

## GUIDELINES FOR INTERPRETING JESUS' PARABLES\*

Mark L. Bailey

A turning point in the study of Jesus' parables came with the work of Adolf Julicher,<sup>1</sup> who sought to expose the inadequacies of the allegorical method of interpretation and asserted that each parable taught a single moral truth. In answer to Julicher, C. H. Dodd and Joachim Jeremias sought to discern more specific lessons from Jesus' parables by focusing on their major referent, the kingdom of God.<sup>2</sup> Dodd and Jeremias attempted to interpret the parables in their historical contexts in the life of Jesus and in the gospel records.

More recent trends have tended to see the parables as literary art at the expense of historical interpretation.<sup>3</sup> Consequently some writers have returned to the approach that sees multiple meanings based on the subjective philosophical self-understanding of the interpreters rather than the historical objectivity of Jesus and His message. The past fifteen years or so have been dom-

Mark L. Bailey is Vice President for Academic Affairs, Academic Dean, and Professor of Bible Exposition, Dallas Theological Seminary, Dallas, Texas.

\*This is article one in an eight-part series, "The Kingdom in the Parables of Matthew 13."

<sup>1</sup> Adolf Julicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 2 vols. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche, 1963).

<sup>2</sup> C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Scribner & Sons, 1961); and Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, trans. S. H. Hooke, 2d ed. (New York: Scribner & Sons, 1954).

<sup>3</sup> For example Dan Otto Via, *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967); John Dominic Crossan, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973); idem, "The Servant Parables," *Semeia* 1 (1974): 17-62; and idem, "Parable and Example in the Teaching of Jesus," *Semeia* 1 (1974): 63-104.

inated by a "sophisticated" literary criticism and structuralism which seems to be more concerned with the style of argumentation than the historical interpretation. From the pendulumlike extremes of Julicher and the multiple meanings allowed by the extremes of the philosophical linguistic movement, a more cautious balance is being sought by recent conservative writers. Though authors such as Robert Stein, David Wenham, Craig Blomberg, and John Sider<sup>4</sup> have sought to interpret Jesus' parables more conservatively, it remains to be seen how many will join their effort.

Parables are distinguished from other literary figures in that they are narrative in form but figurative in meaning. Parables use both similes and metaphors to make their analogies, and the rhetorical purposes of parables are to inform, convince, or persuade their audiences. Pedagogically Jesus utilized parables to motivate hearers to make proper decisions. To Jesus' original audiences the parables both revealed and concealed new truths regarding God's kingdom program. Those who rightly responded were called disciples and to them it was granted to understand the mysteries of the kingdom. The same truth was concealed from those who, because of hardened hearts, were unreceptive to the message of Jesus.

A parable may be briefly defined as a figurative narrative that is true to life and is designed to convey through analogy some specific spiritual truth(s) usually relative to God's kingdom program.

A proper interpretation of Jesus' parables should give attention to the following five steps.

#### UNDERSTAND THE SETTING OF THE PARABLE

Conservative hermeneutics proceeds on the premise that language is meaningful and that the words in God's biblical communication carry "historical, cultural, spiritual, and moral meaning and values."<sup>5</sup> As an interpreter approaches the Scriptures, he is conscious of the words and endeavors to discover the meaning carried by them. Sometimes Jesus supplied the interpretation (e.g., Matt. 22:14; 25:13), and on other occasions the Gospel

<sup>4</sup> Robert H. Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981); David Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1989); Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990); and John W. Sider, *Interpreting the Parables* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> A. T. Cadoux, *The Parables of Jesus: Their Art and Use* (London: Clarke, 1930), 45.

writer made an editorial comment. Often the key to interpretation can be found in the prologue to the parable (e.g., Luke 18:1, 9; 19:11). Other times the epilogue gives a clue to the proper interpretation (Matt. 25:13; Luke 16:9). And in some parables the prologue and epilogue form an interpretive parenthesis around the story (e.g., Matt. 18:23-24, 35; Luke 12:16-21).

