

Parables of the Kingdom

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Jesus and the Use of Parables
in the Synoptic Tradition

Mary Ann Getty-Sullivan



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*For my husband, Dan Sullivan, who has shown me
and many others by example the power of parables.*

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction to the Parables

Parables are especially suited to religious language because they assert that God is both “like” and “unlike” persons, practices or events familiar to us. For example, God is like and unlike the woman who searched her whole house for the lost coin. God is also like the shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine sheep in order to search for the single sheep that has wandered away from the flock. Yet God does not “leave” anyone, not even the righteous who do not wander. With God, no single story or image tells it all; that would be idolatry. Rather, Jesus needed to use multiple parables that each illustrate different aspects of God’s caring and faithful relationship with us and together help us appreciate various aspects of that love, justice, forgiveness, persistence, mercy, and kindness that is God.

There is a saying among storytellers: “The story begins when the teller stops talking.” Jesus is a master teacher and a master storyteller. When we read the Synoptic Gospels, we see that much of Jesus’ teaching comes in story form, as parables. By their nature, parables are meant to involve hearers and challenge them to change their perspective, their hearts, and their behavior. The parables invite us to live in a new way, in a way worthy of the Gospel.

Discovering Parables

Many very short “parabolic” sayings characterize both the Old and the New Testaments, which, as religious literature, is necessarily symbolic, poetic, imaginative, and nonliteral. By nature, parabolic language

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is symbolic and that implies drawing images “outside the lines.” In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, in particular, parables can mean proverbs, examples, similes, allegories, as well as the more familiar, expanded metaphors in narrative form, which are the object of our study. Once we understand that, we are impressed with the abundance of parabolic images we encounter in the Synoptic Gospels.

Many of the parables Jesus told were narratives. That is, they are stories that have a beginning, a middle, and a conclusion. There are characters and settings and sometimes dialogue. The story is short and conducive to easy recall. Its elements are usually vivid though not detailed. The parables are meant to involve the hearers who are drawn in by their familiarity with the situation that is described. But there is also in a parable an element of surprise, a hook, designed to present something new and different to the listeners. This has been called the “twist” or “gotcha” aspect of a parable. People might be either attracted to or put off by this element of surprise, but a good parable does not leave its listeners indifferent. They are meant to “get it.” A parable challenges listeners to respond, although not necessarily in any single way. A good parable remains open-ended and contains a challenge to conversion, to change one’s worldview and values.

What Is a Parable?

A well-known, much-used definition by C. H. Dodd tells us that a parable is a “metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.”¹ This useful description actually tells us four things about a parable:

- (1) it is a comparison (a metaphor or simile),
- (2) describing something new or unknown in terms of something very familiar (drawn from nature or common experience),
- (3) with an unexpected twist (arresting in its strangeness),
- (4) designed to engage its hearers and prompt some reaction from them (leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its application to tease it into active thought).

This fourfold description will help us discuss, evaluate, and understand the importance of parables in the Bible, and especially in the Synoptic Gospels.

A Parable Is a Comparison

Parables are simple word pictures well suited to the oral culture of Jesus' original hearers. Jesus' parables compare one thing to another. A simile compares things using the terms "like" or "as." Some parables begin with the phrase, "The kingdom of God is like . . ." a mustard seed (Luke 13:19), or ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom (Matt 25:1). A metaphor is a little more subtle, comparing the disciples, for example, to light or salt, but without the terms "like" or "as": "You are the salt of the earth" (Matt 5:13) or "You are the light of the world" (5:14).

Thus, parable-like language is used to describe in familiar terms a world, a "kingdom," a "time" or a "place" that is unknown to us. Borrowing and building on the language of the prophets, Jesus speaks of the "day of the Lord" that will come as a "thief in the night" or "as the labor pangs" of an expectant woman. Disciples must act as the "children of day, not night." They are warned that the kingdom of God is not revealed to flesh and blood. The parables describe what is unknown in terms of what is known. Parables use the language of analogy and comparison.

