Parables in the Gospels: History of Interpretation and Hermeneutical Guidelines[1]

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About one-third of Jesus' teaching is in parables. So influential are these parables that even people who have never read the Bible use expressions drawn from them (e.g., "the good Samaritan" or "the prodigal Son"). Though widely known, Jesus' parables are also notorious for their frequent misinterpretation. In this article, I will begin by defining "parable" and giving a brief historical survey of how the parables have been interpreted. Then, in the second half of the article, I will offer some guidelines for properly interpreting parables.

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Defining "Parable"

When asked the definition of a parable, most Christians might respond, "An earthly story with a heavenly meaning." The dictionary definition is "a short fictitious story that illustrates a moral attitude or a religious principle."[2] While these definitions are correct, the most fundamental component of a parable is that there must be a comparison.[3] For example, in the parable of the hidden treasure the kingdom of heaven is compared to a treasure ("The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field," Matt 13:44). The Greek word *parabolē* which underlies our English word "parable" has a broad range of meaning. It can refer to proverbs, similes, figurative sayings, stories, etc. For our purposes, however, we will limit our discussion primarily to the story parables that are found in the Bible.

History of Interpretation

At this point, we will briefly survey the way parables have been interpreted throughout church history. This summary will be helpful in two regards: (1) In seeing the interpretive missteps commonly taken throughout history, the reader will be forewarned not to repeat them; and (2) it can be instructive to see how scholarly insights

resulted in significant shifts in the understanding of parables. The interpretation of parables is surveyed in five historical periods below.

Jesus' Original Setting and the Writing of the Gospels

At the least, we can say that Jesus and the inspired Gospel authors properly understood his parables. Thus, when Jesus gives an explanation of his own parables (Matt 13:36–43; Mark 4:13–20), or the Gospel authors give contextual clues as to the meaning of the parables (e.g., Luke 10:29; 15:1–2), those interpretations are definitive. It is important to note that while Jesus used parables to illustrate truth (Mark 12:12; Luke 10:36–37), he also used parables to conceal truth and increase the culpability of his hard-hearted opponents (Mark 4:10–12, 33–34; cf. 2 Thess 2:11–12).[4]

The Early Church to the Reformation

Very soon after the completion of the New Testament, early Christians began interpreting the text allegorically. That is, they proposed many allegorical meanings unintended by the biblical authors. For example, every early post-New Testament interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) explains the story as an allegorical message of salvation, with the Good Samaritan signifying Jesus. In the text, however, Jesus clearly tells the story to answer a Jewish legal expert's question, "Who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29). A typical example of such allegorical interpretation is below.

THE PARABLE OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN, AS INTERPRETED BY ORIGEN (AD 185–254)[5]

Parable Details	Allegorical Explanations
Man going down to Jericho	Adam
Jerusalem	Paradise
Jericho	The world
Robbers	Hostile powers (John 10:8)
Priest	The Law
Levite	The Prophets
Samaritan	Christ
Wounds	Disobedience, vices, and sin
Beast (Donkey)	The Lord's body, which bears our sins
Stable (Inn)	The Church
Two Denarii	Knowledge of the Father and the Son
Manager of the Stable (Innkeeper)	Head of the Church "to whom its care has been entrusted" (guardian angel)
Promised Return of the Samaritan	Savior's Second Coming

Early Christians interpreted parables in this way for several reasons: (1) Jesus himself explains at least a few details of his parables allegorically (Mark 4:13–20; Matt 13:36–43). If Jesus can do this, why not his followers? (2) Allegory was a common approach to interpreting religious texts in the Greco-Roman world. Some early Christians uncritically adopted some of the interpretive methods of their day. (3) Allegorical interpretation emphasizes the interpreter's access to the "secret" meaning of the parables. Such a method is inevitably attractive to humans who have a propensity towards the secretive and conspiratorial.

The Reformation

The Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century decried the allegorical excesses of their forbearers. Martin Luther (1483–1546) said that Origen's allegorical interpretations were "silly," "amazing twaddle," "absurd," and "altogether useless."[6] While isolated voices throughout pre-Reformation church history had criticized illegitimate allegory, the Reformation was the first time that such focused criticism descended systematically even to the parables. Unfortunately, out of habit, carelessness or for other reasons, many Reformers continued to provide allegorical reflections on the

parables. John Calvin (1509–1564), the prince of Reformation biblical expositors, was most consistent in keeping to the authorial intent of the parables. In reference to allegorical interpretation, specifically as represented in the allegorization of the parable of the good Samaritan, Calvin wrote,

> I acknowledge that I have no liking for any of these interpretations; but we ought to have a deeper reverence for Scripture than to reckon ourselves at liberty to disguise its natural meaning. And, indeed, any one may see that the curiosity of certain men has led them to contrive these speculations, contrary to the intention of Christ.[7]

The Reformation to the Late Nineteenth Century

The Reformation broke the allegorical stranglehold on much of the Bible, but a majority of Christian writers continued to allegorize the parables. The many unexplained and striking details in Jesus' stories were irresistible fodder to these interpreters who, due to historical influences, were predisposed to see allegorical significance that the biblical authors did not intend.

