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THE UNDERSTANDING OF THE SYNOPTIC PARABLES

I. THE PROBLEM

(a) *The Nature of Jesus' Parables.*

There is hardly another field of New Testament studies, where throughout the ages scholars have so thoroughly disagreed as the interpretation of the parables of Jesus. One reason for this wide confusion may be the lack of clear distinction between parables proper on the one hand, and similitudes and example-stories on the other.¹ They all are παραβολαί (פ'רבוֹלֵי), but not all of them belong to the type of parable created and so masterly employed by Jesus. Similes such as the Light and the Salt, or example-stories such as the Good Samaritan, Dives and Lazarus, or the Pharisee and the Publican do not concern us here.

Yet making such distinction will not help us much farther on our way. Many of the modern interpretations of the parables seem to neglect their main peculiarity, namely the fact that they are meant to communicate a truth by concealing it. Yet it is the apparent simplicity and obviousness of the parables that make it so difficult to grasp their true meaning.

(b) *Dialectical Function.*

An analysis of their dialectical function will lead us a step farther. The parables of Jesus tell stories, but unlike historical records or novels they do not tell the story for narrating's sake. They are not literary works, which have their significance in their artistic perfection, but rather parts of a living and often lively dialogue. In speaking his parables Jesus pointed to some similarity that existed between God's work and earthly events, and he indicated that discovering the nature of that similarity would be of extreme importance for his hearers.

In this respect the Synoptic parables may be likened to the fables of Aesop or Lafontaine.² But while it is true that both types of narratives argue and appeal to the hearer's reasoning,

¹ Rudolf Bultmann, *Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition*. 1931.

² Adolf Jülicher, *Gleichnisreden Jesu*, vol. I, p. 103 f.

the fable teaches wisdom merely to follow which is advisable, whereas the parables were intended to call forth recognition of truths, the neglect or rejection of which would be fatal for the hearer. Moreover, whereas the poet does everything possible to make the animals in his fables act like human beings, Jesus in His parables seems almost afraid of introducing features of the heavenly world into the picture of His story.

Finally Jesus intimates that His parables have some secret meaning, but He never discloses this meaning Himself. He admonishes His audience to find it out by their own efforts. This obscurity of the parables is not removed by the fact that to some of them "applications" are added, most likely by Jesus Himself. For contrary to their first appearance these applications are meaningless, unless one knows how to interpret the parable story. The injunction *γρηγορεῖτε* (Matt xxv. 13), for instance, that follows the parable of the Ten Virgins remains enigmatic to those who have not understood the point of the story; for without such knowledge it is impossible to say of what kind this watchfulness should be.

Similarly even those few "explanations" of parables that are given in the Synoptic Gospels, betray their authenticity by the fact that they do not really reveal the secret of the parable. In the explanation of the parable of the Sower, for instance (Mark iv. 13-20 and par.), Jesus gives no hint as to the identity of such essential objects as the *σπείρων*, the *λόγος* or the nature of the fruit that the seed will finally bear.

This refusal to give the conclusions of His own argument might be interpreted as a pedagogical device intended by Jesus to develop the spiritual life and understanding of His followers. But why then did Jesus practise this method only when speaking in parables? If His "plain sayings" were substantially identical with the doctrine given in His parables¹, the parabolic method would be absurd, because it would withhold from the disciples knowledge of things that had already been given to them in other ways. It is only when we realise that the parables contain secrets not otherwise communicable to His audience that Jesus' strange method of telling parables appears meaningful.

By adopting this method Jesus did not want "to leave the multitudes in ignorance of what He really meant"². The

¹ C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*.