A Parable Draws on Nature or Common Experience

Jesus' parables appeal to an audience familiar with the Galilean landscape. Fishing and farming were the main occupations of Galilean people in Jesus' time. Thus it is not surprising that Jesus used images from the fields and the sea that were typical of the environment in which he taught. Jesus speaks of fishing for people and of farmers who go out to plow the fields. Jesus describes the growing of seeds without human help and the amazing disproportion of an ample harvest to the tiny mustard seed that was sown.

A Parable Is Arresting in Its Strangeness

The real teaching value of Jesus' parables can be seen in the "twist" that changes the story's dynamic from a familiar one to a surprising one. The hearers are drawn into the story by Jesus' description of their common experience. Hearers expect to relate to Jesus' story and its characters and they are not disappointed.

But then there is a "gotcha" or shocking element that suddenly strikes the audience. Some are put on the defensive, realizing as the story unfolds that their own presuppositions or biases or practices are being undermined. What father expects to be treated disrespectfully and would eagerly embrace the practice of daily scanning the horizon to see if his

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wayward son will return? What laborers who have borne the heat of the sun doing backbreaking work expect to receive the same as those who have only shown up an hour before the payout? As a parable unfolds, hearers are likely to perceive the twist and, beginning to anticipate its implications, try to avoid them with protests, indignation, and rejection. The “kingdom of God,” Jesus seems to be saying, is unlike our notions of patriarchy, of justice, and sometimes even of common sense.

A Parable Is Designed to Evoke Conversion

Parables are intended to get a commitment, or as Dodd says, to “tease the mind into active thought.” Jesus is always searching for “understanding,” often to no avail. But parables are not about intellectual assent. Moreover, parables are not meant simply to get someone to do something. The parable about the sower and the seed is not a commentary on sloppy farming practices versus a more effective and precise method of sowing. The parable intends to draw listeners, regardless of their profession, to envision a new way of being and doing that would include God’s prolific generosity and an appropriate, proportionate human response. The intended response is a changed perspective that follows upon a changed heart. When Jesus praises the servant who alters the accounts of his master’s debtors (see Luke 16:1-8), he is not advocating dishonesty. Rather, Jesus calls for his disciples to be as dedicated to the values of the coming reign of God as the “children of this world” (16:8) are to the concerns of their earthly masters. Obviously Jesus is not addressing only accountants nor is he thinking of worksheet balances. Rather, he is describing the single-mindedness that seems to characterize successful people and must be qualities of those participating in the promotion of God’s reign.

Parables and Allegories

Many scholars have observed that parables (which they often distinguish from allegories) have only one point of comparison. This means that, generally speaking, Jesus’ parables are best understood as extended metaphors rather than a series of metaphors in which many of the details represent different realities (which is how allegories may be described). But it is not necessary to exaggerate this distinction.² Some of Jesus’ parables, such as the sower and the seed, for instance, are interpreted allegorically in the gospels themselves. That is to say, after speaking the parable, Jesus explains the meaning of several of the metaphors he used (Mark 4:15-17 and parallels in other gospels). For example, the seed sown

on the pathways represents how the temptations of Satan rob people of the word that was sown in them. The seed sown on rocky ground has no root so that tribulation causes it to quickly wither and die.

A good parable often has more than one overall meaning or application. The purpose of the parables is to challenge hearers to change their hearts and minds and make themselves more open to the reign of God. Parables are not meant merely to compare gospel teachings to everyday realities either in the first century or today. Parables are meant to challenge and confront hearers and evoke a conversion. Parables are one of Jesus' preferred tools to involve hearers in the process of revelation so that they can better perceive the truths of the Gospel and participate more fully in the kingdom of God.

The Kingdom of God

Through parables Jesus taught about God and about the "kingdom of God." The first words of Jesus in Mark, the earliest of the gospels to be written, proclaim the arrival of the "kingdom of God." Mark pictures Jesus suddenly announcing, after being baptized and emerging from the desert where he was tempted, "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:14-15). The kingdom of God appears as the heart and core of the message of Jesus.

