

Prophets, Parables, and Theologians

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This article addresses three questions concerning parables: Why did Jesus teach in parables? What classification of parables should be used? And how should theology be done from the parables? Parables were used effectively by the OT prophets, and Jesus used parables because he came as a prophet with a prophet's agenda. Søren Kierkegaard's discussion of indirect communication provides a basis for a more effective classification system than Adolf Jülicher's fourfold system. The prophetic use of parables and the classification system provide a basis for thinking about how theology is done from the parables.

Key Words: parables, OT parables, extra-biblical parables, prophets, classification of parables, theological interpretation of parables

The parables of Jesus may well be the most discussed literature ever, and surely they are among the most abused. Parables, which were intended to make things understandable, have often become the source of confusion and distortion. Despite the numerous treatments of parables, certain issues still deserve our consideration and can be the gateway to greater clarity. I would like to focus on three: Why did Jesus teach in parables? What classification of parables should be used? And how should theology be done from the parables? These three questions are not as unrelated as they might appear on the surface.

WHY DID JESUS TEACH IN PARABLES?

Lurking behind this question are several others, not the least of which are: From where did Jesus derive the parabolic method? Are there precursors to Jesus' parables? Was Jesus' use of parables unique? My concern in asking why Jesus taught in parables is not with the Synoptic discussion of the purpose of the parables (Matt 13:10–17/Mark 4:10–12/Luke 8:9–10), although that discussion is not irrelevant; rather, I will emphasize that Jesus intentionally taught in parables because parables were a form of prophetic discourse, and the implications of this fact deserve more attention than they usually receive.¹

1. Two people who have done the most to emphasize the importance of the prophetic background of parables are Claus Westermann, *The Parables of Jesus in the Light of the Old Testament* (trans. and ed. by Friedemann W. Golka and Alastair H. B. Logan; Minneapolis: Fortress,

To argue that parables are prophetic instruments involves several assumptions that require consideration, especially because some people find little help in the OT for understanding parables. Joachim Jeremias argued Jesus' parables are entirely new,² but, while Jesus is unparalleled in the skill and frequency with which he tells parables, the parabolic method is quite old. There may be differences with Jesus' use, but his parables are not an entirely new phenomenon. David Flusser likewise found little profit in the OT for understanding parables, treated only the story of Nathan to David in 2 Sam 12:1–7 (which he did not think was actually a parable), and focused all his attention on rabbinic parables as the sphere from which Jesus' parables were drawn.³ B. Scott, although fully aware of the importance of *meshalim* in the OT, denies that the parable genre is found there. This is because he defines a parable as "a *mashal* that employs a short narrative fiction to reference a symbol," and he does not find short narrative fictions that reference *symbols* such as the kingdom or the Torah.⁴ Why should a parable be defined as referencing a symbol? Jesus' parables do not always reference symbols. If a parable is defined as a *mashal* that employs a short narrative fiction to reference reality—some process, event, or truth—then the OT certainly has parables. Of course, others find numerous parables in the OT.⁵

A brief treatment of parables prior to Jesus' use is necessary, but the picture is puzzling to say the least. On the one hand, the parabolic method is so old and widespread that we can justly say that virtually all cultures evidence the use of parables. On the other hand, apart from the OT examples, relatively little appears, especially in Jewish writings, that is *demonstrably* prior to Jesus and *truly* comparable to his narrative parables. An interesting set of parables appears in a Hurrian-Hittite bilingual text, which apparently stems from about 1500 B.C. Here several narratives portray some animal or object in nature, and each is followed by an interpretation that says explicitly that the story is not about the animal or object but about a human. For example,

[A builder] built a tower in a praiseworthy fashion. He [sank] the foundation trenches down to the Sun-goddess of the Earth. He made the battlements(?) reach up nearly to heaven. Then the foolish [tower]

1990); and N. T. Wright, *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, vol. 2: *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 147–97. Westermann emphasizes that parabolic language appears virtually never in legal texts and rarely in historical narrative, but it abounds in the prophetic literature, psalms, and proverbs. The majority of comparisons and parables occur in contexts of judgment and indictment. (See pp. 2, 20–31, and 150–61.)

2. Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (2nd ed.; trans. S. H. Hooke; London: SCM, 1972), 12.

3. *Die rabbinischen Gleichnisse und der Gleichniserzähler Jesus*, 1 Teil: *Das Wesen der Gleichnisse* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1981), esp. pp. 17–19 and 146–48.

4. Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 7–8 (quotation on p. 8), see also pp. 63–64.

5. See especially Westermann, *The Parables of Jesus in the Light of the Old Testament*; and John Drury, *The Parables in the Gospels* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 7–23, both of whom find the OT full of parables. Obviously both have a broad definition of the term.

began to curse the one who had built it: "If only the hand of the one who built me were broken! If only his [right] forearm were palsied!" The builder heard and he [became sick] at heart. [The builder] said to himself: "Why has this wall which I built cursed me?" Then the builder uttered a curse [against the tower]: "Let the Stormgod smash the tower and pull up the foundation blocks! Let its [. . .] fall down into an irrigation ditch and the brickwork fall down into a river!" It is [not] a tower, but a human. A certain son who was an enemy of his father became an adult, and he attained [an honorable position(?)]. He no longer looks after his father. The gods of his father have cursed him.⁶

Disputations similar to the fables of Jotham and Jehoash (Judg 9:7–15 and 2 Kgs 14:9–10) appear as well, but they tend to be much longer.⁷

The Story of Ahiqar, the Aramaic manuscript of which has been dated to the sixth century B.C.,⁸ had wide influence and probably is referred to in the prologue to part two of Babrius' collection of Aesop's fables.⁹ The later and more elaborate versions of Ahiqar have material similar to Jesus' parables, but the fragmentary Aramaic text has only a few parabolic sayings, not narrative parables.¹⁰

The Qumran Scrolls, although they evidence analogies, do not have *narrative* parables.¹¹ Relatively little in the the Apocryphal and Pseudepigraphal writings prior to Jesus' ministry is a close parallel either. Among various candidates, one might point to 1 *En.* 101:4–9, which has an extended analogy of sailors fearful before a storm being contrasted with sinners who do not fear God,¹² or, if it is early enough, to *Jos. Asen.* 12:8, where Asenath, using an extended analogy, prays that God will stretch out his hands and snatch her from the earth just as a loving father lifts, embraces, and comforts a fearful small child. *Testament of Job* 18:6–8 comes closer to Jesus' parables, for here the author describes himself as like one traveling by cargo ship to enter a wealthy city and gain from its splendor,

6. *The Context of Scripture* (3 vols.; ed. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, Jr.; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 1:217.

7. See several disputations such as "The Disputation Between the Ewe and the Wheat," in *The Context of Scripture*, 1:575–88.

8. The Syriac, Armenian, Arabic, and other versions are quite different and much later, and they must be used with caution.

9. *Babrius and Phaedrus* (LCL), 139.

10. See sayings 125 ("... a man who chops wood in the dark when he cannot see is like a thief who breaks into a house and is caught") and 159 ("A man of fine character and a happy disposition is like a mighty city which is built on a hill").

11. Fragment 3, 4–5 of 4Q 424 has a similitude: "Like he who winnows in the wind [grain] which does not separate out, so is he who speaks to an ear which does not listen or he who recounts to someone asleep. . . ." See also *Genesis Apocryphon* XIX, 14–21; 4Q 302; and 4Q Four Kingdoms^{a,b} (4Q 552 and 553).

12. The Similitudes of 1 Enoch (chs. 39–71) are, of course, later than the rest of the document.

who when threatened by the waves and wind, threw the cargo into the sea because he was willing to lose everything to enter the city.¹³

The parables of 4 Ezra are from the late first century, but some are reminiscent of Jesus' parables. For example, 8:41–45 is a parable about a farmer sowing seeds, not all of which come up, to demonstrate that not all sowed into the earth will be saved.¹⁴ Other apocalyptic writings have allegorical treatments (such as *1 En.* 89), but most tend to be much longer and more involved than Jesus' parables. They are not close to Jesus' narrative parables at all.

If we look at Greco-Roman parables, we find first of all that insufficient research has been done. A significant number of parables or parable-like forms appear. People tend to discount Aesop's fables because they mostly involve the personification of plants and animals, but numerous fables in Babrius and Phaedrus are not about plants and animals at all but about humans or humans in relation to gods.¹⁵ The difference between Aesop's fables and Jesus' parables is primarily regarding their purpose. Aesop's fables were for entertainment and for teaching wisdom generally, neither of which is true of Jesus' parables, which are much more context specific with regard to his own ministry.

The parable form is discussed in *progymnasmata* (textbooks providing exercises for instruction in rhetoric)¹⁶ and were a regular component in the elaboration of *chreiai*.¹⁷ Frequent examples of parables or parabolic material may be found in Seneca, Plutarch, and Epictetus, and discussions of the genre appear in Aristotle's *The "Art" of Rhetoric* (2.20.1–8), Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria* (5.11.1–44) and *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (4.45.59–4.48.61).

13. "And I became as one wishing to enter a certain city to discover its wealth and gain a portion of its splendor, and as one embarked with cargo in a seagoing ship. Seeing at mid-ocean the third wave and the opposition of the wind, he threw the cargo into the sea, saying, 'I am willing to lose everything in order to enter this city so that I might gain both the ship and things better than the payload.' Thus, I also considered my goods as nothing compared to the city about which the angel spoke to me."

Fourth Baruch, which may be as late as the second century A.D., at 7:26–27 has a similitude that Jeremiah offers to Baruch: "For (it is) just as (when) a father has an only son and he is handed over for punishment, those who . . . (are) consoling him cover his face so he won't see how his son is being punished. . . . For God similarly had mercy on you and didn't allow you to come into Babylon so you wouldn't see the oppression of the people."

14. See also 4:13–21, 28–32, 38–43; 7:49–61; 8:1–3; and 9:30–37. Pertinent analogies appear also in 5:46–49, 51–55, and 7:3–16, and the apocalyptic visions and their allegorical interpretations throughout the book and esp. chs. 11–13 deserve attention. The allegorically interpreted apocalyptic visions in *2 Bar.* 35–40 and 53–74 and in *1 En.* 37–71 and 85–90 are very unlike Jesus' parables, but they are still instructive.

15. Among many, see fables 2, 10, 15, 20, 22, 30, 34, 47, 49, 54, 57, 63, 75, 92 in Babrius' collection and in Phaedrus, Book 2, fables 2, 3, and 5; Book 3, fables 5, 8, 9, 10, 11, 14, 19, and in Perottis's appendix, fable 15.

16. See especially Theon's *Progymnasmata* in *Progymnasmata: Greek Textbooks of Prose Composition and Rhetoric* (trans. with introduction and notes by George A. Kennedy; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 23–28.

17. See *The Chreia and Ancient Rhetoric: Classroom Exercises* (trans. and ed. by Ronald F. Hock and Edward N. O'Neil; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), especially pp. 83–84.

One of the first examples often listed of parables is Cyrus's story to Ionian and Aeolian cities who refused to join in a revolt against Croesus. After Cyrus's victory, these cities sent messengers offering to be his subjects, to which Cyrus replied:

Once . . . there was a flute-player who saw fishes in the sea and played upon his flute, thinking that so they would come out on to the land. Being disappointed of his hope, he took a net and gathered in and drew out a great multitude of the fishes; and seeing them leaping, "You had best," said he, "cease from your dancing now; you would not come out and dance then, when I played to you."¹⁸

The parable did not need explanation, and on receiving his message the cities prepared for war.¹⁹

One other example will have to suffice. Seneca (4 B.C.–A.D. 65) offers an interrogative parable with an explanation:

And so there is no reason for you to think that any man has lived long because he has grey hairs or wrinkles; he has not lived long—he has existed long. For what if you should think that that man had had a long voyage who had been caught by a fierce storm as soon as he left harbour, and, swept hither and thither by a succession of winds that raged from different quarters, had been driven in a circle around that same course? Not much voyage did he have, but much tossing about²⁰

None of this is to suggest influence from Greco-Roman sources on Jesus; it is merely to point out that parables and parabolic language were present in various cultures before and contemporaneous with Jesus. No one, Gentile or Jew, would have thought the *form* of Jesus' parables strange or unfamiliar.

