"CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES TO INTERPRETING THE PARABLES"
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Introduction

This essay aims to discuss major interpretive models of the parable interpretation. For the purpose of this paper only representatives of different views are referred to. In the process the author interacts briefly with the proponents on their views. The first section of the article talks about the allegorical method of interpretation by the church fathers and theologians, which dominated during the early church history until the late ninetieth century. The second section deals with the one-point approach championed by Adolf Jülicher, the approach that dethroned allegorizing, and its presence still felt today among scholars and students of parable interpretation. The third section discusses the historical approach by C.H. Dodd and Joachim Jeremias, who were both heavily influenced by Jülicher. The fourth section examines the artistic approach of Dan Via, the methodology that stresses human existence as the reference of interpretation, and thus, undermining authorial intent and historical inquiry. The fifth section analyses the approaches of Robert Funk, Dominic Crossan and Madeleine Boucher that are based on the literary and linguistic nature of the parables. Finally, the allegorical and multiple point approach of Craig Blomberg is briefly described in the last section.

Theological Allegorizing Approach of the Past

The earliest and most dominant interpretive model for understanding the parables of Jesus is "Allegorizing." It is a common belief among many scholars that mostly in the history of the Christian Church from the time of Irenaeus until the end of the nineteenth century, parables had been interpreted allegorically.[1] The church was influenced by the popular practice of the Greeks in *allegorizing* their mythological heroes and their unacceptable actions, to avoid charges of immorality, and ultimately to preserve their legacy.[2] Philo, a Jewish scholar adapted allegorizing to his teachings on the Old Testament.[3] In treating the parables as allegories, the early church fathers corresponded the characters and objects with spiritual equivalence. To them "a parable was not just a story about human activity but also a narrative of "heavenly reality."[4] Irenaeus allegorized the parable of the laborers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1-6) making the following references: the first group called to work refers to the creation of the world; the second group called to work (third hour) were "others afterwards" or those who lived in the Old Testament; the third group called to work (sixth hour) were "others during the intermediate period" or those present during the ministry of Jesus; the fourth group called to work (ninth hour) were "others after a long lapse in time" or contemporaries of Irenaeus; and the fifth group called

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[1] See Warren Kissinger, *The Parables of Jesus: A History of Interpretation and Bibliography* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1979), pp. 1-230; Klyne R. Snodgrass, *"From Allegorizing to Allegorizing: A History of the Interpretation of the Parables of Jesus," in the Challenge of Jesus' Parables* (ed. Richard N. Longenecker; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 3-29; Robert H. Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1935), 42-52; Craig C. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove, Ill. : Intervarsity, 1990), 29-167

[2] Stein, 41.

[3] See Stein, 42-43; Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 4

[4] Blomberg, 15.

to work (eleventh hour) are those "others again in the end time" or those will be present at the end time.[5] Furthermore, he referred the vineyard to righteousness, the house holder to the Spirit of God, the penny to the knowledge of the Son of God which is immortality.[6] Tertullian[7], Clement of Alexandria[8] and Origen[9] likewise made allegorical interpretations on some parables. Believing that the Scriptures possess threefold sense: literal, moral, and spiritual, Origen employed the allegorical method to the parables to find spiritual meanings.[10] He interpreted the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 25-37) by giving spiritual sense to each item: (1) The man going down to Jericho is Adam; (2) Jerusalem is paradise; (3) Jericho is the world; (4) Robbers are hostile powers; (3) The priest is the law; (4) The Levites is the prophets; (5) The Samaritan is Christ; (6)The wounds are sins; (7) The beast is the Body of Christ; (8) The Inn is the church, which welcomes everyone; (9) The two denarii is the knowledge of the Father and the Son; (10) The Innkeeper is an angel in charge of the church; (11) The promise of the return

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[5] Irenaeus, *Against Heresy Book Four*, trans. Alexander Roberts and William Rambaut. From <u>Ante-Nicene Fathers</u>, Vol. 1. Edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885.), Chapter 36. 7. Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103436.htm>.

[6] Irenaeus, Vol. 1., Chapter 36. 7.

[7] Tertullian, *On Modesty*, trans. by S. Thelwall. From <u>Ante-Nicene Fathers</u>, Vol. 4. Edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885.), Chapter 9. Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0407.htm>.

