

“‘Jesus’ parables are like diamonds,’ writes Lohfink, held within settings that both preserve and protect. *The Forty Parables of Jesus* presents the content of Jesus’ unique sayings mindful of the traditions that preserved, preached, and interpreted those parables. But Lohfink also provides the larger context in which parables, as provocative short stories with a twist, were heard, read, and understood. Lohfink has deftly written a well-exegeted and researched book that is at the same time eminently readable. *The Forty Parables of Jesus* witnesses to the ‘unbelievable nearness of God,’ and invites us to embrace the implicit Christology of Jesus’ parables.”

— Laurie Brink, OP, PhD, Catholic Theological Union

“Drawing from his magisterial career and vast publications on Scripture, Father Lohfink invigorates the discussion on parables for scholars and students alike. With perceptive analysis, he marshals a broad range of examples to expand our knowledge of how these stories undermine our expectations of conventions, ultimately reminding us of what was so compelling about Jesus’ parables. This book is more than a commentary, but a text much like the parables themselves: an invitation to ponder the Good News, rethink the genius of story, and enlarge the stunning horizon of the proclamation of the Reign of God.”

— Gueric DeBona, OSB, St. Meinrad Seminary and School of Theology

“Drawing on his genius for biblical interpretation that is both intelligent and pastoral, profound and accessible, Gerhard Lohfink turns to an exposition of Jesus’ parables, forty in all. He begins by noting, through a selection of parables from a variety of sources, how context and structure add meaning to parables, including those of Jesus. His goal is not to pit the possible original meaning of Jesus’ parables against the layers of meaning derived from their use in the early church and in the Gospels, but to illustrate the rich and varied layers of meaning these characteristic stories of Jesus hold for us as Christians.”

— Donald Senior, CP, Catholic Theological Union, Chicago

Gerhard Lohfink

The Forty Parables of Jesus

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For Peter Stuhlmacher
in gratitude

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Preface

“The parables not only draw us into the center of Jesus’ proclamation; at the same time they point to the person of the proclaimer, the mystery of Jesus himself.”

—Eberhard Jüngel¹

Jesus’ parables were never museum pieces. From the very beginning they were retold, reflected on, explained, relocated into new situations—and in the process they survived as something eternally fresh and blooming. Above all, they were inserted into the text of the gospels, where they were even given their own framework in many cases; the frames were themselves a kind of interpretation. In the process it could well happen that the “point” of a parable shifted.

Obviously it is legitimate to inquire about the oldest form and original meaning of Jesus’ parables, but not with the idea that the “overlayer” of church tradition must be removed to get access to the solid original rock. I reject that image. Church tradition is not a field of boulders, and most certainly not a dump. Without the church’s tradition as a faithful and sculpted heritage Jesus’ parables would no longer exist. It is only because they lived on in the church’s preaching that they have survived and are able to develop their power ever anew.

I prefer a different picture: Jesus’ parables are like diamonds that were given a setting even in their earliest transmission and then especially in the gospels. Settings for precious stones are not only valuable in themselves; they are necessary. They present the stone, hold

¹ Eberhard Jüngel, “Die Problematik der Gleichnisrede Jesu,” in *Gleichnisse Jesu. Positionen der Auslegung von Adolf Jülicher bis zur Formgeschichte*, ed. Wolfgang Harnisch, WdF 366 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1982), 283–342.

it fast, preserve and protect it. In the case of Jesus' parables, they have to be included in the interpretation. The church needs both a constant attention to its tradition and historical criticism that inquires about its origins.

In fact, we need to speak in much more radical terms: we receive the true image of Jesus only through the church's proclamation and never apart from it. Peter Stuhlmacher rightly wrote: "Historical criticism is a valuable tool, but in the exegesis of biblical books it must be embedded in the framework of the church's tradition."²

That all needed to be said to avoid a wrong understanding of what follows. Now that it has been said I can speak of what this book is about. It is about the origins. It is about the oldest form of Jesus' parables and what they originally said. That is to say, it is about one of the most important questions in the interpretation of the gospels and about problems that have sustained research on Jesus for a long time. In this book I will refer gratefully to the work of many New Testament scholars on Jesus' parables.

Still, I do not intend to offer a review of scholarship, nor am I primarily interested in purely scholarly debate. All that I want to do is to unlock these bold and often surprising texts for my readers. In doing so I have occasionally referred to parable interpretations I have published previously in various places, but I have questioned those interpretations again, thought about them, and often reformulated them.

The book's title speaks of *forty* parables. Please, don't anyone put that number on the scales! For example, is the great speech about the Last Judgment in Matthew 25:31-46 anything like a parable? Does the opening image of a separation of sheep and goats permit us to call it that? At any rate the whole composition is by no means a parable.³

² Peter Stuhlmacher, "Der Kanon und seine Auslegung," in *Biblische Theologie und Evangelium. Gesammelte Aufsätze*, WUNT 146 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 167-90, at 179.

³ Joachim Jeremias, in his book on parables that has gone through many editions, and rightly so, treats forty parables, but he counts the Last Judgment (Matt 25:31-46) and the return of the unclean spirit (Matt 12:43-45) among them. I have not followed him in that. I cannot see a genuine parable in either of those texts. See Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, trans. S. H. Hooke (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962; 2nd rev. ed. 1972).

Part One

How Parables Work



The books on parables and parables research that are now classics begin with a statement of basics: the nature of a parable, how it is linguistically shaped, what life situation it is rooted in, and what kinds or genres of parables there are. A great deal of space was devoted to that last question. How can we catalogue Jesus' parables in clearly-defined types so we can file them correctly?

