

Reflections on Jesus' parables as metaphorical stories past and present

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Abstract

During the past decades scholars have endeavoured to read Jesus' parables as metaphorical stories. This article provides a theoretical overview of the ongoing debate, reflecting both on past claims and present criticism. The assertion is made that the use of the metaphor as a model to read and study the parables of Jesus, remains valid and should be expanded to include the parables in their particular Gospel settings.

1. INTRODUCTION

There are many ways to approach the study on Jesus' parables, and indeed different methodologies can be applied in interpreting these parables. One approach that has dominated scholarly debate during the past decades has been the interpretation of Jesus' parables as metaphors. The emergence of this approach is amongst others directly related to a revised understanding on what a metaphor is and how it functions.

Traditionally the metaphor was seen to be "an elliptical simile useful for stylistic, rhetorical, and didactic purposes, but which can be translated into a literal paraphrase without any loss of cognitive content" (Johnson 1981:4). The assumptions on which this description is based can be prefigured in terms of two basic components: (1) the focus on the single word, and (2) the notion of a similarity based comparison. For centuries it was believed that individual words themselves have meaning. Inevitably the metaphorical

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transfer of “giving a thing a name that belongs to something else” (Aristotle’s definition of a metaphor; cf Johnson 1981:5) was seen to be on the level of *words*. Accordingly the metaphor itself was seen as the substitution of one word (used literally) with another word (used figuratively) based on the similarities that existed between the two words. Such a substitution was generally seen as a *deviance* from the literal or proper use of a word. As such the function of the metaphor was confined to providing rhetorical and stylistic ornamentation of a truth already (literally) known.

It was only in the twentieth century that the realisation dawned that the basic semantic unit is larger than the word. The semantic breakthrough is reflected in I A Richards’s description of the metaphor. Richards (1981:51) writes: “... when we use a metaphor we have two *thoughts* of different things active together and supported by a single word, or *phrase*, whose meaning is a resultant of their *interaction*” (italics mine). This description highlights a number of crucial factors: (1) Juxtaposed in a metaphor are not just words but thoughts (or worldviews); (2) the thoughts find expression not only through individual words, but phrases (or whole stories), and (3) the meaning of the metaphor is not the result of a literal word being substituted by a figurative word, but interaction; that is two (often diverging) thoughts being juxtaposed. Jan G van der Watt (2000:1-24) provides a most helpful overview on these and other theoretical issues on the metaphor.

The new insights on metaphor have rejuvenated biblical research in various areas, not least of all the parables of Jesus. It is our intention to provide a theoretical overview of *Jesus' parables as metaphorical stories*. This overview is to be reflective in the sense that it will reflect on *past* works whilst also engaging in some of the *present* critique levelled at the parables of Jesus as metaphors. In conclusion it will also provide an impetus for further areas of parable research.

There seems to be no better way to introduce the metaphorical perspective on Jesus’ parables than with the well-known and eloquent definition provided by C H Dodd in *The parables of the kingdom* (1935) (see also Funk 1966:133-162; Patterson 1998:120-162). Dodd ([1935] 1961:5) defines the parable as follows: “At its simplest 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.” The basic elements of Dodd’s definition is to form the structural basis of our discussion.

2. PARABLES ARE METAPHORS

That Jesus’ parables are metaphors has not always been the accepted position. One strategy already employed by the New Testament authors was to read the parables of Jesus as *allegories*. The classical example is the parable of *The Sower* in Mark 4:3-8 which is interpreted allegorically in Mark 4:14-20. According to this method each item is given a deeper, spiritual meaning. Mark also provides the underlying theory: It is not everybody’s prerogative to understand the meaning of the parable, but its understanding is confined to those to whom the “secret of the reign of God” (Mk 4:11) is revealed. It was only natural to assume that the other parables would and should be interpreted similarly. Accordingly throughout most of the church’s history the parables of Jesus have been allegorised.

Some Church Fathers and Reformers protested such allegorising, though at times such allegorical exegesis also crept into their own treatments (cf Kissinger 1979:41-46). Invariably interpreters read into the parables of Jesus various features of their church’s theology, with many of those features having little to do with Jesus’ own intentions. More importantly however, it does seem highly improbable that Jesus would tell parables with the intended purpose that they should not be understood by all his listeners. This view we owe primarily to Adolf Jülicher, who convincingly argues that the allegorisation of parables is a *secondary* procedure. Jülicher ([1960] 1976:61) concludes: “Trotz der Autorität so viele Jahrhunderte, trotz der grösseren Autorität der Evangelisten kann ich die Parabeln Jesu für Allegorien nicht halten. Es spricht nämlich nicht weniger als alles dagegen.” The main premiss for Jülicher’s argument is that parables do not disguise meaning, but by their simple and vivid pictures the meaning is self-evident to its listeners (Jülicher 1976:61-62). With the discovery of the Gospel of *Thomas* Jülicher’s rejection of Jesus’ parables as allegories gained more support. Various synoptical parables with explicit allegorical interpretation occur in *Thomas* without it confirming that the allegory is independent of the parable illustrating the ideology of the evangelists (cf Scott 1990:44). In the light of the arguments above, even those scholars who do accept that the

allegorical interpretation of Jesus' parables forms part of Jesus' own words, insist that this type of interpretation is not the norm, but the exception (cf Purdy 1985:93).