[8] Clement, *Who is the Rich Man That Shall Be Saved?* trans. by William Wilson. From <u>Ante-Nicene Fathers</u>, Vol. 2. Edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885.), Chapter 29. Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0207.htm>.

[9] Origen, *Homilies on Luke*, trans. by Joseph T. Lienhard (Washington D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 137-141. ProQuest ebrary.

[10] Origen, 137-141.

of the Samaritan is the Second coming of Christ. [11] This same parable (Parable of the Good Samaritan, Luke 10:25-37) was popularly allegorized by Augustine rendering the following interpretation: the man is Adam; Jerusalem is heavenly city of peace; Jericho is the moon, which symbolizes our mortality; the robbers are the devil and his angels; stripping him means taking away his immortality; beating means persuading him to commit sin; leaving him half-dead means he is dead spiritually due to sin; the priest and the Levite are the priesthood and ministry of the Old Testament; the good Samaritan is Christ; the binding of the wounds is the restraint of sin; the oil is comfort of good hope; wine is the encouragement to work; the donkey is the body of Christ; the Inn is the Church; the two denarii means the two commandments of love; the Innkeeper is the Apostle Paul; the next day is the resurrection of Christ. [12] Like Origen and Augustine, Ambrose of Milan understood the Good Samaritan as a reference to Christ. [13]

Later during the middle ages, the church believed that a fourfold meaning could be drawn from the Scripture: a literal meaning; an allegorical-theological meaning; ethical meaning; and a heavenly meaning, which is eschatological. [14] Thomas Aquinas, in his great treatise *Summa Theologica* defended this fourfold sense of the Scripture and the allegorical method of interpretation against varied objections. [15] He wrote a commentary on parable of the Good

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[11] Origen, 137-141.

[12] See Stein, 46.

[13] Ambrose, *Concerning Repentance I*, trans. by H. de Romestin, E. de Romestin and H.T.F. Duckworth. From Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Vol. 10. Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1896.), chap. 7. 28; chap. 11. 51-52, Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3406.htm>.

[14] See Snodgrass, Stories with Intent, 4

[15] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica Part I*, trans. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province Second and Revised Edition, 1920. Question 1. Article 10. Literally Online Edition Copyright © 2008 by Kevin Knight. http://www.newadvent.org/summa/1001.htm.

Samaritan quoting the earlier interpretations of Theophilus, Bede, Basil, Augustine, Origen, Ambrose, Cyril and others that resulted to Augustinian allegorical interpretation.[16]

In the Reformation period, most of the theologians like Martin Luther[17] and John Calvin[18] rejected the allegorical method of interpretation. Martin Luther dismissed the claim that allegory is a spiritual interpretation:

> An interpreter must as much as possible avoid allegory, that he may not wander in idle dreams. Origen's allegories are not worth so much dirt. Allegories are empty speculations, and it were the scum of the Holy Scripture. Allegory is a sort of beautiful harlot, who proves herself especially seductive to idle men. To allegorize is to juggle with Scripture. Allegorizing may degenerate into a mere monkey-game (Affenspiel). Allegories are awkward, absurd, invented, obsolete, loose rags.[19]

Calvin considered the allegorical interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan as a conjecture that contradicts the "intention of Christ."[20] He asserted that this parable is about "mutual obligation between all men," fulfilling the purpose that man was created for the sake of others, through the demonstration of mercy and kindness to one another.[21] Despite the these objections by Luther and Calvin, allegorizing prevailed and reigned, promoted in the writings of Melanchthon and Archbishop R.C. Trench until the last quarter of the ninetieth century.[22]

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[16] Aquinas, *Catena Aurea on Luke 10: 29-37*, trans. by John Henry Newman except Prooemium and bracketed portions by Joseph Kenny, O.P. http://dhspriory.org/thomas/CALuke.htm#10.

[17] See Frederic W. Farrar, *History of Interpretation* (London: Macmillan & Co.., 1886), 328. http://www.preteristarchive.com/Books/pdf/1886_farrar_history-of-interpretation.pdf.

[18] John Calvin, *A Commentary on the Harmony of Matthew, Mark and Luke*. Trans. by William Pringle (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Christian Classics Ethereal Library), Vol III. 7-8. http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom33.ii.vii.html.

[19] See Farrar, *History of Interpretation*, 328.

[20] Calvin, 7-8.

[21] Calvin, 7-8.

[22] See Stein, 51-52.

