Sapientia Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Development Studies (SGOJAHDS), Vol.3 No.2 June, 2020; p.g. 301 – 310; ISSN: 2695-2319 (Print); ISSN: 2695-2327 (Online)

UNDERSTANDING THE PARABLES OF JESUS

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Abstract
The Parables of Jesus are the essential part of his teachings as well as the aspect which has suffered a lot of misunderstanding. The argument of this paper is that Jesus used his parables to convey his message in such a way that it would leave lasting impression on those who heard him. His primary purpose was to communicate and not conceal his message. Understanding his parables requires a holistic approach which entails coming to grips with, not only the meaning, nature, characteristics and literary purpose of parable in Jewish culture but also with how they function in the teachings of Jesus and how they are adapted by the evangelists.

Keywords: Jesus Christ, Parables, Understanding Parables, Holistic Approach, Evangelists.

Introduction

The Parables of Jesus constitute the heart of his teachings recorded in the Synoptic Gospels. It therefore means that understanding them is very important in understanding his teachings. Unfortunately, they have been an aspect of his teaching that has suffered a lot of misinterpretation. This may be partly as a result of the way the purpose of the parables was understood. The three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), reported that Jesus, in answer to the question "Why do you speak to them in parables?" posed by his disciples said: "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the Kingdom of heaven but to them [those outside], it has not been given… The reason I speak to them in parable is that seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand" (Matt 13:10-13; Mark 4:11-12; Luke 8:9-10, New Revised Standard Version). Some have interpreted this to mean that Jesus speaks parables in order to shield his message to the outsiders. The question is whether Jesus uses the parable to reveal or conceal his message? Although a good number of scholars have shown that Jesus did not use parable to conceal his message from his listeners, the view that parables were meant to conceal rather than reveal seemed to have influenced a lot the interpretation of the parables in the Patristic and Medieval period which very much promoted the allegorical interpretation of the parables. The understanding seem to be that the parables of Jesus were written in coded language that needed to be decoded. They deal with the mystery of the kingdom and therefore every character or details in them reveal aspects of this mystery. A well-known and very often cited example is St Augustine's interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan(Luke 10:25-37). According to him, the man is Adam, Jerusalem is holy city, Jericho is the moon, symbol of our immortality, the robbers are devil and his angels who beat him by persuading him to sin. The Priest and Levite are Old Testament Priesthood and ministry, the Good Samaritan is Jesus Christ, the donkey is incarnation while the inn is the church (Quaest. Ev. 2.19). For Augustine, just like other interpreters at his time, every character and details of the parable stands for something. However, since the time of Adolf Julicher, a lot has been written meant to throw light on how the parables of Jesus should

be understood. This work is a humble contribution in that direction. It is made of four parts: the background to the Parables of Jesus, the Nature of the Parables of Jesus, Its characteristics, Understanding the Parables of Jesus and conclusion.

Background to the Parables of Jesus

The use of parable did not start with Jesus Christ. The literary form known as parable has been in existence centuries before the New Testament period. It existed in Greek culture, in Old Testament and in Rabbinic literature. However, many scholars have acknowledged the uniqueness of Jesus' parables[i].

Parables in Greek Culture

The term "parable" is the English adaptation of the Greek word, parabolē, which literally means what is thrown or placed beside something. An illustration or story which is familiar is cast along or placed beside another reality in order to explain it. This is based on the principle of using the known and familiar to explain and understand the unknown. Understanding of parable in Ancient Greek ranges from simple comparison to extended simile, symbolic or allegorical narratives to even fable. Ancient rhetoric classifies parable under similitude[ii]. Aristotle in his Rhetoric classifies it under realistic fictional proof[iii]

For Aristotle therefore, parable which he also calls comparison is a realistic fiction used inductively in argument[iv]. Ancient Greeks made use of parables which occurred either in form of simple comparison or in form of symbolic or allegorical narratives. A good example is one told by Herodotus. According to him, King Cyrus once requested the assistance of the Ionic cities in his war against Croesus which they refused. However, after the defeat of Croesus, these two cities sent gifts to King Cyrus and he replied them with this parable.