The Late Nineteenth to the Early Twenty-First Century

Several important developments in the interpretation of parables have occurred in the last century and a half. In 1888, the German New Testament scholar Adolf Jülicher published the first of his two-volume work, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* (*The Parable-talks of Jesus*).[8] Jülicher's study sounded the death knell for allegorical interpretation of the parables.[9] Instead of allegorizing the details of a parable, he focused on the main point of why Jesus gave the parable. Unfortunately, Jülicher interpreted parables according to his skeptical and liberal theological predilections and mislabeled many legitimate teachings of Jesus as later historical accretions.[10]

In the early to mid-twentieth century, scholars such a C. H. Dodd and Joachim Jeremias called for interpreters to hear parables as they were heard by Jesus' original first-century Jewish Palestinian audience.[11] Jesus announced an in-breaking of God's kingdom mediated through his messianic reign. Any interpretation of the parables which fails to consider this original historical context is doomed to failure.

Beginning in the mid-twentieth century, scholars known as "Redaction critics" drew attention to the final editorial contributions of the Gospel authors. For parables, this emphasis was important because Gospel authors gave their readers editorial clues to the proper interpretation of Jesus' parables. Through grouping similar parables, providing important contextual information, or employing other literary devices, the authors of the Gospels provided guidance to the correct understanding of Jesus' parables.

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, there has been somewhat of a regress towards early allegorical tendencies. On one front, some reader-response and "aesthetic" critics insist on reading the parables apart from the original historical context.[12] The parables are taken as having a dynamic meaning-producing polyvalent life of their own. While this description may sound somewhat appealing in the abstract, in real life it means parables can mean whatever the reader wants them to mean. Clearly, however, Jesus used parables to convey specific, definable truths. Admittedly, the affective power of story cannot be reproduced in propositional summary, but the basic meaning of Jesus' parables can and should be so summarized.

On other fronts, there has been an increasing *uncritical* interest in the history of the church's interpretation of biblical texts.[13] In other words, various interpretations of biblical passages are valued in their own right and given a level of authority and influence which sometimes equals or exceeds the inspired text. While a study of "reception history" (the way a text has been received throughout history) can be quite informative, the text itself must maintain a clear primacy over aberrant interpretations.

HERMENEUTICAL GUIDELINES

If parables have been so infamously misinterpreted throughout church history, what are some hermeneutical guidelines that will aid us in staying on the proper course? As a start, it is important to note that Jesus often employed parables to teach about the kingdom of God. Klyne Snodgrass claims that the meaning of almost all parables can be subsumed under the theme of kingdom, which was the main subject of Jesus' preaching (Mark 1:15). In fact, many parables begin with an explicit introductory phrase such as, "This is what the kingdom of God is like" (Mark 4:26). Snodgrass writes,

> 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 Old Testament promises.[14]

This kingdom theme, in turn, is often expressed through three main theological sub-motifs: "the graciousness of God, the demands of discipleship, and the dangers of disobedience."[15]

Below are several suggestions for determining the author's intended meaning of a parable.[16]

Determine the Main Point(s) of the Parable

The most important principle in interpreting the parables is to determine the reason the parable was uttered and why it was included into the canon of Scripture. There is some debate among evangelicals as to whether each parable teaches only one main point (e.g., Robert Stein) or whether a parable may have several main points (e.g., Craig Blomberg). In reality, these two perspectives are not as varied as they may initially appear.

For example, Craig Blomberg insists that parables can have one, two, or three main points, *determined by the number of main characters/items in the parable*.[17] Thus, for example, in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32), there are three main characters—the father, the older brother, and the younger brother. The three main points, based on the activity of the three representative characters, would be

> (1) *The father:* God the Father is gracious and forgiving.
> (2) *The older brother:* Followers of God should beware a begrudging attitude towards his grace and forgiveness exercised towards others.
> (3) *The younger brother:* God welcomes rebels who confess their sin, turn from it, and embrace his mercy.[18]

On the other hand, Stein maintains that it is more helpful to express the main point in one sentence. He might explain the meaning of the parable as follows: God (represented by the father) is gracious to sinners (the younger brother) and, therefore, we should not despise his love to others (as did the older brother). The focus of the parable, according to Stein, is on the response of the older brother and his unwillingness to rejoice in his brother's return and his father's complete acceptance. This analysis is confirmed by the context as Luke clearly indicates that Jesus is responding to the Pharisees for their begrudging attitude towards God's mercy (Luke 15:1–2).

