



The Nature Parables in the Synoptic Gospels

Cork Scripture Group – Spring Module - April 2024

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Parables: Jesus' preferred form of teaching.

Parables are Jesus' preferred form of teaching in the synoptic gospels, accounting for almost a third of the teaching material in Matthew, Mark and Luke. Indeed the gospels themselves attest to the centrality of the parables in Jesus' teaching.

Mark 4:2^{NRSV} *He taught them many things by parables.*

Matthew 13:34^{NRSV} *Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing.*

Yet it can be difficult to put our finger on what exactly constitutes a parable. The Greek word for parable, *'parabole'*, is made up of two words: *'balein'* meaning 'to throw' and *'para'*, meaning 'alongside'. It involves placing two things alongside each other as a means of comparison or contrast.

Often we understand the term 'parable' to describe what biblical scholars refer to more specifically as a 'parable story' such as the Parable of the Prodigal Son or the Parable of the Good Samaritan, which contain both a narrative and a comparison but the term parable is used in the New Testament in a broader and relatively loose sense and can refer to short metaphorical sayings, similitudes, allegories, riddles and lessons for illustration. For example, in the gospels, the actual term 'parable' is used in Matthew 15:10-16 [and in the parallel text in Mark 7:17] which we would not typically refer to as a 'parable' but rather as a short metaphorical saying.

In Luke 6:39 the term is specifically used of another short saying that we might not be inclined to think of as a parable:

He also told them this parable: "Can the blind lead the blind? Will they not both fall into a pit?" **Luke 6:39** ^{NIV}

'Maschal' in the Old Testament

Biblical scholars closely associate parables with the *'maschal'* of the Old Testament which covered various forms of speech and figurative discourse such as riddles, proverbial sayings, allegories, parabolic stories and satire, amongst others. The common feature of *'maschal'* in all these different genres and figures of speech in the Old Testament is that they function at more than one level of meaning and so can at the same time both conceal and reveal. They invite the reader or listener to understand a deeper meaning or message beyond the obvious or literal meaning.

One of the classic examples of '*maschal*' in the Old Testament appears in 2 Samuel 12:1-4, where the prophet Nathan speaks to King David.

The LORD sent Nathan to David. When he came to him, he said, "There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him. Now a traveller came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveller who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him."

David is enraged when he hears the parable before Nathan reveals that David is in fact the man spoken of, for he has committed adultery with Bathsheba and then arranged the death of her husband Uriah.

⁵David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, "As surely as the LORD lives, the man who did this must die! ⁶He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity."

Jesus draws on and was influenced by the tradition of '*maschal*' within the Hebrew scriptures and his parables in many ways reflect the style and form that he would have encountered within his own culture as he grew up.

Towards a definition or understanding of parable.

One of the most widely quoted definitions of what we mean by 'parable' comes from C.H. Dodd who described a parable as:

'A metaphor or a 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.' [*The Parables of the Kingdom*]

A parable invites and requires interpretation. In a sense the interpretation completes the parable. The very nature of a parable is to get the listeners to tease out the meaning for themselves.

The elements and situations that Jesus draws on in his parables are drawn from realities and situations that would have been familiar to his listeners. They would have understood what he was speaking of and that shared understanding allows Jesus to suffuse the parable with deeper levels of meaning and understanding. The parables draw the listener into the story and comparison opening them to new worlds of meaning.

In general, there are certain characteristics common to gospel parables:

- a) They tend to be brief and engaging, and so are easily remembered.
- b) They are engaging, often beginning with a question and drawing the listener into the comparison or the narrative.
- c) They often contain elements that reverse or challenge expectations and presumptions: a good Samaritan, a righteous judge.

- d) They often contrast two things/groups/ people with positive and negative attributes: the two debtors, the two sons, the Pharisee and the Tax-collector.
- e) They are theocentric – they focus on God and the action of God.
- f) They are written to call forth a response in faith.