In contrast to allegories that disguise meaning, Jülicher (1976:71) contested that parables seek to illustrate (*veranschaulichen*) a certain teaching. For Jülicher (1976:71) the parable is an instrument of truth (*Beweismittel*) with the task to support and reinforce previous knowledge. Parables are regarded primarily as *Vergleichung* or as *similes*. Two sentences, or two streams of thought are compared (evidenced by the word "like") with another by placing them side by side. The first part is literal (*die Sachhälfte*) and the second part is figurative (*die Bildhälfte*). The comparison calls for a "third" (the *tertium comparationis*), which is the common factor between the subject matter (*Sache*) and the figure (*Bild*), resulting in the *single* meaning of the parable, which inherently illustrates moral behaviour. The Samaritan in the parable of the "Good Samaritan" (Lk 10:30-27), for example, serves to illustrate impartial love, culminating in the (moral) command: "Go and do likewise" (Lk 10:37). For Jülicher a parable cannot posit several points (as happens with allegory), as the *tertium comparationis* can *per se* only provide a single point.

Jülicher's methodology was without doubt a powerful tool to combat an allegorical interpretation of Jesus' parables, but it in turn was based on the false assumption that a parable has only one proper or true meaning which by definition is illustrative of moral behaviour. The pendulum had swung from one extreme to the other. With the rejection of allegory as a notion for parable, one would have expected Jülicher himself to explore the avenue of the metaphor, but instead it is explicitly discarded by him. For Jülicher (1976:52-56) metaphor is purely the rhetorical device of allegory, in kinship with one another. It is the *Vorstufe* of allegory, both of which belong to *uneigentliche Rede*. Metaphor as *uneigentliche Rede* (that speaks about something in terms of something else) burdens and obscures the task of interpretation and is, like the allegory, itself in need of interpretation (Jülicher 1976:57). Jülicher therefore opts to construe the concept of *Vergleichung* in a non-metaphorical way. Ricoeur (1975:90) observes that Jülicher, instead of looking for a solution in Aristotle's *Poetics*, used Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, in particular Book II concerning the "common means of conviction." Jülicher is clearly guided by the traditional view that poetic (figurative) language (being a

deviance from the literal or proper use of language) is not suitable to convey matters of truth. This is further complicated by Jülicher's Aristotelean understanding of how a metaphor functions. The theory of metaphor implicitly assumed by him is a *substitution* theory (a literal word is substituted by a figurative word). The close kinship established by Jülicher between metaphor and allegory, however, disappears if metaphor is not a substitutive process, but one of interaction, as postulated by I A Richards.

Besides his misunderstanding on what a metaphor is, Jülicher is further mistaken in his understanding of what a parable does. Ricoeur (1975:91) advocates that the initial mistake made by Jülicher (see 1976:68) was to identify the *maschal* of Hebrew literature with the *parabole* of Greek rhetoric. The two may not be equated (see also Scott 1990:8-35). *Parabole* means literally to "set aside", or "to throw beside", and as a result functions "as a comparative term, indicating similarity or parallelism" (Scott 1990:19). *Parabole* is an *illustrative* parallel, which under the influence of Aristotle and the Greek Rhetoric, gained the subsidiary meaning of being a "sort of argument" (Scott 1990:20). The Hebraic *maschal*, on the other hand, is quite different. It "links directly the meaning of the saying and a corresponding disposition in the sphere of human existence, without the detour through a general ethical statement which the parable would illustrate" (Ricoeur 1975:91). The parable (*maschal*) in contrast to the *parabole* is therefore not an instrument of proof in need of persuasion, achieved by the use of figurative language. Although there is something "figurative" in the parable, it is not figurative in the *rhetorical* sense, whereby one thing (a word or a thought) stands for something else (substitution and/or comparison theory) and in doing so acts as an auxiliary means of persuasion. Ricoeur (1975:92) contests further that

if the parable is figurative (*bildlich*), it is not as the rhetorical "figure" of a subject matter (*Sache*), but as a "figure" for a mode of being which can be displayed in human experience. The *Sache* – the *issue* – is not a "thought", not a "proposition", which could be written down in "juxtaposition" to the narrative. The "*Sache*" is the *referent* in human existence.

This insight has been overlooked by many scholars. Eckhard Rau (1990:11-26), for example, continues to make a case for a rhetorical approach to parable interpretation and

advocates in support of Jülicher that the *Sachhälfte* forms just as much part of the parable as the *Bildhälfte*. Although the parable does reference an “issue”, this issue does not form an inherent part of the parable itself, but is something, as Ricoeur pointed out, *beyond* the parable in our human existence. The parable juxtaposes the figure (*Bild*) with this referent, which in turn leads to something new, that was not there before. This in turn correlates with the *interaction* theory of metaphors and what a metaphor does (cf Black 1981:72-77).

The road to an alternative and new understanding of Jesus' parables was paved by the *New Hermeneutics* (cf Perrin 1976:110-126). The *New Hermeneutics* created awareness of the *performative* aspect of language. Language has the power to bring into being something that was not there before the words were spoken. Although the practitioners of the *New Hermeneutics* were not literary scholars and as a result gave little attention to *metaphor*, it was their insight that encouraged scholars to explore not only *what* is written, but also *why* something is written and the *effect* it has on its listeners. By juxtaposing not only similar (*epiphors*), but contrasting entities (*diaphors*) (see Wheelwright [1962] 1973:72), both the metaphor and the parable have the power to create something new. Wolfgang Harnisch (1984:109) reflects on this insight:

Entweder setzt die Parabel den Referenten, also das, wovon die Rede sein soll, bereits voraus Was (dann) erzählt wird hat den Charakter eines Arguments, das eine bestimmte Position illustriert Oder aber die Parabel setzt das, wovon die Rede sein soll, allererst in Kraft. In diesem Fall hat die Erzählung performativen Sinn. Sie besitzt kreative Potenz. Dann vermittelt sie dem Adressaten im Medium des Erzählten selbst den Referenten

These two functions, to illustrate and to create something new, may not be confused, as it may be the case in Dodd's definition, in which a parable is defined as being a metaphor *or simile*. Metaphor and simile are not the same. Funk (1966:136) makes the following literary distinction: “A *is* B” is a metaphor, whereas “A *is like* B” is a simile. But essential to an understanding of both the metaphor and the simile is not the literary difference (inclusion or emittance of the word “like”), but the distinctive *function* of both literary forms, that is the *nature* of the metaphor and the simile (cf Funk 1966:136). The

word “like” implies that a simile functions to *illustrate* an entity. A metaphor, however, does not illustrate but *represents* that entity. In a simile a point already been made is illustrated with the purpose of clarification. In a metaphor a point is discovered.

