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The Interpretation of Parables: Exploring “Imaginary Gardens with Real Toads”

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Introduction¹

“Nowhere else in the world’s literature has such immortality been conferred on anonymity.”²

Throughout most of the church’s history it has allegorized the parables. The classic example of this, though we might produce many others, is Augustine’s (AD 350-430) treatment of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37):

...the wounded man stands for Adam; Jerusalem, the heavenly city from which he has fallen; the thieves, the devil who strips Adam of his immortality and leads him to sin; the priest and Levite, the Old Testament Law and ministry which was unable to cleanse and save anyone; the good Samaritan who binds the wounds, Christ who forgives sin; oil and wine; hope and stimulus to work, the animal, the incarnation; the inn, the church; and the innkeeper, the apostle Paul.³

We stand in amazement wondering if Augustine has left any stone unturned. Obviously, such allegorizing has disastrous effects on the practical authority of the Bible for its message becomes completely obscured and there is no reasonable method whereby we can adjudicate between competing interpretations. Thankfully, lest these small, but great stories of Christ be lost to the church, there has been some progress in parable study since then.

A (Extremely) Brief History of Parable Interpretation

Augustine’s fanciful, and certainly incorrect interpretation(s) of the parable of the Good Samaritan led many commentators in a post-Enlightenment (i.e., conscious of the historical-critical method) setting to argue for two important correctives. First, the parables are not allegories, from which highly suspicious and dubious readings can claim authorial intention and second, parables convey only one main point.

Though writers had criticized the allegorical approach before him, Adolf Jülicher’s two volume work, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*⁴, denounced the allegorical approach and justifiably brought an end to it. He argued that the parables were not allegories and that whenever allegory did occur it was the addition of the evangelists, not the authentic teaching of the historical Jesus; Jesus only sought to convey a general religious maxim through simple, straightforward comparison (cf. the parable of the sower). Thus Jülicher’s work served to correct a gross error in one direction, but as it turns out—and as is often the case—it swung the pendulum too far in the other direction.

...by Book/Passage
...by Series
...by Media
...by Language
Related Topics:
History
Bibliology (The Written Word)
Spiritual Life

Thus, in the following years and into the early 20th century Jülicher’s work was severely criticized on many fronts. Many found his definition of metaphor inadequate and his understanding of allegory incorrect. Further, a more devastating critique involved his arguments about the nature of parables. Many scholars recognized that his view of Biblical parables was much more dependent on ideas from Greek rhetoric than on examples from Hebrew literature where allegory was much more common. Finally, it was obvious that for all he had done to put an end to fanciful interpretation, he had confused the literary device of allegory with the hermeneutic of *allegorizing*; the two are not the same and thus Jülicher’s work stood in need of correction.⁵

Parable research in the 20th century (i.e., 1930-1970) has been dominated by the work of C. H. Dodd and Joachim Jeremias. They responded to Jülicher’s attempt to reduce the parables to general maxims and instead sought through the textual *form* of the parable to reconstruct a likely original form and historical situation for a parable. The desire to construct an original form of a parable continues still, though two new developments have emerged.

First, with the advent of a reader-response approach to scripture—e.g., the phenomenological approach of R. W. Funk and J. D. Crossan—there has been much more attention paid to the original impact and “surprising reversal” of the parable. Though evangelicals will find much useful material here, the presuppositions with which Funk and Crossan approach the text are at odds with scripture’s self claims and evangelical understandings of scripture’s divine inspiration.

Second, Dan O. Via, Jr., following the work of Murray Krieger, Northrop Frye, and Philip Wheelwright, has pursued a different emphasis in parable research and interpretation. Referred to as the aesthetic-rhetorical approach, it is less concerned with the particular historical situation in which the various parables developed, but rather in the aesthetic qualities of the parables themselves. Via sees their internal pattern as a clue to their interpretation and uses Aristotelian categories of comic (rising) and tragic (falling) plot lines to elucidate their meaning.⁶

The Nature of Jesus’ Parables

The number of Jesus’ parables varies between 45 and 60 depending how one classifies a parable. In any case, they represent a great deal of his teaching, perhaps up to one-third. Therefore, it behooves us to study them diligently and above all respond to him through them.

The term parable (*mashal* [OT], *parabole*, [NT]) is used several ways in Scripture and in Jewish intertestamental literature. It can refer to a proverb (1 Sam 24:13), a satire or taunt (Ps 44:11), a riddle (Ps 49:4), a figurative saying (Mark 7:14-17), an extended simile (Matt 13:33), story parable (Matt 25:1-13), an example parable (Matt 18:23-25), and even an allegory (Judges 9:7-20; Mark 4:3-9, 13-20).⁷ While there are many interesting differences between these literary devices, there is a common thread that in various ways runs through them all: they all involve the language and literary device of *comparison*. Something known is compared to something unknown in order to give understanding of the latter.

