PARABLE
(Anchor Bible Dictionary)

An extended metaphor or simile frequently becoming a brief narrative, generally used in biblical times for didactic purposes.

A. Parabolic Genre

The Greco-Roman literary tradition took the genre "parable" in a fairly restricted manner. In his *Rhetoric* (2.20) Aristotle distinguished two types of proof used in all types of rhetoric. First, there is the example *(paradeigma),* which is to be used inductively. This is divided into two classes, "one which consists in relating things that have happened before, and another in inventing them oneself." The former is history, the latter fiction. Those fictional examples are again divided into two subclasses: the fable *(logos)* and the comparison *(parabolē).* Fables are impossible or unrealistic fictions. Aristotle gives an instance from Aesop: The flea-ridden fox refuses the hedgehog's offer of help because his fleas are now sated. Parables are possible or realistic fictions. Aristotle gives an instance from Socrates: "If one were to say that magistrates should not be chosen by lot, for this would be the same as choosing as representative athletes not those competent to contend, but those on whom the lot falls; or as choosing any of the sailors as the man who should take the helm, as if it were right that the choice should be decided by lot, not by a man's knowledge" (2.20.4). Second, there is the saying *(enthymēma),* which is to be used deductively. Here again there are two classes. One is the maxim *(gnōmē),* for instance: "There is no man who is really free." Another is the proverb *(paroimia),* for instance: "An Attic [i.e., troublesome] neighbor."

The Hebrew literary tradition gave the genre a much wider understanding. As we shall see in more detail below, the word *māšāl,* with its most usual Greek translation, *parabolē,* meant a similitude or comparison and the expression had a very wide range of application. In fact it is almost synonymous with metaphor.

Contemporary literary criticism agrees with the Greco-Roman tradition in emphasizing the narrative element in parable but with the Hebrew tradition in allowing both impossible and possible stories into the genre. Three elements are stressed in modern parabolic theory. Parables combine the qualities of narrative, metaphor, and brevity. A parable must tell, in as short a space as possible, a story with a double meaning. One meaning will usually be quite clear on the surface of the narration. Another, and presumably deeper meaning, or other, and possibly multiple meanings lie hidden within the complexities of the [Vol. 5, p. 147] narrative, and these challenge or provoke the recipient to interpretation. Parables are lures for interpretation and also revelations of the very process of interpretation itself.

B. Parabolic Corpus

1. The Hebrew Scriptures. In the Hebrew scriptures the parabolic genre, as *māšāl* or *parabolē* is not limited to narratives but is concentrated around the idea of comparison, of one thing said and another intended. It therefore includes everything from proverb to allegory (Boucher 1977: 86–89). The full continuum of its usage can be seen even in a single book, for example, in Ezekiel.

The term can designate what we would call a proverb, and specific examples are italicized in the following cases. In Ezek 12:22–23 God says to the prophet, "Son of man, what is this proverb that you have about the land of Israel, saying, 'The days grow long and every vision comes to nought'? Tell them therefore, 'Thus says the Lord God: I will put an end to this proverb, and they shall no more use it as a proverb in Israel.'" In Ezek 16:43b–45b, God accuses Jerusalem, "Have you not committed lewdness in addition to all your abominations? Behold, every one who uses proverbs will use this proverb about you, 'Like mother, like daughter' … Your mother was a Hittite and your father an Amorite." Finally, in Ezek 18:2–3, in a text very similar to the first one in 12:22–23, God again refutes an Israelite proverb. "The word of the Lord came to me again, 'What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." As I live, says the Lord God, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel.'"

There is a special instance of parable-as-proverb in the case of proverbs of warning or bywords of caution. In Ezek 14:8 God is threatening idolators who seek prophetic guidance despite their infidelity: "I will set my face

against that man, I will make him a sign and a byword and cut him off from the midst of my people; and you shall know that I am the Lord."