In some instances, as in the case of the Parable of the Prodigal Son, some of Jesus’ parables seem to have an open-ended conclusion. We are not told if the older son stayed outside or entered the celebration. But this omission in some ways reveals the very purpose of the parables. They are meant to stimulate and clarify insight, but never to impose or demand it.

Because ‘parable’ is capable of such a loose and broad collection of literary genres and figures of speech, it is difficult if not impossible, to give a definitive list of gospel parables, but the attached list of ‘*Parables in the Synoptic Gospels*’ includes the gospel passages generally regarded as ‘parables.’ The word ‘parable’ does not feature in John’s Gospel in which Jesus’ teaching generally occurs in longer discourses and in extended images such as the image of the sheepfold in John 10 and in the various ‘I am’ discourses in which Jesus describes himself using various images such as a shepherd, the light of the world, the true vine, and the bread of life: figures of speech which are substantially different in style and form from the parables that we find in the synoptic gospels.

The Nature Parables in the Synoptic Gospels

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| The Parable of the Sower | Mark 4:1-20 | Matthew 13:1-23 | Luke 8:4-15 |
| The Parable of the Growing Seed | Mark 4:26-29 | | |
| The Mustard Seed | Mark 4:30-32 | Matthew 13:31-32 | Luke 13:18-19 |
| The Fig Tree | Mark 13:28-31 | Matthew 24:32-35 | Luke 21:29-33 |
| The Wheat and the Tares | | Matthew 13:24-30 | |

Jesus’ first listeners would have come from an agrarian world and so it would have been natural for him to draw on images and situation with which they would have been familiar. We know however that as the Church grew in the years after Jesus’ return to the Father, the Church became more urban in nature. Much of the imagery that Paul uses in his letters is drawn from the Roman world. However, it is significant that when the Mark, the first of the synoptic gospels was written about 65 CE, the nature parables were given a place of prominence within Jesus’ teaching recorded in the gospel. This in part can be attributed to the fact that parables by their nature as story would have been readily remembered and transmitted within an oral tradition and that stories tend to be more faithfully transmitted than other forms of teaching as the collective memory of the community acts to protect and preserve the original parable. Many scholars suggest that the content and form of the nature parables mean that they may well be amongst the oldest parts of the gospel tradition, faithfully reflecting the mind and teaching of Jesus and are as close as we get to the teaching of the historical Jesus.

It is also notable that the nature parables that are recorded in Mark’s gospel are retained in both Matthew and Luke’s gospels, when they were written in the mid-80s CE, although their narrative setting is altered according to the focus and purpose of each evangelist. The fact that the Parable of the Seed Growing by itself does not appear in Matthew or Luke may be attributable to the fact that many of the elements of the parable are already implicit in the Parable of the Sower

and the Parable of the Mustard Seed. What is significant is that, even 50 years after they were originally spoken, the nature parables retained a power and resonance for the early Church who continued to give them a place of prominence in the canon and continued to, in the words of C.H. Dodd, to allow them to ‘tease them [Christian listeners/readers into active thought.]’

Staying at the surface level of meaning of the ‘nature parables.’

As we already discussed, a parable usually involved using a comparison between something that is known and familiar to help the reader or listener to glimpse and to contemplate a deeper spiritual insight or hidden reality. Usually, when we read the parables, we take the first part of the comparison, that which is familiar and known, for granted and focus on the deeper message that the parable seeks to convey. In the case of the ‘nature parables’ that we will discuss in this study, Jesus draws on the imagery of seeds and the familiar cycle of the growth and the development of a seed, with all its challenges, to help readers to understand something of the nature of the ‘kingdom of God’ that he has come to proclaim.

However, for the purpose of this study, we will consider only the literal level of each of the parables, that which is in many ways is normally taken as self-evident and obvious, and explore what each of the parables has to say to us at that first level about how Jesus saw the world of nature, its rhythms and its potential, to see what lessons and insights, if any, we can glean from them to support and underpin a truly Christian and gospel-inspired ecological response for our own time. For the purposes of this study, we will not address the deeper spiritual or faith interpretations that Jesus sought to convey through these particular parables.