Allegorizing parables is an inadequate way of interpreting the parables. Fundamentally, parables are not allegories. Employing this method leads one to find independent meanings behind all the details, which in turn warrant multiple points drawn from the parable. This methodology ignores historical and cultural background studies that, I believe, crucial in ascertaining the meaning of each parable. That the church fathers and theologians put emphasis on spiritualizing aspect of interpretation, and thus undermine exegesis.

One-Point Approach by Jülicher

It was Adolf Jülicher who intensely rejected the allegorical interpretation of the parables of Jesus in the past by the church fathers and theologians. His two-volume works on the parables, in the last quarter of the ninetieth century, comprehensively deal with his views that parables are not allegories and there is only one point in every parable with corresponding one meaning. According to Blomberg, Jülicher, who was influenced by the classic Aristotelian rhetoric, employed the contrast between simile and metaphor, clearly distinguishing each real first-century Palestinian parable from most allegories that can only be understood by decrypting them.[23] Simile and metaphor appear to be similar but simile is easier to understand by the usage of the word "like" or "as" making the comparison intelligible.[24] Jülicher believes that a parable is an extended simile, whereas allegory is an extended metaphor: simile and parable are easy to grasp because they are literal; metaphor and allegory need to be decrypted because they are not direct speech.[25]

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[23] Adolf Jülicher, *Die Gleichnireden Jesu* (Freiburg: Mohr, 1899), vols. 1-2 Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables,* 32-38.

[24] Jülicher, 32-38.

A parable is analogy that compares two things. Jülicher maintains that the "logic of Jesus' brief parabolic sayings is proportional analogy" that involves two steps: first is determining two things being compared by the analogy; second is determining the "point of resemblance."[26] Jülicher interprets the parable of the Unworthy Servant (Luke 17:7-10), as translated by Sider,

> A disciple's relationship to God is being compared with that of slave to his master. In the latter case it is obviously clear that the slave does all his duties without demanding thanks; and the same principle applies as the sole standard for spiritual life also…
>
> Jesus is urging his disciples that even the best person can never do more than his duty—that he may claim thanks from God just as little as unfailingly diligent slave might from his master.[27]

In the analogy, "a disciple's relationship to God", which is the theme of Jesus, the parable's tenor (*Ger. Sache*), is compared to "that of a slave to his master", which is his pictorial image, the parable's vehicle (*Ger. Bild*).[28] Therefore, the disciple is to God as the slave is to his master. Jülicher determines point of resemblance which is "even the best person can never do more than his duty," by drawing from the idea of the end of the parable: "So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servant; we have only done our duty.[29]

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[25]Jülicher, as cited in Klyne R. Snodgrass, *"From Allegorizing to Allegorizing..",* p.6.

[26]Jülicher, vol. 2 cited in John W. Sider, *Interpreting the Parables: A Hermeneutical Guide to Their Meaning* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 29-31.

[27] Jülicher, 32-38.

[28] Jülicher, 32-38.

[29] Jülicher, 32-38.

As noted above, Jülicher denied that parables are allegories. He contended that Jesus, being a preacher from Galilee, he told simple comparative stories, not complex allegories, which are series of metaphors.[30] Jülicher stressed that Jesus did not intend to conceal his parables through allegories, with many separate but connected references, but rather, each of them should viewed as pronouncing "one main point" about God and his creation.[31] The "one main point" is what each parable or "single picture" portrays, which its details serve not for themselves, but as the background or add coloring to its portrayal for the "one main point."[32] In Jülicher's concept, there is only point of comparison: between the picture/image and the object being portrayed, and no postulating of many comparisons. It follows therefore, when we interpret a Gospel parable as Jülicher proposed, that we need to identify the "single picture" or "point of resemblance" instead of paying much attention on details. The lessons drawn from the parables, according to Jülicher were mostly general maxims about the kingdom of God being lived out in the lives of Christians.[33] For examples: "the parable of the talents (Mt. 25:14-36) commended faithfulness with everything entrusted; the story of the unjust steward (Lk. 16:1-3) encouraged the prudent use of the present to ensure a happy future; and the example of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk. 16:19-31) illustrated the need to avoid a life of wanton wealth and pleasure."[34]

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[30] Jülicher, vol. 1, cited in Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 5-6.

[31] Jülicher, vol. 1cited in Blomberg, 32-33; John Dominic Crossan, *In Parables: The Challenge of Historical Jesus* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 8; Klyne R. Snodgrass, *"From Allegorizing to Allegorizing: A History of the Interpretation of the Parables of Jesus,"* 6-7.