This is but one example of many challenges that confronts us all as readers of the gospels. Any "kingdom" strikes us as an archaic and arcane reality, removed from our experience as regular people, as Americans, as people of a democracy. Certainly the "kingdoms" of the first century are foreign to our daily life. Those kingdoms include puppet kings of the Roman Empire and tax collectors who skim their share off the top of the arbitrary number they tax the poor. Kingdoms of the first century meant slaves and masters and stewards given responsibility for the land but accountable for its yield to shadowy and whimsical absentee landlords. If these are examples of values incorporated in the term "kingdom," how can that be an adequate term to use in relation to God? And how are we to understand the term today?

Not only is kingdom a concept foreign to us, it is a spatial term, a noun, that could suggest a place or state of being and that, too, is problematic. What Jesus describes seems much better conveyed by verbs or action words. That is one reason many commentators prefer the term "reign" or "rule" of God, which functions as both a noun and a verb. The "kingdom of God" is not a physical place but the event of God's

triumph, God's reign. The *basileia* (the Greek term for kingdom) of God is the hope of God's people. Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done." These are parallel phrases meaning the same thing. God's reign happens where God's will is fulfilled.

God rules where and when people forgive unconditionally and without limit, where and when the boundaries of justice are broken and the disenfranchised, the excluded, the neglected, or the forgotten are heard, included, cared for, and remembered. Those known as "Samaritans," and "widows" and "lost sheep" challenge us to identify and eliminate our biases and opposition to our enemies so that God rules over aspects of our lives that have shut God out. The phrase "kingdom of God," like the term "parable" itself, ought not to be too narrowly defined.

Nonetheless, the phrase "kingdom (or reign) of God" has a long, revered history and significance in the Bible. It is mainly an eschatological³ concept beginning to appear in the prophets. Later, during the Exile in the sixth century before Christ and afterward, apocalyptic passages of the Old Testament elaborated upon the phrase, "the kingdom of God." Eschatology refers to a future world conceived as a "time" and "place" when all human hopes will be fulfilled according to God's purposes. Micah describes it this way:

- ¹In days to come
the mount of the LORD's house
Shall be established higher than the mountains . . .
And peoples shall stream to it;
²Many nations shall come, and say,
"Come let us climb the mount of the LORD . . .
That he may instruct us in his ways,
that we walk in his paths." . . .
- ³He shall judge between many peoples
and impose terms on strong and distant nations;
They shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks . . .
- ⁶On that day, says the LORD,
I will gather the lame,
And I will assemble the outcasts,
and those whom I have afflicted.
- ⁷I will make of the lame a remnant,
and of those driven far off a strong nation;
And the LORD shall be king over them . . .
from now on forever.

(Mic 4:1-7)

For Micah, then, God rules when there is peace among all nations. The crippled who were excluded from religious services because illness was seen as a judgment of God will represent the inclusive nature of God's reign. All will live together in peace and unity because all have one king, God.

Similarly, the Psalms picture an idyllic time and place where God rules over all. Psalm 102 promises a time when God will "attend to the groaning of the prisoners, / to release those doomed to die" (v. 21) and "all peoples and kingdoms gather / to worship the LORD" (v. 23). Psalm 145 likewise praises God, saying: "And your faithful bless you. They speak of the glory of your reign / and tell of your great works, / making known to all your power, / the glorious splendor of your rule" (vv. 10-13).

The apocalyptic writers promised a better day after the present suffering of oppression was ended by the coming triumph of God. In the book of Daniel, for example, the young men who were thrown into the fiery furnace by the wicked King Nebuchadnezzar sang out in praise to God, "Blessed are you on the throne of your kingdom, / praiseworthy and exalted above all forever" (Dan 3:54). It is the "one like a son of man" who receives "dominion, glory and kingship," which shall never "be taken away" according to Daniel 7:13-14. These images of God's rule depict a time and place where all know and worship God; when there is an end to suffering, and where there is peace.