² A. T. Cadoux, *The Parables of Jesus*, p. 23.

parables were the touchstone of spiritual understanding of the mystery of the Kingdom of God. To all mankind the message was to be brought that the Kingdom of God was at hand. But those only who were effectually called would understand the true nature of that kingdom as distinct from the popular views held by contemporary Jewry. The fact that the disciples themselves felt rather bewildered, when Jesus for the first time spoke to them in parables, and that they should have asked Him for an explanation (Mark iv. 10), is evidence of the fact that the parabolic method of teaching was to convey a secret that was not, at least not conspicuously, contained in the "plain sayings" of Jesus.

On the other hand, Jesus Himself felt confidently that His disciples and other elect ones would understand the secret of the parables (Mark iv. 11)¹. This fact explains the scarcity of explanations of parables given by Jesus. The disciples did not need an individual interpretation of each of them—such procedure would have been necessary only if the parables were allegories—it was sufficient to teach them the principles and essential view-points of interpretation. This Jesus did.

The obscurity, which at close scrutiny manifests itself as an outstanding characteristic of Jesus' parables, is an essential, inherent element of this method of teaching rather than the incidental result of "lack of genuine understanding and carelessness in their transmission".² The reason why we, as all ages, find them hard of understanding is the fact that they are "vehicles of affirmations so profound, or so far from current thought of the time as to be incapable of any other expression."³ The element of novelty that places Jesus high above all the

¹ This obscure passage does not state, as is held by many exegetes, that Jesus pretended to preach in parables in order that the non-elect should be deceived about His message. The saying may not even have been uttered by Jesus in this connection. Jesus says here that quite apart from this occasion the mystery of the Kingdom of God had been given to His disciples and intimate followers, whereas it was withheld from the rest of mankind. Thus every thing appears to them as a *παραβολή*, i.e. as a *mashal*, an obscure saying, a riddle. They hear and see what they are unable to understand. It is not the speaking in parables, but the need of the divine election that makes them unable to understand what Jesus has to tell of the essential things of the Kingdom.

Dodd's recent attempt to question the authenticity of the passage on linguistic grounds is particularly unconvincing. For *παραβολή* is not used here in the Hellenistic sense, but as an equivalent of the Hebrew ^{מִשְׁלָּה}; the word emphasises the obscurity of the communication, not its rhetorical form. *Μυστήριον* has its antecedents in Daniel, a book with which Jesus was familiar (see also Strack-Billerbeck ad loc. I, p. 659). While the expression *οὐ ἔξω* is used by Jesus only here, the idea itself occurs in a number of parables, and both the expression and the idea are frequent in rabbinical literature, as designation of the heretics.

² Bultmann, *Gesch. d. synopt. Tradition*, p. 216.

³ Cadoux, l.c. p. 26.

other prophets is mainly contained in His parables. In His "plain sayings" Jesus is in line with the other great teachers of Israel. The message given there is the climax of ethical monotheism. But if we had no knowledge of His parables we would be almost completely ignorant of the historical significance of His messianic mission.¹

The Kingdom of God, as any divine manifestation, remains eternally a mystery to mortal beings. But it is, nevertheless, God's will to reveal as much of it as man is capable of apprehending. Thus the parables point both to the fact of the mystery and to the helps for its understanding. But it must be left to the individual to apprehend this understanding in an appropriate way.

This recognition leads us to our basic problem: If the parables contain a mystery, normally not accessible and intelligible to man, how shall we be able rightly to interpret them?

II. THE SOLUTION

(a) *Structure of the Parables.*

The understanding of the parables of Jesus is rendered easier, when we transform them into two premisses of a logical syllogism, and regard the understanding of the parables intended by Jesus as the conclusion to be drawn from these premisses. We do not thereby imply that the solution of the parables can be accomplished by way of philosophical reasoning; but this procedure enables us clearly to state the problem as put by Jesus.