[32] Jülicher, vol. 1, cited in Stein, 53-54.

[33] Jülicher, vol. 1. as cited in Blomberg, 32.

[34] Jülicher, vol. 2. 472-95, 495-514, 617-41, as cited in Blomberg, 32-33.

Objections came quickly against Jülicher's views on interpreting the parables. Primarily, he vehemently reacted against the allegorical approach to the extent of dismissing any allegorical elements in the parables. He attributed the allegorical elements and interpretations to the early church's reconstruction.[35] He relied on classic Aristotelian rhetoric in the etymology of a parable instead on the Old Testament, which is the context of the Jesus parables.[36] Stein explains that the Hebrew term *mashal* for parable can refer to a proverb, a taunt, a riddle, a story parable or even allegory, and thus, one cannot suppose that allegorical components are absent from a parable.[37] Paul Fiebig argued that the Hebrew world abounds in allegorical parables and mixed forms of similes and metaphor, from which Jülicher should have derived his idea about the parables.[38] I agree with Madeleine Boucher and John Sider, who strongly believe that, while it is not a literary genre, allegory is "a way of thinking that can be present in various genres."[39] Secondly, Jülicher's one main point in parables he promoted was always "general moral truth." This has been rejected by a majority of scholars, who understand that parables are about "God's bringing the kingdom."[40] The meaning of the parables should be determined according to their respective specific contexts, and not just presuming that all of them have universal moral lessons. In addition, this one-point approach is problematic in that it may miss significant elements in the

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[35] See Stein, 54-55; Snodgrass, Stories with Intent, 5-6.

[36] See Stein, 54-55.

[37] Stein, 54-55.

[38] See Snodgrass, "From Allegorizing…", 7.

[39] Madeleine Boucher, *The Mysterious Parable* (Washington: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1977); Sider, *Interpreting the Parables.*

[40] See Blomberg, 33.

parable necessary to understand its message.[41] Despite the attacks against Jülicher's views on interpreting the parables, there are scholars who still emphasize that a parable has a single point and are doubtful of the presence of any allegorical features in parables.

Historical Approach by Dodd and Jeremias

C.H. Dodd and Joachim Jeremiah relied on Jülicher in writing their books on interpreting the parables. Believing that parables are first century popular real stories, both tried to explain each parable in its cultural setting. In doing so, they attempted to eliminate any allegorical features embedded in the parables. In the first part of his book, Dodd presented a sufficient discussion on the improbability of allegorical way to interpret the parables.[42] Like Jülicher, Dodd believed and argued that parables are analogies that present one single point; the details don't have bearing in themselves. For Dodd, "the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought."[43]

Dodd uses the form-critical method to uncover the oral forms of the parables in the light of the ministry of Jesus. Thus, he proposed the idea that in order to correctly understand the parables, we need to interpret them in the context of the original hearers i.e., the people to whom Jesus spoke the parables, and their original *Sitz im Leben,* that is, their context in connection to the life and ministry of Jesus. Dodd explains how he correlates original meaning and application:

> I shall presently try to point out certain changes in the historical situation which have led to the re-application of parables in senses not originally intended. In such case we must

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[41] Dan Otto Via Jr., *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 3

[42] C.H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London: Nisbet & Co., 1935), 11-25.

[43] Dodd, 16.

carefully scrutinize the parable itself, and attempt to relate it to the original situation, so far as can reconstruct it. From this will follow the conclusion regarding its original meaning and application, which may be guided by the following principles: (i) The clue must be found, not in ideas which developed only with the experience of the early Church, but in such ideas as may be supposed to have been in the minds of the hearers of Jesus during His ministry. Our best guide to such ideas will often be the Old Testament, with which they may presumed to have been familiar. (ii) The meaning which we attribute to the parable must be congruous with the interpretation of his own ministry offered by Jesus in explicit and unambiguous sayings, so far as such sayings are known to us; and in any case it must be such as to fit the general view of His teaching to which a study of non-parabolic sayings leads. A preliminary task, therefore, will be to define, so far as we can, the general orientation of the teaching of Jesus.[44]