But that is just what will *not* happen here. In part 1 we will simply look at ten different parables from very different epochs and ask how they are structured and how they work. We will not consider any authentic parables of Jesus. Then, in part 2 of the book, this 360-degree view will help us to deal properly with Jesus' own parables.¹

1. The Lion, the Bear, and the Snake (Amos 5:18-20)

Not long ago I presented a parable to a discussion group that meets regularly to read and discuss selected literary texts. I did not name the author but only asked the participants how they would read and interpret the following:

A man was attacked by a lion. By sheer accident he was able to save himself, but then a bear ran at him. Again he escaped. With the last of his strength he made it to his house and just barely slammed the heavy door in the bear's face. Gasping for breath, he leaned his hands against the wall—and a snake bit him. The bite was fatal.

I was amazed at the intensity with which the group engaged with this brief text. A seventeen-year-old whose provocative but intelligent remarks often roused the group said spontaneously: "But the meaning is obvious: your worst enemies are not outside; they are in your own house."

¹ Translator's note: German scholarship distinguishes between "Gleichnisse" (similitudes) and "Parabeln" (parables). Similitudes, based on real-life situations, are the subject of this book. The author speaks literally of "Jesus' similitudes." But in English usage "parable" is the term we all understand, and so it will be used here.

“What!” said an older woman. “This parable is about death. It means to say that you can’t escape dying. It comes inevitably, no matter how much luck you have had in your life.”

A middle-aged man, a professor of classical philology, offered: “Certainly you might say that . . . but I would like to modify that last interpretation a little. The parable doesn’t just speak about death; it is about fate. You will never escape the fate that hangs over you, no matter how hard you struggle. At any rate, that was how the Greeks thought. You can run as fast as you like; in the end it will get you—even if the gods have to send you a serpent.”

Another, a successful psychotherapist, said: “Of course you didn’t invent that parable. It is certainly very ancient, and those old parables contain a lot of experience—at depth. The parable is about the shadows that victimize so many people. Most cannot deal with them without therapy; they are repeatedly threatened and even overwhelmed by them, and the shadows continually reappear in new configurations.”

“I have a completely different interpretation,” said a shrewd young man who had a broad range of interests and was working on a dissertation on seventeenth-century moral theology. “The lion symbolizes a severe temptation. The man who is being tempted succeeds in escaping from it, but then the same temptation reappears in a different form. He manages to escape again. He is happy at having won out and thinks he is finally free, but then the temptation plays its last card and appears in yet another form. And now it conquers the person precisely because he thought he was such a winner.”

At last a woman with a very unhappy and painful marriage behind her spoke up: “You all seem to be theoreticians,” she said. “The worst part of my marriage was not the really hard blows: the death of our little daughter and my husband’s cheap affairs. No, the worst things were the little pinpricks he employed to wound me over and over again, his sarcastic remarks, the stabs he deliberately inflicted. It was those teeny-tiny poison darts that were ultimately the death of our marriage.”

Then I told the group where I had found the parable: I read the text from the prophet Amos:

Alas for you who desire the day of the LORD!
Why do you want the day of the LORD?

It is darkness, not light;
 as if someone fled from a lion,
 and was met by a bear;
or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall,
 and was bitten by a snake.
Is not the day of the LORD darkness, not light,
 and gloom with no brightness in it?

Then, of course, I had to say something about the “Day of the LORD,” the crucial phrase that frames and dominates the parable. Amos is using the parable to explain to his hearers in the Northern Kingdom of Israel what the “Day of the LORD” means for them. Before war and deportation overtook them the people of the Northern Kingdom lived in a fragile security. Their economic situation was good (Amos 3:15). The rich were getting richer all the time and exploiting the poor (Amos 2:7; 4:1; 8:4). Pompous worship services were celebrated, along with lavish feasts (Amos 5:21-23; 6:4-6). But the political situation was heating up. The people expected God to defeat their enemies, as on the “day of Midian” (Isa 9:3; Judg 7). For them that was a day on which God had intervened, a day when God had rescued Israel from its foes. Now they were longing for such another “Day of the LORD.”

But the prophet levels that expectation to the ground. The “Day of the LORD” the people are wishing for will look completely different. It will be an evil day, a day of destruction and death, because community life in the Northern Kingdom of Israel by no means corresponded to God’s will.

This little passage from Amos is terse and pithy in the extreme. Its statement is utterly compressed. The historical Amos could really have spoken it. Instead of light, the symbol of salvation and rescue, darkness will come over the land. The hoped-for “Day of the LORD” will prove to be death and decay. Embedded in the prophecy of woe stands the parable of the futile flight. There is no salvation any longer for the people of the Northern Kingdom!

Our discussion group then debated for a long time about how open to a variety of interpretations an isolated parable text standing by itself can be. Only the literary context or oral commentary or the actual situation in which a parable is spoken can establish its meaning without doubt. For that very reason Amos gave his parable a

frame—the “Day of the LORD.” The frame could, of course, have simply been the contemporary historical situation that everyone knew about: the intensifying military pressure from the East and the people’s illusionary ideas about rescue.

Without any framing, and without any knowledge of its historical situation, would Amos’s parable be completely open to any and every reading? “Certainly not,” said one part of the group. “After all, the various interpretations that have been offered all run in a certain direction: they are all about *inevitability*.” “That’s not true at all,” said the seventeen-year-old. “My interpretation, that the real enemies are always in one’s own house, has nothing to do with ‘inevitability.’” I had to admit that she was right. Apparently a parable without a frame and a clear historical context can admit of the widest variety of interpretations.