If we ask about rabbinic parables, we face a major problem. None of the rabbinic parables, even though they are attributed to rabbis who preceded or were contemporaneous with Jesus, is *demonstrably* earlier than Jesus' parables.²¹ The Mishnah, apart from *ʿAbot*, has little that is

18. Herodotus, *Histories* 1:141 (5th century B.C.).

19. The correspondences in the analogy are obvious: Cyrus corresponds to the flute player, the cities to the fish, their refusal to dance to the refusal to revolt with Cyrus, and their leaping in the nets to their present attempt to please Cyrus. The correspondences were clear from the context and required no explanation. Later this parable was retold by *Aesop* (Babrius 9) but without its context and original intent, and it is given an insipid, generic application.

20. "On the Shortness of Life," 7:10. Similar to Jesus' saying about finding a log in a brother's eye, Seneca writes, "You look at the pimples of others when you yourselves are covered with a mass of sores" ("On the Happy Life," 27:4). Among other examples from Seneca, see "On Anger," 2.23.1–2; 3.31.3; 3.39.4; 3.43.1–2; "On Mercy," 1.3.5; 1.19.2–3; 1.25.4; 2.2.1–2; and 2.7.4–5.

21. Jeremias (*The Parables of Jesus*, 12) asserts that not a single parable has come to us from the time before Jesus. If we follow Jacob Neusner in saying "What we cannot show, we do not know," we must be much more cautious about merely latching onto rabbinic parables as the key to understanding Jesus, as important as the rabbinic parables may be. See his *Rabbinic Literature and the New Testament: What We Cannot Show, We Do Not Know* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press

parabolic.²² *ʿAbot* has seven passages close to Jesus' similitudes, but nothing that is a narrative parable *with a plot*.²³ Parables are attributed to other early rabbis such as Hillel the Elder (late first century B.C. to early first century A.D.; *Midr. Lev.* 34:3),²⁴ Johanan ben Zakkai (before 80 A.D.; see, e.g., *b. Šabb.* 153a) or Gamaliel the Elder (before 80 A.D.; see, e.g., *ʿAbot R. Nat.* 40:10) and could stem from the first century, but, again, the uncertainty of the attributions vitiates any sure knowledge about date. David Instone-Brewer suggests *t. Peah* 3:8 is a parable from a time when the temple was still in existence, for in it a man asks his son to make two animal sacrifices on his behalf.²⁵ This is not a parable but, as it is labeled, a $\pi\psi\chi\mu\tau\omicron$, a case or historical precedent, merely a story about a pious man who was extremely scrupulous about keeping the law. A $\pi\psi\chi\mu\tau\omicron$ is not the same as the so-called example stories. Later rabbinic parables are close to Jesus' parables in both form and content—close enough in specific instances that some people debate direct dependence.²⁶ The purpose of rabbinic parables is different, for they are *usually* exegetical, whereas Jesus' parables are not. Jesus may well have drawn on stock rabbinic stories, as is often suggested, but that cannot be demonstrated. In fact, J. Neusner finds little support for the idea that a corpus of autonomous parables circulated and were appropriated to situations. Rabbinic parables in his estimation are not “off the rack” parables;

International, 1994), especially pp. 185–90. Further, to focus merely on the rabbinic writings ignores the larger question of the relation of the parables of Jesus and the rabbis to similar types of discourse in virtually every culture. From where did the rabbis develop the procedure? For them too, whatever else is involved, the OT is a primary source.

For a helpful list of rabbinic parables pertinent for Gospels study (with dates for the rabbi to whom the parable is attributed) see Craig A. Evans, “Jesus and Rabbinic Parables, Proverbs, and Prayers,” in *Jesus and his Contemporaries: Comparative Studies* (ed. Craig A. Evans; Leiden: Brill, 1995), 251–97, 252–57.

22. Three passages should be mentioned: *m. Sukkah* 2:9 and *m. Nid.* 2:5 and 5:7, all rather rudimentary analogies. *M. Soṭah* 9:15 has an honorific exaggeration that when Rabbi Meir died there were no more makers of *meshalim*, but the intent with *meshalim* is not clear. Given the halakhic nature of the Mishnah, the paucity of parables is not surprising, for they occur primarily in haggadah.

23. See 1:3; 2:15; 3:17, 18; 4:16, 20; 5:15. Flusser (*Die rabbinischen Gleichnisse und der Gleichniserzähler Jesus*, 31) accepts that *m. ʿAbot* 1:3, a similitude about work attributed to Antigonos of Socho (about 180 B.C.) is the oldest evidence of Jewish parables. Can the attribution to this rabbi be accepted uncritically?

24. *Str-B* 1:654 lists this as the only parable from the pre-Christian rabbinic literature.

25. David Instone-Brewer, *Traditions of the Rabbis from the Era of the New Testament*, vol. 1: *Prayer and Agriculture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 151–52.

26. Adolf Jülicher (*Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 2 vols. in one; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1963 [reprint of Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1910], 2:267) argued *ʿAbot. R. Nat.* 23 is dependent on Jesus' parable of the Two Builders (Matt 7:24–27/Luke 6:47–49); Flusser (*Die rabbinischen Gleichnisse und der Gleichniserzähler Jesus*, 98) suggested Jesus was dependent on the rabbis, although on p. 103 he acknowledged Jesus could be the creator of the parable. Jeremias (*The Parables of Jesus*, 138) and John Drury (*The Parables in the Gospels*, 95) both suggested rabbinic parables on workers show dependence on Jesus' parable of the Workers in the Vineyard. Jülicher (*Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 2:467–68) suggested that Jesus may have known a rabbinic parable like this one.

rather, they have been generated by the text they serve.²⁷ Some will think I am too cautious with rabbinic parables, but as important as they are, we cannot presume that the parables we see in the Tosefta, Talmuds, and midrashim three to five hundred years later were circulating before Jesus' time. Rabbinic parables *should* be used and are especially helpful in understanding the form of parables, but they must be used with caution.

What can be demonstrated is that the form of Jesus' parables, his parabolic way of thinking, the images used, and the purpose of his parables stands in line with the OT and especially with the prophets. That should occasion no surprise, but it is an important point that sometimes is neglected. If the content of Jesus' message draws largely on the OT, his analogical way of thinking and the form of his sayings does as well. In focusing on the prophetic use of parables I do not mean to diminish their origin and use in sapiential/pedagogical literature nor to downplay wisdom, nor is it necessary for me to engage the debate about the relation of wisdom and prophecy.²⁸ Wisdom has an edginess about it, which is natural, given the foolishness of humans. It seeks, at least partly, to confront and debunk. As Eccl 12:11 puts it, "The sayings of the wise are like goads," and the descriptions of fools in Proverbs or of Ahiqar's nephew are prime witnesses. Prophets found the tools of wisdom thinking to be forceful ways to communicate their own message. What is a prophet but a wise person in tune with the voice of God and with an edginess set against the foolishness of the people addressed?²⁹

Scholars differ significantly over what they consider a parable, but little is gained from excluding forms by a narrow definition. Although not many OT precursors to the longer narrative parables of Jesus exist, I would suggest more parables and parabolic sayings occur than is typically granted.³⁰ Some would list additional items, but I suggest that *at least* the following deserve attention (even though the noun and verb forms of מִשַׁל rarely appear to describe these accounts):

27. Jacob Neusner, *Rabbinic Narrative: A Documentary Perspective*, 4 vols. (The Brill Reference Library of Judaism; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 4:111–14, 221–23.

28. Wisdom also hears the voice of God. Wisdom is more general, while prophecy is more specific. Wisdom observed life and nature, but so did the prophets. Wisdom associated with the royal cult, but so did some of the prophets. There is no hermetic seal between the two. On this question, see Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, "The Sage in the Prophetic Literature," in *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (ed. John G. Gammie and Leo G. Perdue; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 295–306, especially 297–301.

29. I am not arguing prophets were first sages in the technical sense.

30. Birger Gerhardsson identifies only five parables from the Hebrew Scriptures, but also lists ten additional borderline cases. See his "The Narrative Meshalim in the Synoptic Gospels: A Comparison with the Narrative Meshalim in the Old Testament," *NTS* 34 (1988): 339–63, 343. T. W. Manson lists nine parables and two fables (*The Teaching of Jesus* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1939], 62–63) some of which are not in Gerhardsson's two categories. Westermann, of course, would find numerous parabolic forms. See *The Parables of Jesus in the Light of the Old Testament*, 5–151.

Four judicial parables, the second and third of which are actually judicial dramas

1. the parable of the Ewe Lamb that Nathan tells David (2 Sam 12:1–14)
2. the parable of the Widow and the Avengers which Joab arranges for a wise woman from Tekoa to tell David (2 Sam 14:1–20). Surely this is one of the most powerful and significant parables ever told, especially with its theology of God being a God who devises ways to bring back the banished (2 Sam 14:14). Surely this picture is as poignant as the parable of the Prodigal.
3. the parable of the Fake Injury, by which an unnamed prophet confronts Ahab (1 Kgs 20:35–42)
4. the parable of the Vineyard (Isa 5:1–7), which expresses judgment on the house of Israel and the people of Judah for being so unproductive³¹

Six story parables in Ezekiel presenting Israel's history in figurative form

5. Jerusalem the Prostitute (16:1–54)
6. the Eagle and the Vine and its explanation (17:2–24)³² (וְיִשְׂרָאֵל מְשָׁל)
7. the Lioness and her Cubs (19:2–9)
8. the Transplanted Vine (19:10–14)
9. the Two Adulterous Sisters and its explanation (23:1–49)
10. the Cauldron and its explanation (24:3–14)³³ (וְיִשְׂרָאֵל . . . מְשָׁל)

To these obvious examples, several *other parables/parabolic sayings* should be added:

11. an interrogative parable about plowing and sowing to teach about the coming judgment of God (Isa 28:23–29)
12. the poor wise man in a small city besieged by a powerful king, which is used to lament the way people ignore wisdom (Eccl 9:14–18)
13. a similitude of a fisherman who catches fish and then sacrifices to his net, used to describe the Babylonians' capture of people (Hab 1:13–17)
14. a similitude about a wine bottle, virtually a judicial parable, depicts the drunkenness and destruction of all the people (Jer 13:12–14)
15. the story of a vine that was brought out of Egypt, was planted, then ravaged and burned, all a metaphorical retelling of Israel's story and a prayer for restoration (Ps 80:8–17)

31. The self condemnation in Isa 5 is implied.

32. Cf. also 15:1–8, which is close to being a parable about the vine.

33. While NT scholarship rightly does not see Ezekiel's being addressed as Son of Man as an influence on Jesus' use of the title, Ezek 20:49 [21:5] does give pause: "They say of me, 'Is he not a speaker of parables?'" At a more general level, Ezekiel may have influenced Jesus more than is usually recognized. Ezekiel 34 is often seen as a text that influenced Jesus' thinking.

