**Jesus: the Parable of Divine Love**

**A Study of the Parables – Part 1**

**General Introduction**

**The word *Parable***

Parable is a word loaned from Greek. In classical Greek, we find the noun was used to mean “setting for the purpose of comparing.” So it was used as a means of “comparison” in Plato and in Aristotle (Pol. 11.5). Aristotle used it in his book “On Rhetoric” as just a “similitude” or “parable” (Rhet., II, 20, p. 1393a, 22-1394a, 18).

The verb in Greek means to use a figure of speech that is “para” at “bole,” or something to “see in comparison.”

The Hebrew noun ***Mashal*** and the plural ***Mashalim*** similarly means that “something is like something else.”

**Figure of Speech in Literature**

A parable is a figure of speech that is based on comparison between two or more things.

It has been argued that we know from literature two types of Parables:

1. A “narrative parable” includes a narration aiming at discovering the quality of something, such as: *“Once upon a time there was a king who was … ”* and then a quality – *rich, powerful, wise, handsome* – is brought into the narrative. Here is an example from the Talmud: A pagan philosopher once asked Rabbi Gamaliel why God is angry with idolaters and not with idols? Whereupon Rabbi Gamaliel answered him with the following parable: “A king had a son who raised a dog which he named after his royal father; and whenever he was about to swear he said, ‘By the life of the dog, the father.’ When the king heard of this, against whom did his anger turn, against the dog or against the son? Surely only against the son" ('Ab. Zarah 54b).

2. A similitude, that is, a comparison without a narrative but just says “it is like.”

**OT Parables**

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| 1. Balaam—Concerning the Moabites and Israelites. | Mount Pisgah | [Num 23:24](http://www.blueletterbible.org/Bible.cfm?b=Num&c=23&v=24#24) |
| 2. Jotham—Trees making a king. | Mount Gerizim | [Jdg 9:7-15](http://www.blueletterbible.org/Bible.cfm?b=Jdg&c=9&v=7#7) |
| 3. Samson—Strong bringing forth sweetness. | Timnath | [Jdg 14:14](http://www.blueletterbible.org/Bible.cfm?b=Jdg&c=14&v=14#14) |
| 4. Nathan—Poor man's ewe lamb. | Jerusalem | [2Sam 12:1-4](http://www.blueletterbible.org/Bible.cfm?b=2Sa&c=12&v=1#1) |
| 5. Woman of Tekoah—Two brothers striving. | Jerusalem | [2Sam 14:1](http://www.blueletterbible.org/Bible.cfm?b=2Sa&c=14&v=1#1) |
| 6. The Smitten Prophet—The escaped prisoner. | Near Samaria | [1Kin20:35-40](http://www.blueletterbible.org/Bible.cfm?b=1Ki&c=20&v=35#35) |
| 7. Jehoash, King of Israel—The thistle and cedar. | Jerusalem | [2Kin 14:9](http://www.blueletterbible.org/Bible.cfm?b=2Ki&c=14&v=9#9) |
| 8. Isaiah—Vineyard yielding wild grapes. | Jerusalem | [Isa 5:1-6](http://www.blueletterbible.org/Bible.cfm?b=Isa&c=5&v=1#1) |
| 9. Ezekiel—Lion's whelps. | Babylon | [Ezek 14:2-9](http://www.blueletterbible.org/Bible.cfm?b=Eze&c=14&v=2#2) |
| The boiling pot. | Babylon | [Ezek 24:3-5](http://www.blueletterbible.org/Bible.cfm?b=Eze&c=24&v=3#3) |
| The great eagles and the wine. | Babylon | [Ezek 17:3-10](http://www.blueletterbible.org/Bible.cfm?b=Eze&c=17&v=3#3) |

These Old Testament parables could be reduced to Five, corresponding to the definition of “Narrative Parable.” The rest may be seen as symbolic stories, such as Ezekiel 3:24-26, 4:1-4, and 24:3-50. But if we look at the others such as:

1. The poor man who had raised a single lamb which a wealthy neighbor took to set before a guest (2 Sam 12: 1-4); intended to illustrate the sin which David had committed with Bathsheba, Uriah's wife.