We will encounter that same problem with regard to Jesus’ parables. If we regard them as “autonomous aesthetic constructions” that stand by themselves² it may help us to investigate their structure more carefully than usual, but we will too easily miss what they have to say. Then we will see them only as general ethical admonitions, acute precepts of wisdom, or the uncovering of the realities of human existence. But Jesus’ parables were decidedly more than that: they spoke of the urgent advent of the reign of God and about the “here and now” of the rule of God in Israel. Jesus’ parables must never be isolated from the one who spoke them and the situation into which they were uttered.

2. The Bramble Becomes King (Judges 9:8-15)

Our second text comes from the book of Judges, where it stands in the following context: Abimelech, the son of Jerubbaal, has become king of Shechem (Judg 9:6). To get there he had to hire a troop of ruffians to kill his seventy half-brothers from his father’s harem (9:4-5). Only Jotham, the youngest, survives by hiding just in time (9:5).

² If I have understood Dan Otto Via correctly this is precisely his position. See esp. his *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 71–73. However, a little later (pp. 83–84) he relativizes it somewhat. Here we should also mention Wolfgang Harnisch and his book *Die Gleichniserzählungen Jesu* (reprint Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1963) He deliberately sets aside any inquiry into a historical location of Jesus’ parables.

7. The Elm and the Vine (Hermas *Similitudes* 2.1-10)

The parable below comes from the second century CE and is found in a book written in Rome by a Christian named Hermas somewhere around 140; the book is called *The Shepherd of Hermas* (*Pastor Hermae*). It was later subdivided into part 1, “Visions” (*Visiones*), part 2, “Mandates” (*Mandata*), and part 3, “Similitudes” (or: Parables; *Similitudines*). I have chosen the second parable in part 3. The “shepherd” who speaks with Hermas here is an angel in the shape of a shepherd who appears in one part of the book as a kind of teacher and interpreter who authoritatively answers the many questions that are worrying Hermas. The “I” narrator is Hermas himself:¹¹

As I was walking in the field, and observing an elm and vine, and determining in my own mind respecting them and their fruits, the Shepherd appears to me, and says, “What is it that you are thinking about the elm and vine?” “I am considering,” I reply, “that they become each other exceedingly well.” “These two trees,” he continues, “are intended as an example for the servants of God.” “I would like to know,” said I, “the example that these trees, you say, are intended to teach.” “Do you see,” he says, “the elm and the vine?” “I see them, sir,” I replied. “This vine,” he continued, “produces fruit, and the elm is an unfruitful tree; but unless the vine be trained upon the elm, it cannot bear much fruit when extended at length upon the ground; and the fruit which it does bear is rotten, because the plant is not suspended upon the elm. When, therefore, the vine is cast upon the elm, it yields fruit both from itself and from the elm. You see, moreover, that the elm also produces much fruit, not less than the vine, but even more; because,” he continued, “the vine, when suspended upon the elm, yields much fruit, and good; but when thrown upon the ground, what it produces is small and rotten. This similitude, therefore, is for the servants of God—for the poor and for the rich.” (Herm. *Sim.* 2.1-4)

We see immediately that the parable consists almost entirely of a dialogue between the Christian Hermas and the one who conveys revelation, appearing as a shepherd. At the beginning of the dialogue Hermas is looking at a vine growing up the trunk of an elm tree.

¹¹ Adapted from the translation by Frederick Crombie in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Library 1, The Apostolic Fathers* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1867), 377.

We have already seen in the case of Jotham's fable that in the ancient Near East vines were often simply laid on the ground (something one may likewise often see today). For the most part they were elevated slightly on forked sticks so that the tendrils would not lie too close to the ground. But there was also another possibility, used especially in Italy: elms (or ash trees) were planted in advance to prepare for laying out a vineyard. Once they had reached the right height some of the branches would be sawed off, leaving only a few wide-spreading limbs. Then a vine would be planted; its branches could grow in a spiral around the elm's boughs or simply hang down from them. Particularly in Italy there were many vineyards with elms as "vine espaliers." The picture presented by those vineyards must have been very impressive, for the symbiosis between elm and vine appears with some frequency in Roman literature.¹² That same symbiosis even became a simile for human community, true friendship, and happy marriages.

Hermas draws on that then-current symbol to shape his parable, but he gives the communion of elm and vine a specific meaning. For him it is an image of the community of poor and rich in the Christian assembly, with the elm representing the poor and the vine standing for the rich because the vine yields sweet grapes, but when it lies on the ground it produces less fruit, and what it does bear is always in danger of rotting. On the other hand, if it is tied up to an elm, then "with the help of the elm" it will bear richer and better fruit.

That, however, means that even though the rich have their wealth they are beggars before God because their wealth will spoil, or better: it is meaningless. It only has meaning when the rich let themselves be held up and supported by the poor, concretely: when they help the poor with their riches. In the explication of the parable in verses 5-10, which I have not quoted for reasons of space, this is developed especially in terms of prayer: the poor are rich before God because their prayers are powerful. If the rich members of the community support the poor they will be aided by the petitions and thanksgivings of the poor that rise up to God and are pleasing to God. Thus both profit one another.

But here we are not so much interested in the theology the "Shepherd of Hermas" derives from the symbiosis of elm and vine. Our

¹² See, for example, Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 14.661-69.

interest is much more in the structure of the parable speech. The situation is that the parable speech develops within a dialogue between Hermas and the Shepherd. For the most part Hermas raises questions and the Shepherd offers explanations that get longer and longer. We have not yet seen any form comparable to this.