At the other end of the continuum are instances of what we would term allegory. Once again there are very good examples in Ezekiel. Here the parable designates a narrative comparison with the hidden meaning carried by both the narrative sequence and details of the story. In Ezek 17:2 God tells the prophet, "Son of man, propound a riddle, and speak an allegory to the house of Israel." There follows in 17:3–10 the parable-allegory of The Two Eagles, which is explained in detail in 17:11–21. The first or "great eagle" is Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon, the "young twig" is Jehoiachin, the "seed of the land" is Zedekiah. The "second eagle" is Pharaoh Psammeticus II of Egypt. The turning of the vine away from the first eagle which had planted it and toward the second eagle is Zedekiah's pro-Egyptian intrigues which will bring the wrath of Babylon down upon him. There is another parable-allegory in Ezek 20:45–49 where The Great Fire from the north will destroy the trees of the south, and Ezekiel protests, "Ah Lord God! they are saying of me, 'Is he not a maker of allegories?'" It should be noted that not every single element in the allegorical story has a specific referent in the allegorized history.

In those preceding instances the word *māšāl* or *parabolē* was explicitly used for those parabolic or allegorical stories. But even in Ezekiel there are allegories where the term does not appear. They are simply called prophetic lamentations. For example, The Young Lions in Ezek 19:1–9 has Judah as a lioness. Jehoahaz as the "young lion … brought with hooks to the land of Egypt," and Jehoiachin as "another of her welps … put … in a cage and … brought … to the king of Babylon." Similarly, The Vine's Branch in Ezek 19:10–14 has Judah as a vine, the "strongest stem" is Zedekiah, the "east wind" is Nebuchadrezzar, and the "transplantation in the wilderness" is the Babylonian Exile.

There are several instances elsewhere in the Hebrew scriptures where the specific term *māšāl* or *parabolē* is not used but which should also be considered as parables in the sense of allegories. Here the stories are taken not from natural events but from human actions. The most famous may well be The Ewe Lamb in 2 Sam 12:1–4. The "rich man" is David, the "poor man" is Uriah, the "ewe lamb" is Bathsheba, and Nathan traps David in his own indignation. Notice, once again, that even in such parabolic allegories, not every narrative element has an extranarratival referent. What, for example, in the story of David's adultery and murder corresponds to the narrative's "there came a traveler to the rich man"? Is it part of the allegorical challenge that the recipient must determine just how far such detailed references are to be passed? A similar allegorical trap is sprung on David by The Widow's Sons in 2 Sam 14:5–7. Here the first son is the murdered Amnon, and second son is the fugitive Absalom. One final example, which Aristotle would have termed a fable rather than a parable, is the case of the antimonarchic story in Judg 9:8–15. The trees sought a king but were turned down by olive, fig, and vine, and had to take in the end the useless and dangerous bramble. In that example there are no specific referents for olive, fig, and vine, but the bramble clearly applies to Abimelech.

Most of what will follow in this parabolic tradition is already set up by those preceding examples. Parable extends from nonnarrative proverb to narrative allegory, from fables with possible or impossible natural protagonists to stories with quite possible and plausible human protagonists, and with or without the specific title of parable being present.

