

2.5 Teaching in Parables

In all the Synoptic Gospels Jesus is presented as teaching in parables. The teaching in parables in most cases is teaching about the kingdom of God. In the Gospels of Matthew and Mark this is in most cases explicitly stated as an introduction to the parable. We thus find formulations such as 'The kingdom of God is as if...' (Mk 4.26) and 'With what can we compare the kingdom of God...' (Mk 4.30). Similar introductions can be found also in Matthew 'He put before them another parable: The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field....' (Mt 13.4), and 'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed...' (Mt 13.33).

In Luke the parables are introduced in a variety of ways, and it is not always clearly stated that the narrative that follows concerns the kingdom. The elaboration on the first parable, the parable of the sower, Lk 8.4-8, provides some explanation for this in claiming that to the disciples 'it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God, but for others they are in parables, so that seeing they may not see and hearing they may not understand' (Lk 8.9-10).

This explanation is followed by an allegorical interpretation of this particular parable.

It has been pointed out in the history of interpretation that parables have to be distinguished from allegories and one should be cautious to distinguish parable from allegory and allegorical interpretation.

The next parable we find in Luke's Gospel is 10.25-37 (The good Samaritan). We note again that the parable is not introduced as referring to the kingdom but only with the following words 'Jesus replied'. Thus we find this great parable in the context of a conversation over the kingdom (eternal life). To conclude the conversation Jesus only says 'go and do likewise' (10.37).

Other parables are introduced merely by brief sentences like 'and he said to them' (11.5-6), or 'and he told them a parable' (12.16). Others are explicit concerning the kingdom as the introduction to the parable of the mustard seed (13.18-19), or the leaven (13.20), and of course the parable of the great banquet (14.15).

Of course we find more parables in Luke's Gospel as narrative unfolds, but the image remains the same. The introductions to the parables not only indicate that they are not always straight forward to understand but also that in Luke not all the parables are kingdom parables. They refer to a variety of situations, like ethical conduct appropriate in the context of the kingdom or the power of prayer, like Lk 18.1-8, the parable of the unjust judge. There are a significant number parable unique to Luke (see list below), some are of the most prominent ones of Christian tradition such as the parable of the Lost Sheep (15.3ff.), the Lost Coin (15.8), and the Lost Son (15.11-32). Note here that these parables are presented as replying to critique of Jesus for eating and having table fellowship with sinners and outcasts and tax-collectors (15.1-2), which means that they are seen as situational stories in the context of interpretive conversations.

Parables moreover are stories which do not give a detailed account of everything that is going on. There are gaps in the narrative. These gaps are not omissions or indications of poor narrative technique on Jesus or the narrator's part. Narrative gaps are typical of Jewish/rabbinic parables and they are often intentionally ambiguous. Like many biblical narratives they are notorious for their scarcity of detail. The resultant gaps have been left open precisely at key points, central to the discourse as a dramatic progression as well as a structure of meaning and value. These gaps challenge hearers to utilize all their exegetical resources in order to make sense of the narrative – and thus involve them actively in the struggle of interpretation.

Parables Unique to Luke

Lk 10.25-37 The Good Samaritan

Lk 11.5-8 (9-12) The Friend at Night

Lk 12.13-21 The Rich Fool

Lk 13.1-9 The Barren Tree

Lk 15.8-10 The Lost Coin

Lk 15.11-32 The Lost Son

Lk 16.1-12 The Dishonest Stewart

Lk 16.10-31 The Rich Man and Lazarus

Lk 18.1-8 The Widow and the Judge

Lk 18. 9-14 The Pharisee and the Tax-Collector

Essential Readings

Further Readings

Tannehill, Robert C. *Luke*. Nashville, TN: Abdingdon Press 1996, pp. 236-254