Therefore, since parables in general, and Jesus’ in particular, are by their nature limited or extended similes and metaphors, we can classify them formally in five different ways:⁸ (1) simple simile (Matt 13:33; Luke 13:20-21); (2) simple metaphor (Matt 7:6); (3) extended simile (Matt 20:1-16); (4) extended metaphor (Luke 15:11-32), and (5) examples stories (Luke 10:30-37; 12:17-21; 16:19-31; 18:9-14).⁹ Example stories are really not similes or metaphors, but Luke nonetheless calls all four in his gospel, parables.

It is indeed now recognized by many scholars that parables are indeed *allegories*, just as a metaphor is an allegory “in little.”¹⁰ These may be simple allegories as in the case of Matthew 13:31: “the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed...” or more extended as in the case of Mark 4:13-20: “the sower stands for...these are the ones who...etc.” Therefore, it is also

recognized by many evangelical NT scholars that as allegories, these stories often relay more than one main idea (or more than one important point, though any parable’s overall message can be summarized), corresponding at times to the characters in the parable, though this is not always the case.¹¹ They are not, however, highly developed allegories akin to Bunyan’s, *Pilgrim’s Progress* where every point and detail in the text stands for something else.¹² Rather, they are allegories of a special sort, loaded with realism and aimed at eliciting a response. This realism, their context in the Gospels and the necessary relationship they sustain to Christ’s other teachings, must be kept in mind in their interpretation.

Jesus’ parables, though utilizing a literary form for fiction, possess a realism that cannot be mistaken; they are pervaded with first century Palestinian characters, settings, and ideas. Stock images from the Semitic world crowd these stories—images of farmers, fisherman, crops, fish, water, pearls, wheat, treasures, workers, landowners, masters, slaves, peasants, young maidens, sons, and kings and as such the characters, including Lazarus in Luke 16 (the only character explicitly named), function as universal types. “Nowhere else in the world’s literature has such immortality been conferred on anonymity.” They also evidence plot development, conflict, foil, and suspense. Ryken makes the interesting point, in light of the *secular realism* in the parables (and the fact that they do not focus on religion *per se* or religious leaders), that they will not allow any two-world view that makes a hard and fast divide between the spiritual from the earthly. “In the world of the parables it is in everyday experience that people make their spiritual decisions and that God’s grace works.”¹³

A Survey of Jesus’ Parables

Markan Parables	Mark	Matthew	Luke
The Bridegroom’s Friends	2:19-20	9:15	5:33-39
Unshrunk Cloth	2:21	9:16	5:36
New Wine	2:22	9:17	5:37-39
Binding the Strong Man	3:20-29	12:22-32	11:14-23
Soils	4:1-20	13:1-23	8:4-18
The Lamp	4:21-25		
Seed Growing Secretly	4:26-29		
Mustard Seed	4:30-32	13:31-32	13:18-19
Wicked Tenants	12:1-12	21:33-46	20:9-19
Budding Fig Tree	13:28-32	24:32-36	21:29-33
Doorkeeper’s Watch	13:34-36		12:35-38

Matthean Parables	Matthew
Good and Bad Fruit	7:15-20
Wheat and Tares	13:24-30, 36-43
Dragnet	13:47-50
Hidden Treasure	13:44
Merchant and Fine Pearls	13:45-46
Wicked Slave	18:21-35
Laborers in the Vineyard	20:1-16
The Two Sons	21:28-32
The Wise and Foolish Maidens	25:1-13

The Sheep and Goats

25:31-46

Lukan Parables

Luke

The Two Debtors	7:40-50
The Good Samaritan	10:25-37
The Friend at Midnight	11:5-8 (cf. 9-13)
The Rich Fool	12:13-21
Barren Fig Tree	13:6-9
The Tower Builder	14:28-30
The Warrior King	14:31-33
The Lost Sheep	15:1-7
The Lost Coin	15:8-10
The Prodigal Son (“two sons)	15:11-32
The Unjust Steward	16:1-13
The Rich Man and Lazarus	16:19-31
The Lowly Servant	17:7-10
The Unjust Judge	18:1-8
The Pharisee and the Tax Collector	18:9-14

Parallels in Matt/Luke

Matthew

Luke

Wise and Foolish Builders	7:24-27	6:46-49
The Narrow Door/Gate	7:13-14	13:23-27
Leaven	13:33	13:20-21

The Lost Sheep	18:12-14	15:1-7
The Wedding Banquet	22:1-14	14:15-24
The Thief in the Night	24:42-44	12:39-40
Faithful and Unfaithful Steward	24:45-51	12:42-46
The Talents	25:14-30	19:12-27

Johannine Parables	John
The Good Shepherd	10:1-18 (cf. Matt18:12-14; Luke 15:1-7)
The True Vine	15:1-8

Principles for Interpreting Parables

There are several principles to remember and implement in the study of the parables.

