M. Boucher, allegory is not a literary form at all, but a device of meaning; therefore, all parables are allegorical either as wholes or in their parts. Parables rarely have only one correspondence between the story and the reality being reflected, even though one should not view interpretation of the parables as the process of deciphering points. Parables are best defined as stories with two levels of meaning; the story level provides a mirror by which reality is perceived and understood. In effect, parables are imaginary gardens with real toads in them.

3. Characteristics of the Parables

Parables tend to be brief and symmetrical. They often make use of balanced structures involving two or three movements. They typically omit unnecessary descriptions and frequently leave motives unexplained and implied questions unanswered. They usually are taken from everyday life, but they are not necessarily realistic. Because of hyperbole or elements of improbability they often are pseudo-realistic and have elements that shock. For example, it is unlikely that anyone in first-century Palestine would owe a 10,000-talent debt (several million dollars) as in the parable of the unforgiving servant (Mt 18:23–35). In addition, parables elicit thought. Twenty-two parables start with a question such as “Who from you ...?” or “What do you think ...?” Parables frequently cause a hearer to pass judgment on the events in the story and then require a similar judgment about religious matters. Often the parables require a reversal in one’s thinking. The despised Samaritan is a neighbor; the tax collector (see Taxes), not the Pharisee*, is righteous (see Justice, Righteousness). The crucial matter is placed at the end of the parables, and correspondingly, “the rule of end stress” requires that the interpretation focus on the end of the parable. Although the parable of the wicked tenants has christological implications, most parables are theocentric in that they focus on God, his kingdom and his expectations for humans. Consequently, the parables are often invitations to changed behavior and discipleship*. The degree to which the theological referent is transparent varies from parable to parable.

4. The Use of Parables Prior to Jesus

Jesus was not the first person to teach by parables and stories. There are both Greek and Semitic antecedents, but there is no evidence of anyone prior to Jesus using parables as consistently, creatively and effectively as he did. There are so many rabbinic parables similar to the ones Jesus told that some scholars argue Jesus drew from a fund of popular stories or at least that he drew his themes and structures from such a fund. As always with the rabbinic evidence, the problem is that these writings are later than the time of the NT. Because there is so little actual evidence of teaching in parables prior to Jesus, some scholars argue that Jesus' use of parables was entirely new. There are no parables so far from Qumran and none in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha (excluding the so-called Similitudes of Enoch, which are apparently later in origin). Virtually none of the rabbinic parables is from as early as the first half of the first century. In addition to the problem of date, rabbinic parables, all of which are in Hebrew rather than Aramaic, primarily are used as a means to interpret Scripture, whereas Jesus did not use parables this way.

The OT does provide seven parables which are antecedents to Jesus' parables: Nathan's parable to David about the poor man and his lamb (2 Sam 12:1–10); the woman from Tekoa's story about her two sons (2 Sam 14:5–20); the prophet's acted parable condemning Ahab (1 Kings 20:35–40); the song of the vineyard (Is 5:1–7); the eagles and the vine (Ezek 17:2–10); the lioness and her cubs (Ezek 19:2–9); and the vine (Ezek 19:10–14). (Only Ezek 17:2–10 is explicitly called a *māšal*. In addition, Judg 9:7–15 and 2 Kings 14:9 contain fables.) Of these OT parables only Nathan's parable of the poor man and his lamb is a true parallel to the parables of Jesus.

5. Distribution of the Parables in the Gospels

Approximately one-third of Jesus' teaching is in parables. The Greek word *parabolē* occurs fifty times in the NT, and except for Hebrews 9:9 and 11:19 all the occurrences are in the Synoptic Gospels. Parables appear in all strata of the Synoptics. If one accepts the four-source hypothesis of Gospel origins, parables make up about sixteen percent of Mark, about twenty-nine percent of Q*, about forty-three percent of M* and about fifty-two percent of L*. John does not have story parables, but does have forms that would fit the broad sense of *māšal* such as the good shepherd (Jn 10; see Shepherd and Sheep) and the true vine (Jn 15). (John uses the word *paroimia* four times. This word is similar in some respects to *parabolē*.)