16. the image of the potter making what he will as an image of the sovereignty of God (Jer 18:2–13)
17. the metaphorical depiction of God as a warrior putting on his armor to bring salvation (Isa 59:16–17)
18. a metaphorical description of shepherds who scatter the sheep and of God who will bring his flock back to their folds and protect them (Jer 23:1–4)
19. a metaphorical description of the failed shepherds of Israel and a promise that God will be Israel's shepherd (Ezek 34)
20. the valley of dry bones resurrected to life as a promise of God's redeeming work with Israel (Ezek 37)
21. Two interrogative parables about cleanness (Hag 2:12–14)
22. Hosea's relation to his wife as a parable about God's relation to Israel

What is obvious about this list is that nearly all of the occurrences are told by prophets and most are in prophetic books. Depending on how one assesses the wise woman of Tekoa's story to David (number two above), only Eccl 9:14–18 and Ps 80:8–17 do not come from prophets, but the latter depicts the history of Israel, which is the way prophets use parables. Nearly all the parables mirror the nation, its king, or God's action of judging and redeeming. God's coming always has the dual purpose of judgment/justice and salvation/restoration.

To this list should be added the prophetic visions,³⁴ which cannot be treated here, and especially parabolic acts or signs,³⁵ particularly those of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, but also Nehemiah, who shakes out the folds of his garment to show how God will shake those who do not obey the promise (5:13). By their lives and actions (such as Ezekiel acting out the siege and plight of Jerusalem and the exiled people, 4:1–5:4; 12:1–20; and 24:15–27), the prophets mirror Israel's fate. Usually the focus is on the judgment coming on the nation, but even with prophetic actions the promise of restoration is given, as is evident in Jeremiah's buying a field (32:6–44). Parabolic language and acts are tools of prophets in the conflict they have with Israel and her leaders, both to depict their perilous situation and the hope that could be theirs.³⁶ Parables were a prophetic tool to confront hardness of heart.

34. Among many, Jer 24:1–10 describes two baskets of figs, one good and one bad, which mirror those taken captive to the land of the Chaldeans and those who stay in Judah or go to Egypt. Amos is well-known for his series of visions from God: locusts, fire, plumb-line, and summer fruit (7:1–9 and 8:1–3). Zechariah 1:7–6:8 is primarily a series of visions and interpretations. The dreams and interpretations in Dan 2 and 7 depict the succession of human kingdoms and the ultimate kingdom of God.

35. See Scot McKnight, "Jesus and Prophetic Actions," *BBR* 10 (2000): 197–232, 205–14, for a convenient survey of OT prophetic actions.

36. Note Hos 12:10(11) and the difference between the NIV ("I spoke to the prophets . . . and told parables through them") and the NRSV ("Through the prophets I will bring destruction"). This results from choices between two different words with the same letters (הָמַד), one meaning "be like" and the other meaning "cease" or "cause to cease."

At this point and without going into the rest of the history of the development of parables, a process of development of the use of Semitic parables can be set out, beginning with sapiential/pedagogical parables, and moving then to prophetic parables, apocalyptic allegorical descriptions, early Jewish parables, Jesus' parables, and rabbinic parables. Parables began in sapiential/pedagogical material and are evidenced in various cultures both as general instruction and sometimes as instruction or confrontation in specific contexts. Parables were adopted and honed by the Hebrew prophets and used in quite specific contexts, not as general instruction, but as depictions of the nation's perilous situation and hope. Later apocalyptic writers adapted parabolic language and often extended them into longer allegorical depictions detailing both history and the future. Early Jewish teachers, including John the Baptist (e.g., Matt 3:10/Luke 3:9), also used parabolic sayings, but examples here of narrative parables are few and far between. Jesus stands closer to the prophets in their use of parables, but contact with apocalyptic thought may be granted.³⁷ Further, Jesus did more than merely adopt the prophetic genre. Sometimes he used parables the way prophets did to depict Israel, coming judgment, and restoration, but he brought a creativity to the genre and used parables more often and for other purposes, such as more frequently and directly to mirror God's character, to depict the kingdom, both present and future, to instruct about behavior, compassion, the use of wealth, prayer, and discipleship. The prophets did not use parables for such purposes. Prophets sometimes used parables to confront individuals, specifically kings, but Jesus—in addition to using parables to address the nation—frequently addressed specific groups and individuals. Jesus' parables address both the judgment on the nation and judgment on individuals (e.g., the Feast, the Rich Fool). The novelty in Jesus' use is directly related to the difference in Jesus' message and, no doubt, to the fact that the promises were being fulfilled in his own ministry. Later, with the rabbis, a further development occurs: parables become exegetical tools to help understand OT texts or questions about living out the text. One can understand why Jeremias thought Jesus' use of parables was entirely new, but his view was too narrowly conceived.

Why is it important to recognize that Jesus' parables are prophetic instruments? The parables are not nice stories, mere clever illustrations, or nice pedagogical tools: *they are part of a prophetic agenda*. Clearly Jesus presented himself, and was understood first of all, as a prophet, both an oracular and a leadership prophet.³⁸ Like the prophets, he brought a word from God, but more than the prophets, he enacted the promises of God to reconstitute Israel under his own leadership. Like the prophets, he told parables to confront the hardness of heart of the people, especially the leaders,

37. Why N. T. Wright (*Jesus and the Victory of God*, 175, 177, and 181) emphasizes apocalyptic is not obvious, because the form of Jesus' parables is very unlike most apocalyptic allegorical descriptions.

38. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 162–68.

and he performed prophetic acts such as eating with sinners, choosing twelve disciples, his entry into Jerusalem, and cursing the fig tree; possibly the “cleansing” of the temple should be understood this way too.³⁹ Obviously, the Johannine signs should be understood in relation to the OT prophetic signs as well. In connection with the purpose of parables, Matthew, in 13:35, specifically sees *Jesus’* speaking in parables as fulfilling the word of the *prophet* as expressed in Ps 78:2: “I will open my mouth in parables; I will proclaim things hidden from the foundation [of the world].” The use of Ps 78 is no accident; this psalm retells the history of Israel up to David, instructs the nation about God’s glorious acts, gives hope, and urges people not to be like the previous rebellious generations. Understanding parables as prophetic instruments helps make sense of several aspects of *Jesus’* parables, not the least of which is the use of Isa 6 in Mark 4.⁴⁰ *Jesus* as a prophet experiences and warns against the hardness of heart that Isaiah experienced, as he enacts God’s sowing the message of restoration. Like Jeremiah and Ezekiel before him, he adapted the words of Isa 6 to describe his own ministry.⁴¹

Jesus’ use of parables reinforces the fact that he came as a prophet to Israel, and it has something to contribute to the question about what kind of prophet *Jesus* was. He seems closer to the classical prophets of the OT than one might conclude if the parables are left out of consideration.⁴² *Jesus’* prophetic use of parables provides a lens to understand both his sayings and actions. It reinforces that *Jesus* is to be understood in continuity with Israel’s history and as using OT images from that history, and, therefore, it gives the context against which *Jesus’* parables and other sayings are to be understood. Some are parables of *Israel*, but not as many as N. T. Wright suggests.⁴³ It gives focus to the themes of kingdom, redemption, and judgment in *Jesus’* message. Judgment is not some vengeful, irrational theme added by the early church but a prophetic theme communicating the crisis facing the nation. What prophet ever came without a focus on judgment? The prophets’ parables about judgment are a rhetorical strategy, and so are *Jesus’* parables. *Jesus* comes as a prophetic revealer and uses parables in a way similar to and building on the prophetic practice. If *Jesus* used parables as prophetic tools, we have a context in which he must be understood, and he must be understood as expressing a prophetic theology.

39. Mark’s account of the two stage seeing miracle (8:22–26) appears to be a prophetic act as well, mirroring the flawed seeing of the disciples. On *Jesus’* prophetic acts see McKnight, “*Jesus and Prophetic Actions.*”

40. See my “A Hermeneutics of Hearing Informed by the Parables with Special Reference to Mark 4,” *BBR* 14 (2004): 59–79.

41. See Jer 5:21 and Ezek 12:2.

42. McKnight (“*Jesus and Prophetic Actions,*” 229) thinks *Jesus* is closer to the Jewish sign prophets and Moses’ major actions than to the preclassical and classical prophets.

43. See Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, especially 125–44, 174–86, and 229–43.

WHAT CLASSIFICATION OF PARABLES SHOULD BE USED?

Most people studying parables have encountered the fourfold classification of parables, even if they have never heard of Adolf Jülicher from whom the classification comes: similitudes (German, *Gleichnisse*), parables (*Gleichniserzählungen*), example stories (*Beispielerszählungen*), and allegories (*Allegorien*), the last of which Jülicher for all intents and purposes rejected.⁴⁴ This system, despite its use, had problems from the beginning, and today it has rightly been abandoned by many. The debate over the distinction of parable and allegory has never been satisfactorily settled. Now, people frequently question the legitimacy of the category example story. Further, even with similitude and parable there were questions, evidenced by the lack of agreement between Jülicher and Rudolf Bultmann about which accounts were similitudes.⁴⁵

With apologies to Quintilian, who in the first century complained about those who show pedantic zeal in making a minute classification of similes,⁴⁶ I want to suggest a classification system that I think is more helpful than Jülicher's fourfold system. It is not enough to speak only of two types of parables (similitudes and narrative parables), as some do.⁴⁷ But why bother with classification at all? I suggest three reasons why classifying parables is not merely a pedantic exercise: (1) Jülicher's system, which is still used by many, will not work and obfuscates; (2) to classify a parable at least partly determines its interpretation, and implicitly, if not explicitly, we do classify parables when explaining them; (3) a workable classification system allows us to compare like parables and gain understanding about how different kinds of parables work. This is not to say that all parables in a given category function exactly the same way; they do not, but family resemblances help considerably in interpretation.

44. *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 1:49–118, especially 117.

45. Jülicher used the German word *Gleichnis*, which is usually translated with "similitude," to cover parabolic sayings (such as the blind leading the blind in Matt 15:14/Luke 6:39, which is labeled a παραβολή), the proverb "Physician, heal yourself" (Luke 4:24), and the parables of the Tower Builder and Warring King (Luke 14:28–32). He labeled several passages as parables (*Parabeln*), which most now call similitudes (e.g., the parables of the Lost Sheep and Lost Coin, the Mustard Seed, the Leaven, the Treasure, and the Pearl). Note that Bultmann, although following Jülicher, treats all these as similitudes (*Gleichnisse*). See his *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (rev. ed.; trans. John Marsh; New York: Harper and Row, 1976), 170–73.

46. Quintilian *Inst.* 5.11.30.

47. Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 3. Detlev Dormeyer, partly in dependence on Quintilian, has only two subgenres for parables: parables in the narrow sense (essentially similitudes) and parables (stories in the past tense telling of "one-off cases"). See his *The New Testament among the Writings of Antiquity* (trans. Rosemarie Kossov; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 156–73. The distinction between similitudes and parables was already recognized and discussed by Origen. See his treatment on Matt 13:44 in *Commentary on Matthew* 10.4 and 16 (*ANF* 9:415–16 and 423–24), in which he says that similitudes are generic while parables are specific and that parables were told to the multitudes while similitudes were told to the disciples. Note John Dominic Crossan's division of parables into aphoristic, extended, and narrative parables ("Parable," *ABD*, 5:148–49).