### HISTORICAL SETTING

In recent years many writers have misunderstood the parables because they have not given adequate attention to their historical setting. Doerksen notes forcefully that "the modern critical method is to remove the parable from the setting."<sup>6</sup> Whether allegorized or taken with a totally aesthetic bias, the historical settings of the parables have been overlooked in favor of seeking to find existential implications for the present. In contrast to the liberal tendency to generalize the lessons of the parables, Dodd maintained, "The task of the interpreter of the parables is to find out, if he can, the setting of a parable in the situation contemplated by the Gospels, and hence the application which would support itself to one who stood in that situation."<sup>7</sup> Stein correctly commends the contribution of Dodd, who stressed the parables for Jesus' initial hearers and for the initial readers of the three Gospels.

It was Dodd, who, more than anyone else, pointed out that to understand the parables correctly one needed to interpret them first of all in their original *Sitz im Leben*, i.e., in their original setting in the life of Jesus and in the context of his ministry. In other words, before one should seek to understand the significance of the parables for one's own situation today, one should seek the original meaning of the parables and their application for Jesus' audience in the first century. If we were to reword this in still another way, we could say that Dodd demonstrated that the question, What is the meaning of this parable for me/us today? must be preceded by the question, What did the parable mean when it was uttered by Jesus during his ministry?<sup>8</sup>

Hunter spoke of a double historical setting: "The parables, in the earliest context, had two settings—their original setting in the life of Jesus, and their secondary one in the life of the early church."<sup>9</sup> The context concerns both the events recorded and the recording of those events, that is, both the historical and the liter-

<sup>6</sup> Vernon D. Doerksen, "The Interpretation of the Parables," *Grace Journal* 11 (Spring 1970): 11.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-14.

<sup>8</sup> Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables*, 59.

<sup>9</sup> Archibald Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 76.

ary settings. The timing of the parables in the historical development of Jesus' ministry is not accidental. He spoke a number of His parables in response to the national leaders' rejection of Him, and so those parables were weapons of controversy in exposing the self-righteousness of the opposition and in extolling the kingdom of God.<sup>10</sup> Other times the parables were instruments of instruction for encouraging the disciples to be faithful. The parables can be interpreted properly only by understanding the audience and the occasion that promoted them. Most of Jesus' parables are clustered around scenes of controversy, found especially in the final year of His training the disciples, as found in the Lucan travelogue (Luke 9:51-19:27).

It is not by accident that some [parables] appear in one Gospel and are omitted from others, for on closer examination it will generally be seen that their record is in keeping with the character of the Gospel in which they appear. . . . The Evangelists were instructed by the Holy Spirit not only what to record, but when to record it, and all attempts to "harmonize" produce discord if we forget this.<sup>11</sup>

The human authors were led by the Holy Spirit to arrange the material of each of their Gospels for theological as well as chronological purposes.

### CULTURAL SETTING

Understanding the cultural background also is essential for interpreting the parables properly. As Ramm stated, "In the interpretation of every parable it is necessary to recover as much as possible the local color employed in it."<sup>12</sup> Each parable Jesus spoke was taken either from analogies to nature or from people's reasonings and judgments. These were taken out of the thought and mind-set of ordinary persons living in Israel. Studies in the local color of the parables have turned up a rich store of information. Russell contended, "Most of the stories involve customs, conditions, and ideas peculiar to the Jews of Palestine in Jesus' time and therefore require explanation before an American reader fully understands them."<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Peter R. Jones, *The Teaching of the Parables* (Nashville: Broadman, 1982), 37; cf. Cadoux, *The Parables of Jesus*, 11-13. Apparently Cadoux coined the idea of the parables as "weapons of controversy."

<sup>11</sup> Ada R. Habershon, *The Study of the Parables* (London: Nisbet, 1904), 34-35.

<sup>12</sup> Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 3d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), 282.

<sup>13</sup> Elbert Russell, *The Parables of Jesus* (New York: Young Women's Christian Association, 1912), 10.

Addressing the problem of "cultural foreignness"<sup>14</sup> Bailey proposed what he called "Oriental Exegesis."