2. The Jesus Tradition. The Christian tradition was consciously aware that Jesus spoke both in aphoristic parables and narrative parables. This is clear in two documents discovered at Nag Hammadi. The aphoristic parables are recalled by the comment in *Dial. Sav.* (NHC III.*5*) 139:8–11, "Mariam said, 'Thus about "The wickedness of each day," and "The laborer being worthy of his food," and "The disciple resembling his teacher."'" Those three sayings are known to us also from elsewhere in the Jesus tradition. The Wickedness saying is in Matt 6:34b. The Laborer saying is in Matt 10:10b; Luke 10:7b; 1 Cor 9:14; 1 Tim 5:18b; *Did.* 13:1–2. The Disciple saying is in Matt 10:25a; Luke 6:40. The narrative parables are recalled by the comment in *Ap. Jas.* (NHC I,*2*) 8:1–10, "It was enough for some 'to listen' to the teaching and understand 'The Shepherds' and 'The Seed' and 'The Building' and 'The Lamps of the Virgins' and 'The Wage of the Workmen' and 'The Didrachmae' and 'The Woman.'" Those seven parables are also known to us from elsewhere in the Jesus [Vol. 5, p. 148] tradition. The Shepherds (despite the plural) is probably Matt 18:12–13; Luke 15:4–6. The Seed is Mark 4:3–8; Matt 13:3b–8; Luke 8:5–8a; *Gos. Thom.* 9. The Building is Matt 7:24–27; Luke 6:47–49. The Lamps is Matt 25:1–13. The Wage is Matt 20:1–15. The Didrachmae (despite the plural) is Luke 15:8–9. The Woman is either Matt 13:33 or *Gos. Thom.* 97.

Following from the Hebrew scriptural usage, we would expect the term "parable" to cover both the aphoristic and narrative metaphors of Jesus. Thus, when Jesus is accused of Satanic collusion, Mark 3:23 continues, "And he called them to him, and said to them in parables, 'How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand.'" In this case of Kingdom and House the term "parables" refers to nonnarrative or aphoristic metaphors. Later in Mark 12:1, the story of The Evil Tenants is introduced with, "And he began to speak to them in parables," and in 12:12 it is concluded with, "And they tried to arrest him, but feared the multitude, for they perceived that he had told the parable against them; so they left him and went away."

This wide understanding of parable as including both aphoristic metaphor and narrative metaphor is present even within the same chapter in Mark 4. This opens in 4:2, "And he taught them many things in parables," and concludes in 4:33–34, "With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he explained everything." Yet inside those emphatic frames, the section includes both parables-as-narratives, for example, The Sower in 4:3–8, The Harvest Time in 4:26–29, The Mustard Seed in 4:30b–32, and parables-as-aphorisms, for example, Lamp and Bushel in 4:21, Measure for Measure in 4:24b. And both types of parable receive the warning, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear," in 4:9 and, "If any man has ears to hear, let him hear" in 4:23.

In general, therefore, the Jesus tradition follows the Hebrew scriptural precedent and places the emphasis on comparison or metaphor in applying the term "parable" to a unit. Whether the unit is aphoristic or a narrative metaphor is of no significance. The data of the Jesus tradition necessitates, however, the expansion of that double into a triple category: aphoristic parables, extended parables, and narrative parables.

a. Aphoristic Parables. There is a very high incidence of aphoristic metaphors in the Jesus tradition and these may be present with or without the explicit term "parable" being present. For example, Mark 2:21–22 says, "No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; if he does, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; if he does, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but new wine is for fresh skins." Matt 9:16–17 follows Mark in not calling this aphoristic metaphor about Patches and Wineskins a parable. And it also occurs without explicit parabolic characterization in *Gos. Thom.* 47d. But in Luke 5:36a the same unit is introduced by "He told them a parable also." Exactly the same phenomenon occurs in the case of The Blind Guide. Matt 15:14b reads, "And if a blind man leads a blind, both will fall into the pit." The aphoristic metaphor also appears in *Gos. Thom.* 34 and again without being explicitly called a parable. But Luke 6:39 reads, "He also told them a parable: 'Can a blind man lead a blind man? Will they not both fall into a pit?'"