As in John 15:1-8, we are not offered a coherent parable; the material of the parable is named at the outset: "As I was walking in the field, and observing an elm and vine" Other metaphorical elements will be provided later, in the context of the interpretation.

In and of itself the dialogue form has some advantages. We will see that there is a lot of dialogue in Jesus' parables; dialogues make a story exciting. But in the case of Jesus the dialogues take place within the parables themselves, while in Hermas the initial parable of the elm and the vine is "discussed" in a dialogue.

Moreover, that "dialogue" is far from being so formally self-contained and profound as the interpretation in John 15:1-8. The text moves awkwardly and the interpretation in terms of community relationships seems strained. Above all, Hermas fails to say clearly from the beginning what the elm and vine represent. The fact that the elm is described as "an unfruitful tree" has led many interpreters to see the elm as the rich and the vine as the poor, but that is exactly what Hermas does *not* mean to say. For him the elms represent the poor and the vines are the rich. Hermas's language is quite awkward: he confuses readers more than he helps them.

To be honest, I chose this rather stilted and badly organized metaphorical speech from the *Shepherd of Hermas* primarily because it is such a good contrast, so that other parables may appear all the better when set over against it: Jotham's fable in Judges 9:8-15, for example; the parable of the poor man's lamb in 2 Samuel 12:1-4; the song of the vineyard in Isaiah 5:1-7; and then, in part 2 of this book, Jesus' parables. To be able to truly appreciate his parables we also need to see how frequently the ancient world produced parables that went wrong or were awkwardly told.

8. The King Who Gained a People (*Mekhilta Exodus 20.2*)

The following text will serve as a model of the extraordinarily large number of *rabbinic* parables. It appears in the *Mekhilta* of Rabbi Ishmael on the book of Exodus. This *Mekhilta*, a kind of commentary, underwent its final editing in the second half of the third century CE.

The biblical text commented here contains the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:2-17). Instead of the whole text, only the first words are quoted; readers or hearers then knew which text-complex was the subject. The interpretation is as follows:¹³

“I am the L-rd your G-d”: Why were the ten words [= commandments] not stated at the beginning of the Torah? An analogy: A man enters a province and says to them [= the inhabitants]: I will rule over you. They respond: Did you do anything [good] for us that you would rule over us? [What does he do?] He builds the [city] wall for them, provides [a water conduit] for them, wages war for them, and then says: I will rule over you—whereupon they respond: Yes! Yes! Thus [Footstool = circumlocution for the divine name] took Israel out of Egypt, split the sea for them, brought down manna for them, raised the well [= split the rock] for them, brought in quail for them, waged war with Amalek for them, and then said to them: I will rule over you—whereupon they responded: Yes! Yes! (*Mekh. Exod. 20.2*)

This example illustrates very well the structure of many rabbinic parables: the biblical text to be interpreted or (more often) the first words, standing for the whole text, are given first. Then follows a parable, beginning in the dative case. Finally, in a separate section, the parable is explained.

In this case the full text of the Ten Commandments is not commented serially; rather, this is about a special question that will prove to be of extreme importance for the theological understanding of God’s commandments as a whole. That special question is introduced with great pedagogical skill. Someone asks, apparently quite naïvely: if the Ten Commandments are so fundamental for the relationship between Israel and its God, why are they not at the beginning of the whole Torah, even before the story of creation in Genesis 1?

The answer then given by means of the parable and commentary on it is: because God’s commandments are challenges to Israel, and keeping them can only be a response to what God has already done for this people out of pure love for them. *Therefore, before the Ten Commandments were given, God’s gracious action in God’s people had to be told in the texts of the Torah.* In the text quoted here that preceding, attentive

¹³ *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Jishma’el. Ein früher Midrasch zum Buch Exodus* (Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2010). English LMM.

action of God is summarized in the brief statement, "I am the LORD your God," to which, of course, must be added "who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." The readers or hearers obviously know and are reminded in the commentary that after the rescue from Egypt came the passage through the Sea of Reeds, the gifts of manna and quail, the bounty of water from the rock, and rescue from the hands of the Amalekites. Only then did Israel come to Sinai, where the Ten Commandments (and with them Israel's whole social order) were given. So the commandment was preceded by multiple saving actions on God's side.

From a purely theological point of view that is presented with remarkable clarity and relevance by this parable, for the principle of grace dominates not only the New Testament but also the Old. God's endless giving, without any reason, precedes any and all commandments.

Still, if we look at the parable (and its commentary) it seems altogether to lack the stringency of Jotham's fable and the weight of the poor man's lamb. This parable is, to put it mildly, a construct—because, after all, this is not how powerful people who want to be king somewhere are liable to act. Either they think they already have a right to rule or they seize the rulership by violence. The parable is well constructed as a way to illustrate God's actions, but it seems to have little relation to reality. It is a "construct."

That, in fact, is the accusation that Christian interpreters of Jesus' parables have repeatedly thrown at the rabbinic parables. They are said to be artificial and divorced from reality, in utter contrast to the fresh, down-to-earth parables of Jesus.¹⁴ Certainly that is related to the fact that the rabbis for the most part were interpreting a particular biblical passage, and they would force their interpretation of the text into parable form. Jesus' parables, on the other hand, were not told for the purpose of interpreting passages from the Bible; they were interpretation of the reign of God that was now coming to be.