First, note the literary setting of the parable in the gospel. This can provide clues to the overall interpretation of the parable, especially its mood and affective force.

Second, note the wording, structure, general progression, plot progress, and suspense. Remember these are stories and need to be read as such. In this connection it is helpful to note any changes in the same parable in another gospel. The chart above lists all the parables and their parallels.

Third, read the parables in their original historical situation first. Therefore, nothing should be read *out* of them that is not consistent with the customs, etc. employed in them and certainly no later reading of theology or church experience should be read *into* them. In other words, no global or particular interpretation should be given any “air time” that would not have been understandable to those to whom these parables were first addressed by Jesus or later communicated by the evangelists. In this way we preserve the distinction between authorial intent (author’s intended meaning) and significance (meaning to me).

Fourth, note the main characters/things in the parable and any parallels and or contrasts between them. The main characters are often clues as to the main points being asserted.

Fifth, recognize that there are two audiences being addressed by the parables. There is first the audience to whom Jesus originally spoke, e.g., the Scribes and Pharisees, and the audience of the early church to whom the evangelists addressed their writings. A different audience signifies at slightly different functions for the parables and thus little different emphasis in interpretation.

Sixth, avoid over-allegorizing and note carefully what occurs at the end of a parable as a (the) clue to the meaning of the parable. This is called the rule of “end stress.”

Seventh, seek to place the teaching of the parable in the overall ministry of Jesus and his teaching as a whole. In this way, it will be seen that most of his parables deal with the kingdom of God, either its inauguration or consummation, and discipleship within the present phase of the kingdom in expectation of the consummation.

Eighth, through continued prayer, meditation, and seeking, discern the meaning of the parable for the original hearers and

2B. Characters/Things and What They Stand For

The Parable of the Soils

The Parable (4:1-9)	Path ⁺³⁻⁴	Rocky Soil ⁺⁵⁻⁶	Thorns ⁺⁷	Good Soil ⁺⁸⁻⁹
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hard Soil • Birds Ate Seed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not Much Soil • Sprang Up • Sun Withered It 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seed Grew Up • Thorns Choked It 	Seed Grew: Crop Produced
Purpose Statement	<i>so that</i> [ἵνα]... (Mark 4:12)			
The Interpretation (4:13-20)	Hard Heart ⁺¹⁵	Fearful Heart ⁺¹⁶⁻¹⁷	Worrisome Heart ⁺¹⁸⁻¹⁹	Good Heart ⁺²⁰
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Satan Takes Away 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mostly External • Trouble or Persecution • Person Quickly Falls Away 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mostly Internal • Worries/Worship • Contrary Desires • Word Is Choked Out 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 30x • 60x • 100x
The Sower	God, Jesus and All Those Who Preach the Message			
The Seed	The Word (cf. the “secret,” [4:11]; “the word of the kingdom” [Mt]; “the word of God” [Lk])			

3B. Historical Details

In Palestinian culture at this time, sowing probably preceded plowing so that it is incorrect to view the sower as hopelessly inept, fumbling as it were, and somehow unable to deliver seed to good soil. He simply scattered and plowed later. But even if this was not the case, as some argue, it is not Jesus’ point to emphasize methods of sowing, but on *different kinds of soil*. There were paths that were trampled down and hard; there was rocky soil where limestone lay immediately beneath a layer of topsoil; there was soil overgrown by weeds and thorns (very common), and thankfully, there was good soil.

4B. General Progression, Plot Conflict, and Suspense

1C. Opening/Closing

Notice that the parable opens with the command to “listen” and “see” (4:3a) and ends with an interesting and closely related idea: “He who has ears, let him hear.” Though the parables often use common agrarian imagery, beware lest you doze off and miss the point!

2C. Suspense

After the seed is planted, then comes the wait...that seemingly endless period of time in which the farmer bites his knuckles and prays for the right combination of rain and sun. Herein lies the tension and suspense in Jesus’ story. Will there be a harvest? In our culture most of us go to the supermarket, but such super-stores were not available to the ancients. The growth of the crop was essential to the life and welfare of the family. There was always the question of whether there would be a harvest or not. Today’s farmers understand this tension and anxiety.