It is already evident from some of the above examples that aphoristic parables often appear in doubled format. We just saw the doubled aphoristic metaphors of Patches and Wineskins. There are also several cases where an aphoristic metaphor appears as single in one text but as double in another. For example, the Dogs and Swine saying in Matt 7:6 reads, "Do not give dogs what is holy; and do not throw your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under foot and turn to attack you." *Gos. Thom.* 93 also has this saying as a doublet, "'Jesus said,' "Do not give what is holy to dogs, lest they throw them on the dung leap. Do not throw the pearls to swine, lest they grind it [to bits]." Yet *Did.* 9:5 warns with a single aphoristic metaphor, "But let none eat or drink of your Eucharist except those who have been baptized in the Lord's Name. For concerning this also did the Lord say, 'Give not that which is holy to the dogs.'" Again, the sayings on Hating One's Family and Carrying One's Cross appear as a doublet in Matt 10:37–38; Luke 14:26–27; *Gos. Thom.* 55. But the latter saying appears alone in Mark 8:34; Matt 16:24; Luke 9:23; and the former appears alone in *Gos. Thom.* 101. Finally, the famous saying about the Prophet's Own Country appears as follows in *Gos. Thom.* 31 (P. Oxy 1.30–35), "Jesus said, 'No prophet is accepted in his own village; no physician heals those who know him.'" Instead of this double version, with prophet and physician present, there is a single version, with only prophet present, in Mark 6:4; Matt 13:57b; John 4:44.

In most of these cases it is almost impossible to decide whether a single saying has been doubled by analogous creation or an originally double saying has been contracted into single format. In that final instance, the second option seems more plausible. Prophet could be taken literally and the metaphorical physician could easily drop away. This is confirmed by Jesus' comment in Luke 4:23, "And he said to them, 'Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, "Physician, heal yourself; what we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here also in your own country."'" Luke, in other words, may have known the double aphorism but opted, unlike Mark and the rest, for the physician rather than the prophet.

There are even some cases where a single or double aphorism is moving on to become a triple version. We saw already the double saying on Kingdom and House in Mark 3:24–25 and Luke 11:17b. In this case Matt 12:25b almost triples it: "Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand." One begins to glimpse a possible third saying about a divided city added to that on kingdom and house. Similarly the Serving Two Masters saying appears in single form in Matt 6:24, "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other." So also in Luke 16:13. But this is a triple version in *Gos. Thom.* 47, "Jesus said, 'It is impossible for a man to mount two horses or to stretch two bows. And it is impossible for a servant to serve [Vol. 5, p. 149] two masters; otherwise he will honor the one and treat the other contemptuously.'"

Aphoristic parables, in other words, appear in single, double, triple, or even multiple units, and these may either expand or contract as the transmission progresses. And doublets, of course, could be formed either synonymously, with twin positives or twin negatives, or else antithetically, with a balanced positive and negative in

whichever order. All the preceding doublets were in synonymous parallelism. Examples in antithetical parallelism appear in the next section.

b. Extended Parables. The distinction between extended and narrative parables may be clarified by an example. The narrative parable of The Treasure appears in Matt 13:44: "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field." On the one hand, this is much more than a simple aphoristic parable, as if it had said only, "the kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field," and stopped right there. On the other, it is surely a minimal story, with beginning, middle, and end, with the three sequential elements of finding, reburying, and buying. Still, despite its brevity or maybe even because of it, one could certainly not guess from the opening sentence how the story would unfold. That is a narrative parable and the application depends on how one reads the entire story. There is, in other words, some at least minimal amount of surprise or unpredictability in narrative parables.

Extended parables, however, are but the predictable unfolding of what is implicit in aphoristic parables. Consider The Two Houses in Matt 7:24–27 or Luke 6:47–49, "Every one then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon rock; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon the house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And every one who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house upon the sand; and the rains fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell; and great was the fall of it." That could be taken as a sequential narrative with beginning, middle, and end, with building, flooding, standing, or building, flooding, falling. It could be considered a narrative parable, just like The Treasure. But each half does no more than unpack the details already quite predictable in those opening aphoristic metaphors, "built on rock" or "built on sand." No doubt, the expanded metaphor is quite suitable as the climactic ending for Matthew's "Sermon on the Mount," but it is also a moot point in aesthetics whether expanded metaphors are not often ruined metaphors. It is sometimes best to leave the unpacking to the recipient's imagination.