First we should remind ourselves how broad *παραβολή* and *משל* are, particularly the latter in that it can cover a proverb, a taunt, a byword, an oracle, or an allegorical account. *Παραβολή* in the NT is almost as broad in that it is used of a proverb (Luke 4:23), a riddle, (Mark 3:23 and parallels), a comparison (Matt 13:33), a contrast (Luke 18:1–8), both simple stories (Luke 13:6–9) and complex stories (Matt 22:1–14), and of allegorical accounts as well (Mark 4:3–9). In fact, B. Gerhardsson would classify most of Jesus' sayings as *משלים* and divide them into aphoristic and narrative *משלים*. He grants that greater precision is needed, but he raises important and interesting issues. For example, he points out that Jesus makes christological claims in aphoristic *משלים* but not in narrative ones.⁴⁸

If, as Kierkegaard argued, parables are a means of indirect communication,⁴⁹ most of Jesus' parables are *double indirect communication*, whether similitudes or narrative parables. Direct communication addresses the hearer about the subject at hand. Direct communication about the kingdom might say, "The kingdom is of supreme value and is worth everything you could give." The parable of the Treasure in the Field is double indirect communication in that it does not speak of the hearer/reader or the subject at hand. It uses another person (the one who finds) and another subject (the treasure) to address the hearer indirectly. The story of the Prodigal and the Elder Brother is double indirect communication. It is about a man and his sons, not the hearers/readers and not their relation as sinners to God, but it uses these other people and another subject (their relations) to speak of God, relation with God, and relations among humans.

Other systems of categorization could be used,⁵⁰ but, leaving aside the shorter aphoristic sayings and taking my cue from Kierkegaard, I suggest the following distinctions:

- similitudes (double indirect)
- interrogative parables (double indirect)
- narrative parables, of which there are three further distinctions:
 1. double indirect narrative parables
 2. judicial parables, a particular type of double indirect narrative parables
 3. single indirect narrative parables
- "how much more" parables

48. "The Secret of the Transmission of the Unwritten Jesus Tradition," *NTS* 51 (2005): 1–18, 11–13. He counts a total of 55 narrative *משלים* in the Synoptics.

49. See *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, 6 vols. (ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong; Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1967), 1:273–90 for his treatment of indirect communication.

50. E.g., note the distinction J. Jeremias makes between nominative and dative forms of parables, i.e., ones that begin with a noun in the nominative case (Mark 4:3) and ones that begin with a dative case (Mark 4:30–31). See his *The Parables of Jesus*, 100–103. C. Blomberg (*Interpreting the Parables* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1990], 24–25) classifies parables as triadic, dyadic, and monadic based on the number of main characters. See also G. Sellin, "Lukas as Gleichniserzähler: die Erzählung vom barmherzigen Samariter (Lk 10:25–37)," *ZNW* 65

All the designations are double indirect except those labeled single indirect. These categories are determined both by form and by function. Except for the “how much more” parables and the judicial parables, the categories are mutually exclusive. Judicial parables are a type of double indirect narrative parables, and the “how much more” logic can be used with other categories. A few comments about each category is in order.

Similitudes. Similitudes are extended similes. Often it is said that they relate a *typical or recurring* event or process in real life and are expressed in the present tense, but neither description works. Tense is not a factor in distinguishing forms. Some similitudes have two or more tenses, and some use the aorist (e.g., the Leaven in Matt 13:33).⁵¹ Nor is a similitude necessarily a typical or recurring event. Is finding a treasure typical or recurring? The marker of a similitude is that it is an extended analogy which *lacks plot development*. It is more than a simple comparison and may involve several actions *and* a period of time. For example, the kingdom is like a woman who took leaven and hid it in three measures of dough until the whole was leavened. There is action but no plot, no problem needing resolution or development of the situation so that one has a story.⁵² Similitudes tend to be rather straightforward, less confrontive, and not focused on correspondences in contrast to more developed forms.

(1974): 166–89, who classifies parables according to their introductions (τις ἐξ ὑμῶν, ἀνθρώπος τῆς, and ἄνθρωπος). See the discussion of Jeffrey T. Tucker, *Example Stories: Perspectives on Four Parables in the Gospel of Luke* (JSNT Supp 162; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 209–19.

51. The Mustard Seed in Mark has the present tense and the aorist subjunctive. Luke has the aorist, and Matthew has both present and aorist. This causes some to label Matthew and Luke’s version a parable. See among others Harry Fleddermann, “Mustard Seed and Leaven in Q, the Synoptics, and Thomas,” *Society of Biblical Literature 1989 Seminar Papers* (ed. David J. Lull; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 216–36, 216. W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 3 vols. [ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988–1997], 2:416), following N. A. Huffman, label the Q version (represented by Luke) a “true parable” about a particular mustard seed, and since it is in the past tense as less influenced by the church. Drawing the opposite conclusion, Peter Rhea Jones (*Studying the Parables of Jesus* [Macon, Ga.: Smyth & Helwys, 1999], 85) sets Matthew’s and Luke’s past tense parable against Mark’s present tense similitude and concludes that Mark’s version fits better with Jesus’ time, whereas the past tenses of Matthew and Luke fit the time of the church. Tenses are dubious support for such conclusions about the influence of the church. *Tense is no ultimate guide* to the distinction between similitudes and parables, as a glance at the different tenses in the parables of Treasure in the Field and of the Pearl shows. The Treasure uses the aorist for “hid” (ἐκρυψε) and then uses the present tense. The Pearl uses the perfect tense for “sold” (πέπρακεν), the imperfect for “had” (εἶχε), and the aorist for “bought” (ἠγόρασεν). However, the aorist active indicative of πῆρασκω seems to have fallen out of use. See S. M. B. Wilmshurst, “The Historic Present in Matthew’s Gospel: A Survey and Analysis Focused on Matthew 13:44,” *JSNT* 25 (2003): 269–87, 281.

52. Cf. Georg Baudler, *Jesus im Spiegel seiner Gleichnisse: Das erzählerische Lebenswerk Jesu – ein Zugang zum Glauben* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1986), 58–79 who distinguishes between “procedure parables” (*Vorgangsgleichnissen*) and “parables with a plot” (*Handlungsgleichnissen*), and Eckhard Rau (*Reden in Vollmacht: Hintergrund, Form, und Anliegen der Gleichnisse Jesu*, FRLANT 149; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990, 30), who distinguishes between descriptive parables and narrative parables (*besprechenden and erzählenden Gleichnissen*).

Interrogative parables. These parables do not have plot development and are logically close to similitudes. Questions are one of the major ways that parables create interest, and parables often begin with questions, have questions in their narrative, or conclude with questions. As a category though, interrogative parables are distinct in that they *are presented entirely as questions*. A number of these parables are “Who from you?” (τίς ἐξ ὑμῶν) parables, a question that some translations unfortunately eliminate.⁵³ Obvious examples include the parables of the Lost Sheep and the Friend at Midnight. Interrogative parables are also close to judicial parables, for they set up a hypothetical situation, force the hearer/reader to answer a question, and obligate one to transfer that answer to another arena. (Judicial parables carry additionally an accusatory element.) The question “Who from you?” *always* expects a negative answer: no one would act as the parable describes.⁵⁴

Double indirect narrative parables. Narrative parables, parables in the restricted sense, are metaphors (*contra* Jülicher) extended into narrative analogies *with a plot*. These parables are fictitious stories, each narrating a *particular* event, are usually told using the past tenses, and each is intended to convey moral or spiritual truth. Narrative parables of all three types have *plot development*. It is not a documentary merely reporting information and actions. Something happens in the narrative that *creates a problem or possibility that requires reaction in the story*, and these other acts bring, or potentially bring, resolution or closure. The parable of the Banquet (Luke 14:15–24) is an obvious example.

Judicial parables. As a subset of double indirect narrative parables,⁵⁵ these are among the best known and most forceful parables. By hiding their referent, judicial parables elicit a self-condemnation from the hearer through the aid of an image. The hearer is forced to judge the circumstances of the parable, and then the lens drops, and one realizes that he or she has judged him or herself. Kierkegaard described his discourses as “thoughts which wound from behind,”⁵⁶ an especially apt description of judicial parables. The best known judicial parable is Nathan’s parable of

53. The NIV and NRSV both substitute “Suppose” for “Who from you?” (e.g., Luke 11:5). It is *crucial* that one realize that Luke 11:5–7 is one long question and should not be divided into several sentences in translation. Why the UBS⁴ and N-A²⁷ do not punctuate these verses as a question is a mystery.

54. This is the case for every NT occurrence. In Luke 11:5–7 the whole scenario is unthinkable. The expectation of a negative answer holds true as well among Greco-Roman writers. See, e.g., Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.27.19–20 (τίς ὑμῶν εἰς βαλανεῖον ἀπελθεῖν θέλων εἰς μύλωνά ἀπῆλθεν;—“Who among you when he wishes to go to a bath goes to a mill instead?”).

55. For discussions of this genre, see Simon, Uriel, “The Poor Man’s Ewe-Lamb: An Example of a Juridical Parable,” *Bib* 48 (1967): 207–42; Adrian Graffy, “The Literary Genre of Isaiah 5,1–7,” *Bib* 60 (1979): 400–409; Gale Yee, “A Form Critical Study of Isaiah 5:1–7 as a Song and a Juridical Parable,” *CBQ* 43 (1981): 30–40.

56. See, e.g., Søren Kierkegaard’s *Journals and Papers*, 1:266–76, or his *Christian Discourses: The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress* (ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), part 3, pp. 161f.

the Ewe Lamb told to David (2 Sam 12:1–14), but Jesus' parables of the Two Sons (Matt 21:28–32), the Matthean version of the Wicked Tenants (Matt 21:33–45),⁵⁷ and the Two Debtors (Luke 7:40–47) are judicial parables.⁵⁸ Judicial parables nearly always and almost by necessity require concluding explanations, something that points the accusing finger at the hearer and makes explicit how the person has erred.

Single indirect parables. Most of these parables have traditionally been called *example stories*.⁵⁹ The usual explanation is that the primary purpose of these parables is to present a positive or negative character (or both) who serves as an example to be imitated or whose traits and actions are to be avoided. Either explicitly or implicitly the example story supposedly says, "Go and do [or do not do] likewise" (cf. Luke 10:37). Typically only four parables, all in Luke, are identified as example stories: the Good Samaritan, the Rich Fool, the Rich Man and Lazarus, and the Pharisee and the Toll Collector.⁶⁰ A number of scholars reject this category because they are unimpressed with what they see as moralistic teaching in example stories, because they know other parables also give examples to follow or not follow, because only the Good Samaritan has the command to go and do likewise, and especially because they presuppose all parables must be metaphorical. In their estimation, either these four accounts were originally metaphorical too, or they are not parables, and if they were originally metaphorical stories, they have been changed into moralistic accounts by the evangelists. Dan Via excludes them from the category of parables.⁶¹ Crossan believes that all four parables were originally parables of reversal to emphasize that the kingdom brings reversal, but the parables have been turned into moral injunctions by the tradition.⁶² For example, in Crossan's opinion the Good Samaritan at the literal level causes the hearers' world to be turned upside down, and the metaphorical point is that the kingdom breaks abruptly into one's consciousness and demands the reversal of values.

I confess that for some time I tried to keep the category example story, but in the end this label is both inadequate and inappropriate. Other par-

57. Mark's and Luke's versions are implied judicial parables, like Isa 5:1–7.

58. The parables of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) and the Pharisee and the Toll Collector (Luke 18:9–14) are very close to being judicial parables.

59. The most important treatments of this question are Tucker's *Example Stories: Perspectives on Four Parables in the Gospel of Luke*, even though in the end I do not think his solution is satisfactory; and Ernst Baasland, "Zum Beispiel der Beispielerzählungen: zur Formenlehre der Gleichnisse und zur Methodik der Gleichnisauslegung," *NovT* 28 (1986): 193–219.

60. Bultmann also viewed other accounts as example stories, such as Luke 14:7–11 and 12–14. See his *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, 179.

61. Dan Via, "Parable and Example Story: A Literary-Structuralist Approach," *Semeia* 1 (1974): 105–33, esp. 119. He says that the narrative is a metaphor that gives new meaning to neighborliness but not a metaphor of the kingdom and, therefore, not a parable. How does such a statement square with the breadth of the term מִשְׁלָּה?