3C. Progress and Plot Conflict

This story has no well developed “plot” as we find, for example in the parable of the Wicked Tenants (Matt 21:33-44). Nonetheless, there is conflict which mounts as we move through the parable; initially it seems that there will be no crop, because there is no good soil. At the very end, however, our hope is restored—finally there’s soil in which an abundant harvest can flourish. The kingdom of God (and his Servant), though being misunderstood by so many, will nonetheless find a bountiful harvest in the hearts of some.

5B. End Stress

The principle of “end stress” tells us that what comes at the end of a parable is often very significant to the meaning of the parable as a whole; it provides a lens through which to correctly view the parable. This, of course, is the case here. Jesus ends the parable with this comment: “He who has ears to hear, let him hear!” In the Bible, this expression is found only on the lips of Jesus and it always relates to our need to be careful how we listen to Jesus (Matt 11:15; 13:9; , 43; Mark 4:9, 23; Luke 8:8; 14:35; Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 29). We need to listen with spiritually sensitive hearts, waiting and willing to be instructed no matter what the cost. Only then are we good soil.

6B. Unclear Statements or Exaggeration

Crops totaling thirty or sixty or one hundred times what was sown were not uncommon, but one hundred represents a very good crop indeed. The point is: some people really experience the blessing of the kingdom.

7B. Statement of General Theme and Variations

The major theme in this parable has to do with how a person listens and responds to the message of the kingdom (i.e., the word). There are several related variations on this theme. **First**, God sows his seed of the kingdom among a variety of people. As Mark said in 1:1-15, Jesus has come to proclaim the good news of God. **Second**, the parable has much to say about the response to the message of the kingdom. The three types of soil represent those who through hard (or indifferent) hearts, superficial and fearful hearts, or worrisome and distracted hearts evidence less than saving faith in the gospel. They will not participate in the kingdom. But, like the good soil, there will be those who respond with genuine faith that leads to obedience and fruitfulness. But even among those who have rightly

responded to the message, there will be degrees of right response. Some will yield minimal fruit, some more, and finally some who will “sell the farm,” as it were, to possess the blessings of the kingdom (cf. Mark 10:28-31). A **final** theme we note, is the fact that at no time is the quality of the seed brought into question; there is no need to change the gospel message (Gal 1:6-9).

We must also point out the importance of this parable for understanding other parables. This parable is about various responses to the message of the kingdom and Jesus gently rebukes the disciples for their obtuseness. If a person is unable to understand this parable, then Jesus says they will not be able to understand any parable (Mark 4:13). Why? Well, the reason seems to be that as this parable stresses entrance into the kingdom, failure to understand it means a person is on the *outside*, and being on the outside renders them unable to comprehend other parables that talk about kingdom life from the *inside*. In the narrative, those with Jesus and the twelve are on the inside, but the religious leaders and the crowds are on the outside; they have failed to respond to the Servant’s message because they cannot tolerate the Servant.

But while the parable stresses entrance into the kingdom, it also teaches us about life in the kingdom. There were three levels of response represented by the good soil. So even as Christians we too must be exceedingly careful how we listen to the teachings of Jesus. If you persist in a hard heart toward God, Satan does have the power to snatch the word of God being sown in your heart. Indwelling sin, or as Owen referred to it—“the remainders of indwelling sin in believers”—can harden our hearts toward God and blunt our spiritual receptivity (Heb 3:13). We must be careful to keep an open heart toward God.¹⁴

Further, we need to make sure that the *word* is sown deep in our heart so that when tough times come, we will not abandon it (Joshua 1:8). One key way to achieve this, in cooperation with the Spirit, is to meditate regularly on Scripture. Then our hearts will not be as the rocky soil in which the *seed* found no root. Tough times, by the good providence of God, will come. They come as divinely sent friends to uncover what is in our hearts. Now is the time to prepare for visitation.

Finally, in a consumer driven culture, we need to be very careful about having the third kind of heart Jesus spoke about, i.e., a heart that’s enmeshed in “the cares of the world, the delight in riches, and the desire for other things” (Mark 4:19). This kind of heart chokes out God’s word and makes it unfruitful. Riches can shrivel a heart in a hurry; giving freely can liberate the heart so enmeshed.

8B. Desired Response (Then and Now)

Jesus stressed the importance of listening to him, and listening well! He wanted the religious leaders, the crowd, his followers, family, and the Twelve to listen very closely to what he was saying. What does this mean for us? It certainly entails coming to him through the Bible with humble and contrite hearts and accepting whatever it is he wants to tell us. There are no qualifications on true discipleship. We must deal with the sin in our heart before God, yield ourselves completely to his will and desires, resist sin, and listen to his voice (cf. 1 Peter 2:1-3; James 1:19-21). As 4:15 makes it clear that Satan will seek to steal the word from our hearts. We must be alert (1 Peter 5:8). What kind of heart do you have? Read Jesus’ interpretation of the parable again and ask God show you where your heart is. Ask for grace to listen.