An exact number of the parables cannot be given since there is no agreement among scholars as to which forms should be classified as a parable. There are thirty forms explicitly labeled *parabolē*, but this includes proverbs (Lk 4:23); riddles (Mk 3:23); short sayings (Mk 7:15) and questions (Lk 6:39). There are at least forty parables on a more restricted definition, but as many as sixty-five if one includes such items as Jesus' saying about a person with a beam in his or her eye trying to get a speck out of the eye of another (Mt 7:3–5).

The parables are thematically arranged in the Synoptics. Mark has only four story parables: in chapter four the sower, the mustard seed, the seed growing secretly; and in chapter twelve the wicked tenants. Except for the seed growing secretly, Matthew and Luke have Mark's story parables and both of them have the parables of the leaven and of the lost sheep. Both Matthew and Luke have parables about guests who reject

invitations to a feast (Mt 22:1–14; Lk 14:16–26) and about servants who are entrusted with money to invest (Mt 25:14–30; Lk 19:11–27). However, the wording is not close in either of these parallels, and whether Matthew and Luke are reporting the same parables or only similar parables is debated. Jesus, no doubt, told some of the parables more than once and offered several variations on the same basic structure. Matthew has arranged most of his parables in chapters 12–13, 18 and 20–25. He has at least twelve parables that are unique to him. Luke has placed most of his parables in chapters 10–19 of his so-called travel narrative. Luke has at least fifteen parables that are unique to him.

Fourteen parables occur among the sayings of the *Gospel of Thomas*, three of which are not recorded in the canonical Gospels. The *Apocryphon of James* also has three parables not recorded in the canonical Gospels.

The Parables of Jesus

Markan Parables

Mark

Matthew

Luke

Bridegroom's Guests

2:19–20

9:15

5:33–39

Unshrunk Cloth

2:21

9:16

5:36

New Wine

2:22

9:17

5:37–39

Strong Man Bound

3:22–27

12:29–30

11:21–23

Sower

4:1–9, 13–20

13:1–9, 18–23

8:4–8, 11–15

Lamp and Measure

4:21–25

8:16–18

Seed Growing Secretly

4:26–29

Mustard Seed

4:30–32

13:31–32

13:18–19

Wicked Tenants

12:1–12

21:33–46

20:9–19

Budding Fig Tree

13:28–32

24:32–36

21:29–33

Watchman

13:34–36

12:35–38

Parables Shared by Matthew and Luke (Q)

Wise and Foolish Builders

7:24–27

6:47–49

Father and Children' Requests

7:9–11

11:11–13

Two Ways/Doors

7:13–14

13:23–27

Leaven

13:31–32

13:20–21

Lost Sheep

18:12–14

15:1–7

Wedding Banquet

22:1–14

14:15–24

Thief in the Night

24:42–44

12:39–40

Faithful and Unfaithful Steward

24:45–51

12:42–46

Talents and Pounds

25:14–30

19:11–27

Parables Found Only in Matthew

Good and Bad Trees

7:16–20

Fishnet

13:47–50

Wheat and tares

13:24–30, 36–43

Treasure

13:44

Pearl

13:45–46

Unmerciful Servant

18:23–35

Laborers in the Vineyard

20:1–16

Two Sons

21:28–32

Wise and Foolish Maidens

25:1–13

Sheep and Goats

25:31–46

Parables Found Only in Luke

Two Debtors

7:41–50

Good Samaritan

10:25–37

Friend at Midnight

11:5–8

Rich Fool

12:13–21

Barren Fig Tree

13:6–9

Tower Builder

14:28–30

Warring King

14:31–33

Lost Sheep

15:1–7

Lost Coin

15:8–10

Prodigal Son

15:11–32

Unjust Steward

16:1–8

Rich Man and Lazarus

16:19–31

Humble Servant

17:7–10

Unjust Judge

18:1–8

Pharisee and Tax Collector

18:9–14

Parables Found only in John

18:9–14

Good Shepherd (10:1–18; cf. Mt 18:12–14; Lk 15:1–7)

True Vine (15:1–8)

6. The Authenticity of the Parables

Even scholars who are persuaded that the Gospel parables include additions by the early church still view the parables as providing some of the most authentic and reliable teaching from Jesus (*see* Form Criticism). Supporting evidence for this confidence is strong:

(1) The parables reflect the clarity and eschatology of Jesus' preaching and his conflict with Jewish authorities.