> Once, there was a flute-player who saw fishes in the sea and played upon his flute, thinking that they would come out on the land (and dance). Being disappointed of his hope, he took a net and gathered in and drew out a great multitude of fish, and seeing them leaping in the net, he said: 'cease from your dancing now; you would not come and dance then when I played to you' (Histories, 1.141).

With this parable, King Cyrus indicated to the Ionian and Aeolian cities what awaits them. Since they were not ready to dance when he played for them, he would make them to dance in the way they would not like. There are also parabolic materials in the works of Homer and these are more of symbolic or allegorical narratives like the accounts of Polyphen the Cyclops (Odeyssey 9.166.566)[v].

Parables in the Old Testament

In the Old Testament, the Septuagint (LXX) used parabolē to translate the Hebrew māšāl (mashal) which has the basic sense or root idea of similarity or comparison. Mashal has a wide range of meaning which stretches from a simple illustration to a detailed story and "may refer to a proverb, riddle, anecdote, fable or allegory" (Young, 1998, p3). Among its various meanings, proverb occupies a pride of place. As a proverb, it can mean a popular saying like "Is Saul among the prophets" (1 Sam 10:12); or "the fathers have eaten the sour grapes and

children teeth are at edge" (Ezek 18:2-3). In Wisdom Literature, proverb is basically a wise saying which can be in different forms like ethical or religious admonitions, maxims drawn from life experience. Mashal is sometimes used in terms of riddle, like the one Samson posed to the Philistines "Out of the eater came something to eat. Out of the strong came something sweet" (Judges14:14.) It can also mean a byword like one addressed to the King of Babylon: "How the insolence has ceased! The Lord has broken the staff of the wicked, the sceptre of ruler, that struck peoples in wrath…"(Isaiah 14:4ff). It also includes a detailed illustration in terms of allegory (like in Ezek 17:1-10), fable or parable. Whereas the differences among the three are debatable, allegory is taken as a story with multiple points of comparisons or stories in which different characters and items represent something while parable is more often understood as a story with one or few points of comparison[vi]. Fable is a story whose major characters are mainly animals or plants.

The Greek parabolē and the Hebrew māšāl have certain things in common but they are not exactly the same. Both deal with using one thing to explain another, however, the idea of resemblance is not as forceful in Greek parabolē as in Hebrew māšāl but in both there is likeness between the images used in illustration and the objects being portrayed (Young 1998, p.3). Moreover, māšāl has a wider range of meaning than parabolē. Another very important difference lies in the manner of understanding and expressing reality. Greeks are known for their logical and abstract representation of reality while Jews are known for their pictorial representation of reality. For example, as Young (1998, p. 3) illustrated, while a Greek may see God as almighty, a Jews will rather see God as one who liberates with mighty hand and outstretched arm. Where a Greek would say that it is very difficult for a rich man to enter heaven, a Jew would rather say that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of the needle than a rich man to enter heaven. As Donahue (1988, p.1) rightly stated, the background and antecedents of Jesus' parables have to be sought not in Greek milieu but in Israel, not in Greek orators but in Old Testament prophets and Jewish Father.

Rabbinic Use of Parables

Midrash (investigation or study) which is the rabbinic exposition of the Scripture aimed at bringing out its norms and teachings as guide for good living employs two methods: halakah (often written, halacha) and haggadah (often written, agada). The former (from the verb hālak, to walk) employs various forms of exegetical principles to analyse and draw out meaning from sacred text. It is used mainly in the Pentateuch, especially in its legal aspect in order to bring out various implications of the teaching of the Law. Hagaddah, on the other hand, employs storytelling to bring out message of a biblical text. Hagaddah, on account of its method, is very simple and easy to understand. It is captivating and exercises a more lasting impact on the listener than an academic exposition of the law through Halaka. As Heschel(1976, pp. 336-337) pointed out, while "Halacha gives knowledge, agada gives us inspiration. Halacha gives us the norms for action, agada, the vision for the end of living"[vii]. Hagadda bridges the gap between the highly intelligent and the less intelligent. It easily moves its listener to take action than the halacha. The effect of hagaddah is clearly brought out by this story told by Rabbi Eleazer on his encounter with an ugly man. Rabbi Eleazer was returning from the house of his teacher very happy and elated because he had learnt much of the Law. On his way home, he met an exceedingly ugly man who greeted him, "peace be upon you, rabbi". In reply Eleazer said, "Racca" (empty one or good for nothing), "how ugly you