In the Old as well as the New Testaments, the very phrase denoting the "kingdom of God" varied somewhat. The kingdom of God or kingdom of heaven appear as interchangeable. Rabbis taught that God's name ought not be pronounced, as a way of keeping the divine name holy. Matthew, drawing often on the Old Testament, prefers "kingdom of heaven," a phrase that emphasizes the heavenly origin and nature of the kingdom. Other New Testament phrases include the "kingdom of their Father" (Matt 13:43; 26:29) or "his (i.e., the son of Man) kingdom" (see Matt 13:41; Col 1:13).

The greatest blessings conceivable are found in the kingdom (see Matt 5:20; 7:21; 13:44-45; 18:3; 19:23; Mark 10:15; 10:23-25; Luke 12:32; 24:26). The mysteries of the kingdom are revealed to the disciples of Jesus (Mark 4:10-11), but those who reject the gospel will not understand these mysteries (4:12). A prerequisite for participation in the kingdom is conversion, the willingness to become as children. Indeed, participants in the kingdom are called its children (Matt 8:12; 13:38). Sometimes the kingdom is conceived as a banquet where all are welcome (see Matt 8:11; 26:29; Mark 14:25; Luke 13:28-29; 22:16, 18, 30).

Jesus' initial words reveal the gospel as the fulfillment of time and the arrival of the reign of God. Followers are expected to believe in this revelation of the reign of God and transform their lives in light of it. When Jesus says, "It is easier for a camel to pass through [the] eye of [a] needle than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:25), he is not talking so much about the wealthy going to heaven after death. This saying means rather that it is very difficult for God to reign in hearts where money is a distraction. At the very beginning of his public ministry according to Mark, Jesus announces that the time has come for God's will to be accomplished (1:15). What God wants to happen is about to take place. We learn that this nearness of God's reign is a secret not known to all (4:11). We learn it is only the beginning of something (4:30-32) that is quite big. What is going to happen will transpire in a way that is mysterious (4:26-29) but powerful (9:1). Because the reign of God has drawn near, it is both possible and imperative for people to "enter" it (9:47; 10:15, 23-24). People do this by believing the Good News that Jesus proclaims and by reflecting the power of the Gospel in the beauty of their lives.

Parables in the Old Testament

Speaking in parables was not a new way of teaching invented by Jesus. For hundreds of years before Jesus, the great teachers of Israel had employed this kind of short story. In fact, parables go back to the prophets who also used such stories to teach the meaning of the ways God works in history and how to worthily live as members of the people of God. The most famous example may be the prophet Nathan's confronting King David after his great sin, with this parable:

¹The LORD sent Nathan to David, and when he came to him, he said: "Judge this case for me! In a certain town there were two men, one rich, the other poor. ²The rich man had flocks and herds in great numbers. ³But the poor man had nothing at all except one little ewe lamb that he had bought. He nourished her, and she grew up with him and his children. She shared the little food he had and drank from his cup and slept in his bosom. She was like a daughter to him. ⁴Now, the rich man received a visitor, but he would not take from his own flocks and herds to prepare a meal for the wayfarer who had come to him. Instead he took the poor man's ewe lamb and made a meal for his visitor." ⁵David grew very angry with that man and said to Nathan: "As the LORD lives, the man who has done this merits death! ⁶He shall restore the ewe lamb fourfold because he has done this and has had no pity." ⁷Then Nathan said to David: "You are the man!" (2 Sam 12:1-7)

This wonderful little story has all the features of a narrative parable such as we find also in the New Testament. Nathan is sent to David to issue God's judgment, but he first invites David to act as judge. The story is one David the shepherd could well identify with. It draws a verbal picture of the harmony and care of a true shepherd for the one lamb he possesses and even treats as a member of the family! The outrage of David resonates with the reaction any of us would rightly share. But we are also wary, knowing that David is judging himself. In a sense, the chilling words of Nathan, "You are the man!" are not even necessary, at least for readers who have witnessed with what kindness and love God has treated David to this point. We read on to learn that David was immediately and deeply affected by the prophet's words, much more so than he might have been had Nathan prejudged him and condemned him from the beginning. David judged rightly that the rich man deserved harsh punishment and that a fourfold restitution ought to be made to the poor man. David recognized his own part in the story and his sin, and he repented sincerely. Such is the power of a good parable.