The word “like” (“The kingdom of heaven is *like* ...”) in many synoptical parables has misled many scholars to continue to interpret them solely as some kind of *Vergleichung*, that is as a simile. But it has been argued convincingly that the introductory phrase in at least some cases is secondary (see Harnisch 1984:174). Confined to the parable corpus, Matthew, for example, repeatedly uses the phrase “the kingdom of heaven is like ...”, even in passages which could have Q as their source (cf Mt 18:23; 20:22:2; 25:14). Luke however omits the phrase, and indeed even in such parables whose literary context clearly has the kingdom of God as subject (cf Lk 14:15; 19:11). The literary phrase *per se* should therefore not determine the interpretational approach. Amos Wilder ([1964] 1971:xxi-xxv), a New Testament scholar as well as a poet and authority on general literary criticism, accentuated the value of interpreting a particular work (especially of a narrative nature) as a self-sufficient aesthetic whole. As a poet Wilder knew that with all creative, poem-like texts, the whole is more than the sum of its parts. Before analysing the formal elements of a story, the reader or interpreter should allow the story to speak to him or her as a whole. This “holistic” approach to the parables of Jesus supports the general hypothesis that Jesus’ parables *function* like metaphors. They have a life challenging and a life changing *effect* on the listener. Jesus, like any gifted storyteller, had the ability not only to illustrate the given, but to create worlds in which human events unfold and in which insight is gained about life which without the stories assistance would have remained uncovered.

The view that parables are metaphors has not been without critique. More recently various scholars have again argued for the validity of Jesus’ parables as allegories. This is reflected in Klyne Snodgrass’s (2000:3-29) overview on the history of the interpretation of the parables of Jesus, entitled *From allegorizing to allegorizing*. One of the main proponents of the revised view on parables as allegories is Craig Blomberg. An overview of his views, which includes a sharp criticism against the parables of Jesus as metaphors, is presented in *Interpreting the parables* (Blomberg 1990:29-170). Blomberg’s view of parables as allegories is based primarily on two points. First, he

refutes an understanding of metaphor which rejects the notion of allegory *per se*. Central to his understanding of allegory are the distinctions made by Hans-Josef Klauck (see 1978:91) between *Allegorie* (allegory), *Allegorese* (allegorising), and *Allegorisierung* (allegorisation). Allegory is defined as a rhetorical device applicable to many literary genres which gives a symbolic dimension to a text. Allegorising refers to the process of ascribing to the text hidden, often anachronistic meanings, never intended by the author. Allegorisation is the expansion of a text which originally was an allegory in simpler form. Blomberg (1990:44) attests that the real problem is not allegory or allegorisation, but allegorising. Allegorising, which is equated with an anachronistic interpretation, is rejected, but not allegory. Blomberg's view on allegory is of course largely a debate on semantics involving the meaning of allegory. If allegory is understood as figurative language whereby one entity can stand for something other than itself, Blomberg's argument is legitimate. In such a case allegory and metaphor are not opposites but synonyms (semantically related). For Blomberg (1990:43) a parable is allegorical as long as its overall point "transcends its literal meaning." This view however differs from the understanding attached to allegory by Jülicher, who perceived allegory primarily as a literary genre – a view that is rightly to be rejected. Indeed the whole scholarly debate to distinguish between an allegory and a metaphor is less critical if the view of Madeleine Boucher and John Sider (cited by Snodgrass 2000:16) is held that allegory is not a literary genre at all, but a "way of thinking", it is a "device" or a "mode" of meaning, which applies equally to metaphor.

Blomberg's second rejection of the parables of Jesus as metaphors is largely directed against what seems to be a devaluation of propositional language. The *New Hermeneutics* argued that because parables (as metaphors) are in essence language events *impacting* on the listener (that is conveying *actions*), they in essence do not convey truth in *propositional* form (cf Forbes 2000:35). Blomberg (1990:143) however insists, and indeed rightly so, that every attempt to consistently apply a nonpropositional approach to the parables fail. Invariably the meaning of the parable, or the impact it causes on the listener, can be summarised in discursive speech. Similar sentiments are echoed by Robert Stein (2000:34-38). He fervently rejects any understanding of metaphor as an instrument creative of meaning which cannot be reduced to some form of propositional

interpretation. For Stein (2000:36) the confusion rests on the failure to distinguish between the “referential” and the “commissive” dimensions of communication, which he defines as follows: “Whereas the former is primarily informative in nature, the latter is primarily affective. And whereas the former seeks mainly to convey information, the latter seeks to convey emotion and bring about decision.” The parables as metaphors convey emotion in so far as they impact on the listener. This commissive dimension however does not exclude its referential dimension. Stein (2000:36) therefore rightly argues for a balance between the informative and affective dimensions of language.