are. Is every one in your town as ugly as you are?" The man replied, "I do not know, but go and tell the craftman who made me". When Eleazer realised that he had insulted God, he jumped down from his horse, fell prostrate and asked for the man's forgiveness. (Young, 1998, 9) This story brings out more forcefully than any legal exposition that all men are created by God and to insult anybody is to insult his creator.

Jesus' parables therefore follow along the line of Jewish hagaddah. Since the Jews are used to this method of teaching, it will not be a problem for them following and understanding the parables of Jesus.

Nature and Characteristics of the Parables of Jesus

Some scholars are of the view that no single definition of the parable of Jesus can encapsulate all its elements[viii]. However, this will not discourage this work from examining one or two. Dodd (1960, 16) defines a parable as "a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer with its vividness or strangeness and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt of its precise application to tease it into active thought"[ix]. In the words of Dodd, parable is fundamentally a similitude either in form of simile or metaphor which is usually drawn from observation of nature or common life experience which by its nature captures the attention of its hearer and provokes thought in the person. This definition brings out a number of features of a parable. It can be in form of simile. For example, "the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind" (Matt 13:47). It could also be in form of metaphor: A city built on the hill cannot be hidden (Matt 5:14). It can be a simile or metaphor that has been developed briefly with some details like the following: the kingdom of heaven is like leaven which a woman put in three measures of flour until they are all leaven (Matt 13:33). Or, no one lights a lamp ad puts it under a bushel. It is placed on the lampstand so that it will give light to the whole house (Matt 5:15). It can still be developed into a story with plots and characters like the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) or the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). For McKenzie (1998, p. 365), parable is a "wise saying or fictitious short story used by Jesus to set forth his teaching". McKenzie shows that parable can be in the form of wise saying, like proverb, ethical sayings, or in form of fictitious story which can be short or long, with one or many points of reference. Some have decided to classify these into figurative sayings, similitude and parable proper. Bultmann classified them as word-image (Bildworter), similitude (Gleichnesse) and parable (Parabel).

Parables of Jesus are wise sayings or stories in form of simile or metaphor drawn from nature or common experience which by their nature capture the attention of the listener and provoke thought in the person. It can be in the form of figurative saying like proverb, maxim or ethical saying, simple simile or metaphor, expanded simile or metaphor, developed fictitious story which may have one or more points of reference[x]. Juelicher insisted that there is no allegorical parable in the parables of Jesus. By this, he means that there is no parable of Jesus that has more than one point of reference and therefore that any such interpretation is done by the early church. However, many scholars today, while discouraging allegorical interpretation of the parables are of the view that some of the parables of Jesus admit more than one point of reference or some form of allegorization (Crossan, 1992, p.150; Donahue 1993, p.1365).