The culture that informs the text of the Gospel parables can be delineated in a relatively precise manner by bringing together three tools. The culture of contemporary conservative peasants must be examined to see what the parables mean in their setting. Oriental versions need to be studied to see how Oriental churchmen through the centuries have translated the text. Ancient literature pertinent to the parables must be read with the insights gained from these other two sources, not in isolation from them. This text must be examined against the background of information gleaned from these three sources. These three tools need to be used *along with* and not in isolation from the other skills of modern scholarship.

Thus "Oriental Exegesis" is a method of studying a culturally conditioned text. The method is to use the standard critical tools of Western scholarship in combination with cultural insights gained from ancient literature, contemporary peasants, and Oriental versions.<sup>15</sup>

Although Bailey offers fresh perspectives for the parables from a literary-cultural approach, he seems at times to reconstruct the social background at the expense of the text and context. Nevertheless his emphasis on cultural interpretation is a welcome corrective in countering the existential tendencies of some modern interpreters. Kelley rightly criticizes the tendency to ignore the culture. "The danger we see in this sort of orientation is that it yields a picture of Jesus not as a wandering Jewish rabbi who instructs disciples, replies to opponents, and stimulates crowds, but rather of an existentialist theologian, wearing a Bultmannian or Heideggerian face, who by parabolic speech dramatizes ontological possibilities for hearers."<sup>16</sup>

Augmenting the historical foundation with an awareness of first-century culture allows the parables to retain their true-to-life nature and unlocks the parabolic references to the religious and social cultures of the original settings of the parables. "By 'cultural' is meant the total ways, methods, manners, tools, customs, buildings, institutions, and so forth, by means of which, and through which, a clan, a tribe, or a nation carry on their existence."<sup>17</sup> The proper understanding of a parable's historical and cultural contexts is the beginning point for proper interpretation.

<sup>14</sup> Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 29.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 29–30 (italics his).

<sup>16</sup> Robert Kelley, "The Significance of the Parable of the Prodigal Son for Three Major Issues in Current Synoptic Study" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1971), 132.

<sup>17</sup> Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 152.

## UNCOVER THE NEED THAT PROMPTED THE PARABLE

Jesus often told parables to answer a question, meet a challenge, or invite the hearers to change their thinking. To discover the need that prompted the parable is a significant step toward unlocking its meaning within its original context. Often that need in the original historical and/or literary audience is shared by current readers. Thus the supporting braces for the bridge of application can begin to be formed at this point in the interpretive process. The need may be seen in the material that introduces the parable (e.g., Luke 18:1) or it may not be revealed until after the parable is told (e.g., 16:8). Zuck suggests nine kinds of occasions or purposes that led to Jesus' parables, with examples of each: parables in answer to questions, parables in answer to requests, parables in answer to complaints, parables given with a stated purpose, parables of the kingdom given because of Israel's rejection of Jesus as Messiah, parables following an exhortation or principle, parables that illustrate a situation, and parables with the purpose implied but not stated.<sup>18</sup>

## ANALYZE THE STRUCTURE AND DETAILS OF THE PARABLE

Traina suggests a most helpful means of analyzing the structure of narrative discourse. In his discussion of the observation step of Bible study, he notes the importance of understanding the structure of the passage being studied. He discusses five ways the literary structure is arranged to carry along the thought process of the reader:<sup>19</sup> biographical progression, which tracks the lives of people; historical progression, which follows the sequence of events; chronological progression, which unfolds the narrative with time indicators; geographical progression, which journals the changes of place; and ideological progression, which focuses on the development of ideas.

To understand the communication of a narrative properly, narrative art must also be appreciated. The contribution of setting, characters, and plot all relate to this step of the hermeneutical process, and valuable insights are gained by not sidestepping the values of narrative composition and the means ("progressions") an author used to move readers through the narrative to a desired impact.

Details in the parables serve as background for the central truth in the foreground. Defining the parable as "truth carried in

<sup>18</sup> Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1991), 211—15.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Traina, *Methodical Bible Study* (1952; reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 51-52.

a vehicle," Ramm speaks of the presence of "accessories." These details "are necessary for the drapery of the parable, but are not part of the meaning."<sup>20</sup> Various details often play important roles, but on the other hand they may be given simply to add back-drop to the story.

Interpreters have often wrongly suggested that the presence of details in the parables calls for allegorical interpretation. Boucher, though not a conservative exegete, makes a helpful distinction.

