

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

fied of her children. There is a truth behind the sublimity of Isaiah's conception of the world-ruler who weighs the stars in a balance and measures the heavens with a span. There is a truth behind the Babylonian legend of a good triumphant over misery and chaos. There is a truth behind the Zoroastrian teaching concerning light and truth victorious over the lie. Truth even somewhere behind the too smug morality and too mathematically exact retribution of the Göläh schools. God is sovereign. God is inscrutable.

Though He slay me
Yet will I trust in Him.

J. P. NAISH.

THE TEN BEST BOOKS ON THE PARABLES OF JESUS.

THE parables contained in the first three gospels are one of the methods employed by our Lord in His teaching. It is therefore impossible to isolate them strictly from the general teaching, and indeed much of the best discussion of them is to be found in the various biographies of our Lord as well as in any competent book upon His teaching, as, for example, in what seems to me the ablest life of Jesus, Keim's *Jesus of Nazara* (English translation, vol. iv., pp. 127 f.), or in Strauss's *Life of Jesus* (tr. George Eliot, § 78), in Professor Gardner's *Exploratio Evangelica* (ch. xvii.), T. G. Selby's admirable little book on *The Ministry of the Lord Jesus* (C. H. Kelly, 1896), or in Dr. E. A. Abbott's rich series, *The Fourfold Gospel*. Also, all the commentaries handle the parables. But the parables have had a literature of their own for over a century. One or two, like the parable of the Ten Virgins or that of the Dishonest Steward,

have for special reasons been discussed separately. But, from time to time, their distinctive features have commanded attention, in a more general way, and as they form a ripe topic for the preacher, it seems worth while to enumerate ten of the best books upon their meaning and function, in order to afford some guidance for those who desire either to study them critically or to understand them for the special purpose of preaching on them effectively.

The older works are not of much value, though Salmeron's volume *De Parabolis* (1602) marks the first serious attempt to treat the parables independently. Still, exposition or practical interpretation sometimes retains elements of usefulness, even when its historical basis must be abandoned. An exception ought to be made in favour of the *Commentarii* of the Spanish Jesuit Maldonatus in the sixteenth century; this work on the gospels shows a real grasp of what is vital. In another direction, preachers may still find material occasionally in an exposition like E. Greswell's elaborate *Exposition of the Parables* (Oxford, 1834), or in William Arnot's *Parables of our Lord* (Edinburgh, 1867), which has been often reprinted. But of all the English books belonging to this latter class, by far the most popular has been Archbishop Trench's *Notes on the Parables of our Lord*. It was published in 1841, and has been repeatedly re-issued. A convenient edition is published by Messrs. Routledge, with a preface by Dr. Smythe Palmer. Trench belongs to the school of interpreters who love to draw mystical meanings from the text, though he does exhibit more restraint than some of his predecessors along this line. He thinks, for example, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, that it is not "far-fetched to see in the inn the figure of the Church," and when the father in the story clothes the prodigal son with the best robe we are asked to believe that this means positively "the imputation to him of the merits and righteous-

ness of Christ." But Trench's book contains a store of material from ancient life and interpretation, which may be consulted with profit by the prudent, however antiquated and unsafe the method of exposition may be.

The first book in our language which seriously challenged the older moralising view and set itself to study the parables in the daylight of synoptic criticism was Professor A. B. Bruce's *Parabolic Teaching of Christ* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1882). Dr. Bruce had already dealt with the parables incidentally in his *Training of the Twelve* (Edinburgh, T. and T. Clark), a book of first-rate merit upon the teaching of Jesus, which ought to be in every clerical library. Dr. Bruce was a pioneer in this department. His book on the parables is characteristically brisk and practical. An air of reality breathes through its pages. It is a critical exposition, and historical criticism has, of course, progressed far since he wrote; yet there is much in this book which will never be antiquated. It concentrates upon what the parables meant for Jesus primarily, and it is sensitive to what Dr. Bruce felt to be the gracious, evangelic spirit of our Lord. Yet even as he was writing, a new chapter was being opened in the subject. His principle was that you can best learn what a parable is by reading it as Jesus spoke it. But the question now was raised, Do we know exactly how Jesus spoke the parables? And further, How is a parable, in the synoptic tradition, related as a literary form to its classical and Jewish antecedents? Such were the sort of questions proposed in 1888 by Adolf Jülicher in his large book *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, whose two volumes were completed in 1899 (new editions, 1910). Jülicher's book is the beginning of all modern discussion. He sets himself to three tasks:—(i.) First, to analyse the special contents of a "parable." (ii.) To apply the methods of historical and literary criticism to the extant parables of Jesus. (iii.) To