(2) They reflect daily life in Palestine.

(3) Little evidence exists that parables were used frequently prior to Jesus.

(4) In view of the fact that parables do not appear in the NT outside the Gospels and rarely in other early Christian literature, the early church shows no propensity for creating parables.

At the same time critical scholarship has gone to great lengths debating the authenticity of both the parts and the whole of specific parables. The so-called Jesus Seminar has even produced a Red Letter edition of the parables of Jesus which prints the wording of the parables in red, pink, gray or black reflecting the opinions respectively that Jesus said those words, said something like those words, did not say those words but expressed similar ideas, or did not say those words and the ideas are from a later time. Only three parables represented in the canonical tradition are printed entirely in black (the tower builder and the warring king, both in Lk 14:28–32, and the fishnet, Mt 13:47–50), and only four more in which all accounts are printed entirely in gray. (However, in these cases preference is often for the version of the parable in the *Gospel of Thomas*.)

While this underscores the confidence expressed in the parable tradition, the assumptions and procedures adopted by the Jesus Seminar and many other scholars are unacceptable. The Jesus Seminar, like so many earlier scholars, has succumbed to the tendency to find a Jesus who is amenable with modern expectations. Far too much preference is given to the *Gospel of Thomas*, which appears to derive from a second stage of the oral tradition. Furthermore, the rejection of the introductions and conclusions of the parables and of any allegorical significance is unjustified in light of recent research on Jewish parables. The oral tradition no doubt shaped the parables, and the Evangelists have clearly edited them in keeping with their stylistic tendencies and theological purposes. We can and should identify many such changes. However, any attempt to identify the *ipsissima verba* (the exact words) of Jesus is naive at best. The Gospels present the *ipsissima vox* (the very voice) of Jesus, and nowhere is that voice so clearly heard as in the parables.

7. The Purpose of the Parables

Often it has been said that the parables of Jesus are not merely illustrations of Jesus' preaching but are themselves the preaching. Clearly the parables are to engage and instruct, but it is not fair to say that the parables are themselves the preaching. Parables demand interpretation; they point to something else. They are not merely stories to enjoy. They hold up one reality to serve as a mirror of another, the kingdom of God. They are avenues to understanding, handles by which one can grasp the kingdom. Jesus told parables to confront people with the character of God's kingdom and to invite them to participate in it and to live in accordance with it.

Mark 4:10–12, however, seems to say the exact opposite. On the surface these verses argue that Jesus gives the secret of the kingdom only to his disciples. "To those outside all things are in parables in order that seeing they may see and not see, and hearing they may hear and not understand, lest they turn and it be forgiven them" (Mk 4:11–12). The latter part of this saying is from Isaiah 6:9–10.

An understanding of Mark requires attention to his technique, structure and theological emphases. Mark uses the technique of *bracketing* to provide insight into the individual sections of his Gospel. For example, the cleansing of the Temple (11:15–19; see Temple Cleansing) is bracketed by the cursing of the fig tree (11:12–14) and the lesson drawn from the withered fig tree (11:20–25). Furthermore, the material in 4:1–34 has been carefully arranged:

- 4:1–2—Narrative introduction telling that Jesus taught parables from a boat
- 4:3–9—The parable of the sower
- 4:10–12—Jesus alone with disciples with whom he contrasts those who are *outside*
- 4:13–20—Interpretation of the parable of the sower
- 4:21–25—Parabolic sayings about hearing
- 4:26–32—Parables of the seed growing secretly and the mustard seed
- 4:33–34—Narrative conclusion summarizing the intent of this section

Some argue that this structure is chiasmic, with the center of the chiasmus being the interpretation of the parable of the sower. (Chiasmus is a poetic a b b' a' pattern.) Note that in 4:35–41 Jesus and his disciples are back in the boat. This section picks up

chronologically where 4:9 seems to have left off. Therefore, 4:10–34 comprise a thematic arrangement by the author. Note also that 3:31–34, with its focus on Jesus' family standing *outside* seeking him and 4:10–12 with its focus on those *outside* bracket the parable of the sower just as the parable of the sower and its interpretation bracket 4:10–12.