But just how do we determine the main point(s) of a parable? Stein recommends these additional questions: [19]

> (1) *Who are the main characters?* As we have already seen with the parable of the prodigal son, the main characters are the father, the younger brother, and the older brother. Stein suggests that of the three, the father and the other brother should be given the most attention.
> (2) *What occurs at the end?* As Jesus often stresses his most important point at the end of a parable, the fact that the parable of the prodigal son ends with a rebuke of the older brother (Luke 15:31–32) further supports that Jesus is focusing

on correcting a wicked attitude towards God's gracious treatment of sinners.

(3) *What occurs in direct discourse?* (in quotation marks) Direct quotations draw the readers' or listeners' attention to the parable's emphasized point. For example, in the parable of the prodigal son, note the emphatic placement of the older brother's quoted words towards the end of the parable (Luke 15:29–30).

(4) *Who/What gets the most space?* (That is, who or what has the most verses devoted to them?) Simply by giving the most literary space to a certain person or item in the parable, Jesus showed us where his emphasis lay.

Recognize Stock Imagery in the Parables

In my classroom lecture on parables, I sometimes ask for an international student as a volunteer. Addressing the student, I say, "Imagine you pick up a newspaper and find a cartoon with a donkey and elephant talking to each other. What is the cartoon about?" The suggestions are inevitably amusing—and completely wrong. The Americans in the class, on the other hand, immediately recognize the donkey as a symbol of the Democratic political party and the elephant as a symbol of Republicans. We do so because we are accustomed to such stock imagery from our cultural conditioning.

Jesus' first-century audience and the early readers of the Gospels were also accustomed to certain stock imagery. From the Old Testament and other early Jewish sources, we can note these common symbols:

Stock Image	Significance	Example
Father	God	Luke 15:11–32
Master	God	Mark 12:1–11
Judge	God	Luke 18:1–8
Shepherd	God	Matt 18:12–14
King	God	Matt 18:23–35
Son	Israel, a follower of God	Luke 15:11–32
Vineyard	Israel	Matt 21:33–41
Vine	Israel or God's People	John 15:5
Fig Tree	Israel	Mark 11:13
Sheep	God's people	Matt 25:31–46
Servant	Follower of God	Matt 25:14–30
Enemy	The devil	Matt 13:24–30
Harvest	Judgment	Matt 13:24–30
Wedding Feast	Messianic banquet, the coming age	Matt 25:1–13

Symbolic stock images appear as main characters or central actions within parables. Sometimes a non-stock image plays a central role, and careful study must determine its significance. Additional details in the story are generally intended simply to make the story interesting and memorable.

Note Striking or Unexpected Details

My wife and I once gave an Arabic "Jesus video" (Gospel of Luke video) to some new Sudanese immigrants. As we sat in their cramped living room, watching the video with them, I was struck by how the immigrants were captivated by Jesus' teaching and how at certain points they laughed or glanced at each other with amusement. For them, and rightly so, Jesus was an amazing, interesting, and even humorous teacher. Sadly, our minds have been dulled by familiarity. Jesus' parables are filled with striking details, unexpected twists, shocking statements, and surprise outcomes. When such attention-getting components occur, we need to pay attention because an important point is being made. For example, in the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matt 18:23–35), we should note the nearly unfathomable difference between the debt that the servant owed the king ("ten thousand talents" [NIV] or "millions of dollars" [NLT]) and the debt owed to him by another servant ("a hundred denarii" [NIV] or "a few thousand dollars" [NLT]). Here Jesus emphasizes the immense grace of God in forgiving the depth of our sin, while

also putting in proper perspective the sins we are asked to forgive others. Another example of an attention-getting detail is found in the parable of the widow and the unjust judge (Luke 18:1–8). The brash persistence of the widow would have been scandalous—especially in the traditional society of Jesus' day. With this vivid picture of determination, Jesus calls his followers to persistence in prayer. Similarly, an older man running to anything, much less a reunion with a renegade son (Luke 15:20), would have been an undignified sight in first-century Israel. How much more surprising, then, is the eager graciousness of God the Father towards repentant sinners.