Dodd approached the study of the parables in the framework of *realized eschatology*. He interpreted them in reference to the eschatological content of the message of Jesus. He claimed that the later Gospel tradition had concealed Jesus original message by changing his realized eschatology to futuristic eschatology and ethical issues.[45] Dodd believed that parables were metaphors or symbols of the kingdom of God, therefore each parable is to be read in reference to the Jewish apocalyptic thought to determine its point. Interpreting the parables in the reference to this premise, Dodd viewed the eschatological /futuristic parables such as Matthew 25:1-13 (the wise and foolish virgins); Mark 13:28-30 (the fig tree); Luke 12: 35-38 (the watchful servants); and others *as crisis in the ministry of Jesus* rather than eschatological judgment. He pointed out, "In these three "eschatological" parables then, we seem to have reflected a situation in the ministry of Jesus when the crisis he had provoked was hastening towards uncertain and unexpected developments, which called for the utmost alertness on the part of His followers."[46]

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[44] Dodd, 32-33.

[45] See Snodgrass, "From Allegorizing…", 9

[46] Dodd, 170-172.

This approach to interpreting the end time parables in the premise of realized eschatology is incorrect because these parables are placed within the contexts of future eschatology.

What Dodd began, Jeremias continued and improved. Jeremias expanded the work of Dodd which is reflected in his book *Die Gleichnisse Jesu,* with the English translation *The Parables of Jesus.*[47] While Dodd believed that Jesus eschatological message in parables are already realized, Jeremias held that Jesus' eschatology is rather more futuristic. He recognized the work of Jülicher for "cleansing the parables from the thick layer of dust with which the allegorical interpretation had covered them…"[48] However, he pointed out that the most important task is still to be accomplished, the work that was missing from Jülicher's, which is to try to recover the meaning of the parables.[49] Jeremias attempted to accomplish this through "form criticism"---a method of biblical criticism that aims to recover the original form and historical context of the literary tradition. Jeremias aimed to hear the original words of Jesus in parables by removing allegorical features and expansions by the early church. In Chapter two, sections one through ten of his book, he identifies and comprehensively talks about the areas where revisions made by the early church need to be addressed and corrected in order to recover their original form of the parables. As a result, he formulated *ten laws of transformation* that aid to the recovery of the original meaning of the parables of Jesus:

1. The translation of the parables into Greek involved an inevitable change in their meaning.
2. For the same reason representational material is occasionally 'translated'.
3. Pleasure in the embellishment of the parables is noticeable at an early date.

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[47] Joachim Jeremias, *Die Gleichnisse Jesu.* trans. by S. H. Hooke (London: SCM Press, 1954).

[48] Jeremias, 19.

[49] Jeremias, 19.

4. Occasionally passages of Scripture and folk-story themes have influenced the shaping of the material.
5. Parables which were originally addressed to the opponents or to the crowd have in many been applied by the primitive Church to the Christian Community.
6. This led to an increasing shift of emphasis to the hortatory aspect, especially from eschatological to the hortatory.
7. The primitive Church related the parables to its own actual situation, whose chief features were the missionary motive and the delay of the *Parousia*; it interpreted and expanded them with these factors in view.
8. To an increasing degree the primitive Church interpreted the parables allegorically with the view to their hortatory use.
9. The primitive Church made collections of parables, and occasionally two parables are fused together.
10. The primitive Church provided the parables with a setting, and this often produced a change in the meaning; in particular, by the addition of generalizing conclusions, many parables acquired a universal meaning.[50]

Having analyzed the parables with aid of his ten laws of transformation, Jeremias formulated propositions to recover the original forms of the parables: the parables should be retranslated into Aramaic, being the mother tongue of Jesus; representational changes in the parables into Hellenistic environment need to be reverted to Palestinian descriptions; the comparisons of parallel forms of parables should be done; Old Testament Scriptures and folk story themes should be recognized in order to distinguish them from the authentic parables; the identity of the original hearers should be determined; there is a need to analyze the facts in the parables to hear their original versions; reinterpretations of parables should be analyzed in the original contexts of the parables; allegorical traits found in the present forms of the parables need to be removed to uncover their real meaning; secondary connections between double parables, collections of parables, and fusion of parables should be discarded; the setting of each parable should be analyzed to determine if it is original or secondary.[51]

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[50] Jeremias, 113-114.

[51] See Jeremias, 23-103.

In an attempt to recover the original form and meaning of the parables of Jesus, Jeremias applied historical reconstruction using his knowledge in first century Palestine, removing all components of embellishment, expansion and allegorizing.