expound them, on the basis of his critical method. A brief account of his work is printed in the *Encyclopædia Biblica* (2563-2567),¹ but the book itself requires to be read in order to gain an idea of what he has really achieved. It is a book of exceptional importance. For the first time the characteristics of the gospel parable as a literary form are fully discussed, with a minute analysis of the relevant texts. Here it must suffice to say that Jülicher argues that the "parable" was for Jesus a clear illustration of some vital truth, and that any allegorical interpretation is due to the interests and misapprehensions of the apostolic Church during the course of transmission. The parable originally belongs to the category of the similitude or fable; it is, in the hands of Jesus, a means of elucidating and applying his popular teaching, and that is why he uses apt comparisons drawn from more or less familiar life. Sometimes it may take the form of a narrative, but the details are not to be pressed into an allegorical meaning. There is a single point of comparison in a parable. The rest is decorative detail. Parables are invariably "illustrative instances which establish an abstract religious or ethical truth by the evidence of a concrete case." It is illegitimate to go further and read subtle meanings into the framework of the comparison, or to imagine that the parables were ever intended by Jesus to veil the truth from any of his hearers.

The ability and incisiveness of Jülicher's work soon started fresh investigation. He stimulated a re-examination of the subject, especially on the Continent. No more notable contribution was made than the work of the Scandinavian scholar Dr. C. A. Bugge. He had already written on the

¹ The best dictionary article is Heinrici's in the third edition of the *Real-Encyclopädie für protest. Theologie und Kirche* (vol. vii. 688-703); it was published in 1899.

parables, but in his *Haupt-Parabeln Jesu* (Giessen, 1903) he dealt with the question again in the light of Jülicher's arguments. His book resembles in form that of Dr. Bruce, but it naturally is more abreast of criticism. He shows in the first place that Jülicher had ignored unduly the use of the parable by Palestinian rabbis, and treated the parable too much along the lines of Aristotle. Then he proved that Jülicher had thereby failed to allow for the fact that a certain allegorising element could enter into a genuine parable. Having devoted a long introduction to this preliminary matter, he proceeds to expound six parables on the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven, then seven of the later parables chronicled by Matthew, and finally the Lucan parables about individuals. Bugge provides a clear, apt exposition of the text, and adds at the end of each some relevant specimens of earlier exegesis. His book thus combines criticism and exposition. In thoroughness it is perhaps the most satisfactory counterbalance to Jülicher, for Lagrange's articles in the *Revue Biblique* (1909-1910) have not been reprinted, and anyhow they were not expository, while Weinel's compact, small volume, *Die Gleichnisse Jesu* (third edition, 1910), is upon the whole in the wake of Jülicher. Weinel's book is the best brief account, for popular purposes, of this critical attitude. Lagrange, of course, has treated the parables since then, in his commentaries, with characteristic precision. But the antithesis to Weinel, in size and spirit, was written not by Lagrange but by another Roman Catholic scholar, Professor L. Fonck, whose *Parabeln des Herrn im Evangelium* (Innsbruck, 1902; third edition, 1909), a combination of criticism and exposition, voices the conservative critical position. This is a large, well-equipped volume, with dogmatic interests. The impetus given by Jülicher is also felt in the articles by Loisy, which are reproduced in his *Études Évangéliques* (1902);

his later commentary elaborates the views here outlined.

The next important contribution was made by a Jesuit scholar, Dr. Buzy. In his *Introduction aux Paraboles Évangéliques* (Paris, 1912) he tackles the fundamental question of the significance of the "parable" as no one had done since Jülicher wrote. Buzy has learning. He confines himself to the preliminary data; he does not expound individual parables, but lays bare the underlying principles upon which any interpretation rests. Some of his points are well made. Thus he shows that the Old Testament "parable" and its rabbinic successors were not invariably obvious and clear. Again he brings forward evidence to prove that allegories need not be abstruse or enigmatic, as Jülicher and Loisy had incautiously held. He is not anti-critical, for he allows that a certain editorial work on the part of the evangelists may have affected the parables in their present form as e.g. in Luke viii. 5 and 12. But he makes out a good case for the theory that the occasional interpretations of the parables are not to be relegated entirely to the apostolic Church. There is no introduction which provides so comprehensive an account of the ancient "parable" and its cognate forms in literature, and among other things it demonstrates the weakness of Jülicher's rigid distinction between parable and allegory. It is only fair to add that Jülicher himself has admitted that his original position requires to be modified.