Do Not Press All Details for Meaning

Not all details in a parable have significance. Rather, many details simply make the story interesting, memorable, or true-to-life for the hearers. For example, in the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matt 18:23–35), the amount of money ("ten thousand talents") and the unit of money ("talents") have no special significance—other than to denote a large debt in a known currency. Likewise, in the parable of the prodigal son, when the father greets his repentant son with new clothes, new shoes, a ring, and a banquet (Luke 15:22–23), these gifts signify acceptance and celebration. They do not each carry some symbolic meaning that must be de-coded. In fact, to attempt such de-coding is to head down the misguided path of allegorical interpretation.[20]

Since each *central* parable figure generally conveys only *one main point of comparison*, it should not surprise us that some characters act in untoward ways. The judge in the parable of Luke 18:1–8, in some sense, represents God, to whom we bring our requests. Yet, while the human judge is only pestered into justice (Luke 18:4–5), God is eager to intervene for his people (Luke 18:7). The main point of comparison in the parable is the need for persistence in prayer (Luke 18:1). In the parable of the wise and foolish virgins (Matt. 25:1–13), the wise maidens are commended for preparing appropriately by bringing enough oil for their lamps (Matt 25:4). Though the bridegroom delayed his coming, the wise virgins were still ready for his arrival. In the same way, Jesus' followers are called always to be ready (by living in faithful obedience), though his coming may be delayed (Matt 25:13). The fact that five virgins were wise and five were foolish does not mean that fifty percent of the world will be saved and fifty percent damned. Neither is Jesus teaching us that we should not share (the wise virgins refused to share their oil, Matt 25:9). Jesus was a master storyteller and he included many details simply to make his stories interesting.

A friend once told me about the sermon his pastor preached on Matt 13:44–46 (the parables of the treasure in the field and the pearl of great price). His pastor asserted that the treasure and the pearl stood for the Christian believer or the church and that Jesus was the one buying the treasure or the pearl. The pastor claimed that this interpretation must be true because we do not "buy" the kingdom. Jesus, rather, buys us with his blood. This interpretation sounds very pious, but is based on a misunderstanding of parabolic language. In both parables, Jesus sets before his hearers a crisis, where everything else is less important than the treasure or pearl. Jesus' preaching calls us to "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness" (Matt 6:33). Yes, ultimately, we can only seek the kingdom because of the grace given us (Eph 2:8–10). In these parables, however, Jesus is calling people to respond by valuing him and his messianic kingdom above anything else. Divine sovereignty does not negate human responsibility.

Pay Attention to the Literary and Historical Context of the Parable

The authors of the Gospels often clue us to the meaning of a parable by including information about why Jesus uttered that parable or by grouping together parables on similar topics. An obvious example occurs at the beginning of the parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge (Luke

18:1–8). In the opening lines of the account, Luke notes, "Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up" (Luke 18:1). Any interpretation which neglects this authoritative word of guidance is sure to go astray.

Luke provides similarly helpful contextual information prior to Jesus' series of three parables in Luke 15 (culminating in the parable of the prodigal son), Luke tells us, "Now the tax collectors and 'sinners' were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.' Then Jesus told them this parable" (Luke 15:1–3). Luke did not have to tell us this information, but this introduction helps us see that these parables are given as a response to religious hypocrisy which fails to understand the graciousness of God toward sinners (cf. Luke 15:31–32). Also, both before and after the parable of the good Samaritan, Luke clearly shows that this parable is Jesus' response to a self-righteous inquirer who wants to illegitimately limit the term "neighbor" (Luke 10:25–29, 36–37; cf. Luke 14:7; 19:11).

Whether Jesus originally pronounced the four parables of Matt 24:45–25:46 (The Faithful and Unfaithful Slave, the Ten Bridesmaids, the Talents, and the Sheep and the Goats) together without intervening comment, we do not know. But, it is no mistake that we find them together and that they follow immediately on the heels of his eschatological discourse of Matt 24:1–44. The parables all call Jesus' disciples to faithful obedience as they wait for his return.

Sometimes a knowledge of history or cultural backgrounds aids in the interpretation of a parable. For example, to understand more fully the parable of the good Samaritan, the reader should know that the Jews of Jesus' day discriminated against Samaritans. By making the Samaritan the only "neighborly" person in the story (Luke 10:33, 36), Jesus condemned his hypocritical contemporaries who delimited love to exclude certain races or persons.[21] While such background information is often available from a careful reading of the entire Bible itself (e.g., John 4:9; 8:48), persons with less familiarity with the Bible may want to consult a study Bible. Also, highly recommended is Craig Blomberg's *Interpreting the Parables*, which gives a brief, insightful discussion of every parable in the Gospels.