Scholars do not agree on the number of parables in the Synoptic Gospels (but they all agree that there is no parable in the Fourth Gospel). This is because while some include wise and figurative saying among the parables, others do not include them. For some, they are low as 33 (Snodgrass, 1998 n.p.) or 35 parables, and for others as high as 65 or even 72 (Mckenzie, 1976, p. 635). For this, some prefers to talk of parable in a wide sense which include figurative sayings and one sentence simile and metaphors and parable in strict sense which are mainly stories with intent. It is good to note that the evangelists included wise and figurative saying among the parables (see Luke 5:36; 6:39 Mark 7:14-18; Matt 15:11,15). It is better to talk of aphoristic parables (in form of figurative and wise saying) and narrative parables (in story form)[xi]. If we limit ourselves to parables in story form, either long or short, we then have the following: four in Mark: The Sower (4:1-9, 14-20), the Seed Growing Secretly (4:26-29), the Mustard Seed (4:30-32) and the Wicked Tenants (12:1-12); sixteen in Matthew: the Sower (13:1-9, 18-23), the Wheat and Weeds (13:24-30, 36-43), the Mustard Seed (13:31-32), the Yeast (13:33), the Hidden Treasure (13:44), the Merchant and costly pearl (13:45), the Net cast into the sea (13:47-50), the Householder who brings out his house different things (13:51), the Lost Sheep (18:10-14), the Unforgiving Servant (18:23-34), the Labourers in the Vineyard (20:1-16), the Two Sons (21:28-32), the Wicked Tenants (21:33-46), the Wedding Banquet (22:1-14), the Ten Bridesmaids (23:1-13) and the Talents (25:14-30); and sixteen also in Luke: the Sower (8:4-8, 11-15), the Good Samaritan (10:25-37), the Rich Fool (12:13-21), the Barren Fig Tree (13:6-9), the Mustard Seed (13:18-19), the Yeast (13:20-21), the Great Banquet (14:15-24), the Lost Sheep (15:2-7), the Lost Coin (15:8-10), the Dishonest Manager (16:1-9), the Rich man and Lazarus (16:19-31), the Widow and the Unjust Judge (18:1-8), the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (16:9-14), the Ten Pounds (19:11-26) and the Wicked Tenants (20:9-16).

Matthew, Mark and Luke have three parables in common: the Sower, the Mustard Seed and the Wicked Tenants while Mathew and Luke have four parables in common which are not found in Mark: the Yeast, the Lost Sheep, the Banquet and the Talents which Luke named Pounds. Peculiar to Mark is the Seed Growing secretly, to Matthew are the Wheat and Weeds, the Hidden Treasure, the Merchant and the Pearl, Treasures New and Old, the Unforgiving Servant, Labourers at the Vineyard, the Two sons and the Ten Bridesmaids while peculiar to Luke are the Good Samaritan, the Rich Fool, the Barren Fig tree, the Lost Coin, the Prodigal Son, the Dishonest Manager, the Rich man and Lazarus, the Widow and the Unjust Judge, and the Pharisee and the Tax Collector.

Characteristics of The Parables of Jesus

Parables of Jesus are natural and down-to-earth because they are drawn from nature and the common life of the people. They are drawn from different forms of human activities: farming like the Parable of the Sower, the Seed Growing Secretly, the Wheat and Weeds; fishing like the Parable of the Net Cast into the Sea, family life like the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the Parable of the Two Sons; the Social life of the People like Ten Bridesmaids, the Banquet, the Unforgiving Servant.

They are simple and concise. They are usually presented in form of simple stories. The characters are generally reduced and the way the characters relate to themselves is simple. For example, in the parable of the Prodigal Son, the father relates first with the younger son and later with the elder. The characters and the details are only the ones necessary to bring

out the message of the parable. In the parable of the Prodigal Son, nothing is said about the mother of the two sons.

They are captivating. They are narrated in such a way as to arrest the attention of the listener. Since they are drawn from the common life of the people or things people are familiar with, it is easy for the listener to follow and understand. Secondly, since they are in story-form, the listener would like to know how the story ends. Again, often they contain surprises like the Parable of the Labourers in the vineyard where the owner of the vineyard instructed that payment would start with those who arrived at eleventh hour and worked for only one hour. Some of them contain elements of reversal of societal expectations. Very often the parables do not go along the line of popular expectation, rather they often show elements of reversal of this expectation. For example, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, people would have expected the priest or the levite to have shown good example by helping the man beaten by the robber but it was a Samaritan who has a low social status among the Jews that showed good example. In the Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican, one should have expected the prayer of the Pharisee to be heard since he belongs to the group known for the strict observance of the law. However, it was the prayer of the Publican the Sinner that was acceptable to God. In the Parable of the Labourers at the vineyard, one would have expected those who started to work by 6 in the morning to be the first to receive their pay but it was those who worked only for one hour that were paid first. All these show that very often, the way of God is often different from the ways of humans.