The Parable of the Sower: Mark 4:2-8^{NRSV}

He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: ³ “Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴ And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵ Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. ⁶ And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. ⁸ Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.” ⁹ And he said, “Let anyone with ears to hear listen!”

The parable is a remarkable proclamation of the God-given power of the seed to grow and produce a bountiful harvest. The seed is presented as an irrepressible force that produces a crop in spite of challenges and unfavourable conditions and in so doing speaks of the intrinsic power of nature to overcome challenges and to continue to flourish.

In many ways it is a misnomer to call it the ‘Parable of the Sower’ for the parable focuses on the seed rather than the sower. The sower is almost incidental to the parable. It is the seed that is the subject of the parable and indeed the subject of the verbs within. Four times the parable uses the phrase ‘some seed/other seed **fell**’ almost creating a distance between the action of the sower and the fate of the seed. The seed is the central actor in the parable. Its growth is attributed to God not to human agency. The parable is one of assurance saying that we can trust in the providential power of nature and creation.

The parable does not hurry to its conclusion. It creatively achieves its dramatic effect not by simply listing the three failures in contrast to the great harvest, but by depicting a progression in the growth of the seed. The first has virtually no chance of survival. It falls on the path and is

devoured by the birds before any roots are put out. The second seems to be growing - 'it sprang up quickly' – but it withers under the heat of the sun. The third grows higher only to be choked by thorns. The rhythmic and ascending progression draws the hearers in the mystery of growth.

The fourth seed, the seed that fell into good ground, is introduced in much the same manner as the other three but is immediately followed by an explosion of verbs of motion the seed fell, brought forth, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundred fold..... the litany of verbs expressing the irrepressible power of growth. The triple abundance mentioned is deliberate – it more than compensates for the triple failure.

The parable at its most literal level speaks to and of the inherent power of nature, that of its own devices, fosters growth and provides a bountiful harvest. The power of the seed and the agency of nature is emphasised. Nature plays the dominant role, not the sower.

The Growing Seed Mark 4:26-29^{NRSV}

²⁶ He also said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷ and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. ²⁸ The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. ²⁹ But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come."

The Parable of the Growing Seed occurs only in Mark's Gospel and is paired with the Parable of the Mustard Seed. Scholars suggest that there are no indications that Mark made changes in the parable which he received from the tradition and propose that he most likely incorporated it as he found it. The parable has the marks of having originated in an Aramaic speaking environment: for example, the description 'sleep and rise night and day' reflects the Aramaic tradition of counting days from the evening. Moreover, linguistic scholars suggest that some of the phrases in the parable can be traced back to an Aramaic origin.

Again, the focus here is on the seed rather than the one who sows, who is described simply as 'someone' scattering seed on the ground. The focus falls on the internal dynamic rhythm of development of the seed: it sprouts and grows. The role of the earth in the development of the seed is directly, and the intrinsic relationship between the seed and the earth, is explicitly acknowledged as producing first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. This contrasts sharply with the inactivity of the sower. The seed's ripening is independent of the sower's effort as he goes about his daily routine, sleeping and rising. In many ways, the parable echoes St Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians when he writes: '*I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.*' [I Cor 3:6] This power of growth is mysterious....the sower does not know or understand how the seed grows and develops. . The phrase '*of itself*' explicitly attributes the growth and ripening of the seed to the seed and the earth, rather than to any human activity. The verbs indicating the various stages of the seed's development – sprout and grow, producing first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the ear – speak of the rhythm of nature that must be respected. The harvest can neither be rushed or delayed. Finally, the harvest is irresistible and will come when the time is right and the human agent is invited to become involved once more with his sickle, because the harvest has come.