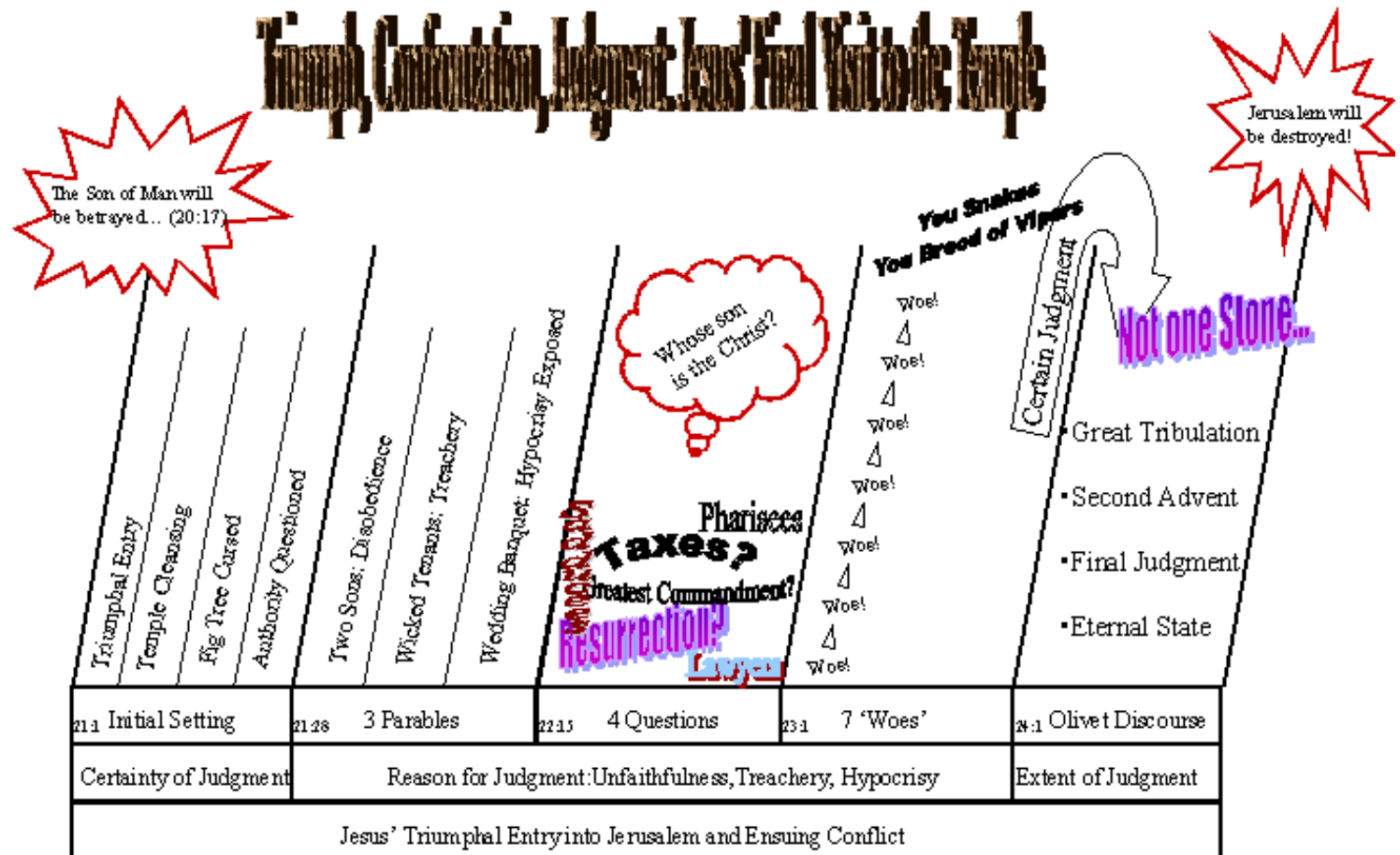
One final point. Did you notice that in none of the synoptic accounts of this parable is the sower mentioned by name, though we know, of course, that it’s God or Christ? But the fact that he is not mentioned by name and that Jesus explains the parable to the disciples and others, expresses an implied universalism, that is, that anyone who is in the kingdom can sow the message of the kingdom. Now I have a question. Do you expect to hear from God through people? God speaks in a variety of ways, at the most inconvenient times, through the unlikeliest of people—not only

our pastor—but the question is, “Am I listening?” Beyond the idea of a sower, God also speaks through circumstances, but again the question is, “Am I listening?” God speaks through our spouses, children, family, friends, etc. “He who ears to hear, let him hear!”

