

The Interpretation of Parables, Allegories and Types

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March 2, 1997

Visitor # 

1. Introduction

Figurative language is used in various ways in both testaments and is an integral part of Biblical literature. The most common and most important forms of figurative language are parables, allegories and types. Although there may be some overlap in the nature of these language forms there are also important distinctions particularly in the function they perform.

The purpose of this essay is to examine the nature and characteristics of parables, allegories and types. Their significance for Biblical interpretation and their limitations and dangers will also be examined.

2. Parables & Allegories

2.1. The Differences Between Parables & Allegories

Parables are short stories that are told in order to get a point across and occur in both testaments of the Bible. The word "parable" (Gk. *parabole*) was generally used in reference to any short narrative that had symbolic meaning (Louw & Nida 1989, p. 391). There are many stories and saying of Jesus in the New Testament that are identified as parables, but not all of these are parables in the true sense. The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-35) may be regarded as a true parable because it is a complete story with a beginning, ending and plot, but the Leaven in the Meal is a similitude, "You are the salt of the earth" is a metaphor and "Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes" is an epigram (Fee & Stuart 1993, p. 136-137). When "parable" is used in this section it refers to the true parables.

A true parable then may be regarded as an extended simile (Blomberg 1990, p. 32). It is a story that resembles real-life natural situations and does not contain any mythical or supernatural elements (Kuske 1995, p. 97). These stories were told in order to catch the listener's attention and provoke a response. C. H. Dodd (1961, p.16) defines a parable as: "a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought." They often embody a message that may not be communicated in any other way (Marshall & Tasker, in New Bible Dictionary:Parables).

An allegory, however, is quite different. It is essentially an extended metaphor (Kuske 1995, p. 94) and uses a story or event (often mythical and supernatural) to illustrate a point (Marshall & Tasker, in New Bible Dictionary:Parables). They are stories with 2 levels of meaning: human activity and spiritual reality (Blomberg 1990, p. 15). Allegories encode relatively static series of comparisons that the author wishes to communicate and always need to be interpreted (Blomberg 1990, p. 35).

Allegories are much less common in the New Testament but are more frequent in the Old Testament. In an allegory virtually every person, thing, place and event has a symbolic meaning (Fee & Stuart 1993, p. 140). Examples of allegories are the visions in Daniel 8:1-11 (which is interpreted in Daniel 8:20-26), and Ezekiel 1. In the New Testament, nearly every chapter of Revelation contains allegorical visions.

Throughout the history of the church, there has been great debate over the level of allegory used in parables. Some have suggested that they are essentially allegories (Blomberg 1990, p. 68, my emphasis), while others emphatically state the opposite (Fee & Stuart 1993, p. 138). However, it must be admitted that the line between parables and allegories is a fluid one (Marshall & Tasker, in *New Bible Dictionary:Parables*).

2.2. Interpreting Parables

2.2.1. Context & Setting

Jesus told parables to be understood and he told them to common people (Luke 15:3, 18:9, 19:11) (Fee & Stuart 1993, p. 136). The telling of parables are historical events but it is unlikely that the content of the parable was historical (Kuske 1995, p. 97). However, this does not mean they are irrelevant or that the truth and message they communicate is unreliable.

The points of reference or points of comparison (also called the tertium) of a parable are usually indicated by the historical setting and situation and by the literary context (Kuske 1995, p. 95). The original audience would have immediately understood the points of comparison when Jesus spoke them (Fee & Stuart 1993, p. 139-140). Therefore the interpreter needs to hear the parable as the original audience heard it. The original audience and their customs and culture needs to be studied in order to grasp how they would have heard, understood and reacted to a particular parable. The interpreter needs to understand what the various people, places and objects meant and the significance they had to the audience (Wenham 1989, p. 16). For example, most people are not aware of the dangers of putting new wine into old wineskins or the dangers of travelling the Jericho road (Wenham 1989, p. 15). The interpreter must also be aware of any Old Testament allusions in parables (eg. Mark 12:1-12 and Isaiah 5).

The difficulty in interpreting parables is because our modern western society is so far removed in time and culture from the original audience (Fee & Stuart 1993, p. 137). The historical distance is not only chronological but social, political and religious (Wenham 1989, p. 15).