The dominant theme in the whole chapter is “hearing,” which is mentioned thirteen times. Isaiah 6:9–10, which is quoted in a version similar to the targum* on Isaiah, was a classic text on the hardness of people's hearts as they refused to hear God's prophetic word. Hardness of heart (*see* Hardness of Heart) is an important theme for Mark and is even possible of Jesus' disciples. (Note Mk 8:16–21, which uses words similar to Is 6:9–10, but this time drawn from Jer 5:21 or Ezek 12:2.)

Several scholars have tried to soften the impact of Mark 4:12 by interpreting *hina* (“in order that”) as expressing something less than purpose. T. W. Manson suggested *hina* was a mistranslation of the Aramaic *de* which can mean “who.” Accordingly, he would translate, “... all things come in parables to those outside who see indeed, but do not know ...” (76–78). J. Jeremias argued *hina* was shorthand for *hina plerothē* (“in order that it might be fulfilled”). Others suggest *hina* should be interpreted as “because” as in Revelation 14:13, especially since the parallel in Matthew 13:13 has *hoti* (“because”). Jeremias' suggestion is helpful, but these explanations are unnecessary. They only mark the difficulty people have with the possibility that Jesus told parables to prevent understanding. Scholars have often attributed this to “Mark's parable theory,” rather than to Jesus. Mark, however, does not have a theory that parables prevent understanding (cf. Mk 12:12).

The intent of Mark 4:10–12 is clear if one pays attention to the context. The kingdom is a kingdom of the word, and the issue is how people hear and respond to the word. The parable of the sower is a parable about hearing. In Mark 4:10–12 the Evangelist shows what typically happened in Jesus' ministry. (Note the use of the Grk imperfect tenses in Mk 4:10–11 indicating what happened *customarily*.) Jesus taught the crowds, but his teaching called for response. Where people responded, additional teaching was given. The pattern of public teaching followed by further private teaching to a circle of disciples* is used elsewhere by Mark (7:17; 10:10). The strong words in Isaiah 6:9–10 were not an indication that God did not want to forgive people. They were a blunt statement expressing the inevitable. People would hear, but not really understand.

The hardness of heart and lack of receptivity that Isaiah encountered were mirrored in the ministry of Jesus. The issue is whether one's heart will be hardened or whether one will hear and respond obediently. Even receiving the message with joy is not sufficient (4:16). What is required is hearing that leads to productive living. That this is Mark's intent is clear from the summary in 4:33: “With many such parables he was expressing the word to them, even as they were able to hear.” The saying in 4:22 is also an important guide to understanding Mark's intent: “Nothing is hidden except that it should be revealed.” This saying seems to be Mark's understanding of the parables. Parables hide in order to reveal. Even though some would respond with hardness of heart and lack of hearing, Jesus taught in parables to elicit hearing and obedient response.

8. Guidelines for Interpretation

The interpretation of the parables is not a scientific procedure, but guidelines can be offered to enhance understanding and prevent abuse of the parables.

(1) *Analyze the sequence, structure and wording of the parable, including any parallels in the other Gospels.* Plot the movement of the parable, and note any specific structure such as parallelism or chiasmus. For example, there are significant parallels between the prodigal and the elder son in Luke's parable of the prodigal son (Lk 15:11–32). Significant changes in wording between the various accounts need to be understood in light of the redactional purposes of the Evangelists (see Redaction Criticism). One should not assume any particular Gospel always gives the earliest version of a specific parable. Certainly one should not excise the introductions and conclusions to the parables.

(2) *Note cultural or historical features in the parable that provide insight.* Most of the parables contain such features that require investigation. For example, the impact of the parable of the pharisee and the tax collector (Lk 18:9–14) is strengthened if one is aware that these two men probably went to the Temple* to pray* at the time of the morning or evening atoning sacrifice. In effect, the tax collector prayed, "Let the sacrifice result in mercy for me."