¹⁴ Cp., e.g., Adolf Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, vol. 1 (Freiburg: Mohr [Siebeck], 1886), 170–71: "Whenever rabbinic variants of gospel parables are pressed upon us the comparison is unfavorable to them; almost all of them are somehow artificial; they are indeed clear and easily comprehended but they are not true, not compelling; their power to persuade is not even close to that of Jesus' parables: either the echo of the school with its compulsion and pedantry cling to them or they are mere series of comparisons that occupy the imagination and support memory." English LMM.

This last observation is absolutely correct. Jesus did not interpret biblical texts in his parables. But we must not simply accept the accusation that the rabbinic parables are “constructs.” The fact that a parable is constructed need not be something fundamentally negative. When, in a well-known fable of Aesop, a lion, a fox, and a donkey go hunting together and kill a deer, that is obviously a construct, and yet the fable turns out to be a skillfully shaped and highly intelligent text.¹⁵ And when in Jotham’s fable all the trees except the bramble refuse to be king, that is likewise a construct—but what a text it is, and what an attack on the arrogance of the powerful! And when Jesus tells of a vineyard owner who in the evening pays the last workers who have toiled only a short time the same amount as the first—is that not a construct?

We need to be cautious about accusing a text of being “constructed.” It may be that precisely what is constructed will prove to be constructive. It could be that when the rabbis’ students memorized and studied the parable from *Mekhilta Exodus* they were deeply irritated at the man who tried to gain a people by good deeds because they knew that there is no such person—and in the same moment they were led by their irritation to understand that, in fact, it all happened, because the text is speaking about God, and God’s actions are absolutely different from those of power-seeking human beings who want to rule over others.

9. The Man in the Well (Friedrich Rückert)

When we talk about parables the concept of “allegory” often arises, or there is a discussion of “allegoresis.” We need to be somewhat clearer about what that means. For that purpose I will use a poem by the German scholar Friedrich Rückert (1788–1866).¹⁶ The poem’s title is not “Allegory” but “Parable.” Rückert was Germany’s first orientalist and is supposed to have been master of some forty languages and dialects.

¹⁵ See the masterful interpretation of this Aesop fable by Wolfgang Harnisch in *Die Gleichniserzählungen Jesu* (see n. 2 above), 16–20.

¹⁶ The text of Friedrich Rückert’s “parable” is taken from Reinhard Dithmar, ed., *Fabeln, Parabeln und Gleichnisse* (Munich: DTB, 1978), 213–25. English LMM.

A man went down to Syria,
leading a camel by the hand.
The beast, in a ferocious mood
suddenly began to brood
and wheeze so truly awfully
his leader then was forced to flee.
He ran, and then he saw a well
more or less along his path.
He heard the beast behind him chuff:
it must have driven him off his nut.
He crawled away into the well;
he didn't fall; he seemed to sail.
A berry bush was growing gladly
out of the shattered fountain's belly;
The man clung to it like cement
and shouted out his sad lament.
He looked above, and saw with fear
the camel's head a hand's breadth near
trying to reach and grab him back.
He looked below, into the deep
and there beheld a dragon's keep;
the dragon gaped with unblocked rage
and hoped to drag him to its cage
if he should happen to fall down.
So, trembling between the two
the poor man saw a third thing, too:
the bramble upon which he hung
was rooted in the well's cracked wall,
and there he spied a pair of mice.
One was black, the other white.
He saw them, there, both white and black
biting at the root, snick-snack.
They gnawed, they nipped, they dug, they scratched
till the dirt fountained from the crack.
And as the dirt did trickle down
the dragon gazed up from its lair
to see the bramble, its roots freed,
falling with the luscious prey.
The man, in fear and need and panic
displaced, besieged, and threatened 'round
swinging on the vine's thin rope
looked to save himself—no hope.

And as he gazed around in terror
he saw a twig of bramble nodding:
a limb with ripened berries laden!
Overwhelmed with his desire
he thought not of the camel's rage,
or of the dragon in the deep,
or even of the clever mice
while berries danced before his eyes.
He let the beast above him snort
and under him the dragon hark
and close to him the mice still gnawing,
he grabbed the berries, as was meet,
thinking they were so good to eat,
gulped them greedily one by one
and through the sweetness that he got
his fear and terror were forgot.

You ask: who is that crazy fool
who easily forgets his fear?
Know this, my friend, that man is you;
take in the meaning I give here.
The dragon in the well's great deep
is the yawning jaw of death;
and the camel's threat above
is this life's full fear and need.
You it is, 'twixt death and life
swinging on the world's green branch.
The two mice gnawing on the root,
the branches, too, on which you light
to save you from the mouth of death—
the mice: they are called day and night.
The black one gnaws in secret dark
from nightfall quietly till morning;
then, from dawn till night doth fall
the white one undermines it all.
And here, between these horrid snares
you're tempted by the berries' savor,
forget the camel's threat to life
and the dragon death below
and the mice by day and night—
nothing draws you from devouring
berries, all that you can snack,
nibbling on the well-grave's crack.

Clearly, Friedrich Rückert had a flair for poetry. People say that in his best years he wrote a poem a day. The irony that runs throughout is gorgeous, and many of the rhymes are masterful, such as “Abend” (evening) and “wurzeluntergrabend” (undermining the root). Anyone who tries to write rhymes has to work them out, but apparently they simply leapt from Rückert’s pen. We can also see very clearly from this text what an allegory is: the metaphorical level is precisely parallel to the factual level and many elements of the metaphorical level correspond precisely to the facts. In this case we find the following:

dragon	→	death
camel	→	fear for one’s life
green bush	→	world
white mouse	→	day
black mouse	→	night
sweet berries	→	sensual pleasures
well	→	grave

An allegory, then, is a story that has to be decoded piece by piece. The model for allegory is probably our dreams, where the oddest images and events combine. Then we usually try to decode the dream. Sometimes we succeed; more often we don’t.