Parables always occur as part of a larger context (Klein et al 1993, p. 272). Therefore they need to be interpreted within this larger literary context and with respect to other parables and other sayings and events. This is particularly true of the parables of Jesus, which must be interpreted in relation to his proclamation of the Kingdom of God (Wenham 1989, p. 16). It should also be noted that no one parable contains the entire gospel (Marshall & Tasker in *New Bible Dictionary: Parables*).

2.2.2. The Meaning of Parables

Historically, most Christians have interpreted parables as allegories but modern scholarship has rejected this practice (Blomberg 1990, p. 15-16) because it ignores the realism, clarity and simplicity of parables (Blomberg 1990, p. 32). Although parables do have some allegorical elements, these are the exceptions not the general rule (Blomberg 1990, p. 17). These allegorical elements are called the points of reference or points of comparison (Klein et al. 1993, p. 337).

Some parables go very close to being allegories, because most of the details in the story are intended to represent something or someone else (ie. they have many points of comparison). However even these parables are not allegories because of the function they perform (Fee & Stuart 1993, p. 138). The parable in Luke 7:40-42 is not allegorical although it appears that way. The purpose of the story is not found in the points of comparison but in the intended response (of Simon and the woman) (Fee & Stuart 1993, p. 140).

The details of a parable must be interpreted with strict reference to the points of comparison so the focus remains on the central meaning of the parable. Sometimes none of the details are important and do not need interpreting (eg. The Good Samaritan). Sometimes a few of the details are significant (eg. Parable of the Tenants) and sometimes all the details are important (eg. Parable of the Weeds) (Kuske 1995, p. 95-96).

The interpreter must also be sensitive to the shape and form of parable. The assumption of 1 single point per parable is not always true (Wenham 1989, p. 17). Some parables are simple and some are complex. Simple parables will just have one central message but complex ones may have a central message and several related messages (Wenham 1989, p. 17). For example, the Prodigal Son teaches that God accepts repentant sinners and also that God wants faithful people to accept repentant sinners (Kuske 1995, p. 97). In fact the majority of parables make exactly 3 points (Blomberg 1990, p. 21).

A parable may also have multiple shades of meaning depending on the perspective of the hearer. When Jesus told the parable in Luke 7:40-48, the messages received by Simon and the woman would have been very different (Klein et al. 1993, p. 338). Simon received a message of rebuke but the woman, a message of acceptance and forgiveness. Also, Jesus told some parables (with modifications) on different occasions to different audiences in order to provoke a different response (eg. Parable of 10 minas - Luke 19:10-26 and Parable of 10 talents - Matthew 25:14-28) (Kuske 1995, p. 98).

2.2.3. The Function of Parables

Parables do not serve to illustrate Jesus teaching with 'picture words' and they were not told to serve as vehicles for revealing spiritual truth - although they most certainly end up doing this. Parables were told to provoke a response - to address the audience, capture their attention, show them up and cause them to decide and act (Fee & Stuart 1993, p. 138). The parable Nathan told to King David in 2 Samuel 12 is a clear example. David "burned with anger" at the man who stole the poor man's ewe and wanted immediate and summary justice. When Nathan revealed that this was what David had done, he felt remorse and repented. In this respect a parable is like a story with a punchline. The unusual twist in the story is what gives the parable its impact and biting force (Wenham 1989, p. 14). Parables jolt people into seeing things in a new way, bringing them to a point of decision and action (Marshall & Tasker in New Bible Dictionary: Parables).

Jesus parables capture the listeners attention, bringing them face to face with his message, which would have been much less effective if stated normally (Wenham 1989, p. 13). He did not use them to illustrate general truth but to force people to determine their attitude toward Him and his message of the Kingdom of God (Marshall & Tasker in New Bible Dictionary: Parables). This is reflected in the fact that parables often break the grounds of realism and conventional expectation. For example, no Jewish father would lovingly greet and accept a wayward son (as in the Prodigal Son) (Klein et al. 1993, p. 337).

Interpreting a parable in some ways destroys what the parable is. It is like interpreting a joke. The immediacy of the parable is what makes it so effective in provoking people. Explaining the points of comparison of a parable is like explaining a joke. The impact is lost (Fee & Stuart 1993, p. 138-139).