The use of parables, then, goes back at least to the prophets whose mission it was to speak on behalf of God. As times and circumstances changed, the people needed guidance to interpret God's will for them and the response that would be appropriate. The prophets often spelled out that interpretation for them.

The use of the word "parable" in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, called the Septuagint and signified as the LXX, shows that the term was not used in a narrow sense. The term "parable" in Semitic languages ranges from "proverb" to "story" to "riddle."⁴ The Greek *parabole* usually translates the Hebrew word *meshal*, which embraces a variety of literary forms such as proverbs, riddles, taunts, metaphors, and allegories. There is a spectrum of meaning to the term that helps us to appreciate that, above all, parables use the language of symbols that appeal to the imagination. The fact that we are often puzzled by the meaning or meanings of a parable is one sign that it "works" as a teaching about God and the things of God. God cannot be reduced to an equation or formula or symbol. Even a really good parable does not capture the truth of God. No single story or image can communicate a truth that will effect a change in us. For that, we need to engage our own creativity and be open to recognize that this story is one that reveals something of God.

The whole book of Job is considered by many interpreters to be an extended parable that illustrates the meaning of disinterested piety in the face of intense though undeserved suffering. The Israelites believed

that all people are sinners, yet Job is described as a completely just man who seeks to discover the cause of his suffering, but refuses to find it either in God or in his own sinfulness. The book of Job belongs to the “Wisdom literature” of the Israelites. Wisdom books discuss universal truths that transcend a particular time and place of human history. Clearly, for the Israelites reading this wisdom book, the lessons of Job are not historical. They do not much care when and where, or even whether, Job actually lived or what was the nature of his supposed offense. Rather, the story of Job is timeless, and even today readers relate to Job’s situation whenever they are caught in a situation that challenges their belief in a just God. Job appears to be unwilling or unable either to accuse God of injustice or to admit that he deserves his suffering. Job is the story of a just person who believes in God even though his belief does not shield him from tragedy and illness and mental torment.

Jonah appears as yet another wisdom text in parable form. Readers or listeners can identify with the prophet who refuses to preach to the undeserving Ninevites for fear that they will be more responsive to the divine word than God’s own people are. Jonah goes to great lengths to avoid obeying God’s command. Often the prophets appear reluctant to speak the word of God, for, in the terms of Isaiah, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, / nor are your ways my way, says the LORD” (Isa 55:8). The strangeness of God’s ways and commands are often met with skepticism, reluctance to believe, and outright rejection by human beings.

Parables in the New Testament

Jesus’ use of parables was not unique or novel. The practice of telling stories as a teaching method was well known in Judaism, and grew even more popular especially in the 200-year period just before Jesus. It is particularly in this “Intertestamental period,” the time between the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New, that the teachers in Israel, who came to be known as “rabbis,” used parables and other stories to interpret the meaning of the Torah in ways that people of an oral society could readily understand. The rabbis, teacher-experts in the Law, used stories that were meant to resonate with the experience of their hearers, just as Jesus did.

Where Are Jesus’ Parables Found?

It is remarkable that the parables Jesus taught are found almost exclusively in the Synoptic Gospels, that is, in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Parables are one of the distinctive emblems common to these gospels that differentiate them from John, the last gospel to be written. John,

though he is rich in imagery and symbolism, does not use the term *parabole*.⁵ A similar word, *paroimia*, meaning “figure of speech,” appears only in three places in John (10:6; 16:25, 29). In speaking of the shepherd who knows his own sheep, John comments, “Although Jesus used this figure of speech, they did not realize what he was trying to tell them” (10:6). In his Farewell Discourse to his disciples, Jesus says “I have told you this in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures but I will tell you clearly about the Father” (16:25). A little later, his disciples respond, saying, “Now you are talking plainly, and not in any figure of speech” (16:29). In John, the term *paroimia* refers to an image Jesus’ audience was supposed to understand but sometimes did not. Certainly some parable-like images occur in John. But Jesus is not pictured by John as teaching about the kingdom of God by use of the simple narrative stories called parables that are so characteristic of the Synoptic Gospels.

