

Meaning of the N.T. Word "Parable"

Broader than English word "parable"
Includes proverb (Lk 4:23), paradox (Mk 7:17) as well as various types of illustrative story (see below)
Probably partly due to influence of OT word "mashal"

Meaning of the O.T. Word "Mashal"

General word for a comparative figure
Includes proverb (1 Sam 10:12; title of Proverbs), by-word (Ps 44:14, 69:11), parable (Ezk 17:2, 24:3), prophetic poem (Num 23:7), taunt-song (Mic 2:4)

Types of Illustrative Stories Called Parables

Similitude: common process or activity which teaches lesson by comparison: e.g., Mustard Seed (Mk 4:30)
Parable Proper: specific story which teaches lesson by comparison: e.g., Tenant Farmers (Mt 21:33)
Allegory: more artificial story, with individual features independently figurative: e.g., Sower (Mt 13:18)
Paradigm (Illustrative Parable): specific story which teaches by example rather than comparison: e.g., Rich Fool (Lk 12:16)
Acted Parable: teacher performs a symbolic action, or a historical event has symbolic significance: e.g., Tabernacle Service (Heb 9:9); Abraham offering Isaac (Heb 11:19)

Uses of Parables

To capture audience's attention by questions, involvement, surprise and suspense
To sneak by audience's defenses (2 Sam 12:1-4; Lk 7:41-43)
To impress a lesson vividly on mind (Jer 19:10-13; Lk 15:11-32)
To change one's way of looking at a situation (Mt 3:10; Lk 15:11-32)
To mystify opponents (Jn 2:18-22; Mt 13:10ff)
To provoke further thought (Mt 13:51-52)

By Observation Rather Than by Fiat

Look at interpreted NT parables, compare with rabbinic parables, look at OT background

A number of misconceptions about parables arise from ignoring some facets of their use:

- (1) Earthly stories w/ heavenly meanings: true for many, but not all parables; not for Laz & Rich Man (Lk 16:19-31) and other Paradigms.
- (2) Parables intended to clarify: true for many, not all; must reject Mt 13:10ff to hold this.
- (3) Parables intended to mystify: also unbalanced, tho true for some parables; c16 pars. precede Matt 13.
- (4) Parables make only one point: some do, some don't; have to decide from details, context, etc.

Some Observations from O.T. Parables

- (1) May take form of realistic story (1 K 20:39-40) or very contrived story (Ezk 17:3-10).
- (2) Realistic story need not be historical (2 Sam 12:1-4).
- (3) Interpretation may be given or not, obvious or not:
given (Ezk 37:11); not given (Isa 28:24-29)
obvious (Isa 20:2-6); not obvious (Zech 5:5-11)
- (4) Interp. may be simple & natural (Isa 5:1-6) or peculiar & complex (Ezk 17:11-21).
- (5) Parable may be spoken or acted.
- (6) Purpose may be to picture truth vividly (1 K 11:29) or to sneak by hearer's moral defenses (2 Sam 12:1-4).

Some Observations from Rabbinic Parables:

- (1) Parables vary considerably in complexity. In some only one basic idea, in others more detailed analogy. Latter esp. for allegories or for parables with natural fit between story and interpretation. Where no interpretation given, study parable structure to see how detailed fit is likely to be.
- (2) As oral teaching devices of experienced instructors, parables of Jesus and rabbis don't waste words. Presumably all words used either for vividness or analogy.
- (3) Parables of Jesus and rabbis regularly make use of stock similes, mostly from OT background. Should check for OT figurative usage of elements in parables.
- (4) Parables also use features of everyday life familiar to the original hearers. As we now live in a very different culture, we may need to study the cultural elements to aid in interpreting them.
- (5) The formula "A is like B" which often introduces a parable is slightly ambiguous. Though it often compares A and B, it may compare A with the whole parable (12, 18, 19, 22, 23).

Explain Parable First; Then Apply It

In addition to exhortation, a sermon is also teaching, including teaching how to understand the Bible.

We want to make congregation as self-sufficient in Bible study as possible, not spoon-feeding them; therefore, they need to see where you got your lessons.

If they see how application arises from parable, they may remember it next time they read parable, so they can apply it to selves or those they are helping.

Try to Recover Vividness & Emotional Impact Parable Had for Original Audience

This makes parable easier to remember and use.

Use historical-cultural information:

Pharisee & Publican: how were these viewed then?

Prodigal Son: impact of father running

Two Debtors: explain relative size of debts

Don't explain away intended peculiarities:

[surprise, etc., often main points]

Crookedness of steward and judge

King's cancellation of forgiveness

Owner sending son, tenants killing him

Don't Leave Congregation Feeling Parable Has No Application to Their Own Situation

Since audience different, try to figure out proper generalization.

Crooked business manager: even unbelievers have sense enough to take action when they see they're going to lose all; do you?

Sower: Gospel will receive different responses; which response are you making?

Ten Virgins: will Lord's delay be too long for you?

Two Debtors: have you really been forgiven? does your life show it?

Vineyard Workers: is God unjust in not giving you what others have?

Tares: no perfect world, no perfect church till Christ returns; are you wheat or weed?