Mark 4:10-12 seems to be a difficult passage to understand regarding the function of parables. This passage seems to indicate that parables cloud and hide the message rather than make it clear (in contrast to the parallel passage in Matthew 13:13). However, the conjunction translated as "that", "so that" or "in order that" in modern translations (Gk. $\iota\{\text{na}\}$), is in fact a result clause not a purpose clause (Moule 1953, p. 142-143). Therefore it would be better translated as "as a result of the fact that". Jesus told parables as a result of the fact that "they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding."

2.2.4. Limitations & Dangers

The basic danger with interpreting parables is mistaking their function and context. Often, too much is read into the details of the story and instead of functioning to provoke a response it becomes an allegory which is essentially a vehicle for truth. The Parable of the Unjust Judge intends to communicate that we should be persistent in our pleading to God for justice - not that God is unjust or that we can change his mind by constantly hassling him. Therefore it is far more likely that parables will be overinterpreted than underinterpreted (Kuske 1995, p. 98).

The problem with this kind of allegorical interpretation is that rarely do two interpreters agree on the meaning of every detail in the story. Too often the meaning given to details reflects understandings of Christian doctrine from a

later period than Jesus ministry. No one in Jesus time could have expected to associate the inn-keeper in the Good Samaritan with the Apostle Paul (Augustine's interpretation) (Blomberg 1990, p. 31-32).

2.3. Interpreting Allegories

Allegories are illustrations and always require interpretation. They are generally interpreted by the Biblical text itself. A clear example can be found in Daniel 8. Daniel sees a vision of a ram with 2 horns, one being longer than the other and a goat with 1 prominent horn between his eyes, that breaks off giving rise to 4 smaller horns. From one of these horns another horn came which eventually became extremely powerful and caused great destruction. These images are precisely interpreted later in the chapter. The ram represents the kings of Media and Persia (Daniel 8:20) and the goat represents the King of Greece, the large horn being the first king (Daniel 8:21) which history records as Alexander the Great. The four horns represent the four kingdoms that emerge from Alexander's kingdom and the single horn which eventually becomes very powerful, represents a stern faced king who is a master of intrigue.

3. Types

3.1. Types & Typology

"Successive epochs of salvation-history disclose a recurring pattern of divine activity, which the NT writers believed to have found its definitive expression in their own day" (Bruce in New Bible Dictionary: *Typology*).

Typology is "a way of setting forth the Biblical history of salvation so that some of its earlier phases are seen as anticipations of later phases, or some later phase as the recapitulation or fulfilment of an earlier one." In the language of typology the earlier series of events is called the type and the later series of events is called the antitype (Bruce in New Bible Dictionary: *Typology*). Klein et al. (1993, p. 130) defines typology as "the recognition of a correspondence between New and Old Testament events, based on a conviction of the unchanging character of the principles of God's working.". Buchanan (1987, p. 3) notes that typology relates one historical event to another, not in details, but in basics.

A type is a picture or pattern of something that lies in the future (Kuske 1995, p. 99). Types can be people (eg. Moses - Deuteronomy 18:15), places (eg. Most Holy Place - Hebrews 9:3, 8, 12), an office (eg. High Priest - Psalm 110:4, Hebrews 9:6-7), festivals (eg. Day of Atonement - Hebrews 9:25-26), an event (eg. Israel being called out of Egypt - Matthew 2:15), an object (eg. bronze snake - John 3:14) or an animal (Genesis 22) (Kuske 1995, p. 99-100).

3.2. Interpreting Types

3.2.1. Meaning, Purpose and Function of Types

Use of typology rests on belief that God's ways of acting are consistent throughout history. Christ and the New Testament writers considered many of God's former actions recorded in the Old Testament as 'types' of what He was now doing in Christ. This does not mean that the Old Testament writers intended to communicate a typological message and probably were not even conscious that what they wrote had any typological significance (Klein et al. 1993, p. 130). Types would most probably not have been recognised by the original audience either, but were pointed out by Christ and the New Testament writers (Luke 24:27, 44, 1 Corinthians 10:6-11).