The recall of criticism to Palestine and Judaism was voiced simultaneously by P. Fiebig's *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* (Tübingen), published in the same year. Fiebig had already written on the *Altjüdische Gleichnisse und die Gleichnisse Jesu*, but his later work supersedes the earlier. He shows, out of a competent knowledge of rabbinic literature, that a close study of rabbinic parables makes it impossible to follow Jülicher in rigorously excluding allegorical traits as

unauthentic. Bugge had hinted this ; Fiebig proves it to the full. He prints specimens of the rabbinic parables to throw light upon the gospel parables, and though this only serves to bring out the obvious superiority of the latter, his proper argument is that the parables of Jesus must be understood in connexion with Jewish parables, not under the category of Aristotle's literary criticism. Neither Fiebig nor Bugge advocates, of course, the allegorical interpretation of the parables, such as had been in vogue until Jülicher finally shattered it. Both recognise the yeoman service rendered by Jülicher in freeing the interpretation of the parables from the arbitrary methods of the moralisers and the mystics. Nevertheless Fiebig's plea is that in the days of Jesus the "parable" might well include more than one point of comparison or illustration, and also that a rabbi sometimes interpreted his own parables. No more useful collection of the rabbinic parables is accessible than this for the purpose of exposition. Rabbi Asher Feldman, in *The Parables and Sayings of the Rabbis* (Cambridge, 1924), has recently supplemented it by amassing references to pastoral and agricultural topics, but his collection is not in the same class as Fiebig's.

In 1913 Mr. L. E. Browne published an Hulsean essay upon *The Parables of the Gospels*, a succinct study which deserves to be chronicled. Though brief, it furnishes the English reader with an outline of the data for acquiring a critical estimate of the subject. Those who have not access to Fonck or Weinel may profitably refer to his pages, especially if they add the sixth chapter of Mr. A. M. Rihbany's *The Syrian Christ* (Melrose, 1919), the relevant section in Wendt's *Teaching of Jesus* (vol. i., pp. 115 f.), and Dr. Denney's pages on "Criticism and the Parables" in the EXPOSITOR for August and September (1911).

Jesus, then, used parables, sometimes as illustrations,

sometimes as arguments—though the distinction is barely adequate, for an illustration may well become a popular argument. Furthermore, apart from the idiosyncrasies of the evangelists (e.g. Luke's fondness for soliloquies), the parables are substantially the reproduction of what Jesus actually said. In the course of transmission they have been edited, touched now and then by æsthetic, moralising and ecclesiastical influences,¹ but they must have come from Jesus Himself originally. The early Church had not the creative mind for this kind of thing; it produced many literary forms, but apparently the parable was beyond its powers. Thus, to quote only one scholar, Professor Burkitt (*Gospel History and its Transmission*, p. 195) admits that while the explanation of the parable of the Tares may be due to the later church, the parable itself is original. He adds, referring to Wellhausen, that he finds it "difficult to believe that the Parables and the Sayings which speak of the Kingdom of God as a thing to be realised here on earth would have retained so fresh and unecclesiastical an atmosphere, if they were both in spirit and in substance the work of an age later than our Lord. Nowhere in early Christian literature, except in those synoptic gospels, do we find that picturesque outlook upon man and nature that finds its expression in the Parables of Jesus." Similarly, the comparison between the parables of Jesus and those of the rabbis reveals the intrinsic superiority of the former. Jesus, for example, did not make trees or plants or animals speak. And He never used the parable as a means of Old Testament exegesis.

Three special problems arise in this connexion:—(a) One is the interpretation of the object of the parables as defined

¹ See on this the second volume of Dr. V. H. Stanton's *The Gospels as Historical Documents* (pp. 73 f., etc.), and, on the tendency to edit the parables, Canon Streeter's words in the *Oxford Studies in the Synoptic Problem*, pp. 197 f.