The positions of Blomberg and Stein are clearly reactions to an understanding of metaphor in which reference is totally suspended. Although the remarks of some scholars may intimate such an understanding, that is not the common view. Metaphoric language does lead to a suspension of the referential function of ordinary language (that is the reference of the literal statement), but that does not mean the *abolition* of reference (cf Ricoeur 1975:83-84). Furthermore, the reference of metaphor is not fixed and one-dimensional (that is in a one-to-one relationship between *Bild* and *Sache*). The paradox of metaphorical reference provides a multi-dimensional or ambiguous reference. The prodigal in the parable of the “Prodigal Son” (Lk 15:11-32), for example, references intratextually both the tax collectors and sinners (cf Lk 15:1-2) as well Jesus himself (cf Lk 7:34), and extratextually all those “outsiders” who *per se* are excluded from the “people of God.”

Vital for an understanding of metaphor, is not “what” it references, but “how” it references (see also 5 below). The “how” highlights the performative power of the metaphor to *create* new meanings, foremost through the juxtaposition of dissimilar entities. Although the meaning(s) of a metaphor (and its references) can be summarised in propositional language, such a summary will inevitably be restrictive and fail to capture the impact of the metaphor. This metaphorical impact and the power to make the audience see reality differently constitutes the very essence of Jesus’ parables and confirms the first element of Dodd’s definition: Jesus’ parables are metaphors.

3. THE EVERYDAYNESS OF PARABLE

The everydayness of parable reflects on the second element of Dodd’s definition “... drawn from nature or common life ...” Jesus made extensive use of the “everydayness”

of his listeners. His parables were drawn from the common experience of those to whom he spoke. They came from the world of a first-century agrarian society, a world of villages and small urban towns, of aristocrats and peasants, of agriculture, of landlords and tenants, of sowing and harvesting, of fishers, shepherds and labourers. The fictive events that Jesus created were typical of that world. They involved disputes on rent, family and social frictions, surprised discoveries and dangerous journeys. In the history of parable research much indispensable work has been done to fill in the cultural and social world in which the parables of Jesus originally made sense. One of the most helpful historical studies is that of Joachim Jeremias, *Die Gleichnisse Jesu* ([1963] 1984). More recent works which take full cognisance of the social and anthropological insights of the first-century Mediterranean world, are those of Bernard B Scott, *Hear, then the parable* (1990), and William R Herzog II, *Parables as subversive speech* (1994). Events and scenes which might seem foreign to the modern reader are most familiar, everyday scenes for the original audience. Wilder (1971:73) speaks of the “secularity of the parables”. The parables hardly take up “religious” themes, but visualise a world known to the “man on the street.” This very important aspect of Jesus’ parables has however also resulted in a most common fallacy in parable interpretation. Based on the everydayness of Jesus’ parables, especially those scholars within the historical-critical paradigm, like Jeremias (1984:23) and others, have argued that Jesus’ parables are based on actual (historical) events. Scott (1990:41) however correctly points out that whether a parable is based on an actual event or not is beside the point and “mistakes verisimilitude for reality”. In spite of the commonness of Jesus’ parables, the parables are and remain to be stories in which everyday events and people are *fictionalised*. Failure to take cognisance of the fictional character of parables, has led to various other problems in parable interpretation. Hyperbole, for example, has often been seen as the one point at which the parables of Jesus diverge from realism. A camel simply cannot go through the eye of a needle (Lk 18:25) try as it may. In interpreting this aphorism, some scholars have made an attempt to find an actual event to which the aphorism could allude. Reference has been made to a small entry in the wall of Jerusalem through which a fully-loaded camel could only squeeze with great difficulty (cf Rienecker 1982:432). But hyperbole is not an actual event, nor is it the opposite of realism. Funk (1966:161) in studying the metaphorical nature of Jesus’ parables, argues that hyperbole is “stepped-

up” realism. It belongs to the nature of metaphorical language in general and to Jesus’ parables in particular, that everydayness is at certain points “intensified”, or “dramatised” with the clear intention to heighten the effect to be realised by the story (see also Scott 1990:41). Awareness of the fictional character of Jesus’ parables also lays at bay the search for the one *Sitz im Leben* of a particular parable. Parables have freedom of context. Although initially being told to a particular audience at a fixed time in history, parables as “fictional stories” or as “aesthetic objects” can be used in different situations and fulfil a multi-functional purpose. This does not make them ahistorical. On the contrary. Juxtaposed within the parables of Jesus as metaphors are still two entities of which one is embedded within the everyday context of first-century Palestinian society. Awareness of this context is imperative for the interpreter, not only to guard against another fallacy, that of “misdirected concreteness” (failure to bridge the gap between the world of the interpreter and that of an ancient text), but more importantly to understand the thrust of the metaphorical language (cf Van Aarde 1985:568).

Everydayness is clearly not an arbitrary ingredient in the parables of Jesus. It forms the locus of the parable’s intentionality. By using common scenes, known to the listener and with which the listener can immediately identify, Jesus was drawing the listener in the world of the parable he was constructing. He was not just telling them about a new world, but through the everydayness of his parables he was getting them “caught up” in this world. A parable cannot fulfil its function if it is being read or studied from a detached, uninvolved position. The parable is only completed when the listener or reader enters the world of the parable and becomes part of the events and reality described. The everydayness of Jesus’ parables *creates* this possibility. The world of the parable becomes his or her world.

Sharing the world of the parable has raised awareness of a listener’s identification with characters. Whenever a story is told, a listener identifies with a particular character. This may change as the story unfolds. The parable of the “Good Samaritan” (Lk 11:30-35) serves as an illustration. In listening to the story, a listener may initially identify with the priest or the Levite. When the expected help does not materialise, identification with the *good* Samaritan follows. It should be noted, however, how identification with the Samaritan depends on the audience’s willingness to do so. The animosity between Judeans and Samaritans would disqualify the identification of a Judean (the probable

initial audience of the parable) with a Samaritan enticing him to identify with the victim, the one person left undescribed in the parable (Funk 1996:176-178). But identification with the victim changes the thrust of the story. The listener is faced with an unexpected challenge, which he or she might never have faced up to, if not drawn into the story by its everydayness. Funk (1966:155) notes that the listener does not initially say “yes” to the reality portrayed in and through the parable, but to the commonness and the realism of the events described. It is this very procedure which makes the metaphorical story so effective to change and to create a new vision on reality. A person is confronted with something new, without having expected it. Harnisch (1984:144) writes: “Das Vertraute [the everydayness] wird von Nicht-Vertrauten *hintergangen*”, and indeed at a stage when the listener has already been drawn into the story.