Typology seeks to discover and make explicit the real correspondences in historical events which have been brought about by the 'recurring rhythm' of divine activity (Lampe 1957, p. 29). The typological relationship between the two testaments is summarised by the epigram "The New is in the Old concealed; the Old is in the New revealed." The Bible is a unity and through typology the Bible speaks of Christ in almost every part (Lampe 1957, p. 12). In the New Testament, Christian salvation is presented as the climax or culmination of God's mighty works in the Old Testament (Bruce in New Bible Dictionary: *Typology*). Therefore, types are in a sense a vague kind of

prophecy. Types teach us how God works and saves. They prepare us to recognise the person and work of Christ. Many events in the Old Testament were not recorded primarily for themselves but for what they foreshadowed. They were images in and through which the Holy Spirit indicated what was to come in the New Covenant (Lampe 1957, p. 10). However, this does not mean that typological events were not historical (Lampe 1957, p. 13). The presence of types is a clear indication of God at work in history and that He divinely inspired the Old Testament writers to record these typological events.

Typological study is a necessity if the full meaning of the New Testament is to be grasped and appreciated. The interpreter needs to see the Old Testament scripture through the eyes of the New Testament writers (Lampe 1957, p. 18-19). Although, the New Testament writers appear to attach strange and out of context meanings to Old Testament scriptures, these meanings were assigned under inspiration and in the light of their experiences of Christ (Klein et al. 1993, p. 131).

Generally most types are in the Old Testament and their antitypes are in the New Testament (Buchanan 1987, p.3). In fact, most Old Testament types are pictures of some aspect of the life of Christ (Kuske 1995, p. 99).

However, there are two archetypal epochs in the Old Testament: the creation and the exodus from Egypt. The exodus is viewed as a new creation in the way that God constrained the waters on both occasions (cf. Genesis 1:9f and Exodus 14:21-29) (Bruce in New Bible Dictionary: Typology).

The restoration of Israel from the Babylonian captivity is viewed as both a new creation and a new exodus. The Hebrew words used for God's workmanship in Genesis 1 and 2 are the same ones used to describe the restoration (Isaiah 43:7f). Also, as the Exodus generation was led by cloud and fire, which moved behind them when threatened from the back, so also the exiles received the promise "The Lord will go before you, and the God of Israel will be your rear guard (Isaiah 52:12) (Bruce in New Bible Dictionary: Typology).

Jesus and the New Testament authors pointed out many types of Christ including the high priest (Hebrews 5), the priest's duties (Hebrews 10:1-22), the blood from animal sacrifices (Hebrews 13:11-13), the Old Testament sacrifices (Hebrews), the red heifer (Hebrews 9:13-14), the Passover lamb (1 Corinthians 5:7), the brazen altar (Hebrews 13:10), the bowls of bronze (Ephesians 5:26-27), the Mercy seat (Hebrews 4:16), the veil (Hebrews 10:20), the manna (John 6:32-35), cities of refuge (Hebrews 6:18), the bronze serpent (John 3:14-15), the tree of life (John 1:4, Revelation 22:2), Adam (Romans 5:14, 1 Corinthians 15:45), Abel (Hebrews 12:24), Noah (2 Corinthians 1:5), Melchizedek (Hebrews 7:1-17), Moses (Acts 3:20-22, 7:37, Hebrews 3:2-6), David (Philippians 2:9), Eliakim (Revelation 3:7) and Jonah (Matthew 12:40).

3.2.2. Limitations and Dangers

Types have one point of comparison that serves to illustrate something about the antitype (Kuske 1995, p. 100). Therefore an interpreter must be extremely careful not to 'stretch' the type too far. They are not perfect pictures of the real thing, only rough sketches. For this reason it is unwise to use types as a basis for a doctrinal position.

4. Conclusion

The diversity of language and literary styles used in the Bible shows it to be a wonderful peace of literature, full of meaning and inspiration. If we approach figurative parts of the Bible, like parables, allegories and types, with caution and treat their context with full respect then we will avoid making many interpretive errors.

The parables must be interpreted according to their function, not according to their allegorical elements. The task of interpreting a parable becomes so much simpler when its context is examined in order to discover the events that led up to the parable being told, the reason why the parable was told and the effect it had on the original audience. This will highlight the parable's power, force and function.

Allegories, although much less common in the Bible, serve to illustrate. They are usually interpreted by the Biblical text itself.

Types serve to prepare people for later events or people. They serve to illustrate and also to prophesy.

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