The parables are contextual. They are not general stories or myth but stories directed to specific people at specific context. There are therefore specific things that led to the parables. For example, in the Gospel of Luke, the parables of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin and Prodigal Son were directed to the Pharisees who murmured that Jesus welcomed sinners and ate with them. Although the contexts of some parables are no longer clear because of thematic arrangement of some evangelists, this does not mean that originally the parable was not told within a setting.

They are theocentric. The parable are not stories merely meant to entertain. They are stories with heavenly message. They reveal how God relates to us humans or how humans are expected to relate directly to God or indirectly through thier fellow human being.
They are action-oriented. They are meant to provoke desired action or response on the listeners. On account of this, very often the parables expect the listener to make a judgement or decision on what to do. For this reason, the parables sometimes begin with such question as: what do you think? For example, the parable of the Good Samaritan ended with the question: which of these proved neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers? This question was followed with an injunction: Go and do the same.

Understanding the Parables of Jesus

Understanding of the parables of Jesus has significantly improved since Adolf Julicher with his two volume study (Die GleichnisredenJesu 1888, 1899) opened a new dawn and discouraged allegorical interpretation. He maintained parable has only one point of comparison (*punctum* or *tertuimcomparationis*) while details of the story do not have individual significance. Many other scholars have made valuable contributions towards better

understanding of the parables of Jesus. Suffice here to mention few like Boucher 1981; Dodd 1961; Donahue 1988; Drury 1985, Eichholz 1984, Funk 1982, Hendrickx 1987 and Jeremias 1972.

To understand the parables of Jesus, one needs to take certain things into consideration.
First is paying attention to the setting of the parable. To understand a parable of Jesus, one needs to pay attention to the setting, especially the immediate context: what led to the parable and what happens immediately after the parable. Parables are given in response to certain situation. Therefore there is need to pay attention to what led to the parable. Very often, this gives a very important key for understanding the parable. For example, in Luke chapter 15, the introductory remarks to the three parables of mercy begin thus: while the tax collectors and sinners were seeking the company of Jesus to hear him, the Pharisees complained that he welcomes sinners and eats with them. The parables of lost Sheep, the Lost Coin and the Prodigal Son were told in response to this attitude of the Pharisees. The major problem with regard to setting or context is the fact that at times the same parable is narrated in different contexts in different synoptic gospel. While the parable of the lost sheep is narrated in the Gospel of Luke in the context of Jesus' response to the criticisms of the Scribes and Pharisees that he eats with sinner, the same parable is narrated in Matthew in the context of brotherly care among disciples. According to Joachin Jeremias for a proper interpretation of the parable, there is need to determine its original context in the teaching of Jesus Christ. As has often been observed, the early Church and the evangelist may have applied the parable to a different context or setting[xii]. However, often this does not change the main thrust of the parable, rather it is the application that changes.

Secondly there is need to understand the structure of the parable[xiii]. Since parable is a narrative, it is important that one pays attention to its narrative structure: the way the story is arranged and how it develops; its plot, whether single of multiple; the characters both major and minor. Some parables have single plot like the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin while some have more than one plot like the Prodigal Son, the Ten Pound etc. Identifying the major and minor characters helps one to know where the stress of the message lies. For example, in the parable of the prodigal son, the major characters are the father, the younger son and the elder son, while the stewards, the man who hired to younger brother are the minor characters. The message revolves around the three major characters. The character of the father represents merciful God who welcomes and forgives sinners. The younger brother represents repentant sinners while the elder brother represents Pharisees who do not accommodate repentant sinners.

Another important element in understanding the parable of Jesus is the cultural background of the audience. Parables are drawn from the common life of the people and from nature. To understand the parable one needs to grasp the cultural life of the people. For example, in the parable of the importunate friend, one needs to comprehend how the Jewish people value hospitality to realize how awkward it is for a neighbour to refuse to help his or her neighbour to take care of his or her visitor. Without some bit of explanation, it will be difficult for a woman or man from African background who usually and carefully clears his ground, tills it before sowing her or his seed to understand such carelessness shown by the Sower in the

parable of the Sower. However the story will become clearer when it is understood that in Israel, sowing the seeds often precede tilling of the ground.