2. The wise woman of Tekoah, who induced David to make peace with his son Absalom (2 Sam 14:6-8).

3. The prophet's disciple, showing Ahab the wrong course which he had adopted toward Ben-hadad (1 Kings 20: 39-40).

4. The vineyard which does not thrive despite the care bestowed upon it (Isa 5: 1-6), illustrating Israel's degeneracy.

5. The farmer who does not plow continually, but prepares the field and sows his seed, arranging all his work in due order (Isa 28: 24-28); intended to show the methodical activity of God.

All these parables have one aim:

Comparing the relationship that exists with the ideal relationship.

**Unexpected Answers**

But a parable can present the hearers with an unexpected answer. Here is another parable from the Talmud:

Once Rabbi Akiba was asked to explain why persons afflicted with disease sometimes returned cured from a pilgrimage to the shrine of an idol, though it was surely powerless. His answer was the following parable: "There was a man in a certain city who enjoyed the confidence of all his fellow citizens to such a degree that without witnesses they entrusted deposits to him, with the exception of one man in the city who always made his deposits before a witness. One day, however, this distrustful man forgot his caution, and gave the other a deposit without a witness. The wife of the trustworthy man attempted to induce him to deny having received a deposit from the distrustful man, as a punishment for his suspicion; but the husband said: ‘Shall I deny my rectitude because this fool acts in an unseemly fashion?.’ Thus it is with the sufferings inflicted by Heaven upon man, which have a day and an hour appointed for their end. If it happens that a man goes on that day to the idol's shrine, the sufferings are tempted not to leave him, but they say, ‘Shall we not fulfill our obligation to leave this fool, although he has behaved with folly?”

And another:

Emperor Antoninus asked a Rabbi how there could be punishment in the life beyond, for, since body and soul after their separation could not have committed sin, they could blame each other for the sins committed upon earth. The Rabbi answered him by the following parable: “A certain king had a beautiful garden in which was excellent fruit; and over it he appointed two watchmen, one blind and the other lame. The lame man said to the blind one, ‘I see exquisite fruit in the garden. Carry me thither that I may get it; and we will eat it together.’ The blind man consented and both ate of the fruit. After some days the lord of the garden came and asked the watchmen concerning the fruit. Then the lame man said, ‘As I have no legs I could not go to take it.’ And the blind man said, ‘I could not even see it.’ What did the lord of the garden do? He made the blind man carry the lame, and thus passed judgment on them both. So God will replace the souls in their bodies, and will punish both together for their sins" (Sanh. 91a, b)

Another parable may be cited from the Palestinian Talmud, which is similar to the parable in Matthew 20:16. When Rabbi Hiyya’s son, Rabbi Abin, died at the early age of twenty-eight, Rabbi Zera delivered the funeral oration, which he couched in the form of the following parable: “A king had a vineyard for which he engaged many laborers, one of whom was especially apt and skilful. What did the king do? He took this laborer from his work, and walked through the garden conversing with him. When the laborers came for their hire in the evening, the skilful laborer also appeared among them and received a full day's wages from the king. The other laborers were angry at this and said, ‘We have toiled the whole day, while this man has worked but two hours; why does the king give him the full hire, even as to us?’ The king said to them: ‘Why are you angry? Through his skill he has done more in the two hours than you have done all day.' So is it with Rabbi Abin benHiyya. In the twenty-eight years of his life he has learned more than others learn in 100 years. Hence he has fulfilled his life-work and is entitled to be called to paradise earlier than others from his work on earth; nor will he miss aught of his reward" (Yer. Ber. ii. 5c).

**Tools for Teaching what is Unfamiliar**

When Jesus preached the Kingdom of God, he was teaching the crowd something they had heard of, but also something new: the good news that is the Gospel.