Outside the gospels, the term *parabole* in the New Testament appears only in Hebrews 9:9 and 11:19, meaning “symbol” or “prefiguration.” The author of Hebrews refers to events of Scripture as a “parable” or symbol indicating things to come.

The Gospel of Thomas (*GTh*) provides another source outside the New Testament that contains many parables similar to the ones we find in the Synoptics. The Gospel of Thomas is a collection of 114 sayings supposedly dictated by Jesus to Thomas discovered in 1945 as part of the Nag Hammadi library.⁶ It resembles the probable form of the sayings source known as “Q,” a hypothetical collection of sayings that apparently was a source unknown to Mark, but used by both Matthew and Luke. It is difficult to date the Gospel of Thomas before A.D. 200, although some of the sayings and parables found there parallel ones also found in the Synoptic Gospels. Scholars are increasingly including parables from the Gospel of Thomas in their commentaries on the Synoptic parables.

Jesus’ Use of Parables

The parables we know from the Synoptic Gospels are especially characteristic of Jesus’ teaching. When we try to distinguish the actual teaching of Jesus himself from the words or events that may have been embellished by years of preaching about Jesus by the early church, we may employ some basic criteria.⁷ For example, *the principle of multiple attestation* says that if a teaching or event appears in more than one source, it may be presumed authentic. Another criterion that a teaching actually came from Jesus himself is that it is sufficiently different from what we may find in contemporary teachers or writers or those who

came before him. In other words, we could credit something as coming from Jesus if it is original and creative and not able to be attributed to someone Jesus might have been quoting. This is called *the criterion of dissimilarity*. A third principle for discerning material authentically from Jesus himself is *the criterion of coherence*, which says that the teaching must cohere or be consistent with and not inconsistent with other teachings known to come from Jesus. So, for example, if Jesus preached enemy-love, which we know from multiple attestation that he did, he would not have advocated murder. The criterion of coherence implies that his teaching on interpersonal nonviolence be consistent.

Parables are among the most authentic sayings of Jesus. Many of his parables are found in multiple sources. Further, the parables show originality and creativity on Jesus' part, while also being consistent with what we know about oral cultures. The parables are consistent with one another and with the rest of the gospel. In fact, parables offer an extraordinarily suitable vehicle for coming to know Jesus and for observing the characteristics peculiar to each gospel writer.

Care should be taken in comparing the gospels, to note the differences in the ways each of the Synoptic evangelists presents the parables. Sometimes even small differences in wording will give a parable a nuance peculiar to that evangelist's special concerns or emphases. Sometimes the context in which the evangelist places a parable suggests a unique role that parable might play in an evangelist's thinking. Mark and Matthew, for example, both present a discourse in parables at a key moment in the progress of Jesus' mission. While Luke's chapter 8 might also be considered a parable discourse, the parables there do not have the same force or purpose as they do in Mark and Matthew. But Luke is just as determined as the other evangelists to present parables as an effective teaching tool for Jesus. Furthermore, for the Synoptics, the parables occasion the unique emphases and themes specific to each writer.

The evangelists themselves probably composed some parables to illustrate aspects of Jesus' teaching as well as to reshape Jesus' own parables to fit new circumstances. Parables as we know them may show traces of a twofold, sometimes a threefold setting: the ministry of Jesus, the life of the early church, and an evangelist's editorial setting. It is sometimes impossible to work backward through the tradition, to a setting in the life of Jesus. But the ways in which the evangelists use Jesus' parables and add their own stories help us to see the great significance of this manner of teaching for the whole gospel.