The effect caused by the story on the listener accentuates the importance of “story.” The story of a parable cannot simply be done away with, to be replaced by a set of ethical or moral statements; nor can individual words or phrases be substituted with literal equivalents (allegory) without cognitive loss. The temptation always remains. But to accede to this temptation is to overlook an essential characteristic of metaphorical language. Funk (1966:158) likens the parable to a “picture puzzle”, which prompts the question, What is wrong with the picture? The picture itself displays a familiar, everyday world. But the *everydayness* is distorted. The tension evoked by the parable relies on the “literal” (everyday event or person) to remain “literal”, and not to be substituted with another meaning, or to be converted into something else. By taking the pieces of the puzzle away, or by substituting the pieces with an already completed picture, destroys the puzzle and fails to recognise how a metaphor works. In telling his parables, Jesus was suggesting that God encounters his people in the concrete everydayness of their lives. But by making extensive use of metaphorical language, Jesus was challenging them to see that familiar world in a new way (cf Patterson 1998:127). For this to happen, the familiar has to remain familiar. While at the same time everydayness cannot simply be equated to the parable’s functionality. A parable is not about “everydayness”, everydayness is the means to an end. Funk (1966:158) postulates that metaphorical language does not look *at* a phenomenon, but *through* it. It functions like a model. It filters the information. But by doing so it unfolds a new world. This new world which opens up is

both extraordinarily similar and strangely different to the everyday world of the parabolic listener. This leads us to the third element of Dodd's definition.

4. THE PARADOXICAL NATURE OF PARABLE

The third element of Dodd's definition is: "... arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness ...". Our focus falls primarily on the words "vividness" and "strangeness." A story depicting the everyday can at times be arresting, especially if vividly narrated. But why should a story told by Jesus in which common situations and characters are used be regarded as strange? Dodd had observed what since then has become a central issue in parable interpretation. Even though Jesus used common situations and characters in his stories, the way he used them was far from common. Once the world of the parable is entered, the parable makes some unexpected twists and turns by which the familiar world of everyday experiences and expectations is replaced by a challenging and at times most distorting picture. In his structural analysis of narrative parables Scott (1981:98-103) shows that at least one actant in Jesus' parables is moved from an *expected* position to an *unexpected* position. Again this is most clearly illustrated by the parable of the "Good Samaritan" (Lk10:30-35). The original Judean audience would have expected the introduction of a Judean layman after the priest and the Levite failed to help the man fallen amongst the robbers. But a despised Samaritan enters the story and instead of fulfilling the role of an opponent, he is placed into the position of a helper. This and other unexpected twist and turns follow on various levels and are not confined to the broad strokes of a narrative's structure. In the parable of the "Prodigal son" (Lk 15:11-32) the familiar is consistently distorted by socially strange and unfamiliar behaviour. The younger son who in Hebrew literature is often portrayed as the favourite son, brings endless shame on his family: Even before his father's death, he claims his inheritance, thereby declaring his father to be dead. He departs to a *foreign* country and feeds *pigs*, thereby breaking with both his family and religion. On his return, the father runs to embrace and to kiss his son, and indeed before the son can portray tangible repentance of his sin. The strangeness of the parable lies in the *distortion* of the everydayness. What seems to be an everyday event or action suddenly changes into something quite extraordinary. The everydayness of the parable is undermined.

From the above it is clear that it makes no sense to regard certain words in a parable to be literal and others to be metaphorical. The whole narrative is told on the level of ordinary (literal) life events and actions. The bearers of the metaphor are therefore not the individual sentences of the narrative, but the whole structure, the story as a whole. Accordingly the "tension" is not between words but between the everyday *reality* of the listener and that of the story. Ricoeur (1975:95-96), whom we referred to earlier in this regard, writes that the kind of tension which can be found in the parables "offer no inner tension between tenor and vehicle because of the 'normalcy' of the narrative and little tension between literal and metaphorical interpretation of the message itself. The 'tension' is entirely on the side of the vision of reality between the insight displayed by the fiction and our ordinary way of looking at things."

The question remains, of course, how the listener or reader will know that a particular narrative conveying an everyday event is the bearer of a metaphorical process? What clues are available? Much has been written on this topic, all of which cannot be repeated here (see Ricoeur 1975:98-99; Klauck 1978:143-145). Central however is the "element of extravagance" (Ricoeur 1975:99). The term "extravagance" refers to the presence of the "extraordinary" within the "ordinary." An everyday, ordinary event is narrated, with extraordinary behaviour on the parts of certain characters or unexpected turns in events. Examples of such language in Jesus' parables are for example: A Samaritan not only helping a (Judean) man lying half dead next to the road, but also taking him to the inn and paying all expenses; or an oriental father running down the road to welcome home a prodigal son; or a landlord whose servants have been killed by his tenants sending his only son to risk a similar fate. These distortions open a gap in our thinking, which in turn makes room for a new and alternative vision on reality.