IIA. The Parable of the Tenants—Matthew 21:33-44 (pars. Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-19)

1B. Literary Context

If we look at our outline of Matthew in the appropriate appendix we can see at a glance that this parable is given at a time of intense conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders. It is interesting to note that the parable is set in the “temple-conflict scene” in all three gospels, following the triumphal entry, temple cleansing, and the questioning of Jesus’ authority. The are more literary connections as the following chart highlights:



2B. Characters/Things and What They Stand For

Many of the various characters in the Parable of the Tenants stand for specific, real life personages. The landowner is God; the vineyard, Israel; the tenants, the religious leaders; the servants, the prophets; the son, Christ.

3B. Historical Details

There are several historical details in this passage that call for comment and reflection. This is where a good Bible dictionary and/or a commentary is very helpful (see bibliography). First, we need to talk about the general attitudes and practices of landowners in ancient Israel and the meaning of the wall, winepress, and watchtower. Besides this, there is the business practices of landowners and how they rented out their vineyards. Second, it would be nice to know the general tendencies of tenants in this situation. Third, why does Matthew change the order of the events in 21:39 (cf. Mark 12:8; Luke 20:15)? This question, of course, presupposes Markan priority.¹⁵

4B. General Progression, Plot Conflict, Suspense

The Parable of the Tenants

Setting	<p>21:33</p> <p><i>The Landowner</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He planted a vineyard <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Wall → Winepress → Watchtower
Intense Conflict	<p>21:35</p> <p><i>The Tenants</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Servants Sent → Beat, Killed, Stoned • More Servants Sent → Beat, Killed, Stoned • Son Sent → Threw him out; <i>killed him</i> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>Climax</i></p>
Q&A	<p>21:40</p> <p><i>The Indictment</i></p> <p>Q: What will the landowner do... ?</p> <p>A: He will bring those wretches...</p>
Jesus' Response	<p>21:42</p> <p><i>Have You Never Read?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Text: Psalm 118:22-23 • The Verdict: The Kingdom will be taken... • The Allusions: Isa 8:14; Dan 2:34-35, 44
The Leaders' Response	<p>21:45</p> <p><i>They knew...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • So they tried to arrest him • But they were afraid...

5B. Unclear Statements or Exaggeration

What is the meaning of the expressions about stones in 21:44? This is an important passage, yet the imagery seems a bit confusing at first.

6B. End Stress

The climax to this story occurs in 21:39 where we are utterly horrified to find the tenants conspiring to kill the son, which crime they then willfully perpetrate. Our anger is deeply aroused. Everything within us cries out for justice, just like it did with the religious leaders when they first heard it. We note the irony in 21:41 when the religious authorities indict themselves: “he [the landowner] will bring those wretches to a wretched end!”

The principle of *end stress*, for the parable proper, falls on verse 40 and the rhetorical question Jesus asks. Therefore, this parable is about the judgment of the religious leaders for being treacherous tenants, cruel and abusive, and for their ultimate failure to receive the son and humbly submit to his authority. The results, laid out in 21:42-44 is that they will be crushed (utterly condemned) and the kingdom given over to a generation producing its fruit.

7B. Statement of General Theme and Variations

The overall theme seems to be that God will judge those leaders in his kingdom who are faithless toward him and treacherous toward his people. Related ideas in the parable include: (1) God is incredibly gracious as exemplified in his care for the vineyard and patient as evidenced in his repeatedly sending servants even though they were brutally treated. But, there will come a time when his patience will run out and judgment will fall; (2) one’s response to Christ is key to one’s participation in the kingdom; (3) God will raise up new leaders to shepherd his people when existing leaders abandon him.

8B. Desired Response (Then and Now)

The parable speaks directly to leaders who shepherd God’s people. As leaders we must strive to stay close to the Lord and seek his will ahead of our own popularity and prestige. We must carefully guard our hearts in respect to our love for Christ and his people and treat them as he commands us to. But the parable also speaks to those in the body who are not leaders per se. They too must remember that their response to Christ is key to their participation in his kingdom.

IIIA. Another Parable of Your Choice (see appendix)

Summary of the Theology of the Parables: The Kingdom of God

The Purpose of the Parables—A Look at Matthew 13:13; Mark 4:12 and Luke 8:10

Matthew	Mark	Luke

13:10 Then the disciples came to him and said, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" **13:11** He replied, "You have been given the opportunity to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but they have not...:**13** For this reason I speak to them in parables: although they see they do not see, and although they hear they do not hear nor do they understand.