62. John Dominic Crossan, "Parable and Example in the Teaching of Jesus," *NTS* 18 (1972): 285–307. Robert W. Funk's approach is similar. See his "The Good Samaritan as Metaphor," *Semeia* 2 (1974): 74–81, where he argues that the parable is a metaphor of the kingdom's mercy always coming as a surprise to those who do not deserve it.

ables clearly give examples of behavior to be imitated or avoided. One thinks immediately of such examples as the Unforgiving Servant, the Two Builders, the Faithful and Unfaithful Servant, the Treasure in the Field, the Two Sons, and the Tower Builder and Warring King. Also, as Jeffrey Tucker points out, all the supposedly distinguishing features (that they provide moral examples, have religious language, name specific persons, groups, or places) can also be paralleled in other parables.⁶³ The *form* of these parables is not different.

Still, the attempt to show that they were originally metaphorical pictures of the reversal of the kingdom cannot suffice. This explanation is noticeably lacking in specificity and is unconvincing. Would hearers really see in the Samaritan a reversal of values and draw the *implicit* conclusion that *the kingdom* must have such a reversal, especially when the parable does not mention the kingdom? A reversal of values can be effected by a single indirect story as easily as by a metaphorical/double indirect parable.

These four parables do *function* differently, and I would add a fifth, the parable of the Unjust Steward. These stories have developed plots, but they are not metaphorical in the way other parables are. Other parables are analogies dealing with two different realms and with two levels of meaning; they are double indirect stories. Through them one sees a subject different from what is in the narrative; i.e., they are not really about seeds, treasure, masters, and servants but about God, the kingdom, and God's people. Interpretation of other parables involves a transfer from the subject in the narrative to some other topic. These five stories do not juxtapose different realms; they are about the subjects they narrate: a Samaritan's aid, the wealth of a rich fool, etc. No transfer is required to another arena, and, therefore, we are justified in speaking of their "relative peculiarity."⁶⁴ They address the reader indirectly by telling of another person but directly *by treating the subject at hand*. The parable of the Rich Fool addresses the reader indirectly through the rich man but directly treats the subject of wealth. They are staged portraits of reality.⁶⁵ These five parables require a different label, and the best alternative is to call them what they are—single indirect narrative parables.

The temptation exists to link Jesus' double and single indirect narrative parables with seeming parallels offered by Aristotle and by rabbinic writings. Aristotle in discussing proofs distinguished historical and invented

63. Tucker, *Example Stories: Perspectives on Four Parables in the Gospel of Luke*, 264–74. See also Wolfgang Harnisch, *Die Gleichniserzählungen Jesu: Eine hermeneutische Einführung* (3rd ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995), 84–92.

64. Baasland, "Zum Beispiel der Beispielerzählungen," 218–19. Note Tucker's legitimate conclusion (*Example Stories: Perspectives on Four Parables in the Gospel of Luke*, 399) that if there is a difference between example story and parable, it is a difference of degree, not kind.

65. The example stories are similar to synecdoche, a naming of the part for the whole, in that they present a particular example to demonstrate a general principle. See Madeleine Boucher, *The Mysterious Parable* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1977), 22. She calls the example stories "extended synecdoches."

examples (*παράδειγματα*), with the latter divided into parables and fables. Rabbis also distinguished two kinds of proofs, the *מִצְעָה* (a precedent) and the *מִשְׁל* (an analogy/parable). There are similarities between these five parables from Jesus and Aristotle's historical examples and the rabbinic precedents, but there are also significant differences. With all three an account, historical or otherwise, is offered as a model for thinking on the subject discussed, but Jesus was not offering proofs by historical precedent nor precedents for halakhic rulings. Rather, he was presenting human behavior as a way to confront people with decisions about life. The single indirect stories are neither historical examples nor *מִצְעָה*.

How much more parables.⁶⁶ This category is not determined by form but by function, and "How much more" parables—for lack of a better term—will also belong to another classification as well. This category includes interrogative parables without plot development and narrative parables with plot development. They explicitly or implicitly contrast human action with God's action. The logic, which is well-known in rabbinic writings, is found in Matt 7:11/Luke 11:13: If human fathers know to give good gifts to their children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those asking him? Contrast is a feature of many parables,⁶⁷ but "How much more" parables function to say God's action far exceeds or is not at all like the person depicted in the parable. These parables may not have explicit signals to warn that the parable functions to contrast human behavior with God's, but the context, the conclusion, or the nature of the parable usually leaves little doubt. An obvious example is the parable of the Unjust Judge, who is not like God at all, and the Friend at Midnight also carries a "how much more" logic.

What About Allegory? Obviously I did not include a category for allegory. Typically an allegory is defined as a series of related metaphors, but Jülicher and others view allegory as obscure, needing to be decoded, and more obfuscating than revealing. Consequently, in biblical studies allegory has been, if not totally rejected, viewed with disdain and suspicion. The claim is made that allegory says something other than what it means by placing pictures in front of reality, but *parable does the same thing*. Both are framed on the reality they seek to portray. The claim that other forms enhance understanding while allegory presupposes understanding is absurd.

Tremendous effort has been expended trying to distinguish parable and allegory, but in the end we must admit the effort is a *complete* failure. Among the most frequently repeated distinctions are:

66. *A fortiori* parables is an alternative label.

67. Birger Gerhardsson divides Jesus' parables into four groups depending on how strongly they involve contrasts within the parable. Of his 55 parables he lists 11 with highly stylized contrasts (such as the Two Builders) and 10 with the contrast clear and important but not as dominant or clearcut as the earlier group. See his "Illuminating the Kingdom: Narrative Meshalim in the Synoptic Gospels," in *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition* (ed. Henry Wansbrough; JSNTSS 64; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 266–309, 273–74.

1. Paul Ricoeur's assertion that allegory is a rhetorical procedure that can be eliminated once it has done its job, while metaphor [and parable] cannot be reduced to abstract language.⁶⁸
2. Dan Via's assertion that the features in allegories are related directly to the outside and only loosely to each other, whereas features of parables relate first of all to each other internally and are not determined by events or ideas outside.⁶⁹

Such statements sound impressive until one reflects on them. Whether parables are incapable of being translated into abstract language is debatable,⁷⁰ but they certainly can be explained, and allegory is no more liable to elimination after doing its job than parable. Nor can one show that allegory relates more externally while parable relates internally or that allegory is necessarily more obscure. A glance at *The Wizard of Oz*⁷¹ or any number of other "allegories" shows how little credence should be given these assertions. The same holds true for other attempts to distinguish the two forms.⁷² Jülicher's approach has been set aside,⁷³ but his disdain for

68. Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 52–56. Cf. John Dominic Crossan, *In Parables* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 11. At the same time, Ricoeur does say that different modes of discourse (parables, eschatological sayings, proverbial sayings) may be translated into one another. See his "Biblical Hermeneutics," 101–2.

69. Dan Otto Via, Jr., *The Parables; Their Literary and Existential Dimension* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), 24–25. Cf. James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 127, who says "An allegory can be understood from the 'outside,' but parables can be understood only from within, by allowing oneself to be taken into the story and hearing who God is and what humans may become. Parables are like stained glass windows in a cathedral, dull and lifeless from the outside but brilliant and radiant from within."

70. See, among others, Boucher, *The Mysterious Parable*, 30; Gerhardsson, "The Narrative Meshalim," 355–56; and Craig Blomberg, "Interpreting the Parables of Jesus: Where Are We and Where Do We Go from Here?" *CBQ* 53 (1991): 50–78, 54.

71. Most people do not know that *The Wizard of Oz* is an elaborate political allegory about conditions at the beginning of the twentieth century in the U.S.A., with "Oz" (the abbreviation for "ounce") and the yellow brick road both referring to the gold standard (which was debated at the time), the scarecrow represented the farmers, the tin man the industrial workers, and the cowardly lion reformers, especially William Jennings Bryan. It is a perfectly good story understandable in its own right, but both enjoyable and powerful when the lens of its intent is in place. It relates internally and externally, just like any good parable.

72. Bultmann (*History of the Synoptic Tradition*, 198) argued that parables and similitudes involve a transference of judgment from one sphere to another, but that allegory does not and instead seeks to disguise some situation in secret or fantastic forms to serve prophetic and other purposes.

Linnemann (*The Parables of Jesus* [trans. John Sturdy; London: SPCK, 1966], 6–7) asserted that an allegory says something other than what it means, whereas a parable means what it says, and she claims that a parable speaks to opponents, whereas an allegory addresses the initiated.

Wolfgang Harnisch (*Die Gleichniserzählungen Jesu: Eine hermeneutische Einführung*, 3rd ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995, 64) distinguished parable and allegory by saying a parable is autonomous, does not need an outside frame of reference, and is self-evident, whereas an allegory is dependent on references to outside stories. He also said (pp. 154–55) a

allegory still exists.⁷⁴ Jesus does not need to be saved from allegory. Parables are allegorical, some more so than others. Allegorical depictions are thoroughly at home in Jewish writings, to say nothing of the Greco-Roman world. Parables refer outside themselves, or they—except for the single indirect stories—are not parables.

Some scholars have no hesitation in describing Jesus' parables as allegories,⁷⁵ and keeping allegory as a category of parables is possible, if one so chooses, even if the category is confusing. On the other hand, literary theorists argue that allegory is not a genre at all but a way of thinking.⁷⁶ Because no clear distinction can be made between allegory and parable and because all parables (except the single indirect stories) are allegorical to varying degrees,⁷⁷ I do not view allegory as a category of parables.

parable adds a new story to an old one in a way that disturbs the old story and expresses a new one, whereas in allegory one story replaces the other through a chain of substitutions.

Peter Rhea Jones (*Studying the Parables of Jesus*, 24) suggested that parable drives toward participation rather than information, that it creates participation and in doing so is never expendable, whereas allegory presumes participation and is expendable.

In my estimation none of these arguments (and others that could be added) has any validity. Note that R. M. Johnston (*Parabolic Interpretations Attributed to Tannaim*, Ph.D. diss., Hartford Seminary Foundation, 1978, pp. 513 and 600–612) from studying over 300 rabbinic parables says that the distinction is unusable. See also M. D. Goulder's comments (*Midrash and Lection in Matthew*, London: SPCK, 1974, 56), "I have argued elsewhere ["Characteristics of the Parables in the Several Gospels," *JTS* 19 (1968): 58–62] that few distinctions have been more ill-starred for the criticism of the Gospels than that between parable and allegory, which are often seen as two different *genres* of literature."

73. Numerous scholars could be listed here, not least of whom would be M. Boucher, Craig Blomberg, D. Flusser, and D. Stern, but see the trenchant comments of Robert W. Funk ("Beyond Criticism in Quest of Literacy: The Parable of the Leaven," *Int* 25 [1971]: 149–70, 154). He accuses C. H. Dodd and Jeremias of being trapped by Jülicher and having been thrown themselves into anarchy and then says, "Jülicher's legacy is a trap because he was never able to escape from the allegory he so fervently rejected. . . . Parable interpretation is at an impasse. The way forward is away-from-here." That comment was made thirty-five years ago, but some people have still not grasped its relevance.

74. I find it amazing how frequently people, Jülicher included, find multiple correspondences between image and reality in a parable but then deny that the form is an allegory.

75. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 29–69; and John Dominic Crossan, *Cliffs of Fall* (New York: Seabury, 1980), esp. 96–97; and his "Parable, Allegory, and Paradox," *Semiology and the Parables* (ed. Daniel Patte; Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1976), 247–81, esp. pp. 271–78.

76. See Boucher, *The Mysterious Parable*, 17–25; John W. Sider, *Interpreting the Parables: A Hermeneutical Guide to Their Meaning* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 19–23; and Mary Ford, "Towards the Restoration of Allegory: Christology, Epistemology and Narrative Structure," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 34 (1990): 161–95, 167–68.