One needs to grasp the main points of the parable. Parables are figurative speech which are open to different interpretation. For this, it is important to find the main thrust of the parable or its tertium comparationis. For example, in the parable of the workers at the vineyard, what is its central theme or where does the emphasis lie? Is it on the different times the workers were employed thereby indicating the different times of conversion. Is it on the equality of payment thereby indicating the indicating the equality of reward. Or is it even in the reversal of the payment? Very often the introduction and the conclusion of the parable or the immediate context of the parable give clues to this. While some parables may have one thrust, others may have more than one thrust. For example, the parable of the lost sheep has divine mercy which seeks and welcomes sinner as its thrust while the parable of the prodigal son has more than one thrust: the divine mercy the welcomes and forgives sinner and the unforgiving attitude of the Scribes and the Pharisees.

It is important to know how the parable functions within its immediate literary context and its wider literary context. The parable is not a narrative in isolation; often it is used to throw more light on what has already been said. For example, in the gospel of Mark, the parable of the sower is preceded by the encounter Jesus had with his close relative which ended with the saying that whoever does the will of God is his relative. The parable of the sower helps to explain how one can do the will of God: by listening and understanding the teaching of Jesus Christ in such a way that it bears fruits in the person's life. The parable of the lamp the immediately follows it continues along the same line that one cannot get something good and hide; rather one has to put it at the service of others.

The aim of parable is to move the listener to action. On account of this, some have argued that parable does not need interpretation as it is already the message. Parable has evocative power which moves people to action. However, it is only when it is understood that its evocative power becomes effective. Parables need not only to be interpreted but also to be applied to contemporary life. What is applied is the message of the parable. Good understanding of the parable will enable the reader to unwrap the parable of its cultural garment and wrap it with modern or contemporary garment.

NOTES

[i]For more studies on this see Joachin Jeremias, (1972) *The Parables of Jesus*, SCM, 12; Brad H. Young, (1998) *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation*, Hendrickson, 5.

[ii]For more on this, see Hauk (1967) "parabole" TDNT 5, 744-61.

[iii] Aristotle in his Rhetoric (Rhetoric II) indicated that there are two types of proofs: those that are used deductively, like syllogism and those that are used inductively like examples. According to him, examples can be divided into those that are based on things that actually happened like history and those that are invented like fiction and fiction is further divided into fable and parable or comparison.

[iv] John Ashton, "Parable" in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 5, 146

[v]For more studies on this, see Klyne Snodgrass, (2008) *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, W.B. Eerdmans, n.p.

[vi] A. Julicher insisted that parable has always a point of comparison unlike allegory where every details could also be points of comparison. However, today a number of scholars caution against rigidity in distinguishing between parables and allegory, especially with reference to the parables of Jesus because Jewish culture did not draw such sharp distinction between them.

[vii]Heschel, Abraham Joshua, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*, New York: Ferrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976, 336-337.

[viii] Snodgrass, Stories with Intent.

[ix] C.H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, London: Collins, 1960, 16

[x] Since the time of Julicher, it has become fashionable to make distinction between allegory and parable. According to Julicher, the difference between allegory and parable is that while parable has one point of reference, allegory has many points of comparisons.

[xi]J.DominicCrossan classified parables into three: aphoristic parables which are mainly in form of maxims and figurative sayings; extended parables which are parables with brief narrative and narrative parable with more elaborate narrative "Parable" *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol 5, 146-154, 148-150.

[xii]Jeremias pointed out about ten different ways through which the parable of Jesus was modified in the process of transmission or evangelistion from the time of the teaching of Jesus to its documentation in the Gospels. For details on this, see pages 23-114.

[xiii] Brad Yound indicated the following components which are found in many parables: a. the prolegomenon or introduction of the parable which helps to dispose the audience to the parable. B. the introduction of the cast. C. the plot of the story. D. the conflict. E. the resolution of the conflict. F. the call to decision or application (The Parables, 14-15).

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