In The Two Houses the extended parables were based on an aphoristic doublet but this doublet, unlike the synonymous ones seen earlier, was an antithetical formation. It balanced a positive with a negative rather than having a synonymous formation containing two of either. Several other extended parables contain antithetical parallelism. For example, notice the contrasted options in The Two Shepherds of John 10:11–13, The Two Positions of Luke 14:7–10, The Two Stewards of Matt 24:45–51; Luke 12:42–46; The Two Reactions of the master in Luke 17:7–9, The Two Refusals of the playing children in Matt 11:16–17; Luke 7:31–32; and The Two Sons of Matt 21:28–32. A graphic illustration of the difference between an extended parable and a narrative parable may be seen by comparing that last instance with the story of the two sons in The Prodigal Son of Luke 15:11–32.

Of course, not all extended parables have this antithetical format. Examples without it are the Fig Tree's Lesson in Mark 13:28 and Matt 24:32, but explicitly called a parable only in Luke 21:29–30; or Knowing the Danger in Matt 24:43; Luke 12:39; *Gos. Thom.* 21,103.

In the Jesus tradition, extended parables form the center of a parabolic continuum with clearly aphoristic parables at one end and clearly narrative parables at the other. There are, therefore, extended parables which are extremely close to aphoristic ones and others extremely close to narrative ones.

An example of the former instance is Before the Judgment. In Matt 5:25–26 and Luke 12:58–59 this reads: "Make friends quickly with your accuser, while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison; truly, I say to you, you will never get out till you have paid the last penny." But the synoptically dependent version in *Did.* 1:5 is much shorter: "He … shall be tried … and being in prison he shall be examined as to his deeds, and he shall not come out thence until he pay the last farthing."

There are several examples of the latter instance, that is, of parables which stand on the exact borderline between an extended and a narrative parable. Examples are The Harvest Time in Mark 4:26–29; *Gos. Thom.* 21; The Mustard Seed in Mark 4:30–32; Matt 13:31–32; Luke 13:18–19; *Gos. Thom.* 20; The Leaven in Matt 13:33; Luke 13:20–21; *Gos. Thom.* 96; The Midnight Friend in Luke 11:5–8; The Tower Builder in Luke 14:28–30; The Warring King in Luke 14:31–32; The Unjust Judge in Luke 18:2–4; and all three parables from one of the Nag Hammadi texts, The Palm Shoot in *Ap. Jas.* 7:22–28; Grain of Wheat in *Ap. Jas.* 8:10–23; Ear of Grain in *Ap. Jas.* 12:20–27.

Finally, there is one very interesting parable, The Returning Master, which might be classified in any of the three categories. In Mark 13:34–36 and Luke 12:35–38, the combination of parabolic third-person and parenetic second-person discourse renders it hard to decide whether there might be a full narrative parable behind those units. But in any case, the synoptically independent version in *Did.* 16:1 is simply an aphoristic parable: "Watch over your life: let your lamps be not quenched and your loins be not ungirded, but be ready, for ye know not the hour in which our Lord cometh."

c. Narrative Parables. The most famous parables in the Jesus tradition are not the extended but the narrative parables. It is those, for example, that gave to our language the images of the prodigal son and the good Samaritan. It

must be remembered, however, that Jesus was an oral teacher and that those stories may well be no more than plot summaries of stories which might have taken hours to tell.