77. See the well-known article by Graham Hough, "The Allegorical Circle," *The Critical Quarterly* 3 (1961): 199–209. Note David Stern's comment: "My purpose in mentioning this scholarly consensus [the disdain for allegory] is not only to dispute its exclusion of allegory from the literary form of the parable, but to suggest that the terms allegory and parable, as they have figured in past scholarship, are simply not relevant to understanding the mashal and its tradition. If the term allegory is taken in its largest possible sense, there is no question that the rabbinic mashal—not to speak of Jesus' parables—contain authentic allegorical characteristics. . . ." ("Rhetoric and Midrash: The Case of the Mashal," *Prooftexts* 1 [1981]: 261–91, 264).

HOW SHOULD THEOLOGY BE DONE FROM THE PARABLES?

Bold is the person who tries to lay down guidelines for dealing with the theology of the parables. Hopefully it is not a foolish act at least to raise the issues. Given the voluminous literature on the parables, it is surprising that relatively little has been written about how theology should be derived from parables.⁷⁸ I will be content if my comments make the matter a topic of discussion.

The first question, of course, is whether we *should* do theology from the parables, for some say explicitly that we cannot,⁷⁹ sometimes with the implication that theology should be done from the Epistles. The argument has a long history and is expressed in the statement *Theologia parabolica non est theologia argumentativa*. Parables, it is asserted, cannot be the basis for theological argument. No doubt, this assertion is partly a defense against the allegorizing to which the parables have been subjected. Richard Chenevix Trench used this statement to say parables may not be the first sources and seats of doctrine. They may be the outer ornamental fringe but not the main texture of proof.⁸⁰ There is good reason, as we will see, to say that parables are not isolated, independent sources of doctrine, but then no text should be. We must move past any fear of doing theology from the parables. Parables must not be marginalized. They can be and are the impetus for *establishing* theological ideas. The most obvious example is with the kingdom of God. Relatively few statements from Jesus describe the kingdom with direct language, and our understanding of the kingdom would be greatly impoverished if we did not use parables to *establish* significant aspects of our definition.

The hesitation to do theology from parables comes from other sources as well. Some will fear that deriving theology from parables assumes that parables or metaphors may be reduced to abstract speech without loss of cognitive content or affective force. It is the argument again that parables cannot be translated, but at least they can and must be explained, contemplated, and discussed. To explain a parable does not mean jettisoning its metaphorical form. Some do not want to do theology at all. Theological concerns may be viewed as less respectable academically, or people may seek to distance themselves from obviously Christian theology. John Kloppenborg's well-researched work on the parable of the Wicked Tenants is an example of the latter. By preferring the version of the parable of the Wicked Tenants in *Gos. Thom.* 65–66 and a truncated version of Mark, he seeks to

78. See Sider, *Interpreting the Parables*, 237–46; Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 162–67; see also Martin Petzoldt, *Gleichnisse Jesu und christliche Dogmatik* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1984).

79. M. L. Scharlemann (*Proclaiming the Parables*, St. Louis: Concordia, 1963, 30) asserted: "Finally, we must be aware of the fact that parables cannot be used to develop theological arguments."

80. *Notes on the Parables of Our Lord* (9th ed.; London: Macmillan, 1864), 39–46. Trench rendered the statement slightly differently: *Theologia parabolica non est argumentativa*.

avoid any idea that the parable depicts God's relation with Israel, any christological concern, or the parable's emphasis on judgment, which he views as an archaic, unacceptable idea. In his estimation, the parable is about the foolishness of a rich man, and it confronts the values that he pursues and the social mechanisms by which he does so.⁸¹ Kloppenborg's agenda will not work for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is that it strips off any awareness that Jesus was a prophet, uses parables as prophetic instruments, and uses images that have a history with the OT prophets. In addition:

1. Kloppenborg is not convincing in his assertion that the *Gos. Thom.* version is original.
2. He is not convincing in his assertion that there is no allusion to Isa 5 with secondary assimilation to the LXX.
3. He is not convincing in his assertion that even without the allusion to Isa 5 the mention of a vineyard would not immediately point to God's relation to Israel or God's people,⁸² as it does in other parables of Jesus.
4. He makes virtually no reference to rabbinic parables of vineyards, which repeatedly are about God's relation to Israel or God's people.
5. He ignores the relation between the parable and the Lament over Jerusalem.
6. His dismissal of the wordplay as the basis for the attachment of Ps 118:22 to the parable is without basis.⁸³
7. The violence against which Kloppenborg reacts, in Matthew, is not from Jesus but from the authorities, and Jesus' response does not repeat the violence. Kloppenborg's treatment, especially of Matthew, is both inadequate and unconvincing.
8. He allows for *Gos. Thom.* what he will not allow for the Synoptics.⁸⁴

81. John Kloppenborg, *The Tenants in the Vineyard: Ideology, Economics, and Agrarian Conflict in Jewish Palestine* (WUNT 195; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006).

82. With the vineyard image the issue is God's relation to Israel, not that the vineyard stands for Israel.

83. He dismisses the wordplay, following Hultgren (*The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary*, 363), because it is in Hebrew, whereas Jesus spoke Aramaic. The language of this parable, though, is uncertain. Some argue Jesus, like rabbis, taught parables in Hebrew. See, e.g., Randall Buth and Brian Kvasnica, "Temple Authorities and Tithe-Evasion: The Linguistic Background and Impact of the Parable of the Vineyard, the Tenant and the Son," in *Jesus' Last Week, Jerusalem Studies in the Synoptic Gospels—Volume One* (eds. R. Steven Notley, Mark Turange, and Brian Becker; Leiden: Brill, 2006), 53–80, 53, 57–58 and on the wordplay, 298–302.

Equally relevant is the question regarding what language would be used in *Judea in the temple*. Further, even if Jesus gave this parable in Aramaic, all that is presumed for the wordplay to work is that the hearers, in this case the religious authorities who certainly knew Hebrew, would recognize the wordplay. Even someone who spoke only Aramaic would know this popular wordplay.

84. He thinks it curious that I argue for Matthew having the earliest version of the parable, even if Matthew's is not the earliest Gospel, but he argues the same for *Gos. Thom.* (247–48). He will not allow secondary assimilation of Matthew and Mark to the LXX, but he argues

9. The interpretation provided for *Gos. Thom.* 65–66 sounds more like a modern ideological agenda, and it is not obvious that it actually explains these enigmatic sayings from *Gos. Thom.*

Further, parable interpretation that seeks to avoid theology nearly always brings theology in under another name. If we are not doing theology from the parables, why read them at all? Can we for a moment marginalize the theological significance of the parables, when approximately one-third of Jesus' teaching in the Synoptics is in parables? It is difficult to believe that Jesus or the evangelists thought that the parables were of secondary significance.

Another problem with doing theology from the parables must be mentioned. While disdain for the allegorizing excesses of the church is regularly expressed, somewhat unexpectedly there are those who encourage a return to an allegorizing exegesis,⁸⁵ no doubt because of the sterility of much "critical" exegesis, but also because of their valuing the living faith of the church. I am sympathetic with the concern for a living faith, but a return to figural reading is not an option that can satisfy. A figural reading already knows a theology that it lays on the text; it does not seek the theology of the text. Once this option is accepted, it is hard to avoid the excesses. We may appreciate the efforts of Augustine and others and their concern to instill faith, but any close attention to this practice knows that salvation does not lie in this direction. The allegorizing of the church mutes the voice of Jesus, and, with apologies to Augustine, the five oxen in Luke's parable of the Feast never will refer to the five senses.⁸⁶

The purpose of the parables is not to teach theology; if that were the case, direct communication would have been used. But, the parables are theological, and virtually no where is Scripture intended to teach theology in a technical sense. Scripture embeds a theology and assumes a theology in seeking to move people to right relation and right living with God. It is our task to ferret out the embedded and assumed theology. That is what we do with Paul's letters, with the Gospels, with the Hebrew Scriptures, and what we must do also with the parables.

Usually when people do theology from the parables, they do it intuitively, often without thinking of why they made one choice instead of another. Doing theology from the parables is not easy, but then neither is it easy with other texts—witness the discussions in Pauline studies about doing theology from ad hoc letters. If we are to do theology with the parables though, where do we stop on the spectrum between Jülicher and

for secondary assimilation of *Gos. Thom.* to the Synoptics as a way to explain the similarity of *Gos. Thom.* to them (p. 243).

85. E.g., Ephraim Radner, *Hope Among the Fragments: The Broken Church and Its Engagement of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2004); R. R. Reno, *The Ruins of the Church: Sustaining Faith in an Age of Diminished Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2002).

86. See his *Sermon* 62 (NPNF 6:447).

Augustine? Despite what people may claim, many are still closer to Augustine than Jülicher.⁸⁷

Even if we avoid the extremes, the task is problematic, as recent discussions have made clear. What shall we do with Matthew's parable of the Unforgiving Servant? Is the king a God figure who takes back his forgiveness and who mercilessly tortures people until they pay for all their sins? The parable says other servants report to the master the actions of the unforgiving servant. Does God need to be told what happens? Luise Schottroff argues the hearers would know God is *not* to be equated with this oppressive human king and that to do so would be blasphemy. To avoid direct analogy with God—unacceptably in my mind—she translates *houtōs* ("thus") in Matt 18:35 as "How is this, then, to be compared to the kingdom of God?" Like Jülicher, she limits the parable to one point, the imperative of forgiveness among humans, and argues nothing is said explicitly about God, yet she concludes that God will call people to account at judgment if they do not forgive each other.⁸⁸ She has ushered any reference to God away from the meal only to bring it back in time for dessert.

Or, how should we understand the parable of the Feast in Luke? Does it have an unflattering portrait of God who invites the poor to the banquet only as an afterthought when the socially elite have turned him down? Is it, as Ernst Haenchen argues, not a distortion of the message of grace to see participation in the kingdom offered to tax collectors and sinners only after the righteous refuse?⁸⁹ Further, what should we conclude from this parable and its possible parallel in Matt 22:1–14, which I do not think is a parallel at all, about missionary activity? Luke has a servant sent once to the first invited guests and then twice to the poor, while Matthew has servants sent twice to the first guests and only once to invite all they find. Does Luke refer to Jesus' ministry, the mission to the Jews, and the mission to the Gentiles? Does Matthew refer to the former and latter prophets and the invitation to the Gentiles, or to the OT prophets, the disciples during Jesus' ministry, and missionaries after the resurrection?⁹⁰ Or, because the invitation is to the eschatological banquet,⁹¹ are all the messengers in Matt 22:3–6 *Christian* messengers so that the parable refers to the pre-Easter disciples, the post-Easter disciples, and the ongoing mission of the church?⁹²

87. Note Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 67–69.

88. Luise Schottroff, *The Parables of Jesus* (trans. Linda M. Maloney; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 196–203, quotation p. 196.

89. Ernst Haenchen, "Das Gleichnis vom großen Mahl," in *Die Bibel und Wir: Gesammelte Aufsätze* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1968), 135–55, 153–55.

90. See the discussions of Anton Vögtle, *Gott und seine Gäste: Das Schicksal des Gleichnisses Jesu vom großen Gastmahl* (Biblische-theologische Studien 29; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1996), 37–39, 54–55, and 78–79; and Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28* (Hermeneia; trans. James E. Crouch; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 53–54.

91. A point made by Ferdinand Hahn, "Das Gleichnis von der Einladung zum Festmahl," in *Verborum Veritas: Festschrift für Gustav Stahlin* (eds. Otto Bocher and Klaus Haaker; Wuppertal: Theologischer Verlag Rolf Brockhaus, 1970), 51–82, 79.