(3) *Listen to the parables in the context of the ministry of Jesus.* Modern readers are often so familiar with the parables that they miss the shock that Jesus' hearers would have felt. We tend to have negative views of Pharisees and are not surprised to hear Jesus say that the tax collector was declared righteous instead of the Pharisee. Jesus' hearers would have assumed that the Pharisee was a righteous man and that the tax collector was a cheat. We are not surprised that a Samaritan helps a victim (Lk 10:30–37), but Jesus' hearers, like the scribe to whom he spoke, could hardly say "Samaritan" and "neighbor" in the same breath. Parables often force such reversals in our thinking.

(4) *Look for help in the context, but know that the context of many of the parables has not been preserved.* The parable of the wicked tenants (Mt 21:33–44 and pars.) must be seen in light of the question about the authority* by which Jesus does his acts (Mt 21:23–27). On the other hand, Matthew 13 provides a thematic grouping of eight parables on the kingdom, the contexts of which have not been preserved.

(5) *Note how the parable and its redactional shaping fit into the plan and purposes of the Gospel in which it appears.* Most of the parables have been arranged thematically by the Evangelists to highlight Jesus' message. With such arrangements the Evangelists show their own theological tendencies. For example, Luke's parables appear primarily in his travel narrative (9:51–19:48), which is chiasmic in its structure. Luke is concerned about prayer, wealth and the outcasts. Not surprisingly, Luke has arranged parables on prayer in 11:5–13 and 18:1–14, on wealth in 12:13–21 and 16:1–31, on invitations to a feast (particularly invitations to outcasts; see Table Fellowship) as reflective of the kingdom in 14:7–24, and on the joy of recovering that which was lost in 15:1–32. In addition to the kingdom parables in chapter 13, Matthew has placed two parables in the context of his "ecclesiastical discourse" in 18:10–14, 21–35 and has also grouped three parables on Israel's rejection of God's invitation in 21:28–22:14 and seven more on eschatology in 24:32–25:46. Matthew and Luke differ on the placement of some of the parables as well. For example, Luke has the parable of the lost sheep (15:1–7) in a context dealing with the repentance of sinners, but Matthew has this parable in a context dealing with an erring disciple. Jesus surely told some of the

parables more than once, but such variations may result from intentional editorial activity.

(6) *Determine the function of the story as a whole in the teaching of Jesus and for the Evangelists.* There may be more than one truth to the parable and several correspondences between the parable and the reality that it reflects. This is not, however, a license to allegorize. Some parables even have two climaxes. (Note the parable of the prodigal, or more aptly titled the parable of the father and his two sons, in Lk 15:11–32 and the parable of the wedding feast in Mt 22:1–14, although the latter could be a joining of two parables.) Any correspondence between the parable and the reality it reflects will probably be limited to the main characters in the story. Details should not be allegorized and parables should not be pushed beyond their purpose. The goal is to hear the intention of Jesus as conveyed by the Evangelists. A helpful way to determine the function of a parable is to ask what question it seeks to answer. Sometimes the question is explicit, such as in the parable of the good Samaritan (Lk 10:25–37) which addresses the question “Who is my neighbor?” At other times the question is implicit, such as in the parables of the warring king and the tower builder, which address the question “Is it easy to be a disciple?”

(7) *Determine the theological significance of the story.* What the parable teaches about God and his kingdom should be reflected elsewhere in the teaching of Jesus. There is no suggestion that we are to reduce the parable to theological propositions, but the parables do express theology. Again, the details of parables should not be pushed. For example, while Matthew 18:34 may underscore the seriousness of God’s judgment, it does not mean that God has tormentors!

(8) *Pay special attention to the end of the parable.* The rule of end stress recognizes that the most important part of the parable is the conclusion where the parable often requires a decision or forces the hearer to reverse his or her way of thinking. The end of the parable of the wicked tenants (Mt 21:33–44) is a quotation from Psalm 118:22 which via a wordplay forces the religious authorities to realize that they, the “builders” of the Jewish nation, have rejected God’s Son (*see* Son of God). Whatever else may be true in the parable of the lost sheep, the focus is on the joy* at recovering that which was lost.