The parable emphasises that the power and driving force comes from the seed and the earth. The sower is involved but neither controls nor understands the mystery of the seed's growth. The sower must respect the rhythm of nature's cycle and trust in its power to produce an

abundant harvest and so the parable calls for the sower to respect and co-operate in the natural cycle of growth.

The Parable of the Mustard Seed ^{NRSV}

³⁰ He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? ³¹ It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; ³² yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

The Parable of the Mustard Seed, which is found in all three synoptic gospels, takes up the theme of the providential power of nature and makes use of creative hyperbole '*the smallest of all the seeds on earth / becomes the greatest of all shrubs.*' The details of the parable are not necessarily historically accurate. The mustard seed, while very small, was not the smallest of the seeds, and the mustard plant common along the shores of the Lake of Galilee generally grew to a height of two to six feet and was more a shrub than a tree. Yet the contrast between the size of the seed and the shrub it grows into, which is the focus of the parable, remains valid. From tiny and insignificant beginnings, great growth can come, because of the gift of God's life-giving power in its beginning and in its process of growth. In his commentary on Mark, the bible scholar J. Marcus speaks of the parable as 'describing a tremendous divine potency behind its apparent insignificance.'

The image of the birds of the air making nests in its shade, whilst not literally true, echoes the imagery in Ezekiel 17:22f where the prophet promises that God will take a sprig of a great cedar and plant it to produce fruit and become a noble cedar under which '*every kind of bird will live in the shade of its branches every winged creature*' speaks to the interconnectedness of the natural world and its power to provide for all of earth's creatures and the providence of God.

Finally, it is noteworthy that, whereas in the Parable of the Sower the birds were presented as a threat to growth, here the interconnectedness and interdependence of the natural world is emphasized, as well as the almost unimaginable possibilities of the power of nature.

The Wheat and the Tares **Matthew 13:24-30** ^{NRSV}

²⁴ He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; ²⁵ but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. ²⁶ So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. ²⁷ And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?' ²⁸ He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' ²⁹ But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. ³⁰ Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'

The Parable of the Wheat and Tares appears only in Matthew's Gospel where it appears directly after the Parable of the Sower and immediately before the Parable of the Mustard Seed, and all three parables must be read and understood in light of one another. As in the other 'seed parables' the focus here is with the entire process and range of actions and reactions that are part of the story.

The tares/darnel was a weed that was similar to wheat in its early stages of growth and therefore difficult to distinguish from the wheat. As they both grow the differences become more apparent but, by this time, the roots are likely to have become intertwined. The servant's desire to intervene is well-intentioned but the master counsels against it, conscious that any such intervention risks pulling up the fledging stalks of wheat as an unintended consequence. He urges patience and allowing both to grow together until the wheat is ready for harvest, when they can be separated, so as not to jeopardise the harvest. The master knows that he has sown good seed and continues to trust in the power of the seed despite the challenge the darnel presents. Rather than intervene, he chooses to trust in the power of good seed to overcome this challenge.

At its surface level, the parable recognises the challenges presented to the growth of the seed and its development to full harvest but insists that one should respect and trust the process rather seeking to intervene lest you cause unintended consequences which adversely affect the harvest. The parable counsels against attempts to manipulate nature to one's own advantage and encourages patience in allowing nature to follow its course.

The Parable of the Fig Tree: Mark 13:28-31^{NRSV}

²⁸ "From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he^{is} is near, at the very gates.

Unlike most trees in Palestine, the fig tree sheds its leaves in winter. Its budding and producing leaves in spring are signs that summer is not far off. The annual cycle of fig tree is presented as a reliable guide to the changing of the season and Jesus encourages his followers to be attentive to the signs within nature that indicate change and the need to prepare for the seasons to come. Even at its most literal level, the parable exhorts Christian readers to be attentive to the signs of the times and changes within nature and to be led by them. In an age of climate change, the ecological call 'to learn the lesson of the fig tree' is more pressing and relevant than ever.