I would suggest that it is more accurate and helpful to speak of the meaning of the whole parable and the meaning of its parts than to speak of "one point" and "many parts." . . . Once the whole meaning is apprehended, the small constituent meanings fall into place; or conversely, once the small, constituent meanings are understood, the meaning of the whole emerges.<sup>21</sup>

The background details of a parable help focus attention on the main point(s) in the foreground of the parable. A parable may be compared to a wheel, with the central point being the hub, and the details being the spokes. The central truth(s) in a parable may be supported by a cast of subordinate or coordinate truths.<sup>22</sup>

#### STATE THE CENTRAL TRUTH OF THE PARABLE AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO THE KINGDOM

Understanding the central analogy of the parable is a safeguard against excessive allegorizing. As stated earlier, this was the major contribution of Julicher. But a weakness of his work was that he viewed the central point of each parable as a general moral truth unrelated to the historical context. Dodd called this emphasis on the central truth "the most important principle of interpretation."<sup>23</sup> Linnemann also discussed the importance of the central truth in a parable.

Like the similitude, the parable is so arranged that the point of comparison comes out clearly. The narrative of a parable has a strong direct flow, which is determined by the point of comparison. Without halts and detours the narrative runs on to the point of comparison. All the individual features of the narrative join in this dramatic movement, and have a function in the development of the narrative. Only when the flow of the narrative has reached its goal is the listener released from suspense. The point of comparison forms the end of the parable.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 283.

<sup>21</sup> Madeleine I. Boucher, *The Parables* (Wilmington, DE: Glazier, 1981), 58.

<sup>22</sup> See Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, 215-17.

<sup>23</sup> Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 7.

<sup>24</sup> Eta Linnemann, *Parables of Jesus: Introduction and Exposition*, trans. John Sturdy, 3d ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 11.

## THE CENTRAL TRUTH

The goal of each parable is to point up an analogy between the story and the intended lesson or appeal. Trench writes, "It will much help us in the matter of determining what is essential and what is not, if, before we attempt to explain the parts we obtain a firm grasp of the central truth which the parable would set forth, and distinguish it in the mind as sharply and accurately as we can from all cognate truths which border upon it; for only seen from that middle point will the different parts appear in their true light."<sup>25</sup>

The central truth can be identified by understanding what question, occasion, problem, or need is portrayed in the historical setting. This question or problem will usually relate to Jesus' disciples or to His opponents, and therefore is related to the revealing and concealing purposes of the parables.

Stein suggests asking seven questions to help identify the main point of the parables.

1. What terms are repeated in the parable? Which are not?
2. Upon what does the parable dwell, i.e., to what or to whom does the parable devote the most space?
3. What is the main contrast found in the parable?
4. What comes at the end of the parable? [This has been called "the rule of end stress."]
5. What is spoken in direct discourse in the parable? [Frequently what is most important in the parable appears in direct discourse.]
6. What characters appear in the parable? Which are the least important? Which are the two most important characters? [Usually a parable focuses on two characters to establish its main point.]
7. How would you have told the parable? If Jesus told it differently, does this reveal anything?<sup>26</sup>

Also the context of a parable sometimes reveals the main point, as in Luke 18:1, 9.

Blomberg has recently argued for as many major points as there are central characters in the narrative. He calls this a controlled use of allegory.<sup>27</sup> However, the interpretations he suggests are stated in the form of theological correlation and not exegetical interpretation in the historical or literary context. His statements are, however, invaluable for the bridge between interpretation and contemporary application.

<sup>25</sup> Richard C. Trench, *Notes on the Parables of Our Lord* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1948), 35.

<sup>26</sup> Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables*, 56.

<sup>27</sup> Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 166.