The major premiss is the parable story, the minor predicates similarity between a supernatural reality and the subject of the story. The major premiss can be formulated as a proposition by stating the point of the story. Jülicher² has rendered an invaluable service to the exegesis of the parables, when following the reformers he laid all stress on the fact that each story has one point only, and that the chief task of the exegete consists in discovering that point. But we shall not find the point

¹ The statement, Mark iv. 23, in which it is said that "in such parables Jesus ἐλάλε τὸν λόγον" does not imply, as is so often assumed by modern critics, that Mark wanted thereby to deny the authenticity of the "plain sayings" of Jesus. Mark only states in accordance with historical facts that ὁ λόγος, i.e. the mystery of the factual establishment of the Kingdom of God in Jesus, was never proclaimed by Jesus except by means of parables. Cp. however Matt. in the parallel passage xiii. 34 (see also Matt. xiii. 11 as compared with Mark iv. 11).

² Adolf Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*. 2 vols. 1888, 2nd ed. 1910.

of the story by treating its concrete traits as incidental, or by picking out one single feature and neglecting the rest, as is so frequently done by Jülicher and his school.¹ Not seldom they excide the very point of the story.

The point of a parable is almost invariably to be learned from a combination of the first and the last finite clauses of the story, all the statements in between being secondary features that give contrast and background to the point. Thus the logical structure of the Selfgrowing Seed, for instance, would be as follows:

Minor proposition: The Kingdom of God is like a certain man, who cast seed upon his field.

Major proposition: Seed in the field, once it is sown, develops by itself and needs no human help until it is ripe.

Nature and validity of the conclusion to be drawn from these premisses will depend both on their logical characteristics, and on their mutual relationship. The major proposition is a particular statement.² It does not speak of wheat or mustard seed or leaven in general, but of some wheat or mustard seed or leaven, that a certain person used for a certain purpose; it does not speak of servants in general, but of a certain unfaithful servant, etc. There is not a single parable of Jesus that describes general facts, or laws of nature. Nor are the parable stories meant to describe typical events. They speak of events that arouse our interest because they are important, satisfactory, unexpected, praiseworthy or blamable in some respect. But a parable does not imply, for instance, that every wheat will yield a thirtyfold or a hundredfold crop, or that every friend, when disturbed in his slumber at midnight, will give bread.

In quality the major is affirmative, in relation conditional. The latter fact is often overlooked by modern exegetes. Jesus does not say, for instance, that wheat bears fruit; He says, if wheat is sown by the sower upon the field, it will bear fruit.

¹ Siegfried Goebel, *The Parables of Jesus*, Engl. tr. Edinb. 1894, rightly criticises such practice, but in turn devotes so much attention to the particulars that he often loses sight of the point of the parable.

² George A. Buttrick, *The Parables of Jesus*, pp. xxv-xxvii, seems to recognise this fact, when saying that "the purpose of the parables was not for dogma, but for life". But in his exegesis he frequently offers general applications instead of concrete interpretation.

But if you cast it into the water or leave it in the bag, it will never bear fruit. Thus the conditional element in the parable is an important secondary feature in the constitution of the point of the story. The modality of the major premiss is assertive, not apodictic. The parable states the factuality of the event as distinct from mere possibility, as is the rule in so many parables of the rabbis¹, but does not imply that it is the nature of the subject necessarily to act in such a way.

The minor proposition in its simplest form is given in the parables of the Kingdom. There it runs like this: The Kingdom of God is like a certain man who did a certain thing. Because the Kingdom of God is an individual term, the proposition is particular in quantity.² In quality it is affirmative, in relation categorical. Its modality is assertive. But not in all the parables is the term of the first premiss explicitly given. The parable of the Sower, for instance, merely hints at something mysterious and of extreme importance to the audience, by adding the concluding phrase: "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear" (Mark iv. 9). To this "something" the work of the sower is likened.

(b) *Ontological Implications.*

Before a conclusion can be drawn from two premisses it is necessary to know the ontological relationship that exists between the major and the minor terms. In ordinary logical syllogisms the relationship is that of part and whole, effect and cause, specimen and species. The history of interpretation bears witness to the manifold attempts that have been made to conceive the relationship of the two terms of the parabolic syllogism in the same way.