**The Power of the Narrated Parables**

1. Jesus talked about a recurrent event from real life. Jesus tells a story like that of the “Prodigal son” which everyone would recognize as familiar but the ending is new and is striking.
2. A parable gains its persuasiveness by recounting what is widely recognized as true. No one, on hearing a parable, is likely to deny that this is the way life is. Such is how anyone would rejoice on finding a lost coin (Luke 15:8-10); this is how seed always grows to full harvest (Mark 4:26-29). Many of the parables in Luke's Gospel begin with a question: “Which of you?" (Luke 11:5; 14:28, 31), or “What woman?" (Luke 15:8), or “What king?" (Luke 14:31). The challenge is made in a direct and clear way. More important, it leaves not many answers to the question.
3. The Parables in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew often begin by a statement that invites the comparison: "The kingdom of God is as if" (Mark 4:26, 30-31; Matthew 13:33). Jesus teaches a new comparison of what those who hear him already know, and the good news. The unexpected is said. The kingdom is not to be gained because God himself offers it.
4. In the Lost Coin and the Growing Seed, God’s love for the sinner is compared to the homely experience of a poor woman seeking and finding one lost coin, and celebrating with her friends. God celebrates finding a sinner. This must have raised too many eyebrows. In Luke's Gospel(15:8-10) we can see how God owns sinners: “Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents. (Lk 15:8-10) The comparison is so accurate that no one can forget it. Please notice:
5. It is one lost coin among other ten. But there is no joy until the lost is found.
6. Look at the woman who seeks diligently and does not stop.
7. God seeks sinners until God catches them.
8. The call to repent is to meet God’s seeking of us.

This was not known in Judaism.

In Mark 4:26-29 the Growing Seed, the coming of the “Reign of God” that is God as King, is compared to the grain's ripening to harvest, a natural occurrence familiar to anyone living in farm country, and yet a mysterious and wonderful event: “And he said, ‘The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed upon the ground, and should sleep and rise night and day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he knows not how. The earth produces of itself, first the blade, then the ear, then and the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.’”

Did you notice?

1. The seed will sprout and grow while the farmer is sleep.
2. Jesus was teaching not a mysterious kingdom but how God does his work.

**Our Mistreatment of the Parables**

1. The parables are stories about life. They never indulge in the fanciful or fantastic accounts of life, but remain true-to-life. They derive their persuasiveness from being told in a simple, vivid and fresh way which engages the hearer. They are usually narrated in the past tense; maybe to excite those who hear them to compare their life with what was there in the past. These beginnings:
   * "There was a rich man" (Luke 16:1);
   * "A certain creditor had two debtors" (Luke 7:41);
   * "A sower went out to sow" (Mark 4:3; Matthew 13:3; Luke 8:5)

are all about what has taken place. The past in Semitic culture is true because since it has happened it will be examined. This may be not true in the USA today,

1. The greatest mistake is to allegorize the parables and to loose the point of comparison.
2. Another common mistake is to change the “Call of the Parables” to a moral teaching and to lose seeing God at work in the “ordinary.”
3. The Persistent Widow (Luke 18:1-8) is about God's liberation of his chosen ones from injustice, need, oppression: *And he told them a parable, to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor regarded man; and there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Vindicate me against my adversary.' For a while he refused; but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor regard man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will vindicate her, or she will wear me out by her continual coming.'" And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge says. 'And will not God vindicate his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will vindicate them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?'”*
4. The parable of the Two Sons is a rebuke of the leaders. It was spoken in the temple to religious leaders, the chief priests and the elders (Matt 21:23- 30). Jesus says to them: “*What do you think? A man had two sons; and he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' And he answered, 'I will not,' but afterward he repented and went. And he went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir,' but did not go.”* Like the other parables Jesus asks his hearers which son did the father's will, and when they reply*, "The first,"* he pronounces this conclusion: *"Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you" (Matt 21:31).* But the Tax Collectors are the most hated figures. The Harlots are not only sinners but are also “unclean”. This is about those who accept God’s call not about those who keep the Torah.

**Our study for next two sessions:**

Jesus reveals God’s uncommon love …

- The Unforgiving Slave, (Matthew 18:23-35),

- The Worker in the Vineyard (Matthew 20: 1-16)

- The Lost Sheep (Matthew 18:12-14, Luke 15:4-7)

- The Lost Coin (Luke 15:8-20)

- The Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32)

**Please read your NT!**

Pope’s Notes

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