Among the parables and parabolic speeches we have thus far discussed, the song of the vineyard in Isaiah 5 and the speech about the faithless wife in Ezekiel 16 are definitely allegories. The parable of the poor man’s lamb in 2 Samuel at least contains allegorical elements, because the little lamb’s eating from the poor man’s table and resting in his bosom certainly represent a motif that can be decoded.

It is already more difficult in the rabbinic parable of the king who gained a people for himself. The point of comparison is in itself only the forthcoming, gracious action of a king, but for every Jewish hearer that king was naturally, from the beginning, none other than God.

Obviously there are texts that are composed as allegories from the outset, but there are also texts that are not allegorical and yet have subsequently been treated and interpreted as such. Then we speak of “allegoresis.” Here, too, an example can illustrate what I mean.

The parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-35), which I will treat in detail below, was for Jesus a narrative primarily meant to show how people act in the reign of God. But Christian interpreters were not satisfied with that. They sought a deeper sense in the story beyond "Go and do likewise!" They tried to unlock every individual part of the story, and that decoding looked like this:

Jerusalem is Paradise, Jericho is the world. The man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho is Adam and his "falling among robbers" is original sin. The Samaritan is Christ and the donkey on which he sits is Christ's earthly body. The inn to which Christ brings the fallen man is the church, the innkeeper is the apostle Paul, the oil and wine with which the wounded man is anointed point to the sacraments, the two denarii the Samaritan gives the innkeeper are the Old and New Testaments, and the promised return of the Samaritan is Christ's return. We can see that the parable thus becomes a reflection of the whole of salvation history. People treated all Jesus' parables in much the same way.

Giving Jesus' parables a deeper sense in this way and decoding every tiniest detail down to the last letter probably satisfies a certain longing to play the detective, but it is done at the expense of the parable itself, which is thus broken to bits. To salve the reputation of the ancient interpreters who took pleasure in such allegoresis we should, of course, add that this method of giving a more profound meaning to normal narrative texts was widespread in antiquity and was considered a high art.

In one thing the allegorizing theologians of the early church and the Middle Ages were certainly correct: Jesus' parables were not banal, everyday texts. They spoke of the reign of God. And as we will see, in speaking about the reign of God they also spoke of the mystery of Jesus, his mission and his saving work. But that means that with the aid of allegoresis those earlier centuries developed what was really present in Jesus' parables, though they did it in their own way. We, too, have to interpret Jesus' parables in terms of the reign of God that has come in Jesus and thus, at the same time, in terms of the one who brought it.¹⁷

¹⁷ For the justification of an allegoresis of the Bible rightly understood and meaningfully applied, cp. Marius Reiser, *Bibelkritik und Auslegung der Heiligen Schrift. Beiträge zur Geschichte der biblischen Exegese und Hermeneutik*, WUNT 217 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 99–118, esp. 113–15.

is about the profound disturbance, indeed, the disruption, that happens when God's new world breaks into ours and calls into question the rituals and models we have so laboriously constructed.

13. The Laborers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16)

The great parable of the laborers in the vineyard is found only in Matthew's gospel. We do not know where he got it; it is certainly not from Q. Thus it appears that there were Jesus texts in circulation and being carefully handed down even outside Mark and Q. The last sentence of the parable, about the "first" who will be "last," was very probably added to the parable as a "commentary" in an early stage of transmission. It would have been a freely-circulating saying of Jesus (cp. Mark 10:31; Luke 13:30) that does not really fit the parable. The introduction, "for the kingdom of heaven is like," probably comes from Matthew.

For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out at about nine o'clock [the third hour], he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock [around the sixth and the ninth hour], he did the same. And about five o'clock [around the eleventh hour] he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, "Why are you standing here idle all day?" They said to him, "Because no one has hired us." He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard." When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, "Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first." When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage [a denarius]. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage [a denarius]. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." But he replied to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage [a denarius]? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I

choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" So the last will be first, and the first will be last.

The parable probably takes place at the time of the harvest, the "crush." The grapes are ripe and must be gathered as swiftly as possible. Every hour counts. Of course it is odd, and it sounds unrealistic, that the landowner repeatedly goes to the marketplace, but it is not altogether distant from reality because in the case of a very large vineyard it often becomes apparent, as the work goes on, that a good many laborers will still be needed; those already engaged will not suffice.⁴⁰

Probably, after all, we shouldn't even ask such questions, since the parable-teller evidently wasn't concerned with them. So we have to restrain ourselves from wanting to fill in some of the gaps in the course of the action. The thread of the narrative is as taut as it can be and has no room for imaginative additions.

Thus, for example, the parable has nothing to say about the discussions between the individual laborers and the landowner. In reality he would surely have given his manager the task of paying the workers. How is it, then, that he suddenly reappears in the action? Did a delegation of workers descend on him? Or was he present from the outset when they were paid off? It is futile to speculate about these things. The parable is not interested in such details; they would only distract us and are best set aside.

The mood that pervades the whole parable is another matter; it needs consideration because in this parable we cannot find the least hint of the joy that marked the days of the grape harvest in ancient Israel. There is nothing of the happy shouting that rang out over the vineyards, none of the blessings shouted at the harvesters by passersby (Ps 129:7-8). The parable presumes a grey, matter-of-fact environment in which work is nothing but toil.