The Synoptic Gospels' Use of Parables

According to the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus and his disciples undertook a single journey from Galilee to Jerusalem where Jesus was put to death. Jesus at first performed miracles and taught the people, often in parables. Many followed Jesus, but many did not. To some extent, the parables are a means by which the faithful are separated from the unfaithful. The Synoptics encourage the faith of believers and warn unbelievers of the consequences of rejecting the Messiah sent by God. The earliest believing communities consisted primarily of Jews familiar with the prophecies and promises of the Scriptures, especially through the prophets. Eventually, especially after the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 70, the community of believers was becoming more Gentile than Jewish. The Scriptures were used by the community to explain Jesus' identity as well as to describe what was required of Jesus' disciples. In fact, all four gospels may be said to have two central concerns: *christology* or how to explain and portray Jesus' Messiahship, especially in the light of the cross, and *discipleship* or what was necessary to be considered and ultimately judged a true follower of Jesus.

The Synoptics include many of the same parables. Mark, Matthew, and Luke will give each of them his own characteristic slant and trademark emphases. We will study the relationship and the differences of each of the Synoptic Gospels, using the parables as the lens to bring their unique qualities into focus. Most of the material Matthew and Luke have in common, which is not in Mark, are sayings of Jesus, including parables. Thus, we will find that Matthew and Luke use the parables found in Mark, although they may put their own spin on these parables, changing their emphases by changing where they are placed or how they are received, for example. In addition, Matthew and Luke have a number of parables not found in Mark. Some of these might be from a source scholars identify as Q, and others may be unique to either Matthew or Luke. Some commentators think Matthew used a source for the parables unique to his gospel and call this source "M"; the source for the parables in Luke that are unique to him is referred to as "L." These are hypothetical sources that may help to explain some of the differences between the gospels (see chart on p. 184).

Common Themes of the Synoptic Parables

There are a number of themes that are present in other parts of the gospels, but are accentuated in a special way through the parables. Some of these themes are:

- *great reversals*. Some parables exemplify proverbs such as “the last shall be first and the first last.” Others, such as the Rich Man and Lazarus, show that the values of this world are not consistent with those of the kingdom of heaven, which reverses them.
- the progress and hope of *growth and transformation over time*. This is a theme found especially in nature parables. Small seeds become great trees; fig trees sprout leaves and indicate not only the present season, but help us anticipate the future. Such parables urge listeners to expect change, to be hopeful about limitless possibilities of transformation, to expect fulfillment of promises and a manifestation of God’s power and grace.
- the surpassing *joy of finding what had been lost*, a joy that exceeds the original feeling of having something. Listeners easily identify with the woman who threw a party to celebrate finding the lost coin, or the overwhelming joy of the father whose son he thought dead returned home.
- the effect of *mixing ingredients*. One parable speaks of a woman mixing yeast with flour to make bread, another says salt flavors meat and preserves it like nothing else. Weeds are found among the wheat that was sown. A dragnet hauls in fish together with dregs and the two must be sorted out.

Sometimes parables are *combined* either to create tension or to produce an overall effect. For example, a series of parables express tension between certainty of the *parousia*⁸ and a solemn warning that constant vigilance and preparedness are needed. Another series may illustrate not only the simple experience of finding something needed, but the inexpressible joy of finding what was really valuable after thinking it was lost for good. Searching for a treasure can cause people to sacrifice everything in order to procure it.

Naming the Parables

We are as familiar with many of the traditional “names” of the parables as we are with the stories themselves. And this presents another problem with reinterpreting them with new eyes. Often the names are an attempt to be descriptive, but their emphasis is misplaced. For example, a parable in Matthew is often called “Workers in the Vineyard” (Matt 20:1-16) but the outlook of the parable is the startling, unlimited goodness of the Vineyard Owner. The so-called parable of the “Prodigal

Son” really focuses on the overwhelming love and forgiveness of the “Prodigal” (the term means generous) Father (Luke 15:11-32). We have attempted in many cases to rename parables where the traditional title seems to be a misnomer. This is not simply a change for change’s sake but to suggest with the title an aspect of the parable that deserves special attention. We want to identify the parable in an appropriate way that draws attention to the character or characters who ought to be observed, studied, imitated, or whose thinking or behavior invites a change of perspective or, more importantly, a transformed worldview.