The use of extravagance within the everydayness of Jesus' parables have often been misunderstood. For Blomberg everydayness and extravagance are mutually exclusive. Blomberg (1990:139) writes: "... it is better to see the unusual features in Jesus' parables as more straightforward pointers to their allegorical nature." However the way Blomberg uses the term "allegory" does not disqualify the metaphorical function of extravagant language. Everydayness points to the way that parables address human

existence. Extravagance in turn points to the way in which this familiar human existence is shattered (cf Snodgrass 2000:14).

Based on the nature of the metaphor, in particular the diaphor, Crossan (1975) has explored in depth both the paradoxical nature of parabolic speech and its function. Crossan draws amongst others on the study of Sheldon Sacks (cf Crossan 1975: 57-62) who argued that all literary forms serve a particular function within their social setting; the three most important forms being: satire, apologue, and action. Apologue defends world, action investigates world, and satire attacks world. Crossan (1975:47-57) then expands Sacks' typology by adding two other literary forms, myth and parable. "Myth" is seen to be reconciliatory and fulfils the basic function of establishing and reinforcing what within a particular society has been accepted as the norm. It has normative function. In contrast the basic function of "parable" is seen to be contradiction. Whereas myth constitutes and legitimises a social world, parable undermines and shatters the world into which it is spoken. It has a subversive function.

Not all scholars agree with Crossan that parables are always and solely world "shattering." John B Cobb, Jr (1980:158), for example, makes a case that we "cannot live by subversion alone." Cobb (1980:159) argues that by placing all stories on a single line from world-establishing to world-subversion, Crossan fails to give enough attention to a parables ability to "transform" the world of its listeners. Cobb (1980:159) writes: "... to transform is neither to establish alone nor to subvert alone. It includes both moments. A world cannot be transformed without being shaken and disrupted, without losing its character of world. But this subversion in itself is not transformation, it is simply destruction." Cobb's statement is true, of course, and creates a valuable balance between destruction and transformation. It furthermore raises awareness of the fallacy of absolute categorisation. The strength of Crossan's work, however, remains in creating *awareness* of the subversive nature of Jesus' parables.

For a twenty-first century reader, the paradoxical and world-shattering nature of Jesus' parables may not always be self-evident. The main reason being that the twenty-first century reader (especially in the West) lives in a socially vastly different world. What for us might be socially acceptable behaviour, a father rushing towards his home-coming son, is for a first-century Judean dishonourable and shameful behaviour. What

seems to be an ordinary, epiphoric (illustrative) juxtaposition of entities, is discovered to be extraordinary and diaphoric (paradoxical), and as a result puzzling and enticing.

Failure to register the social and cultural setting of the parables of Jesus will not only contribute to the failure of the interpreter to note their often paradoxical nature, but will inevitably also lead to the practise of anachronism. In this regard Herzog (1994:38) makes a helpful distinction between “anachronising” and “modernising.” Modernising is advocated as being an inevitable condition of historical inquiry. Historians who read and interpret a text cannot detach themselves totally from their own world. To some extent, it is the very world of the historian that makes perception possible, whether it is done consciously or unconsciously. Anachronising is described by Herzog (1994:38) as “unconscious modernising.” Failing to register the social and cultural world of the text, the modern interpreter unconsciously reads the world of the text as if it was his or her own. It is such “unconscious modernising” that often blurs the paradoxical and subversive nature of Jesus’ parables. When however the paradox and the subversiveness of the parables are noticed, they pose an unsettling and highly enticing challenge. This leads us to the third element of Dodd’s definition.

5. THE CHALLENGE OF PARABLE

Dodd’s definition on a parable concludes with the line: “... and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought”. The word “doubt” implies that the application of the parable is not specified; it remains open-ended, until the listener is drawn into the parable and specifies it for him- or herself (cf Funk 1966:133). The application does not form part of the parable itself. The parable “teases” and “ignites” thought. It challenges the listener to see the world and reality differently. The application is concluded by the listener in his or her own particular situation.

Within the synoptic tradition many parables *do have* an application. However the synoptic moment a parable is given such an application, the original thrust of the parable is radically reduced. According to Borg (1997:12-14) this is a natural process when a novel metaphor (heard for the first time) is conventionalised (becomes part and parcel of everyday language use). Borg’s understanding of this process is closely associated with Ricoeur’s understanding of religious language. Because of the metaphors’ aptness to

speak of the unknown (the transcendental world) in terms of the known (the empirical world), Ricoeur (cf Borg 1997:12-13) argued that religious experience invariably finds expression in metaphors. However over a period of time the metaphors become conventionalised to the point that the metaphoricity has (in part) been forgotten. By way of example Borg (1997:13) refers to a number of metaphors which seek to express the relationship between Jesus and God, and/or Jesus and ourselves: Jesus as the servant of God, lamb of God, light of the world, bread of life, door, vine, shepherd, great high priest, son of God, wisdom of God. Once these metaphors have become common, they are systematised into a conceptual framework, which culminates into the formulation of fixed doctrine. The metaphor “son of God” serves as an example (cf Borg 1997:13-14). Originally a metaphor of intimate family *relationship*, it has through conceptual reflexion developed into an ontological statement about the ultimate *status* of Jesus, climaxing in the doctrinal statements of the Nicene Creed: “only begotten Son of God”, “true God of true God”, and “of one substance as the Father.” The initial imaginative shock (God actually being a “father” to us) is substituted by a doctrinal statement to be believed and confessed.