4:10 When he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. **4:11** He said to them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those outside, everything is in parables,

4:12 ***so that although they look they may look but not see, and although they hear they may hear but not understand, so they may not repent and be forgiven.***

8:9 Then his disciples asked him what this parable meant. **8:10** He said, "You have been given the opportunity to know the secrets of the kingdom of God, but for others they are in parables, so that ***although they see they may not see, and although they hear they may not understand.***

The God Who Summons

The parables teach that God is sovereign in his world and in the salvation of men. He summons people to believe as he graciously sows his kingdom seed, working patiently with people to move them toward response, bearing with them in their sin, misery, and waywardness, and evidencing unexpected and extreme grace. In the end, however, he will judge men according to their response to his messiah and their faithfulness with the talents he has given them.

The Proper Response to God's Summons

The proper response to the gospel in the parables is total. These stories call forth total faith leading to a total commitment of oneself to God. Any attitude, activity or possession must be set aside in the interests of the kingdom. In this way there is joyful participation and an expectant hope that the kingdom will grow and more and more people will come to share in its fruit.

The Fate of Those Who Do Not Respond Properly

All men are commanded to respond to God by producing the fruit of the kingdom. For those who reject God's king and his kingdom there will come a day of great distress and irrevocable suffering. The stress in the parables is on God's justice in bringing about his wrath, man's stubborn refusal to submit to his kingship and therefore his rightful condemnation, and continued hope for people to repent.

Appendix One: Outline of the Synoptic Gospels

Matthew: Jesus as King

IA. The King Arrives (1:1-2:23)

1B. Genealogy and Birth (1:1-25)

2B. Worship, Opposition, Rescue, and Return to Nazareth (2:1-23)

IIA. The King Preaches the Gospel of His Kingdom (3:1-7:29)

1B. Narrative: Preparation for Ministry in the Kingdom (3:1-4:25)

2B. Discourse: Righteousness in the Kingdom (5:1-7:29)

IIIA. The King Extends His Kingdom (8:1-11:1)

1B. Narrative: A Demonstration of the Power of the King and His Kingdom (8:1-10:4)

2B. Discourse: Go Preach the Gospel of the Kingdom (10:5-11:1)

IVA. The King Experiences Opposition to Himself and His Kingdom (11:2-13:53)

1B. Narrative: Doubt, Sabbath, Unpardonable Sin (11:2-12:50)

2B. Discourse: The Parables of the Kingdom (13:1-53)

VA. The King Experiences Increasing Opposition and Polarity (13:54-19:2)

1B. Narrative: Miracles, Traditions, and Transformation (13:54-17:27)

2B. Discourse: Qualities of Kingdom Disciples (18:1-19:2)

VIA. The King and His Kingdom Are Officially Rejected (19:3-25:46)

1B. Narrative: True Discipleship, Controversies, Warnings and Woes (19:3-23:39)

2B. Discourse: Great Tribulation, Christ's Return, Certain Judgment (24:1-25:46)

VIIA. The King's Initial Vindication and Commission (26:1-28:20)

1B. The King's Passion (26:1-27:66)

2B. The King's Resurrection (Vindication) and Commission (28:1-20)

Mark: Jesus as Suffering Servant

IA. Beginning of The Servant's Ministry (1:1-13)

1B. Introduction (1:1)

2B. The Preparation of John the Baptist (1:2-8)

3B. The Baptism of Jesus (1:9-11)

4B. The Temptation of Jesus (1:12-13)

IIA. The Servant’s Ministry in Galilee (1:14-6:6a)

1B. Cycle One: Early Galilean—Saving Sinners and the Sabbath Controversy (1:14-3:6)

2B. Cycle Two: Later Galilean—Withdrawal, Beelzebub, and Rejection (3:7-6:6a)

IIIA. The Servant’s Withdrawals from Galilee (6:6b-8:21)

1B. The Catalyst: John Beheaded (6:6b-29)

2B. Withdrawals and Miracles: Deserted Place, Tyre, Decapolis, Sea of Gal. (6:30-8:21)

IVA. The Servant’s Suffering: *Passion Prediction #1*—Caesarea Philippi (8:22-38)

VA. The Servant’s Journey to Jerusalem (9:1-10:52)

1B. Lessons in Galilee: *Passion Predication #2* (9:1-50)

2B. Lessons in Perea and Judea: *Passion Prediction #3* (10:1-52)

VIA. The Servant’s Ministry in Jerusalem (11:1-13:37)

1B. Presentation of the Suffering Servant (11:1-11)

2B. The Servants Judgment of the Nation in Symbols (11:12-26)

3B. The Servant’s Confrontations with the Religious Leaders (11:27-12:44)

4B. The Servant’s Judgment of the Nation in Prophecy (13:1-37)

VIIA. Culmination of the Servant’s Ministry (14:1-16:8)

1B. Preparations for Death (14:1-52)

2B. The Death of the Servant (14:53-15:47)

3B. The Resurrection of the Servant (16:1-8)