I. THE PRINCIPLE OF ANALOGY

Archbishop Trench,³ following St. Augustine and the Latin Fathers, regarded the earthly world as the imperfect mirroring of the heavenly. Every good thing here on earth

¹ Paul Fiebig, *Altjüdische Gleichnisse und die Gleichnisse Jesu*. 1904.

W. O. E. Oesterley, *The Gospel Parables in the Light of their Jewish Background*, 1936.

² A. B. Bruce, *The Parabolic Teaching of Jesus*, p. 3, overlooks this fact and wrongly identifies the Kingdom of God with the "moral government over the world at large, and over Israel in particular", thus transforming the minor proposition into a general statement.

³ R. C. Trench, *Notes on the Parables*, ch. II.

could then *a fortiori* be predicated of the world above. Modern scholars, dissatisfied with this disparagement, as it were, of this earthly world, tried to modify this view by bluntly speaking of the complete parallelism between the two realms. A statement by Prof. Dodd is typical of this view. He says: "Since nature and super-nature are one order, you can take any part of that order and find in it illumination for the other part. . . . This sense of the divineness of the natural order is the major premiss of all the parables."¹ But the application that is being made of this principle in the interpretation of the parables betrays its un-Biblical, indeed its neo-Platonic character. The principle of analogy does not fit the special purpose of the parables. For the conclusion to be reached from them should be a particular proposition, telling us something of the Kingdom of God and eschatology. Instead, the use of the principle of analogy, when consistently employed, leads to a general truth that can be predicated both of the heavenly and the earthly realm.

Moreover, as Trench rightly noticed, the principle of analogy is the ontological basis of the allegorical interpretation of the parables. If there is a complete congruence between the two spheres of reality, then all details in this world have their counterpart in the supernatural. Those modern scholars who adopt the principle of analogy are therefore inconsistent when rejecting the allegorical method of interpretation.

II. PRINCIPLE OF GENERALISATION

Under the influence of Ritschl's theology and of modern positivistic philosophy Jülicher and his followers replaced the principle of analogy by that of generalisation. By this school the parables are no longer thought of as establishing a comparison between two levels of existence, but merely between two modes of experience or two realms of mental life. These scholars deny the validity of a distinction between nature and super-nature, and they assume that everything in the Universe is of identical structure. Thus events in extra-human nature are regarded as being typical of human life also, and non-moral actions of man as typical of his moral and spiritual life as well. But the parable stories cannot be regarded as typical of all

¹ Dodd, *Parables of the Kingdom*, p. 22.

life, as has been shown above. The result of the use of this wrong principle as made by Jülicher and his followers is the fact that the conclusions drawn by them are frequently truisms, and that in a number of instances they are not to the point, because in order to discover the supposedly general element in the parables these scholars neglect the concrete details of the story.

III. THE SETTING IN LIFE

Realising the particular character of the two premisses of the parabolic syllogism, Dibelius,¹ Dodd, Cadoux and others have recently stressed the significance which the occasion and circumstances in which Jesus told His parables have for their understanding. But while this procedure is in closer touch with the exigencies of the text than are other methods, it, nevertheless, is unsatisfactory in its actual interpretation of the parables. For the Gospels, as is generally recognised, were written for devotional purposes, not primarily as historical records. But interpreted by means of their "setting in life" the parables will yield merely historical information which, owing to the non-recurrent character of the respective events, is unfit as a basis for general applications.

The study of the "setting in life" is by no means useless; it helps to validate our contention that the parables are meant to communicate particular truths. But by the method of Form-Criticism one never attains to this inherent truth, except by fortunate inconsistency.² It is true to say that Prof. Dodd is aware of this undesirable result, and that he makes a remarkable attempt to do justice to the parables as parts of the New Testament message, as addressed to the Church. In order to overcome the merely historical relevance of his interpretation he points to the artistic character of the parables. He holds that "any serious work of art has significance beyond its occasion."³ But within the context of his book this principle starts a vicious circle. For the work of art is intelligible apart from its origins, and no historical knowledge will essentially deepen its understanding and appreciation. The fact is that many of the applications of the parabolic teaching which Prof. Dodd

¹ Martin Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel*, Engl. Tr. 1935.