## RELATIONSHIP TO THE KINGDOM

Most expositors agree with Hunter that the concept of the kingdom is the primary referent of Jesus' parables.<sup>28</sup> This is confirmed by the frequent usage of the introductory formula, "The kingdom of heaven is like...." The reason for the centrality of the kingdom in the parables is the priority it held in Jesus' entire ministry. It was the message of John (Matt. 3:2), Jesus (4:17), and the disciples (10:5-7). As Hope observed, "all of [the parables] deal with one great subject, and one great subject only, namely, the kingdom of God."<sup>29</sup> Or as Ramm states,

Many of the parables directly state that they are about the kingdom, and others not specifically stated cannot be divorced from the kingdom. Adequate interpretation of the parables must now be based upon an understanding of the kingdom of God and the relationship of Jesus Christ and His gospel to that kingdom.<sup>30</sup>

The definition of the kingdom has been one of the most widely debated issues in Synoptic scholarship. However, the study of the kingdom in relationship to the parables has often been neglected. Studying the parables in this light helps interpret the kingdom within the progressive revelation of the life and teaching of Jesus Christ as He presented Himself and the message of the kingdom to Israel. Regardless of one's interpretation of the kingdom, it is difficult to dispute that the kingdom is the primary referent of the majority of the parables. Too often the interpreter's bias about the kingdom has been forced into parabolic exegesis rather than allowing the parables to inform theology of the kingdom. More work is needed to allow the parables to unfold the biblical doctrine of the kingdom as the message of Jesus contributed to it.

## RESPOND TO THE INTENDED APPEAL OF THE PARABLE

Critical scholarship has tended to overlook the historical setting of the parables in the life of Jesus. Also the presuppositions of critical scholars who see parables as only metaphors cloud their interpretation. However, these scholars' discussions of the nature of parable as "language-event" can be appreciated to a point, for this emphasis calls for a decision by the literary audience in the days

<sup>28</sup> Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables*, 39.

<sup>29</sup> Norman Hope, "The Interpretation of Christ's Parables," *Interpretation* 6 (July 1952): 303. Some parables, like those in Luke 15, are more remotely related than those that explicitly mention the term or describe the concept.

<sup>30</sup> Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 153.

of early hearers as well as present-day hearers. While valuable in emphasizing the need for making a decision, these discussions have often missed the proper application which relates the parables to the person of Christ and His kingdom. Their view of polyvalent meanings—that the parables are open-ended—has tended to remove the objectivity of interpretation with historical validation. Therefore the door has been opened for all kinds of opinions. Stein rightly states the need to ground application in historical, interpretation.

Only by attempting to understand the parables in their original *Sitz im Leben* shall we be able to free ourselves from the chains of modern-day fads or trends, whether they be liberalism's general moral truth or existentialism's language event. The greatest reverence we can give to the parables of Jesus is not to treat them as literary accounts that are ends in themselves, but rather to treat them as the parables of Jesus, i.e., as parables Jesus taught and which are filled with his meaning and insight! What he means today by his parables cannot be treated apart from the question of what he meant by them in the first *Sitz im Leben*.<sup>31</sup>

Proper application is based on the timeless principles contained in the message of the parables. Principles "summarize the essence of a Bible passage in terms that are applicable to a broad spectrum of readers and situations."<sup>32</sup> "To principalize is to discover in any narrative the basic spiritual, moral, or theological principles."<sup>33</sup> This principle of truth may then be applied to many situations in the reader's life.

## SUMMARY

A proper hermeneutical methodology for the parables must take into account the nature and purpose of the parables as both a particular genre of literature and the reasons Christ employed them. From the historical, literary, and cultural contexts, the structure and details of the parabolic narratives may be studied to exegete the central truth of the parables, which usually have as their referent some specific aspect of God's kingdom program. The intended appeal for ancient as well as present-day readers provides the framework for proper application. Additional articles in this series will discuss these aspects of the kingdom in Jesus' seven parables in Matthew 13.

<sup>31</sup> Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables*, 69 (italics his).

<sup>32</sup> Roy B. Zuck, "Application: Biblical Hermeneutics and Exposition," in Walvoord: A Tribute, ed. Donald K. Campbell (Chicago: Moody, 1982), 26.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

This material is cited with gracious permission from:

Dallas Theological Seminary

3909 Swiss Ave.

Dallas, TX 75204

[www.dts.edu](http://www.dts.edu)

Please report any errors to Ted Hildebrandt at: [thildebrandt@gordon.edu](mailto:thildebrandt@gordon.edu)