The reason is pretty clear: Jesus' parables offer us an astonishingly accurate picture of the social conditions in Palestine in the first century CE. The times when free farmers in Israel joyfully harvested their own vineyards lay in the past. Most of them had long since lost

⁴⁰ This is an important point noted by Wolfgang Harnisch, *Die Gleichmiserzählungen Jesu. Eine hermeneutische Einführung*, UTB 1343 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985), 179.

their land to wealthy estate owners. The Romans and the minor officials subject to them demanded such high taxes and fees that every operation had to be extremely profitable and so was forced to streamline production. Effectively, then, agricultural enterprises had to be large, and they needed a cheap workforce: either slaves or underpaid day-laborers. Family farms were scarcely able to make ends meet any longer, and many of the former owners of such farms worked by the day. They were hired in the morning at the market and were paid off in the evening. Work went on from sunrise to sunset, from daybreak to full dark.

In such a workday a laborer earned just about enough to feed the family for another day. If such a worker was not hired in the morning, the children in that family would go hungry the next day. The parable reflects those conditions; it was a joyless work world, and to that extent Jesus is being completely realistic.

Therefore we have no reason to look down on the laborers hired at the first hour when they demand a fair wage system. From their point of view they are altogether in the right. It is true that a denarius was not a bad wage for a day's work and probably more than the norm. But for the last hired, who had worked only an hour in the cool of the late afternoon, to be paid just as much as those who had suffered the day's heat over long hours was not only unjust but inhuman. That is how the "first" thought. Weren't they right?

Every society, even the basest slave-state, survives only because some degree of justice is preserved. Without that the society will break apart. In that light we can understand the angry protest of the worker who evidently becomes a spokesperson for the others. And in that light the end of the parable is, at first glance, "impossible."

In the case of this parable we really have to ask: doesn't it rupture the plane of realistic imagery and construct something unreal? We could put it this way: the parable that began so realistically now suddenly reveals its subtlety; in an instant, in the middle of the everyday grayness, something new explodes into history—something totally unusual that not only upsets the characters in the parable but startles the listeners as well.

Obviously we could argue that even such a benefactor as the landowner in the parable is not completely impossible. He could exist. But it seems that Jesus here permits himself a narrative that deliberately rolls over into the surreal. And it is no accident that he does it

precisely *here*. He did not allow it in his parables of growth, where he spoke of natural processes that had to be described with precision and in detail. This parable, on the other hand (and the same is true for the lost son), is about people—human beings with their cryptic natures, their limitations, their “evil eyes,” but also their unfathomable generosity—and it is precisely in this area that Jesus can afford a story that leaps into things unusual, even startling or upsetting. This is the only way he can express the outrageousness he is about.

Only when we are clear about all that can we gain access to the real meaning of the story, for in it two worlds—or we could say two different forms of society—are in collision.

On the one hand the parable soberly and realistically describes the old society that always gets the upper hand, even in the place where Jesus wants to assemble the people of God anew. In that society it’s every man or woman for him- or herself and everyone struggles for her or his own existence. In it there is envy when one has more. It is the endless conflict between those “on top” and those “on the bottom.” And rivalry exists also—perhaps even more—between those who belong to the same social class. Their constant comparing of themselves with others leads to ongoing mistrust and enduring power struggles.

To keep such struggles at least somewhat in check there is law, one of the most valuable of all human achievements. It is quite right that workers in that kind of society fight for their rights. In a world built on rivalries they have no other choice.

The mastery of the parable consists precisely in the fact that, with the greatest economy of means, it shows how God’s new world suddenly erupts into the old society, because the story turns out quite differently from what the listeners expected. They had supposed that the last, who were idle almost all day, would receive only a few copper coins. That they received just as much as the first must have been a shock to Jesus’ listeners. The bottom dropped out from under them. All familiar standards were snatched away. But if they open themselves to the parable they fall—not into the abyss; rather, their feet then rest on the land where God reigns, God’s new society.

In the reign of God, different rules apply. Certainly work goes on from morning till evening here as well. God’s world is no Lotusland. But here work has dignity, and no one need go home in the evening full of care and anxiety. No one is alone any longer. But above all: it

is possible to live without rivalries, and that is because there is something here that is greater and more expansive than all private desires: work for God's cause. It is precisely this common cause, desired by all, that creates a solidarity making it possible to share in others' suffering and rejoice in the joys of others.

In the parable, certainly, that new society has not yet come to be; it is only visible in a preliminary way in the landowner, who—contrary to all experiences in the old society—is “good” (Matt 20:15). The Greek text has ἀγαθός for “good,” and generally it is translated “generous” in this passage: “are you envious because I am generous?” That, at any rate, is how the NRSV has the landowner speak to one of the agitated laborers.

A literal translation of the Greek text, however, reads “is your eye evil because I am good?”⁴¹ That is not exactly the same, because the basic meaning of *agathos* is “good” in the sense of “useful,” “suitable,” “excellent,” “proper.” When the landowner pays the last as much as the first he is acting “properly,” rationally, and therefore well. Certainly he is not acting “rationally” according to the rules of a society shaped by battles over distribution; his actions are rational by the rules of the reign of God. Jesus was the first to fully grasp the rationality of the reign of God. That is reflected, for example, in the demands of the Sermon on the Mount, in the theme of “nonviolence” (Matt 5:38-42). That is the only way to create real peace. In principle Jesus rejected any kind of violence or force in the reign of God and so initiated an unforeseeable future history. Thus he is the suitable, the excellent human being.