9. The Teaching of the Parables

The primary focus of the parables is the coming of the kingdom of God and the resulting discipleship that is required. When Jesus proclaimed the kingdom he meant that God was exercising his power and rule to bring forgiveness*, defeat evil and establish righteousness in fulfillment of the OT promises. In Jesus’ own person and ministry these acts were happening, and the kingdom was made available to people. The kingdom comes with limitless grace, but with it comes limitless demand. That is why it is impossible to speak of the kingdom without at the same time speaking of discipleship. While a number of Jesus’ parables anticipate a future aspect of God’s kingdom, much of the focus is on the kingdom as present and available to Jesus’ hearers. The kingdom is both present and still awaits consummation in the future. With the focus on the kingdom as present comes an invitation to enter the kingdom and live according to its standards.

Prayer and the use of wealth are two areas of kingdom living that are treated specifically in the parables.

9.1. The Kingdom As Present. A short parable in Matthew 12:29 is one of the strongest statements about the presence of the kingdom, and this parable also has christological implications. In response to the charge that he cast out demons by the power of Beelzebul (Mt 12:24), Jesus pointed to the activity of the Spirit (see Holy Spirit) in his ministry as proof that the kingdom was present (Mt 12:28). The parable in Matthew 12:29 argues that no one can enter and plunder the house of the strong man unless he first binds the strong man. Clearly Jesus viewed his ministry as binding Satan and plundering his house.

While all the parables are kingdom parables in one sense, the parables in Matthew 13 are grouped specifically to provide insight into the kingdom. The Parable of the Sower indicates that the kingdom involves the presentation of a message and the necessity of a response that leads to productive living. Several parables in this section seem designed to answer questions from Jesus' hearers about his claims that the kingdom was present. The Parable of the Wheat and the Tares seems designed to answer the question "How can the kingdom have come if evil is still present?" The kingdom is present and growing even in the midst of evil, and judgment will take place in the future. Therefore, the kingdom invites both involvement and patience. The twin Parables of the Mustard Seed and the Leaven both address the question "How can the kingdom be present if the results seem so small?" The beginning may be small, but the effect will be large and extensive. The twin Parables of the Treasure and of the Pearl both underscore that the kingdom is of ultimate value and is to be chosen above all else. In his section on kingdom parables Mark includes the Parable of the Growing Seed (Mk 4:26–29) which stresses that the kingdom is God's work and not the result of human action.

Other parables also emphasize the present aspect of the kingdom. The parables of the banquet (Lk 14:15–24) and of the wedding (Mt 22:1–14) affirm that all is ready and people should come now (Lk 14:17; Mt 22:4). The banquet theme is used to express other points as well. These parables and several others point to the refusal of many of the Jewish people to respond to Jesus' message. With parables like that of the barren fig tree (Lk 13:6–9) they mark a crisis of decision which should lead to repentance. Furthermore, the banquet parables and parables like that of the prodigal son (Lk 15:11–32) in effect proclaim that God is having a celebration and ask people why they are not joining in.

The kingdom is revealed as an amazing expression of God's grace. The Gospels do not record that Jesus taught about grace, but no other word summarizes so well the effect of the kingdom. The invitation to outcasts in the banquet parables is obviously an expression of grace. The parables of the two debtors (Lk 7:41–43), of the lost sheep, lost coin and prodigal son (Lk 15), of the unmerciful servant (Mt 18:23–35) and of the laborers in the vineyard (Mt 20:1–16) all point to God's eagerness to benefit people by seeking them, forgiving them and accepting them. The parable of the laborers in the vineyard also offers a critique of those who think God's grace should be given out based on merit.

9.2. The Kingdom As Future. Jesus' teaching on the future aspect of the kingdom is seen most clearly in those parables that speak of judgment* or of a master who returns to settle accounts. The parables of growth also point to the future as a time of harvest. Particularly in Matthew parables of judgment point to a separation between those who were obedient, faithful, prepared or merciful, and those who were not. The first group enters the kingdom and experiences praise and joy. The other group suffers punishment or destruction. Either explicitly or implicitly, judgment is based on whether one has shown mercy. Not all judgment parables are about the future. Some speak of judgment that is more immediate, such as the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19–31) or the parables that express the crisis facing the Jewish people (Lk 13:6–9). Even so, future judgment is a major theme in Jesus' parables.