Artistic Approach

Unlike Dodd and Jeremias, Dan Otto Via Jr. stresses the artistic and literary nature of the parables. He believes the parable is an *aesthetic literary work* that is "autonomous--detached from sociological and psychological phenomena and from any independent and articulated system of thought—an absolutely self-contained and discreet set of mutually inter-related references." [52] A genuine aesthetic narrative fictional writing maintains the center interest on the writing itself because of the "centripetal interlocking of the parts."[53] Reading the parables as a work of art or aesthetically can draw understanding of human existence without referring them to their original historical context.[54] He contended that parables are not restricted to the author's intent, and therefore, he downplays their historical setting and Jesus' original situation. He argues that "a number of Jesus' parables are in strict sense literary and that because of this they are not just illustration of ideas and cannot have the immediate connection with Jesus' historical situation…"[55] Thus, Via proposed that the central interest of the parables of Jesus should be on the "narrative pattern," less centered on the "implied understanding of existence' and treating mention of the aspects of Jesus' ministry only less important.[56]

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[52] Via, 70-71.

[53] Via, 87.

[54] Via, 73-88.

[55] Via, x.

[56] Via, 88.

Via draws lessons from the parables not by knowing the situation in the life Jesus, as scholars who seek historical meaning proposed; but rather, interpret the circumstance of Jesus through the parables. The situation that Jesus was brought in in the parables, guides the readers for understanding the possibilities of existence. The parables bear messages about the nature of human existence i.e., human beings in the world.

Via's model for interpreting the parables demonstrates hermeneutical flaws. Firstly, he undermines historical inquiries in the life and situation of Jesus, that I believe, indispensable for understanding the meaning and message of the parables. Secondly, Via intentionally disregarded the function of context; by categorizing the parables of Jesus as literary aesthetical works, he proposed to interpret them on their own existential right, independent from their setting. Thirdly, he de-eschatologized parables with futuristic nature and elements, thus, ignoring their literary genre.

Literary Approaches

Robert Funk

Robert Funk's parable interpretation is basically governed by his four basic points: (1) that a parable is a simile or metaphor, which may remain simple or be expanded; (2) that the metaphor or simile is drawn from common life; (3) that the metaphor arrests the hearers by its vividness or strangeness; and (4) that the application if left imprecise to tease the hearer into making his or her own application.[57] Funk views parable as an extension of metaphor, rather than simile. He perceives metaphor and simile to have equal ability to impart information. Whereas

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[57] Robert Funk, *Language, Hermeneutics, and Word of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 124-222, as cited in Snodgrass, "*From Allegorizing to Allegorizing*," 13. Funk derived his four basic points from Dodd's definition of a parable.

simile serves to illustrate, metaphor produces meaning, which is not limited to only one. A

parable then, being an extended metaphor, can create multiple meanings. Readers of the parables

participate in adding new meanings. Funk stresses, however, that the original meaning of a

parable functions to control the fresh new meanings or the reinterpretations. What unique about

Funk's understanding about the parables of Jesus is that his emphases on "everydayness" and

"strangeness", which direct to the fashion in which the parables deal with "human existence"

(everydayness) and to the fashion in which the parables "shatter the unfamiliar (strangeness)."[58]

Funk's model is inclined to reader response theory because it encourages and even instructs

interpreters to create new fresh meanings as they allegorically read and encounter the parables of

Jesus. Putting high value on the Gospel of Thomas and viewing it as superior to canonical

Gospels,[59] demonstrates his low view of the NT Canon.

John Dominic Crossan

In his book *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus*, John Dominic Crossan

understands the parable as metaphorical story, characterized as verbal symbol that functions to

involve the hearer or the reader in forming its message. He discusses Jesus' parables employing

the *form-critical methodology*, which he believes that it was formed for a definite situational

function, was utilized by the primitive church and by Jesus alike. Following Paul Ricoeur,

Crossan distinguishes between an allegory and a parable, arguing that an "allegory can always be

translated into a text that can be understood by itself; once this better text has been made out, the

allegory falls away like a useless garment; what allegory showed, while concealing it, can be

said in direct discourse that replaces allegory," whereas myth and metaphor are irreducible to

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[58] Funk, 13.