² H. W. Robinson, *The Parables of Jesus in Relation to His Ministry*. Chicago, 1928. p. 30 f.

³ *Parables of the Kingdom*, p. 195.

makes in the last chapter of his book are not based on the artistic character of the parables, but on the principle of identification. He rightly assumes that there is identity of structure between the ministry of Jesus and that of the Church, or between the life of the first disciples and that of the believers of all ages. In this respect we agree with Prof. Dodd. But this principle of identification is based on an assumption of faith; it cannot be deduced from the aesthetical character of the parables. It is from the parables that this kind of wisdom is to be learnt. It cannot therefore be presupposed as a principle of their interpretation.

IV. THE DIVINE PURPOSE OF REDEMPTION

The New Testament shows clearly both that there is a fundamental difference between the heavenly and the earthly world, and that there is no direct analogy between the two realms. It also makes clear beyond doubt that the link that holds the two realms together can be found in neither of them. The fact that a manifestation of the heavenly world (namely God's Kingdom) and events of the earthly world can serve as minor and major terms in parables is rather due to the fact that the Divine purpose of Redemption brackets the Divine work both in nature and in the establishment of the Kingdom. Thus, as Pascal says, "all things cover a mystery".

There are facts in nature that point beyond the purely natural. Such amazing phenomena are, for instance, the existence of organic life, procreation and multiplication in a barren universe of inorganic matter, or the occurrence of kindness in an evil race, or the good results of foresight in a hostile world of evils, etc. We are naturally inclined to take all these things for granted. But when Jesus tells His parables He makes people thereby to wonder how such things can be in existence at all. The explanation is that by the will of God this world is destined to be the scene of His Kingdom, and the object over which it is to be established. Hence it is that earthly events, although not indicative of the nature of the heavenly world, are, nevertheless, indicative of the divine purpose for which they exist. Thus we learn that in the parables of Jesus the ontological relationship between the minor and the major term is that of end and means.

(c) The Validity of the Conclusions.

I. NECESSITY OF CERTAINTY

A last problem to be dealt with in this connection is that of the validity of the conclusions drawn from the parables. The parables of Jesus are not meant to convey purely theoretical truths. They reveal mysteries, by whose knowledge men shall be enabled to take the right stand in the process of the establishment of God's Kingdom.¹ For this purpose it is necessary that the conclusion should carry absolute certainty with it.

Our analysis has shown, however, that the two premisses of the parabolic syllogism are particular propositions, and even if the major be treated as typical, the conclusion would at the best possess probability, and more likely possibility only, because of the conditional and assertive character of the major. Moreover, unlike the ordinary form of syllogism, whose propositions state subsumption of one concept under another, the minor proposition of the parabolic syllogism predicates similarity between the minor and the major terms. Thus the predicate of the major cannot be the predicate of the conclusion. The growth of the Kingdom, for instance, is not a biological process like that of the selfgrowing seed, or a chemical process like the operation of the leaven. Furthermore, the act of comparison that is required here cannot be executed by means of analogical reasoning, whereby we assume that *b* is likely to have the property *e*, because it has the properties *a*, *β*, *γ*, and *δ* in common with *a*, which is known to have also the property *e*. For in the parables the Kingdom is unknown, and exclusively defined by the parable story.

Genuine comparison requires knowledge of the essence of the two objects to be compared. In the case of the parables this would mean that we should have knowledge of the place which both the Kingdom of God and the subject of the parable story have in the Divine purpose of Redemption. But such knowledge we lack when we are told the parable.