The essence of metaphor, and indeed the parables of Jesus, is the element of surprise. When Jesus’ parables are read as metaphors within the social setting of the first-century Mediterranean world, they reveal unexpected twists and turns, which are highly troublesome and intensely thought provoking. Basic assumptions of human life and perceptions of God are called into question. Questions are raised, but the parables themselves seldom resolve to give an answer. They “tease into active thought”, and challenge conventional perceptions. It is this observation that has led to the conclusion that Jesus’ parables *function* as metaphors. Funk (1966:144) quotes A T Cadoux who advocates that “almost all the parables ... were spoken in attack or defence.” Cadoux accordingly concludes that the parables of Jesus are “argumentative” in character; that is, points (set of ideas) are presented to persuade the listener into seeing something differently. But clearly Jesus’ parables were not argumentative in the sense that valid premisses for and against an argument were put forward which could either be verified or falsified. Instead a world (a new vision of reality) was drawn which was juxtaposed with the conventional world of the audience. That being the case, the parables of Jesus are not

“ideational” at all, with a set of ideas being “weight-up” against one other (cf Funk 1966:149). *Worlds* are contrasted revealing something new that was not there before. As the result of the challenge being posed, some listeners may “shut the door” on the alternative world of the parable, whereas others may “take up the challenge” and endeavour to enter it. The challenge is not an appeal to the will, “Do this”, but rather, “Consider seeing it this way” (Borg 1994:75). “This way” may be unreconcilably different to the world known and experienced by the listener.

Worlds being juxtaposed again raises the issue of reference and poses two related questions: (1) What is referenced by the parable? and (2) What is the direction of reference? The juxtaposition of two worlds has been understood by some scholars as a total abolition of reference. This is however not the case. The word “juxtapose” is used consciously to contrast it with the word “transfer.” This is done to distinguish between metaphor and allegory and also to guard against the traditional understanding of metaphor whereby the meaning of one word is *transferred* to another word (substitution theory). Referencing remains central to the metaphorical process.

Ricoeur (1981:239) distinguished between a “first-” and a “second-order” reference. The “first-order” reference is the reference for the literal level. The “second-order” reference is for the nonliteral level when the literal level is suspended. In the parables of Jesus the second-order referent is sometimes explicitly named. In many cases, however, it is left unspecified. In such cases the referent is generally assumed to be the kingdom (rule) of God, or more precisely its fictional re-description (cf Scott 1990:48). This assumption is based on the centrality of the kingdom of God in the language, message, and teaching of Jesus. The *status* of the kingdom of God, however, remains to be a controversial issue and constitutes an ongoing debate. An invaluable contribution was made by Norman Perrin. Since Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer kingdom of God has generally been understood as an apocalyptic concept, with both a present and a future dimension. Perrin (1976:33) however rejects the notion of a concept for kingdom of God all together in favour of a *symbol*. A “concept” grasps cognitive experience and can be translated into discursive speech. A “symbol”, however, is perceptive and experiential and cannot be substituted by some larger meaning, or a set of meanings. Perrin’s understanding of symbol is based on the distinction made by Peter

Wheelwright (1973:92) between *tensive* and *steno* symbols. Kingdom of God is not a *steno* symbol in a one-to-one relationship to what it describes, but a *tensive* symbol which by definition is open-ended and polyvalent. As a *tensive* symbol kingdom of God does not describe one particular, fixed meaning, but is itself symbolic and incapable of complete capture. Scott (1990:61) contests that opting to interpret Jesus' parables exclusively against the background of the apocalyptic, restricts that which kingdom of God as a symbol references. As a symbol in Jesus' parables, kingdom of God opens onto a wide range of associations. The *mediate* "second-order" referent of the parable is the kingdom of God. But the *ultimate* referent is human reality in its wholeness (cf Scott:1990:62).

Based on this insight we have used the word "worlds" to define the entities juxtaposed in the parables of Jesus. As such "world" is used interchangeably with worldview (a view on reality), which includes a convergence of the temporal and the transcendent. A narrative (story) always reflects the worldview of the author. Accordingly the parables of Jesus reference on a "second-order" the distinctive worldview of Jesus (or that of the evangelists). This worldview is juxtaposed with the worldview of the person or community to whom the parable is addressed. The worldview of the storyteller (Jesus/evangelist) is reflected in the world of the fictional narrative. The worldview of the listener is reflected in the "everydayness" of the narrative and the repertoire of associations it calls to mind. Scott (1990:36) shows how the parables of Jesus repeatedly draw on the conventions of Israel's heritage. Their "everydayness" consists not only of events that could happen everyday, but also of allusions to well-known stories and themes in the history of Israel, termed "mythemes." The word "mytheme" consists of the two words "myth" and "theme." "Myth" is used in the sense of stories which establish, legitimise, and sustain a social world. They impress a dominant worldview on a particular society. An example of such a mytheme is that of the two-sons, a common theme in the Hebrew Scriptures: Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob, and so on (cf Scott 1990:109; see also Syrén 1993). The younger son, although often a rogue is portrayed as the favourite, with the older son usually portrayed as the one not loved by the father. A parable starting with "A man had two sons" (Lk 15:11) immediately places the parable within a known story tradition (articulating a particular worldview). But as

Crossan (1975:54-57) rightly contests, Jesus parables are not myth, but antimyth. The “challenge” posed to a new vision on reality is along the path of disordering the mythical world. The “mythical world” is juxtaposed with the “world of parable” in a diaphoric structure.

That scholars have often overlooked the diaphoric nature of Jesus' parables is related to the second question posed above: What is the direction of reference? For Scott (1990:47-51) this is a central issue in the understanding of the metaphorical process. Scott (1990:47) elaborates: “Does the transference go from parable to referent or the other way around? Does the referent determine the understanding of the parable? ... Is the parable a true illustration or is it dictated by what it illustrates?”