[59] Funk, 13.

clear language.[60] Crossan quotes great poets to explain the contrast between allegory and

symbol:

> Goethe expressed the distinction of allegory and symbol in terms of expressing the inexpressible: "Allegory transforms the phenomenon into abstract concept, the concept into an image, but in such a way that the concept can still be expressed and beheld in the image in a clearly circumscribed and complete form. Symbolism transforms the phenomenon into an idea, the idea into an image, in such a way that the idea remains forever infinitely active and unreachable in the image and, even if expressed in all languages, still inexpressible." This is very similar to the norm of difference found in Yeats: "Symbolism said things which could not be said so perfectly in any other way, and needed but a right instinct for its understanding; while Allegory said things which could be said well, or better, in another way, and needed right knowledge for its understanding. The one gave dumb things voices, and bodiless things bodies; while the other read a meaning---which never lacked its voice or its body---into something heard or seen, and loved less for meaning than for its own sake." On the other hand, the poet Coleridge emphasizes the symbol's participation in its referent as the heart of the distinction: "An allegory **i**s but a translation of abstract notions into a picture language, which is itself nothing but abstraction from objects of the senses…. On the other hand symbol…is characterized by the translucence of the special in the individual, or of the general in the special, or of the universal in the general. Above all by the translucence of the eternal through and in temporal. It always partakes of the reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as living part in that unity, of which it is representative. Much the same sort of difference is noted by Eliot in contrasting Charles Williams and Chesterton: "Chesterto's The Man who Was Thursday is an allegory; it has meaning which is meant to be discovered at the end; while we enjoy it in reading, simply because of the swiftly moving plot and the periodic surprises, it is intended to convey a definite moral and religious point expressible in intelligible terms. It gives the ideas, rather feelings, of another world. Williams has no such 'palpable design' upon the reader. His aim is to make you partake of a kind of experience that he has had, rather than to make you accept some dogmatic belief."[61]

Crossan, using the concept of figurative language, he contrasts allegory and metaphor:

the figurative language that "illustrates information so that information precedes participation;

metaphor creates information so that participation precedes information." Allegories and

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[60] Crossan, 11.

[61] Crossan, 9-10.

examples are created by the former function; metaphor on the verbal level and symbol on the

non-verbal level are produced by the latter. The verbal phenomenon of metaphor can appear

"either parable or myth."[62] Crossan is interested in a metaphor that creates new information after

a reader participates. The new meaning within the metaphor is only drawn after the "hearer has

entered into it and experienced it from inside itself." In this process of interpreting the parables,

the hearer or the reader participates in the shaping of the meaning of the story itself. Crossan

further explains this:

> The thesis is that metaphor can also articulate a referent so new or so alien to
> consciousness that this referent can only be grasp within the metaphor itself. The
> metaphor here contains new possibility of world and of language so that any information
> one might obtain from it can only be received after one has participated through the
> metaphor in its new and alien referential world…When a metaphor contains a radically
> new vision of world it gives absolutely no information until after the hearer has entered
> into it and experienced it from inside itself.[63]

Crossan believes that the parables of Jesus are true metaphors because they possess

power to create participation whereby their truth is experienced. The rabbis used didactic figures

in telling their stories for the purpose of instruction and dissemination of information; Jesus used

poetic metaphors derived from experienced revelation that seek to evoke reflection by the hearer

or reader, and thereby participate to the shaping of its meaning. In reference to the contents of

the stories of Jesus and the rabbis, Gunther Bornkamm notes: "The rabbis also relate parables in

abundance, to clarify a point in their teaching and explain the sense of a written passage, but

always as an aid to the teaching and an instrument in the exegesis of an authoritatively prescribed

text. But that it just what they are not in the mouth of Jesus, although they often come very close

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[62] Crossan, 14.

[63] Crossan, 13.

to those of the Jewish teachers in their content, and though Jesus makes free use of traditional and familiar topics."[64] Crossan asserts the fact that Jesus, spoke in metaphorical parables and in not any other linguistic style, means that his experience is part of that expression.[65] The parables themselves are the lessons; they do not merely illustrate truths. They are "the parables are preaching itself."[66] Crossan proposed to interpret the parables of Jesus by way of the readers or hearers reflecting on the world and on God, and thereby participate in ascertaining of their meaning.

Crossan categorized the parables into three modes of kingdom's temporality: (1) parables of advent; (2) parables of reversal; and (3) parables of action. The parables of the Treasure (Matt.13:44), and the Pearl (Matt 13:45) serve as the clues to understanding other parables. He proposed scholarly reconstruction of Gospel parables, claiming that introductions, the interpretations and the conclusions were added by the church.