In a famous article of 1909, Axel Olrik spoke of the epic [Vol. 5, p. 150] "laws" of folk narrative, and those traditions of oral storytelling are still obvious even in the necessarily summarized versions of Jesus' narrative parables. The "Law of Three" appears in the path, rocks, and thistles of The Sower in Mark 4:3–8; Matt 13:3–8; Luke 8:5–8a; *Gos. Thom.* 9; in the three servants of The Talents in Matt 25:14–30, in the "improved" version in *Gos. Naz.* 18, and even in Luke 19:15–26 despite the initial "ten servants" in 19:13; and in the Priest, Levite, and Samaritan of The Good Samaritan in Luke 10:30–35. But those last two cases also follow the "Law of Twins," that is, the first two servants in The Talents and the first two travelers in The Good Samaritan form a twinned situation as contrasted with the third one in each case. The Law of Contrast, of clearly polarized protagonists, appears in the farmer and his enemy in the Wheat and Weeds in Matt 13:24–30; *Gos. Thom.* 57; in the Rich Man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19–31; in the Pharisee and Publican in Luke 18:10–13; in the former and latter guests of The Feast in Matt 22:1–13; Luke 14:15–24; *Gos. Thom.* 64a; and in the wise and foolish bridesmaids of The Closed Door in Matt 25:1–12. The "Law of Concentration" on one leading character explains the emphasis on the master in The Vineyard Laborers in Matt 20:1–15. The "Law of the Single Strand," of unentangled plots, is clear in the three successive scenes of The Unmerciful Servant in Matt 18:23–35. The "Law of Opening," moving swiftly from rest to movement, is evident at the start of The Prodigal Son in Luke 15:11–32 or The Unjust Steward in Luke 16:1–7. But "The Law of Ending," returning terminally from movement to rest, is quite absent in those two parables. It is as if they are deliberately left hanging to force the hearer into judgment and commitment.

Another feature of Jesus' narrative parables, apart from their oral character, is their normalcy. The realities of Galilean life peer out from the everyday actions of peasant women, in The Lost Coin of Luke 15:8–9 and The Empty Jar of *Gos. Thom.* 97; and from the lethal actions of peasant rebels, in The Tenants of Mark 12:1–11; Matt 21:33–43; Luke 14:15–24; *Gos. Thom.* 65–66, and in The Assassin of *Gos. Thom.* 98. Parables speak of a fish, in The Fishnet of Matt 13:47–48; *Gos. Thom.* 8; of a flock, in The Lost Sheep of Matt 18:12–13; Luke 15:4–6; *Gos. Thom.* 107; and of a tree, in the Barren Fig Tree of Luke 13:6–9. One might move up in such a world, but it would take luck or even cunning, for example, in The Treasure of Matt 13:44; *Gos. Thom.* 109; or The Pearl in Matt 13:45–46; *Gos. Thom.* 76. To make a point about riches, a rich farmer is chosen, in The Rich Fool of Luke 12:16–20; *Gos. Thom.* 63.

C. Parabolic Interpretation

In the rabbinical tradition the interpretation of a parable is usually quite clear from the context. The classical sequence for rabbinical usage is: (1) the problem requiring a parable; (2) the introduction of the parable, often with a redundant emphasis, "They parable a parable. Unto what is the matter like? It is like …" but also with several abbreviated forms all the way down to the simple, "It is like"; (3) the parable itself; (4) the application, often introduced with some word like "thus"; (5) biblical quotation, often introduced with "as it is written" (Johnston 1978: 1.164–65, 2.526–38). In the Jesus tradition, however, the interpretation of the parables is much more problematic. This is probably because the parables were often told concerning the Kingdom of God and that explained a symbol by a metaphor. This meant that the first hearers and final writers were themselves forced both to transmit and to interpret the parables at the same time. The presumption is that Jesus intended this effect, namely, that the parables would be both provocative and unforgettable so that the recipient would be forced inevitably to interpret.