Once again, at the moment when Jesus told the parable the new thing had not yet spread; it was visible, but provisionally: only in himself, the one most suitable for the reign of God. But it would soon become visible also in his disciples and sympathizers, namely, in the rare moments in which they abandoned their own rivalries and aided one another in solidarity.

All that probably makes it clear that we are missing the point of the parable if we see its theme as nothing more than the overabundant beneficence of God. Certainly its ultimate statement is about God's limitless and undeserved kindness, but if that were the only message

⁴¹ See NRSV *ad loc.*, note *c.*

of the parable it would remain completely nonbinding. Everyone who believes in God talks about God's goodness. Such talk costs nothing and changes nothing. If Jesus had only talked about God's generosity he would not have been nailed to the cross.

The grumbling of the laborers from the first hour reflects that of those among Jesus' contemporaries who were outraged at the new thing he was beginning with his disciples: a common life growing out of continual forgiveness and solidarity and in which, as a consequence, latecomers and sinners who had absolutely no merits to offer could also find a place.

Thus Matthew 20:1-16 is not about an abstract attribute of God. Jesus talks about God's limitless generosity solely from the point of view that this generosity has become reality since his own appearance and exists in the form of a new society that is beginning to grow around and through him.

The parable talks about how this new reality is breaking into the weariness and hopelessness of the people of God. It is a stupendous event. It puts the lowest on top, awakens hidden fears, evokes outrage. But it also allows hope to flower and bestows profound joy.

In the parable of the laborers in the vineyard Jesus depicts what is happening now, in this hour: the coming of the reign of God. He interprets, he shows what is already happening before the eyes of his hearers—its impetus still hidden and yet becoming visible. Therefore the parable does not offer timeless teaching. It uncovers things that are already happening, and in doing so it sets them free. A new way of living comes to light.

The listeners can engage with the thing the parable is talking about. They can enter into the story told in the parable and allow Jesus' words to put new ground under their feet. They can ask Jesus to accept them into his circle of disciples where the new thing is already starting to grow, or they can become sympathizers of the Jesus movement and so give support to the new world that is beginning there.

Thus Jesus' words are effective; they create reality, but not only in words. Jesus heals the sick, he drives out the demons in society. He begins to live a new society, together with his disciples.

In telling the parable of the laborers in the vineyard that so precisely describes the gloomy social circumstances of his time Jesus was certainly thinking also that the harvest season in Israel must finally become what, from God's point of view, it had always needed

to be: a time of jubilation and cries of joy. He also thought that now, with the Good News of the reign of God, must finally be fulfilled what Israel's Torah had always sought: sisterhood and brotherhood, equality and freedom.⁴²

14. The Judge and the Widow (Luke 18:1-8)

The parable of the judge and the widow comes to us only from Luke. It is significantly shorter than the one about the laborers in the vineyard. There we saw that a narrator can work with "gaps" and need not develop and ground everything in detail. That frugality in narration is all the more evident in the parable of the judge and the widow.

In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, "Grant me justice against my opponent [in court]." For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, "Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming [lit.: come and give me a black eye]." (Luke 18:2-5)

Is that the end of the story? If so there were probably a lot of listeners who were irritated and asked, "Is that really all there is? Of course it is clear that the widow gets her rights, but it would be nice to hear all about it, and to have more details about the case at issue."

But the listeners' expectations are disappointed. The story goes no further, and it does not need to because it has already said everything; all that remains is for it to be interpreted. So this is not a straight-forward narrative. There is an "introduction," then a presentation of the two "actors," and then nothing but an "internal monologue" on the part of the judge—and within that monologue comes the crucial part of the story. Jesus' narrative technique is highly refined.

To begin with let us look at the first part of the parable. Two people appear: a judge and a widow. The judge has no fear of God and cares nothing about the negative judgment of other people. Probably that

⁴² Cp. Gerhard Lohfink, *Im Ringen um die Vernunft: Reden über Israel, die Kirche und die europäische Aufklärung* (Freiburg: Herder, 2016), 15–22.

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The Parables in the Church Year

Below are listed all the parables that are included in the readings of the Roman Catholic Lectionary on the Sundays of Years A, B, and C. (The daily liturgy is not in view.)

If on a given Sunday a parable is read from another of the Synoptic Gospels, for example in Matthew's version instead of the Lukan version discussed in this book, or vice versa, the line is in *italics*.

A	5th Sunday in Ordinary Time	Matt 5:15	The lamp on the lampstand	Pages 187–89
A	6th Sunday in Ordinary Time	Matt 5:25-26	Going to court	Pages 141–43
A	9th Sunday in Ordinary Time	Matt 7:24-27	Building a house on rock or on sand	Pages 184–87
A	<i>15th Sunday in Ordinary Time</i>	<i>Matt 13:1-9</i>	<i>The Abundant Harvest</i>	(See pp. 65–72)
A	16th Sunday in Ordinary Time	Matt 13:24-30	The Weeds in the Wheat	Pages 109–14
A	<i>16th Sunday in Ordinary Time</i>	<i>Matt 13:33</i>	<i>The Leaven</i>	(See pp. 61–62)
A	17th Sunday in Ordinary Time	Matt 13:44-46	The Treasure in the Field and the Pearl	Pages 47–54
A	24th Sunday in Ordinary Time	Matt 18:23-34	The unforgiving servant	Pages 147–53
A	25th Sunday in Ordinary Time	Matt 20:1-16	The Workers in the Vineyard	Pages 89–95
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