II. VALIDATION OF THE CONCLUSION

If the certainty of the conclusion which is required for the practical purpose of the parables cannot be obtained by merely logical means, extra-logical or supra-logical support is

¹ T. W. Manson, *The Teaching of Jesus*, p. 73.

to be sought for. The Synoptic Gospels show that this validation was made possible by two supernatural factors, viz.

- (1) the authority of Jesus as supreme revealer of the divine truth, and
- (2) the operation of the Holy Spirit, that enabled the elect among the hearers to understand the mystery of the Kingdom of God.

Firstly, the minor proposition of the parabolic syllogism is far from being self-evident. Nor does it rest upon sense-experience or on a deductive inference drawn from the idea of God. For to us God is the Wholly Other One. The essential ontic difference that exists between God and His creatures is the reason why, logically, no man has the possibility or the right to assert of himself that the Kingdom of God is like something here on earth. (This, by the way, is the explanation of the fact that Jesus has had no imitators in the art of telling parables.) Thus we have to accept the absolute authority of Jesus Christ as the basis of the truth of the minor proposition. Those who are unwilling to recognise this authority will find themselves bound to interpret the parables as interesting specimens of popular stories teaching ethical common-places, or they have to content themselves with answering the merely historical question, on what occasions and in what circumstances Jesus taught in parables.

Secondly, the recognition of the revelatory authority of Jesus, indispensable as it is for the understanding of His parables, would, nevertheless, be insufficient for an interpretation that would carry certainty with it. For even if, by the recognition of Christ's authority, apodictic character were given to the minor proposition, no valid conclusion could be drawn from the two premisses by purely philosophical reasoning, because, as has been shown, the nature of the similarity between the two terms escapes our natural understanding.

It is in this connection that we receive further light from Jesus' word, saying, "unto you is given the mystery of the Kingdom of God" (Mark iv. 11). Whereas the variants in the parallel texts of Matthew and Luke suggest that Jesus discussed here the knowledge of esoteric, speculative truths, Mark rightly lays stress on the givenness of the mystery of the Kingdom, i.e. on the fact that the mystery is present to the disciples' inner

perception and intuition. They are the ones who see that Jesus Himself is the very centre of His parables. Thus they know, also, what seed, leaven, growth, gathering and casting away signify in the Kingdom of God.

Interpreted in this way the parables yielded to the disciples and to the intimate followers of Jesus particular truths, as was to be expected from the logical nature of the indications given to them in the parables. The role of Jesus in the establishment of God's Kingdom and the signs indicative of the progress of that process were thus revealed to them.¹ These truths are valid truths verified by subsequent experience. They were not general principles of conduct, although they were inductive of an active response. Yet unlike uniform rules of rationalistic philosophy the underlying eschatological reality, whose mystery they reveal, allows us to apply them in various ways to the peculiar problems of changing ages.

In the New Testament and in the early Church no trace is to be found of an official explanation of the parables. This fact makes evident that the hearers of the apostles were as certain as their teachers of the fact that to them also had been given the mystery of the Kingdom of God. The newly established reign of Christ was experienced by means of the Holy Spirit's operation in their hearts. It is this very same spirit that will enable us also to draw the right conclusions from the parables.

Interpreted without this recognition of the revelatory authority of Jesus and without such spiritual insight the parables of Jesus are words of enigmatic wisdom that may bewilder us, and that each one may interpret according to his good pleasure, but which for this subjective interpretation cannot mean anything for our lives. Interpreted rightly, however, they change a person's whole outlook in life.

The gift of the Spirit does not immediately convey to a person the full wealth of information contained in the parables. The example of the disciples shows that a man may possess the mystery without being able to discover its implications. Thus the Spirit does not allow us to dispense with exegetical efforts. But exegesis without spiritual insight remains on the surface.

OTTO A. PIPER.

*The Theological Seminary,
Princeton, New Jersey.*

¹ See: Sir Edwyn Hoskyns and Noel Davey, *The Riddle of the New Testament*, p. 190.