The natural notion acceded to by most interpreters in the past is for the direction of transference to be from referent (kingdom of God) to parable. In such a case the parable is indeed an ornament of something already known in need of further illustration with no cognitive value. The referent is used to determine how the parable is to be interpreted with the result that the first-order (literal) reference is often bypassed by the interpreter. An example given by Scott (1990:48-49) is the interpretation of the “leaven” in Matthew 13:33. Although leaven is a well-known example from the ancient world that stands for “corruption”, interpreters consistently argue that in this parable “leaven” cannot signify that, because it is a parable of the kingdom, that is something “good.” The parable is robbed of its cognitive value and indeed becomes an illustration of an already known referent, not to speak of the exegetical illegitimacy of bypassing the literal level for a secondary level. Scott (1990:49) argues for the transference to be from the parable to the referent (symbol), which allows for a “literal” understanding of the parable on the first level. This coheres with our understanding of metaphor as an *instrument* of knowledge. The metaphorical process remains one of juxtaposing two entities (worlds), exposing both similarities and differences between the parable and the referent. Whereas the substitution theory of metaphor (epiphor) taught us to focus on the similarities, the interaction theory of tension metaphors (diaphor) has taught us not only to take *notice* of the dissimilarities, but has *demand*ed a connection. Demanding a connection where no connection is naturally perceived, paves the way for a new vision. Strong dissimilarities should therefore not be bypassed, but heighten the awareness that the dissimilarity may

well be a way of challenging a listeners vision of the referent. The choice in parable, as so rigorously advocated by Crossan (see 4 above), should however not be a choice for the one (its diaphoric nature) *against* the other (its epiphoric nature). In essence, parable can do both, either exploit the associations (mythemes) that resound in the narrative (epiphor), or turn against them (diaphor) (cf Scott 1990:61). Invariably however the parables of Jesus, as a teacher of an “alternative wisdom”, pose a *challenge* to conventional perceptions on life and reality, deeply imbedded in the religious and social structures of the first-century Palestine.

6. PARABLE AND CONTEXT

In the past the exploration of Jesus’ parables *as metaphors* was largely confined to the context of the *historical Jesus*. The context, however, in which many of these parables have been transmitted is that of the Gospels. This process has in itself been attributed to the uniqueness of metaphorical language, in particular its polyvalent character. The polyvalence of metaphorical language was especially pursued by Crossan. In *Cliffs of fall*, Crossan (1980:9-10) argues that no metaphor has a precise, univocal, absolute, or fixed meaning to begin with. It has by nature a “*void of meaning* at its core.” This “void of meaning” awaits *discourse* to give it specification. Parables as metaphors are therefore by definition not confined to one *Sitz im Leben*. They have a freedom of independence and can be imbedded into different contexts.

Because no specific meaning can be attributed to a metaphor, the original context in which a parable was used can also not determine the true or universal meaning of that parable in *all* contexts. The meaning is always dependent on the context in which the parable features. This means, that the challenge posed by a parable imbedded in one of the Gospels may differ from the “same parable” used by Jesus. This should not be confused with the endeavour of an interpreter to obtain insight into the historical situation of a particular parable. Historical insight is essential to avoid misunderstanding and an arbitrary, ethnocentric, and misdirected reinterpretation of a parable. But an interpretation of the parables in one of the Gospels is not dependent on the interpretation of the same (or a similar) parable told by Jesus in a different social setting to a different

audience. Hypothetically there may either be continuity or discontinuity between a particular parable as used by Jesus and an evangelist respectively.

Based on the past studies of the historical Jesus scholars, the question that needs to be explored further is, whether the parables attributed to Jesus cease to *function* as metaphors in their respective Gospel settings. This seems to be intimated by various scholars. With regard to the parable of the "Good Samaritan" (Lk 10:[25] 30-37), for example, scholars have been quick to make "value judgements" on Luke's use of the parable. Crossan (1973:63-66) argues that Luke "confused" the metaphorical with the literal. Funk (1996:170) suggests that Luke "misunderstood" the parable as used by Jesus. Patterson (1998:122) advocates that it was Luke's clear "intention" to use the parable as an example story (in stead of metaphorical story as used by Jesus). Words like "confused" or "misunderstood", however, hardly do justice to Luke. Indeed, Luke may have had different intentions than Jesus in telling the parable, but this in itself does not nullify the metaphorical nature attributed to these parables. In order to determine whether a particular parable functions as a metaphor, it does not suffice to look at the words and sentences that constitute the parable and its immediate co-text, but one needs to take cognisance of the whole "world" both intratextually (the narrative world) and extratextually (the contextual world) into which the parable has been imbedded. Historical Jesus scholars make a great effort in determining the "world" of the historical Jesus, but often fail to do the same for the "world" of the evangelist and the audience to whom his Gospel has been addressed. The result is that the exploration of the parables within the gospels is confinement to the level of individual words and sentences. Philosophers like I A Richards and Max Black have taught us that metaphor involves the juxtaposition of "thoughts" or, as we have contested "worldviews", which are articulated in the stories we tell one another. These "worldviews" need to be explored as we study the parables of Jesus in their Gospel settings, both on a micro and a macro level, both intratextually and extratextually. This is an avenue worth pursuing.

7. CONCLUSION

Viewing Jesus' parables as metaphors has led to a scientific eruption in parable research. In many ways the approach has been most valuable and will continue to form an integral part of parable research. The criticism raised by contemporary scholars has created

awareness of the danger of claiming absoluteness (only one true way to look at a phenomenon), whereas these scholars themselves are faced with the danger of over-reacting and “throwing the baby out with the bathwater.” There is little doubt that there is a definite resemblance between the way a metaphor and a parable told by Jesus *functions*. As such the metaphor serves as model and becomes a “lens” through which an interpreter can and should view the parables of Jesus. This lens, we believe, should not only “zoom in” on the reconstructed parables of the historical Jesus, but also on the parables of Jesus as told or re-told by the evangelists in their particular gospel setting.

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