

Parables in the Teaching of Jesus

Assessment 1: Portfolio B

(encyclopaedia article)

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Parables are a way of communicating information in an indirect way using allegorical and metaphorical means. The term is derived from the Greek ‘parabolē’ and Latin ‘parabola’ which translate as ‘comparison’. Catherine Keller describes the parables as ‘sideways discourse’.¹ There are many examples of parabolic writing within the Bible, found in both the Old and New Testaments. Jesus’ teachings were often delivered in this way and were used to both teach and challenge the people. The use of this style of communication enabled the people to recognise parallels from their own experiences and provided a basis for understanding. This can however, lead to varying interpretations, based on a person’s subjectivity. Also, as explained by Klyne Snodgrass, modern day interpretations of Jesus’ parables may be misunderstood as there is often no consideration of the historical values and customs in place at the time in which they were recorded.²

Jesus’ parables include lessons in subjects such as patience, wisdom, compassion, forgiveness, acceptance and mercy.³ In essence, these all sound very good practices to adopt, however, the structure of society at the time does not necessarily translate to today’s values. If we look at the example of ‘The Parable of the Ten Virgins’, it would be difficult for the modern woman to identify with the urgency of appeasing a man in such a way. In other parables throughout the Bible apart from Jesus, women are considered ‘controlled’ by the male presence, being instructed how to behave and even what to wear.⁴

The concept of parables has been questioned many times, Catherine Keller describes one leading scholar’s account that, ‘Nothing could be more unauthoritative than the parables of Jesus’.⁵ This does not appear to be a dismissal of the efficacy of the parables but moreover can be viewed as a consideration for the gentle delivery and the non-forceful approach Jesus took. When we ask for interpretation of the parables in society today, we must consider two things; are we looking at what it means for us now, or are we looking for its relevance in the time it was recorded? Anna Wierzbicka discusses the difference between those (such as Biblical scholars) and an individual who wishes to live in accordance with the ways of Jesus on a personal level. The foundational basis of enquiry would be very different in each of these cases.⁶

When examining Jesus’ parables as a personal endeavour, even considering the difference in historical perspective, most people will find truth in the words and be able to relate them to

¹ Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery, Discerning Divinity In Process*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), p.137.

² Kyle Snodgrass, *Bible Odyssey: Parables of Jesus*, (2024), <<https://open.bibleodyssey.com/articles/parables-of-jesus/>> p.1.[accessed 18 January 2025].

³ William, Arnot, Rev., *The Parables of Our Lord*, (London: T. Nelson and Sons, 1874).

⁴ Ann Witherington, ed. & Ben Witherington III, *Women and the Genesis of Christianity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁵ Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery, Discerning Divinity In Process*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), p.137.

⁶ Anna Wierzbicka, *What Did Jesus Mean? Explaining the Sermon on the Mount and the Parables in Simple and Universal Human Concepts*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

some aspect of their life, their moral compass or their religious beliefs. An example of a parable which appears easy to interpret can be found in Matthew 7:24-27 and Luke 6:47-49,

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell – and great was its fall!

This parable appears to convey the process of making wise decisions and is discussed simply. It does also contain some authoritative suggestion ‘...And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them...’, which is in opposition to what was cited earlier by Catherine Keller. The actions and consequences of the ‘foolish man’ are explained, unlike within some of the other parables from Jesus. It has been suggested that without a foundational basis of understanding, interpretation is like ‘...translating unknowns into unknowns.’⁷

When considering most of Jesus’ other parables, the allegorical connection is not so obvious, and it would be reasonable to wonder why this is so. If we look at Matthew 20:1-16 we find the parable of labourers in the vineyard; whereupon labourers that worked for a different number of hours for the same work were paid the same wage. It is difficult to understand the concept of fairness and value, which is what the story first appears to be discussing. However, by the end of the story it seems that this is not the message being conveyed. It takes time to come to the realisation that the story is about acceptance. So why did Jesus convey this in such a cryptic fashion? Do we remember a lesson better when we have had to ponder its meaning? Do we find more value in a lesson when we have worked out its meaning for ourselves? If Jesus would have told the people that they should accept what was agreed to without question, would this have been considered unreasonable?⁸

It appears that the use of parables may offer the listener/reader an opportunity to vicariously consider a lesson, and to almost feel the result of what is being conveyed, increasing an empathetic awareness of the meaning. It seems that Jesus may have used this method to promote a deeper consideration for the messages he wished to share with the people. However, as Danna Fewell describes Crossan’s words, ‘Whatever its intended subject, a parable always points you toward and wants you to go to some external referent’.⁹

⁷ Ibid. p.6.

⁸ Ann Witherington, ed. & Ben Witherington III, *Women and the Genesis of Christianity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁹ Danna Nolan Fewell, Ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative*, (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2016), p.1. <<https://academic.oup.com/edited-volume/34438?login=true>>.

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