92. Hultgren (*The Parables of Jesus*, 344) sees both OT prophets and the killing of Jesus and the disciples reflected in vv. 3–6.

And, if reference is to the destruction of Jerusalem with the burning of the city, does the invitation to the Gentiles go out only after A.D. 70? In my opinion such questions are illegitimate, and any attempt to identify the three sendings in either Gospel is merciless allegorizing.

How does one know to assign representational significance to some features of the parable and not others? No reasonable person would give specific identifications to the three people in Luke's account who reject the invitation or to the elements in their excuses. No one assigns significance to the poor, lame, blind, and crippled; they are treated literally or at least are understood as summarizing outcasts in the society. Note, by the way, how reality shines through at this point in Luke's parable. For a brief moment the parable is no longer indirect. Parables sometimes do that.

Or, notice W. Herzog's interpretation of Matthew's parable of the Workers in the Vineyard. Herzog accuses Matthew of treating the parable as a "theology," his word for a partial allegory in which only selected elements are invested with theological value, so that the vineyard is a metaphor for Israel or the church as Israel's successor, the owner is a God figure, the denarius is a metaphor for salvation, the workers hired first are Jews or Jesus' original disciples, and the workers hired last are the Gentiles or recent converts in Matthew's community. We might ask how he knows that the denarius is a metaphor for salvation or that there is a reference to Jews and Gentiles, but in Herzog's mind this is all from Matthew anyway. He argues that originally the parable codified the agrarian world of Galilee and Judea with its system of oppression. The owner is not a God figure but an elite, oppressing land owner.⁹³

With virtually every parable, the discussion becomes tortured because interpreters fret over questions of reference, nowhere more than with the parable of the Prodigal and Elder Brother, and not just with questions about the relevance of the fatted calf or the ring, cloak, and sandals. Jülicher is pleased to capitalize on the fact that no doctrine of the atonement appears in the parable; it has no room for a dying mediator, and forgiveness is based only on the character of God.⁹⁴ Contrast this view with Kenneth Bailey's. He finds not only an atonement theology but multiple other theological points as well, to say nothing of numerous allusions to Ps 23 and Gen 32–33.⁹⁵ Bailey and Hans Weder see a reference to the incarnation in the father's going out to meet his son.⁹⁶ On the other hand, whereas the shepherd and the woman search for what is lost, the father does not search for the prodigal. Why does the father not search for the prodigal? We think the

93. William Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 79–97.

94. Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 2:364–65.

95. Kenneth Ewing Bailey, *Finding the Lost: Cultural Keys to Luke 15* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1992), 150; *Jacob and the Prodigal: How Jesus Retold Israel's Story* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2003), 115–17 and 175.

96. Bailey, *Finding the Lost*, 148–49; Hans Weder, *Die Gleichnisse Jesu als Metaphern: Tradition- und redaktionsgeschichtliche Analysen und Interpretationen* (4th ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990), 260–61.

father in this story is a straightforward representation of God, for we focus on the love and ever-forgiving character of God, but the father is not a fully adequate portrayal of God at all. Does God sit back and wait for sinners to return from the far country? Should we conclude that the first two parables in Luke 15 are about the sovereignty of God, while the prodigal is about the free will of humanity, as is sometimes suggested?⁹⁷ I think not.

With such discussions a retreat from doing theology from the parables may look attractive, but it would leave us greatly impoverished. Theology *must* be done from the parables, but obviously clarity about how to find the theological significance of parables is needed.

Some people attempt to deny that parables are referential, rejecting the distinction made between the image half and the fact half,⁹⁸ but they rarely avoid completely any referential connotation, and if they do, the resulting interpretation tends to be vague or insipid and far from convincing. Luise Schottroff argues for a nondualistic interpretation of parables, by which she seeks to avoid parables being referential,⁹⁹ but, as we have seen, where convenient the referential aspects are brought back in. In some ways a strict division between image half and fact half cannot be maintained, for often parables, if not diaphanous like Matthew's parable of the Banquet, at points drop their indirection or use images that set off resonances that steer the hearer in a particular direction. Still, most parables are double indirect: *they are not the focus of their own telling*. They are told to teach and convince about another and more important reality. They are referential, but that does not mean they are straightforwardly equivalent, as if parable and reality were connected by equal signs. Parables are useless if we do not determine to what they refer, to what degree they do so, what they teach, and what we should do with such knowledge.

The main problem is and always has been that people want parables to be straight line pictures of theological reality. We want them to mirror the whole of theology. They never do, and you can destroy almost any parable if you seek one for one correspondence. No single parable does everything, not even everything about a given topic. Parables mirror only certain aspects of reality—angled at different degrees—and often are designed to shock and arrest and move people to response. Over and over parables have been forced to address ideas not their concern or critiqued because they do not.¹⁰⁰ This insensitivity to the limits of analogy invariably leads to the ruin of understanding. Parables do not have equal signs making them identical to the reality they portray. Parables only partially

97. See Greg W. Forbes, *The God of Old: the Role of the Lukan Parables in the Purpose of Luke's Gospel* (JSNTSS 198; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 137 and 147.

98. E.g., Weder, *Die Gleichnis Jesu als Metaphern*, 63–67 and 97.

99. Schottroff, *The Parables of Jesus*, 90–98.

100. Luz (*Matthew 21–28*, 59) complains of the christological shortcoming of Matthew's parable of the Wedding Banquet, but that is to presume that Christology is and should be part of every parable.

map the realities they seek to reveal, and they do so to varying degrees.¹⁰¹ When operating appropriately with analogies, we intuitively notice what is pertinent and block out what is unimportant. But even seemingly unimportant items that have no direct correspondence in the analogy still are important parts of the communication, for they may set off resonances that assist understanding. The far country, the swine, the robe, the ring, or other features in the parable of the Prodigal do not stand for theological equivalents, but they are significant in describing the degradation and celebration to which the parable points. The field, oxen, and wife in Luke's parable of the Feast do not "stand for something," but they do point to primary concerns in Luke's portrayal of discipleship. For Luke the primary obstacles—and opportunities—of discipleship are possessions and family (cf. Luke 9:57–62 and 14:25–33). Each parable must be analyzed in its own right, even though insight may be gained from similar forms. No formula exists for determining whether an element is theologically significant. That will have to be determined from the way relations are structured within the whole parable and within the whole of Jesus' teaching. Meaning is determined by relations.

Doing theology from the parables requires knowing the limits of the analogy in each case. Possibly this is the most important thing we can say. *The key is knowing when to stop interpreting. As with metaphor, parable interpretation is about understanding the limits and the significance of the analogy.* Wendell Berry comments with regard to metaphor, "But the legitimacy of a metaphor depends upon our understanding of its limits. . . . When a metaphor is construed as an equation, it is out of control; when it is construed as an identity, it is perposterous."¹⁰² The same is true with parables. To put it another way, "There is always an 'is' and an 'is not' to metaphors."¹⁰³ This is not a new discussion. Long ago Origen gave sound advice, even if he did not follow it: ". . . so conceive with me also that, in the case of the similitudes in the Gospel, when the kingdom of heaven is likened unto anything, the comparison does not extend to all the features of that to which the kingdom is compared, but only to those features which are required by the argument in hand."¹⁰⁴

I offer the following guidelines for doing theology from the parables.

1. *Parable interpretation is not about finding correspondences*, although correspondences may exist and in double indirect narrative parables will

101. See Jacobus Liebenburg, *The Language of the Kingdom and Jesus: Parable, Aphorism, and Metaphor in the Sayings Material Common to the Synoptic Tradition and the Gospel of Thomas* (BZNW 102.; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2001), 158, who points out that in some parables only one aspect of kingdom may be mapped by the parable and with others quite a few aspects.

102. *Life is a Miracle: An Essay Against Modern Superstition* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2000), 46.

103. Barbara E. Reid, "Violent Endings in Matthew's Parables and Christian Nonviolence," *CBQ* 66 (2004): 237–55, 254.

104. *Commentary on Matt 10:11*.

exist. Analogies have correspondences, but their significance is not focused there. A parable is concerned less with correspondences between image and fact and much more with the correspondences between two *processes*. The kingdom is not like some feature in the parable (a man, a woman, a seed, etc.) but like the whole process described in the narrative.¹⁰⁵ Correspondences are given in double indirect narrative parables, and the important ones are obvious. The more one must think about the correspondence, the more likely one is out of bounds. Further, *correspondences are not exact, may hide or mislead, and may be irrelevant*. As Kierkegaard said, indirect communication (to which parables belong) deceives you into the truth.¹⁰⁶ If parables were straightforward equivalents, they would be so obvious they would not confront. The correspondences in Nathan's parable to David are obvious—David and the rich man, Uriah and the poor man, and Bathsheba and the poor man's sheep, but, they are not straightforward equivalents. Whereas the sheep is killed in the story, Bathsheba is not. Uriah is the one killed. The unevenness of the image deceived David into the truth.¹⁰⁷ In the parable of the Wise Woman of Tekoa, the correspondences with reality are at a minimum. The widow and her two sons mirrors David and his two sons, but no avengers seek to kill Absalom, and David has other sons and is not in peril like the widow. In Jehoash's fable in 2 Kgs 14:9 the parallel is not close at all. The fable is about marriage but the reality is about war. Such unevenness is a common feature.

In single indirect parables correspondences are not a factor in understanding. The rich fool and his barns stand for nothing except a rich fool and his barns. They do not correspond to realities in some other arena, but in application they have relevance for the way people think about possessions. The pharisee and toll collector are images only of themselves and attitudes that should be avoided, not Jews and Gentiles or some other realities. The relevance of classifying parables is suddenly obvious.

Correspondences occur less often in similitudes and usually are not significant for understanding, and again, the focus is on the whole process, not the individual features. For example, in the parable of the Leaven the woman and the leaven do not stand for anything, and the kingdom is like neither. The kingdom is like the whole process that happens when a woman hides leaven in dough until the whole is fermented. With regard to the parable of the Growing Seed (Mark 4:26–29), the man, his inactivity, and his ignorance stand for no one—not God, Jesus, or disciples, all of whom have been suggested. The seed has no obvious referent, and certainly the point is not that humans have no active role. The point is that the kingdom is like the whole process of seed planting, which over time in-

105. See Ricoeur, "Biblical Hermeneutics," 97–98; and Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 2:539.

106. Søren Kierkegaard's *Journals and Papers*, 1:288.

107. Gerhard von Rad mistakenly thought this unevenness indicated this "fable" (his word) was not an *ad hoc* creation but existed independently of the situation to which Nathan applied it. See his *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), 43.

evitably leads to harvest. It may look like nothing is happening with Jesus' proclamation of a present kingdom, but the process leading to God's judgment will be as "automatic" (4:28) as planting leads to harvest.

With regard to interrogative parables, correspondences are usually at a minimum and not significant for interpretation, but, again, the key is the whole process being described. The actions and attitudes portrayed—not the people themselves—mirror the actions and attitude of God or humans. Neither the woman nor her ten drachmas in the parable of the Lost Coin represent some reality; rather, the process described says heaven's joy over repentant sinners will be like such a woman who finds what she lost. It is by implication an analogical "how much more argument." If this is the way it is with humans, how much more will rejoicing be in heaven over repentant sinners. Similarly, with the Lost Sheep the shepherd is not God, Jesus, or anyone else, and the sheep is not a person or group, and certainly the mountains/wilderness and the friends do not "stand for something." At the same time, images selected for stories are not chosen at random; often, but not always, they are specifically chosen to set off resonances, and reference to a shepherd and sheep would bring to mind the OT use of these images for God, leaders, and hope for God's people. Nothing supports the suggestion that reference is to someone seeking the kingdom.¹⁰⁸

With "how much more" parables, at times, we should speak of anti-correspondences. Parallels exist between the figures in the parable and reality, but the point is focused on the differences. There is a parallel between the unjust judge and God, but the whole point is that God is not like the unjust judge.