in Mark iv. 10-12, etc. Does Mark misinterpret Jesus here? Were the parables intended in any respect to keep the truth a secret? This difficulty occupies a large part of Buzy's work, and it is constantly discussed in articles like those by von Soden (*Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 1911, pp. 190 f.), J. W. Hunkin (*Journal of Theological Studies*, 1915, April), Dr. Michael (EXPOSITOR, October, 1920), etc., as well as in modern commentaries. (b) Then there is the classification of the parables. Most expositors arrange them topically; e.g. Bruce finds fourteen Theoretic parables, twelve parables of Grace, and seven parables of Judgment. But this method is rarely successful. It becomes artificial, as a rule. A subtle attempt along this line will be found in Westcott's *Introduction to the Study of the Gospels* (ch. vii.). In Goebel's good monograph on *Die Parabeln Jesu* (Gotha, 1880; an English translation is available, 1883) the order is chronological: the parables beside the lake, the parables of the middle period, and the Passion-parables. But Goebel complicates this with a topical arrangement which is unconvincing, for the idea of judgment, for example, is not confined to the last class. However, if a series of sermons were to be preached on the parables, this chronological arrangement is perhaps the least open to criticism; it is natural and it is easily followed. (c) As for the analytic enumeration of the parables, opinions vary widely. Bruce, for example, discusses incidentally what he calls "parable-germs." Bugge more satisfactorily divides his material into three classes, parabolic or brief utterances, paradoxical sayings and parables proper. Yet such literary criticism does not lead to any assured results. As a metaphor may develop into an allegory, so a simile may grow into a parable or fable, no doubt; yet the wide connotation of the *mashal* or Jewish prototype of the parable prepares us for an equal width of range in the latter's usage.

The term "parable" in the gospels (*παράβολή*) means once a proverb (Luke iv. 23), but otherwise it varies from a simple maxim (Luke xiv. 7) or obscure saying (Matt. xv. 11) to a comparison (Mark iii. 23 f.), or a developed comparison in the form of an illustration or story. Instead of elaborating varieties of "parable," it is better to rest content with some general definition like that suggested by Buzy, that "parable" in the gospels, like *mashal* in the Old Testament, "is a counsel of wisdom, in which the element of comparison is generally predominant, although here and there it may be absent."

As for expositions or practical applications of the parables, such books are numerous. The difficulty is to choose which are most likely to be helpful. Much depends upon individual taste here. But if one or two are necessary, I venture to name in the first place, without any hesitation, Dr. Marcus Dods's two small volumes, *The Parables of our Lord* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1886). The art of exposition, like the art of engraving, seems to have died out almost entirely nowadays. Dr. Dods was a master of it in the last generation. His books are second to none in this department. The only drawback to them is that, once you read an exposition of his, you feel that it is impossible to treat the parable otherwise. Dr. W. M. Taylor's *The Parables of our Saviour* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1889, 4th ed., 1894) is another larger work, full of sound edification. Dr. A. L. Lilley's *Adventus Regni* (Griffiths, 1907) may be safely commended, as illustrating a different theological outlook, and Mr. R. Winterbotham's *The Kingdom of Heaven* (Methuen, 1898) or Mr. George Murray's *Jesus and His Parables* (Edinburgh, 1914) shows how the parables may be explained effectively to an ordinary audience. Dr. H. B. Swete's posthumous volume, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (Macmillan, 1920), is an exposition of the Galilean and Judean parables specifically bearing

on the subject of the Kingdom. The Greek text of each is printed, with some quiet explanations of the theology which is involved. As the editors remark, the attractiveness of these lectures to candidates for Holy Orders is due to the author's power of combining "maturity of learning and insight with direct application to life." The only other volume which I single out in this connexion is the charming exposition by Dr James Drummond in the first series of *The Way of Life* (Lindsey Press, London, 1917), a devout and modern interpretation.

To sum up :—(a) For critical study—Bruce, Jülicher, Weinel, Bugge, Buzy, Fiebig, Fonck ; or, for readers who prefer English, Browne. (b) For exposition in the main—Trench, Dods, Drummond, and either Goebel or anyone of the more modern books mentioned in the preceding paragraph.

JAMES MOFFATT.

THE FEEDING OF THE MULTITUDE.

THE man who first wrote Mark viii. 1-10 cannot already have written Mark vi. 30-44. The disciples' question in viii. 4 is decisive. Had the writer thought of them as having already witnessed the feeding of the five thousand as related in chapter vi., he could not have written that they asked, "Whence shall one be able to fill these men with bread here in a desert place?" It could have been done only by a compiler arranging accepted material.

But if these two accounts were not originally from the same hand, then they are probably differing accounts of the same event, or, rather,—so close is the similarity,—different versions of the same account. In both we have the same points related in precisely the same order,—the gathering of the multitude : the statement of the need : the disciples'