Madeleine I. Boucher

Madeleine I. Boucher approaches the parables employing literary criticism. She defines the parable as story that conveys a lesson which has a double meaning, the literal and the figurative; its purpose is to effect change in the hearer, to evoke to make a decision. In a more technical way, "the parable is a tropical narrative which functions as religious or ethical rhetorical speech."[67] She believes that allegory, being a device of meaning and not a genre or

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[64] Crossan, 21

[65] Crossan, 22.

[66] Crossan, 21.

[67] Madeleine I. Boucher. *The Parables* (Wilmington Delaware: Michael Glazier, Inc.,1981), 39.

form, is simply defined an extended metaphor in narratory form.[68] Since every parable has

metaphorical meaning, every parable is allegorical. Parable belongs to the literary type called

speech. Boucher categorized parables as rhetoric literary prose or speech that functions to

convince and persuade, contra aesthetic or poetic speech which purpose is to be enjoyed or be

contemplated.[69] Though interpreters of the New Testament generally regard the parables, taken

as a whole, as among the most assuredly authentic sayings of Jesus and the synoptic parables

reflect the first century Palestinian Jewish milieu, Boucher subscribes to the idea that each

parable must be studied individually and its genuineness assessed on its own merit. Boucher

believes that during the period of oral tradition parables were subjected to change in their setting,

in their social situation, in their audience, in their forms and even in their meaning and

interpretation.[70] In describing Mark use of the Parable, Boucher did partly Redaction Criticism—

study of the special motifs, emphases, and themes, and theological views which the evangelist

contributed to the Synoptic material. According to her, Mark's notion of mystery---"has nothing

do with the audience's intellectual imperceptiveness, but with its resistance to accepting the

message of Jesus. –more of unwillingness not inability to listen. The mystery of the parable is

not intellectual obtuseness, --but spiritual obduracy –"hardness of the heart."[71] Boucher

formulates the guidelines for Interpretation the parables.[72] She proposed to interpret a parable as

a whole, treating its constituents' meaning, such as the meaning of individual characters, with no

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[68] Boucher, 8.

[69] Boucher, 32-33.

[70] Boucher, 52-57.

[71] Boucher, 47-48.

[72] Boucher, 58-62.

independent significance. The constituent meanings must be interpreted in the context of the whole meaning. She subscribes to the idea that parables convey specific lessons. She agrees with Dupont and that parables should be interpreted historically, in the context of the ministry of Jesus and contemporarily.

Current Allegorizing Approach

Craig Blomberg in Interpreting the Parables (1990) helped allegorizing approach regained its popularity. His main assertion is that majority of the parables have more than one learning point; every parable has more than one comparison between "the image and the reality" portrayed. He believes that the parables with two and three main points illustrate the necessity of allegorical interpretation.[73] His defense of allegorizing method is comprehensively discussed using his nine-point argumentation.[74] He affirms the classic view that the parables are allegorical in nature, appealing to rabbinic literature and literature contemporary with the Gospels. Snodgrass[75] and John Sider[76] among others, agree that the parables have allegorical features but view allegory as a literary mode or device rather a literary genre or form.

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[73] Blomberg, 177-277.

[74] Blomberg, 36-49.

[75] Snodgrass, *"From Allegorizing to Allegorizing"*, 20.

[76] John W. Sider, *Interpreting the Parables: A Hermeneutical Guide to their Meaning* (Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 18-23.

Conclusion

There are proponents who believe that there is no need to interpret the parables because, in their literal nature, what they convey is what they indicate. Others who have been influenced by the reader-response approaches are convinced that understanding the parables comes in the process of reading or hearing them, by mere experience of them. However, parables are referential, and their meaning cannot be determined without knowing what they refer to.[77] Just merely encountering them will not bring us to sufficient understanding; the period of encounter or experience with parables does not provide comprehensive information pertinent to fuller comprehension of them. The process of interpretation of the parables of Jesus is imperative!

I propose the following general principles to interpreting the parables of Jesus. Firstly, recognize that every single parable has one meaning, under which other ideas are subservient. In this method, the interpreter should ascertain the one meaning of the parable, and subsequently understand the subservient ideas in reference to the one meaning. Secondly, do not assume general ethical truth behind a parable but ascertain its specific meaning. The task of the interpreter is to identify respective specific context in the ministry of Jesus in which the parable was spoken.

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[77] See Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 30.