I am well aware that saying parable interpretation is not about finding correspondences, at least on the surface, looks like an explicit contradiction of Jesus' method, for with three parables, and only three (the Sower, the Wheat and the Tares, and the Net), that is exactly what he does. The interpretations of these three may not be set aside merely as early church allegorizing. Each parable must be analyzed in its own right—no formulas exist for parable interpretation, but in certain respects these three are different. The parable of the Sower is a fourfold similitude; any one of the pictures could stand on its own as a similitude. There is no necessary connection of the constituent parts. With the Wheat and the Tares the parts are connected, but what is obvious is the unevenness of the parable and the interpretation. Not everything in the parable is identified (i.e., the servants, the sleeping; the departure of the enemy; and the fruit are not), and the interpretation goes well beyond the parable to focus much more on eschatological judgment.¹⁰⁹ The main point of the parable—the command to let both wheat and tares grow together until harvest—is not even mentioned in the interpretation. More is going on than just finding correspondences. With the Net there are obvious correspondences, but, again, the

108. Contra Crossan, *In Parables*, 38–39.

109. Cf. Liebenburg, *The Language of the Kingdom and Jesus*, 206–8, 350–51.

main concern is the comparison of the two processes. This leads us to the second guideline. If parable interpretation is not about finding correspondences, what is it about?

2. *Parable interpretation is about determining the function of the analogy.* All else pales in significance. Correspondences often will be there and are needed for the analogies to work. Rather than seeking a list of correspondences, we seek the illocutionary intent of a parable, the communicative intent, i.e., the function and purpose for which the analogy was told. By using the singular “function,” I do not suggest a parable has only one point—God forbid—nor would I want to say a parable has as many points as it does main characters, although that may sometimes be the case.¹¹⁰ The parables are more nuanced and rich than this limitation. Embedded in a parable’s function may be several theological ideas. A parable is entitled to make as many points as it wishes, but those points will always be in direct relation to the function of the analogy. The parable of the Unforgiving Servant makes several theological points: the enormous indebtedness of humans to God and the impossibility of meeting that indebtedness, the magnanimous grace of God in forgiving, the presence of the kingdom in Jesus’ ministry,¹¹¹ surely here reflecting Jubilee assumptions, the *necessity* for forgiven people to extend God’s experienced mercy and forgiveness to others, and a warning that failure to show forgiveness will be judged. All of these theological teachings derive from the analogy: Just as a king who mercifully and magnanimously forgave a debt would expect his servants to do likewise and hold them strictly accountable if they did not, so God is now forgiving mercifully and magnanimously in Jesus and expects his people *by necessity* to do the same and will hold them strictly accountable if they do not.

3. *Any theology derived from a parable must be verified by, or at least fit easily with, the nonparabolic teaching of Jesus.* What cannot be demonstrated from nonparabolic material probably is not valid.¹¹² People rightly retreat from a straightforwardly equivalent reading of the parable of the Unforgiving Servant, for its depiction of torture is too much to accept. God does not have torturers,¹¹³ and such an idea does not fit with anything we know from Jesus’ nonparabolic material. If we accept that parable interpretation is not about finding direct correspondences and that parables do not carry equal signs, we can ask about the function of this part of the analogy. The intent is not to describe the nature of judgment; rather, within the story world, the intent is to shock the hearer into realizing the seriousness of failing to show mercy. If some parables deceive you into the truth, others,

110. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 163 and 166, points in this direction.

111. Especially with the aorist passive ὤμοιόθη in 18:23.

112. On the principle of verification from nonparabolic teaching see C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London: Nisbet, 1935), 32; and George Eldon Ladd, *The Presence of the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 190.

113. Although a few Jewish texts speak of God torturing, e.g., see Wis 11:9; 12:23; 2 Macc 7:17.

like this one, shock you into the truth. Parables use extravagance and hyperbole to attract attention, confront, and compel, but we are in trouble if we cannot recognize such features. Also, parables are not necessarily realistic; they are pseudo-realistic, as David Flusser pointed out.¹¹⁴ In the kingdom, Christians will not literally be placed over cities (in Luke 19:17 and 19), nor should we conclude that God dichotomizes people (Matt 24:51/Luke 12:46). Nonparabolic material is the check to keep us on track.

Attention to this principle of verifying theological conclusions from nonparabolic material precludes a number of suggested interpretations. For example, with regard to the parable of the Growing Seed, because the parable says only that the man sowed seed and slept and got up night and day, some conclude that the farmer was inactive, even lazy, and that the parable teaches passivity, an ostentatious indifference so that overactivists learn to wait on God, to wait with a carefree attitude, to take time to sleep and relax, and even that those who hear the word need no further nurture and care from Jesus.¹¹⁵ None of this fits with the purpose of the analogy or with the nonparabolic teaching of Jesus.

A caution is in order with this guideline. Not everything in Jesus' teaching is addressed in parables. While all the subjects addressed in the parables are addressed in nonparabolic material to some degree, the parables do not reflect Jesus' teaching on nonretaliation, divorce, oaths, or faith (at least directly), and they do not address sabbath keeping, food issues, miracles, exorcisms, the suffering disciples can expect,¹¹⁶ the cross, or the resurrection.

4. *Any interpretation based on what is not in the parable is almost certainly wrong.* There is an illegitimate tendency among interpreters to import foreign elements into parables and make them the focus of interpretation. While parables assume a culture and assume some facts are self-evident, they usually explicitly give hearers what they need for interpretation. If the parable of the Unforgiving Servant does not tell us the master is an oppressive person, systems of oppression should not be read into the parable.¹¹⁷ If the parable of the Prodigal does not tell us that the prodigal's family is dysfunctional¹¹⁸ or that the real issues are the father's rescuing the boy from the villagers,¹¹⁹ those suppositions should not be read into the parable and made the basis of theologizing. Since the parable of the

114. Flusser, *Die rabbinischen Gleichnisse und der Gleichniserzähler Jesus*, 34–35, 125.

115. For such ideas see Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 367–71; Ernst Fuchs, *Studies of the Historical Jesus* (SBT 42; trans. Andrew Scobie; Naperville, Ill.: Allenson, 1964), 180–81; Jones, *Studying the Parables of Jesus*, 112–13; Raymond F. Collins, "The Story of the Seed Growing by Itself: A Parable for Our Times," *Emmanuel* 94 (1998): 446–52, 452; and Mary Ann Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary-Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 168.

116. Except for the interpretation of the parable of the Sower.

117. Contra Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 79–97, and others.

118. Richard L. Rohrbaugh, "A Dysfunctional Family and Its Neighbors (Luke 15:11b–32)," in *Jesus and his Parables* (ed. V. George Shillington; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1997), 141–64.

119. Bailey, *Finding the Lost*, 121–22, 125, 138–42.

Lost Sheep does not focus on the danger to the ninety-nine left in the wilderness, we should not conclude, with some, that the parable is absurd,¹²⁰ as showing that the shepherd is irresponsible,¹²¹ or as showing the shepherd is a symbol of risk-taking.¹²² Care for one sheep does not preclude care for all the sheep, and certainly some provision would be made for the ninety-nine, either to leave them in some enclosure or, more likely, to leave them with another shepherd.¹²³ This is implied already in the interrogative “Who from you” question, which expects a negative answer. Like other texts a parable creates a world, but to be effective the world it creates must by necessity be clear, with the important items clearly stated so that one knows the matters deserving focus. Parables are streamlined just for this purpose—to give what is really needed for interpretation.

5. *The narrative time of parables is not real chronology.* Strict logic and strict chronology do not work. With many parables this issue does not arise, but with some it does. Some worry that an owner would not plant a vineyard and so quickly seek its fruit, as with the parable of the Wicked Tenants.¹²⁴ The text does not specify “quickly” and just says “at the time” (τῷ καιρῷ). It does not care about the length of time. We saw above with the parable of the Feast that people worry that the invitation to the poor goes out only after the elite refuse. The four years in the parable of the Fig Tree do not correspond to the chronology of Jesus’ ministry. Most obvious of all is the parable of the Banquet with a war taking place while the food for the wedding banquet is kept warm. Parables are streamlined and do not care about unnecessary information or mirroring real time sequences. Further, when the parable is over, the narrative time is over, and it is out of bounds to ask questions or draw conclusions outside the boundaries of narrative time, which happens with the parable of the Pearl. Some ask what the merchant will do after he has been so foolish to sell everything in order to buy one extremely valuable pearl and suggest that he will have no recourse but to sell it again.¹²⁵ Surely this is a distortion of the parable and its function.

6. *Parables must be made the focus of theological reflection.* They beg for careful reflection, and often their surrounding narratives are designed to help with the reflection. With that wonderful statement in 2 Sam 14:14 (God devises ways to bring back the banished), the narrative invites our recognition that David fails to mirror God’s restorative initiative. David brings Absalom back only half way and suffers the consequences. God is not a God who only half way brings back the banished.

120. David Buttrick, *Speaking Parables: A Homiletic Guide* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 219.

121. Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 415–17.

122. Charles W. Hedrick, *Many Things in Parables: Jesus and his Modern Critics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 14 and 49–50.

123. See *m. B. Qam.* 6:2 and *b. B. Qam.* 55b; 56b. See also, among many, Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 133–34.

124. Kloppenborg, *The Tenants in the Vineyard*, 326.

125. Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 319.

For me, reading parables—as well as all Scripture—involves most of all a hermeneutic of identity. Scripture's task is to tell us who we are, and it does so by telling us who God is. To understand God's identity and our own is the essence of theology, and the parables are first order witnesses to both God's identity and our own.

One of the more compelling theological readings of a parable is Miroslav Volf's reading of the parable of the Prodigal. In addition to focusing on identity issues, he discerned the fundamental element underlying the parable of the Prodigal: the father's willingness to embrace. This willingness to embrace becomes for Volf the key to dealing with the broader subjects of forgiveness and reconciliation. The willingness to embrace both summarizes God's character and what God expects of people.¹²⁶ Doing theology from parables requires this kind of ability to discern the fundamental element of a parable or a group of parables.

Another example is evident in several parables that in one way or another focus on seeing, which fits with parables as prophetic instruments. Prophets try to force new insight and confront people with their blindness and false security. At least four parables focus literally on seeing: the Good Samaritan, the Two Debtors, Lazarus and Rich Man, the Sheep and the Goats—to say nothing of Mark 4:11 and parallels. In each of these parables people see but do not see, and in the Good Samaritan and the Sheep and the Goats there is a contrast between those who see and show mercy and those who see and pay no attention. With his parables Jesus sought to enable, even to force, people actually to see other people.

In addition, parables can be the tools for theological reflection. Parables often spawn questions they do not answer. The best known of such questions is What would the Good Samaritan have done if he came along while the robbers were still beating the victim? While such reflection is perfectly legitimate, it is a different level of theologizing. Conclusions from such reflection are not the same as the theological teaching of the text, but they are still worthwhile.

The theology drawn from Jesus' parables is rich and varied. In ways more powerful than abstract statements can achieve, the parables emphasize the presence of the kingdom—despite appearances—the celebration it brings, the hope it entails, and the response it requires. They reveal the mercy and compassion of God more poignantly than any direct statement. They warn of the failings of the nation and its leaders and of the coming judgment on both the nation and individuals. They compel the recognition that God's character is to be imitated by those who claim to know God. They show how disciples should live, what attitudes they should have, and how they should use their money. In short, they show who God is, what God is doing, and who humans should be. As prophetic instruments they are inherently and powerfully theological, and they seek response, a response that grasps the theology and puts it into practice.

126. Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 156–66.