

## **Synopsis of “Parable” Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels (K.R. Snodgrass)**

K.R. Snodgrass introduces parables by differentiating between the English word *parable*, referring to “a short narrative with two levels of meaning,” and the Greek and Hebrew sense of the word, which is much broader. He aptly describes the parables of Jesus as “both works of art and the weapons he used in the conflict with his opponents,” citing them as Jesus’ preferred teaching method used to explain the kingdom, character and expectations of God. Although there is a body of tradition which argues that Jesus’ parables have only one point, the author argues that “many parables convey two or three truths, and there be several correspondences between a specific parable and the reality it portrays.”

What follows is a history of interpretation, which the author maintains as a virtual prerequisite for studying the parables of Jesus. The author points out the significance of the two-volume work by German NT scholar A. Julicher from the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Before Julicher and throughout the history of the church, the parables were for the most part allegorized instead of interpreted, and the author adduces several examples of this, stating that this practice remained “the dominant means of interpretation” until the end of the nineteenth century.

Although Julicher was not the first to repudiate allegorizing, Snodgrass states that his writing “...sounded the death knell on this interpretive procedure.” The author notes that Julicher denied that Jesus used allegory, describing the parables as “simple and straightforward comparisons that do not require interpretation.” Subsequent studies of parable interpretation, according to Snodgrass, of necessity “had to deal with Julicher’s views.” He cites those who refuted Julicher’s “one point” theory, and notes the significant contribution made to the field by C.H. Dodd and J. Jeremias, who both “...tried to understand the parables of Jesus in their historical and eschatological context,” with Dodd understanding Jesus’ message as “realized eschatology.”

The article discusses additional approaches to interpretation, particularly the existentialist, structuralist and literary approaches. Beginning in the 1980’s, several shifts occurred in parable studies under the influence of literary criticism, which has emphasized the reader-response approach, describe as “highly subjective” and yielding “a variety of meanings.” Snodgrass asserts that such subjective approaches to the parables are “not interpretations at all,” and maintains that the historical context is essential for a proper interpretation. Also cited is the “alternative trend” of examining the parables in light of early rabbinic parables, citing D. Flusser, a Jewish NT scholar, as providing the most important research in this regard. However, Flusser’s views provides a challenge to Julicher as well as Jeremias, and the concept of reader-response to parables. Finally, the author describes the more recent work of C. Blomberg as being quite divergent from the earlier work of Julicher and Jeremias

The article continues with the discussion of the definition of *parabole*, the Greek word for “parable,” which carries a significantly broader meaning than the English word. The article describes the range of meaning for *parabole*, including those meanings derived from the Hebrew word *masal*.

Beyond the meanings of the words, the article addresses four commonly distinguished forms of parables, and describes each in detail: similitude, example story, parable, and allegory, noting, “Although this fourfold classification is popular, many scholars find it unworkable.

The characteristics of the parables are described in terms of their being “brief and symmetrical,” and designed to elicit thought. It is observed that the “crucial matter is placed at the end of the parables, and correspondingly, ‘the rule of end stress’ requires that the interpretation focus on the end of the parable.”

In addressing the use of parables prior to Jesus, the author cites the fact that there are “both Greek and Semitic antecedents” to Jesus’ parables, but points out that there is no record of them having been used consistently before Jesus.

With regard to the distribution of the parables in the gospels, it is noted that approximately one-third of Jesus’ teaching is in parabolic form, and in the synoptic gospels these are arranged in thematic form.

The authenticity of the parables is strongly attested to by the author, who cites their almost universal acceptance as “..some of the most authentic and reliable teaching from Jesus,” with even the Jesus Seminar citing only three of Jesus’ parables as not spoken by Jesus. The author goes on, however, to assail the methods of the Jesus Seminar as well as other earlier scholars, who have “succumbed to the tendency to find a Jesus who is amenable with modern expectations.” Acknowledging that the Evangelists have shaped the presentation of the parables in a manner consistent with their authorial purposes, the author asserts that “...any attempt to identify the *ipsissima verba* (the exact words) of Jesus is naïve at best. The Gospels present the *ipsissima vox* (the very voice) of Jesus, and nowhere is that voice so clearly heard as in the parables.”

The purpose of the parables is described as “avenues to understanding,” ultimately designed to lead people to grasp the reality of the kingdom of God and to order their lives accordingly. The writer engages in a lengthy analysis of Mark 4:10-12 in light of the message and structure of Mark’s gospel as a whole, pointing out that, despite the inference that the parable in question seems to say that it is designed to “cover” the truth, in context it becomes obvious that this is a parable about hearing. Snodgrass concludes, “Jesus taught in parables to elicit hearing and obedient response.”

Finally, the author offers eight helpful guidelines for interpretation, and closes by addressing the teaching of the parables as a whole, described as “...the coming of the kingdom of God and the resulting discipleship that is required.” This includes both the present and future aspects of the kingdom, as well as issues concerning discipleship, such as the right use of wealth and prayer.