SUMMARY

In this article, we began by surveying the history of interpretation of Jesus' story parables. We divided the survey into five historical periods: (1) Jesus' original setting and the writing of the Gospels; (2) the early church to the Reformation; (3) the Reformation; (4) the Reformation to the late nineteenth century; and (5) the late nineteenth century to the early twenty-first century. This brief overview will hopefully help the reader avoid interpretive missteps of the past, as well as give a historical example of the influence of Christian scholarship on interpretive trends.

In the latter half of the article, we overviewed a number of guidelines for the interpretation of parables: (1) Determine the main point(s) of the parable. In order to determine the main point, it is helpful to ask the following questions: (a) Who are the main characters? (b) What occurs at the end? (c) What occurs in direct discourse? (d) Who/What gets the most space? (2) Recognize stock imagery in the parables. (3) Note striking and unexpected details. (4) Do not press all details for meaning. (5) Pay attention to the literary and historical context of the parable.

ENDNOTES

[1]This article is excerpted from the forthcoming *40 Questions about Interpreting the Bible* by Robert L. Plummer, ©2010. Published by Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids, MI. Used by permission.

[2]*Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 10th ed.

[3]Robert H. Stein defines a parable as "a figure of speech in which there is a brief or extended comparison" (*An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981], 22). My understanding of the

history of interpretation of parables has been greatly influenced by Stein.

[4]Stein remarks, "The fact that for centuries the meaning of the parables has been lost through allegorical interpretation and ignorance of the *Sitz im Leben* of Jesus also indicates that the parables are not self-evident illustrations" (Robert H. Stein, *The Method and Message of Jesus' Teachings* [rev. ed.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994], 40).

[5]Origen, *Homiliae in Lucam* 34.3–9. Interestingly, Origen draws upon an unnamed predecessor for this interpretation. He begins, "One of the elders wanted to interpret the parable as follows" (*Homiliae in Lucam* 34.3). For an English translation of Origen's extant sermons on Luke, see *Origen: Homilies on Luke, Fragments on Luke* (trans. Joseph T. Lienhard; The Fathers of the Church 94; Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America, 1996).

[6]Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis, Chapters 1–5,* in *Works* (55 vols.; ed. J. Pelikan; Saint Louis, MO: Concordia, 1958), 1:91, 98, 233.

[7]John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (trans. William Pringle; Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, n.d.; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 63.

[8]Adolf Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* (Freiburg: Mohr, 1888). This work has never been translated into English.

[9]The death knell in scholarly circles, at least (K. R. Snodgrass, "Parables," in *Dictionary of jesus and the Gospels* [ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992], 591). Allegorical interpretation in more popular literature has continued to the present day.

[10]Ibid., 591.

[11]C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London: Nisbet & Co., 1935); Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (rev. ed.; trans. S. H. Hooke; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963).

[12]E.g., D. O. Via, *The Parables* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967).

[13]See, for example, Daniel J. Treier's description of the Theological Interpretation of Scripture (TIS) movement (*Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008], 39–55).

[14]Snodgrass, "Parables," 599.

[15]Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), 326.

[16]While the Gospel authors (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) are technically the authors of the parables (in that they wrote them down), we assume that they, as inspired authors, faithfully conveyed Jesus' meaning.

[17]Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 166.

[18]Blomberg summarizes the main points accordingly: "(1) Even as the prodigal always had the option of repenting and returning home, so also all sinners, however wicked, may confess their sins and turn to God in contrition. (2) Even as the father went to elaborate lengths to offer reconciliation to the prodigal, so also God offers all people, however undeserving, lavish forgiveness of sins if they are willing to accept it. (3) Even as the older brother should not have begrudged his brother's reinstatement but rather rejoiced in it, so those who claim to be God's people should be glad and not mad that he extends his grace even to the most undeserving"(ibid., 174).

[19]Questions adapted from Robert H. Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 146–49.

[20]Tertullian (*c.* 160–225), in fact, did just this. He interpreted the following parable images accordingly: good Samaritan = neighbor = Christ; thieves = rulers of darkness; wounds = fears, lusts, wraths, pains, deceits, pleasures; wine = blood of David's vine; oil = compassion of the Father; binding = love, faith, hope (quoted from Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus*, 44).

[21]Thus, it is fitting that in his modern paraphrase of the Gospels set in the Southeastern United States of the 1950s, Clarence Jordan replaces the Samaritan with an African-American. The priest and Levite are represented by "a white preacher" and "a white Gospel song leader" (*The Cotton Patch Version of Luke and Acts* [New York: Association Press, 1969], 46–47).