Luke: Jesus as The Son True Man

IA. Prologue (1:1-4)

IIA. The Infancy and Growth of the Son of Man (1:5-2:52)

1B. Two Pregnancies Predicted (1:5-56)

2B. Two Sons Born (1:57-2:52)

IIIA. The Preparation for the Son of Man for Public Ministry (3:1-4:13)

IVA. The Son of Man’s Galilean Ministry (4:14-9:50)

VA. The Son of Man’s Journey to Jerusalem (9:51-19:27)

1B. Instruction in Discipleship in Light of Jesus’ Ministry (9:51-11:13)

2B. Confrontation with the Pharisees; 1st Cycle (11:14-54)

3B. Instruction in Discipleship in Light of religious Leaders’ Rejection (12:1-13:35)

4B. Confrontation with Pharisees: 2nd Cycle (14:1-24)

5B. Instruction in Discipleship in Light of Jesus’ Impending Death (14:25-19:27)

VIA. The Son of Man’s Jerusalem Ministry (19:28-21:38)

1B. Triumphal Entry (19:28-44)

2B. Opposition in the Temple (19:45-21:38)

VIIA. The Death and Resurrection of the Son of Man (22:1-24:53)

1B. Preparation for Death (22:1-53)

2B. Death (22:54-23:56)

3B. Resurrection (24:1-53)

Appendix Two

IA. The Parable

1B. Literary Context

2B. Character/Things and What They Stand For

3B. Historical Details

4B. General Progression, Plot Conflict, and Suspense

5B. End Stress

6B. Unclear Statements or Exaggeration

7B. Statement of General Theme and Variations

8B. Desired Response (Then and Now)

¹ This catchy phrase is taken from K. R. Snodgrass, “Parable,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), 594.

² Geriant V. Jones, *The Art and Truth of the Parables* (London: SPCK, 1964), 124.

³ *Hom.* 31.

⁴ (Freiburg: Mohr, 1899).

⁵ Snodgrass, “Parable,” 591-92.

⁶ For a further discussion of the current state of literary criticism and how that has impacted parable study, see William A. Beardslee, “Recent Literary Criticism,” in *The New Testament and Its Modern Interpreters*, ed. Eldon Jay Epp and George W. MacRae, *The Bible and Its Modern Interpreters*, ed. Douglas A. Knight, SBL (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1989), 175-198.

⁷ See Robert H. Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 137.

⁸ Since Jesus’ parables appear to have more than one main point (which is not to deny that any one point may stand out more than another or that their theology cannot be clearly articulated propositionally), it is difficult to classify them topically as relating to the kingdom in different ways, i.e., entrance into the kingdom, the nature of the kingdom, life in the kingdom, the crisis of the kingdom, and the tragedy of rejecting the kingdom, etc. Though all of the parables relate in ways to the theme of the kingdom of God, a topical arrangement is reductionistic. See Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), 290-93.

⁹ See G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster), 162-63.

¹⁰ C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1936), 60. Simon Kistemaker, “Parables of Jesus,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 824, says, “The parables of Jesus are stories that are true to life, even though in some cases exaggeration is intended (e.g., ten thousand talents by any standard is an astronomical sum on money, Matt. 18:24) or allegorical overtones can be detected (see the parable of the tenants, Matt 21:33-44; Mark 12:12; Luke 20:9-19). However, the parables Jesus taught are not allegories in which every name, place, and feature is symbolic and demands an interpretation. The parables

embody metaphors and similes, but there are never removed from reality and never convey fictitious ideas. They are stories taken from the world in which Jesus lived and are told for the purpose of relating spiritual truth.” Since all of Jesus’ teaching was designed to illicit a response, and even more so with the parables, we might want to add to Kistemaker’s final comment by saying that the parables were told for the purpose of relating spiritual truth and calling for some form of commitment. They were designed to move the will as well as inform the head.

¹¹ Blomberg, *Parables*, 166. The parables’ allegorical quality does not imply that it’s open season on whatever moves in the text. Principles of interpretation will be discussed below.

¹² This raises the question *not* of allegory versus something else, but of the *degree* of allegory and ways and methods for understanding this. For a discussion of how to judge various degrees of allegory, see Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 89-92.

¹³ Cf. Leland Ryken, *Words of Life: A Literary Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 63.

¹⁴ Regarding John Owen’s work, see www.bible.org for a review and summary of Owen’s, *Mortification*.

¹⁵ Markan priority refers to the literary relationship between the three synoptic gospels, i.e., Matthew, Mark, and Luke. It is generally held by most NT scholars today that there is indeed a literary relationship between these gospels and that Matthew and Luke used Mark as well as their own individual sources (i.e., M and L) and a common sayings document (Q).

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