Parables about the future are not intended to satisfy curiosity. They are intended to alter life in the present. By focusing on judgment and the Master's return, the focus of these parables is to encourage faithfulness, wisdom and preparation. These themes are expressed in the parable of the faithful and unfaithful servants (Mt 24:45–51 and Lk 12:41–48), the parable of the ten maidens (Mt 25:1–13) and the parable of the talents (Mt 25:14–30 with a possible parallel in Lk 19:11–27). These themes are also stressed in parables about the present. (Note especially Lk 16:1–13.) Both present and future eschatology have as their goal right living in the present.

9.3. Discipleship. Since discipleship is the main purpose of Jesus' teaching, the parables focus on this theme frequently. In many cases discipleship is the assumed subject. Elsewhere the concern for discipleship is explicit. In the twin parables of the tower builder and the warring king (Lk 14:28–32), people are warned to consider the cost, for being a disciple is no easy task. The parable of the owner and his servant (Lk 17:7–10) views obedience as an expectation, something people should do, rather than something noteworthy. (Contrast the parable in 12:37 which tells of a master serving his servants because they were faithful!) The parable of the two builders describes the wise person as the one who hears and does Jesus' teachings. As elsewhere, the wise person is the one who understands the eschatological realities and lives accordingly. Likewise, the parable of the two sons (Mt 21:28–32) stresses the importance of obedience over against the *intent* to do the Father's will. Where obedience is made specific, the focus is on the necessity of doing acts of mercy. (Note especially Mt 18:33; 25:32–46 and Lk 10:25–37.) One cannot experience the grace of the kingdom without extending that grace to others.

9.3.1. The Right Use of Wealth. While the use of money is a frequent subject in the teaching of Jesus, Luke has a particular focus on the right use of wealth (see Rich and Poor). Several of the parables unique to him discuss this theme. The rich fool (Lk 12:16–21) thought only of his own enjoyment in the use of his wealth. He failed to consider the source of his wealth or the fact that life consists of much more than possessions. Verse 20 suggests that life is on loan from God and that we are accountable to him for it. The parables and sayings in Luke 16 provide some of the most direct teaching on wealth. The parable of the dishonest steward is debated because there is uncertainty whether his reduction of the amounts owed was a reduction of his own commission, the reduction of the illegal usurious portion that would go to his owner, or merely a rash act counting on the master's mercy. The intent of the

parable is still clear. Jesus' point in Luke 16:8–9 is that people in this world understand the shrewd use of resources better than his disciples understand the economics of the kingdom. Jesus' disciples should make friends for themselves by the right use of "unrighteous mammon," money that tends to lead to unrighteousness. By the right use of wealth in acts of mercy, they make friendships with eternal benefits (cf. 12:33). The parable of the rich man and Lazarus poignantly makes the same point. This parable is not intended to provide a description of judgment so much as it is to underscore the eternal consequences of failing to show mercy. To be a disciple of the kingdom is to have one's priorities reorganized with regard to finances.

9.3.2. Prayer. Another redactional concern which Luke conveys through parables is his focus on prayer*. Two of these parables, that of the friend at midnight (Lk 11:5–8) and the wicked judge (Lk 18:1–8), are *contrasts* between human responses to requests and the way God responds to prayer. The friend at midnight is not about persistence. The word *anaideia* in 11:8, which is sometimes translated "persistence," actually means "shamelessness" and almost certainly refers to the boldness of the man knocking. The point of the parable is that if a human responds to such knocking, how much more will God respond to the prayers of his people (cf. Lk 11:13). Similarly, the unjust judge acts on behalf of the widow so that she will not keep pestering him. But the parable indicates that God is not like the unjust judge; rather, he will adjudicate the cause of his people quickly. Luke gives his readers confidence that God hears and responds to prayer. The remaining parable on prayer, that of the pharisee and the tax collector, emphasizes the humility and repentance with which one should approach God.

See also Form Criticism; Hardness of Heart; Kingdom of God; Literary Criticism.

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K. R. Snodgrass

Paraclete. See Holy Spirit*; John, Gospel of.