The narrative parables of Jesus can receive external and/or internal interpretation. The most obvious mode of external interpretation is by commentary. In this usage the parable is given a detail-by-detail interpretation, somewhat similar to what was seen already for The Two Eagles in Ezekiel 17. The classic example is The Sower in Mark 4:3–8; Matt 13:3–8; Luke 8:5–8a. This is interpreted by Jesus in Mark 4:13–20; Matt 13:18–23; Luke 8:11–15. The seed is the word of God and the earth is the hearers; the birds are Satan; the rocks are persecutions; the thistles are temptations. Similarly, the Wheat and Weeds in Matt 13:24–30 is interpreted by Jesus in 13:36–43, and The Fishnet in Matt 13:47–48 is interpreted by Jesus in 13:49–50. What is striking, however, is that all three of those parables are also known in *Gos. Thom.* 9, 57, 8, but they receive no interpretation at all in that gospel. It must therefore be considered quite possible that such commentaries derived not from Jesus but rather from the tradition itself. In doing so, the tradition may have placed more emphasis on the details of the parable than they will plausibly bear. Although one should not distinguish parable from allegory by saying that the former applies only one point from story to referent while the latter applies every detail, it is correct that the application of Jesus' stories seems to derive more from their general structure than from specific detail.

Another mode of external interpretation is from context. Luke 15:1–2 reads, "Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying, 'This man receives sinners and eats with them.'" Next comes The Last Sheep in 15:3–6, with the conclusion in 15:7, "Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no

repentance." Then comes The Lost Coin in 15:8–9, with the conclusion in 15:10, "Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents." Finally, the chapter concludes with The Prodigal [Lost] Son in 15:11–32. It is clear that the opening sentence sets the context for the interpretation of all three parables which follow it. Yet, on the other hand, The Lost Sheep appears in Matt 18:12–13 and *Gos. Thom.* 107 without the same setting. Context, then, like commentary, is from transmissional process rather than original situation.

Three different interpretations by three different contexts are given to The Feast in Matt 22:1–13; Luke 14:15–24; *Gos. Thom.* 64. First, in the *Gospel of Thomas,* there are three parables in 63–64–65 linked together by their openings concerning "a man." They are also linked by content. *Gos. Thom.* 63 is The Rich Fool, also known from Luke 12:16–20. Then comes 64 about The Feast. Finally, there is 65, The Tenants, also known from Mark 12:1–11; Matt 21:33–43; Luke 20:9–18. All three parables, in other [Vol. 5, p. 151] words, involve the dangers and temptations of wealth or greed. This is a first contextual interpretation for the meaning of the middle parable on The Feast. And in case there might still be doubt, that parable as found in the *Gospel of Thomas* concludes with this explanation from Jesus: "Businessmen and merchants will not enter the places of my Father."

Second, the Lukan version is located within Luke 14:1–24, which groups a series of Jesus' sayings concerning meal situations within an actual meal situation itself. There are four units involved and each one opens with a reminder of the symposium situation. Luke 14:1–6 has a healing "one sabbath when he went to dine at the house of a ruler who belonged to the Pharisees." Then in 14:7–10 he discusses The Two Positions "to those who were invited." Next in 14:12–14, "He said also to the man who had invited him, 'When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your kinsmen or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return, and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just." Finally, in 14:15–24, the parable of The Feast is introduced with this dialogue: "When one of those who sat at table with him heard this, he said to him, 'Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God.'" All that preceding context serves to interpret the concluding parable. In it, those first invited are unable to come, and this reflects on the authorities among whom Jesus sits. Instead, their places are taken, in 14:21, by the outcasts of Israel, by the same four classes mentioned earlier in 14:13, the poor, maimed, blind, and lame.

Third, Matthew formed a parabolic diptych of two parables: The Tenants, concerning an owner and his tenants in 21:33–44, and The Feast, concerning a king and his guests in 22:1–14. He then placed as their interpretive hinge this statement in 21:45–46: "When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them. But when they tried to arrest him they feared the multitudes, because they held him to be a prophet." This means that Matthew intends each parable to throw contextual light on the other and for both to be understood against that dangerous situation noted in the middle.

Apart from those external interpretations from commentary and context, there are also manifold possibilities of internal interpretation by the very details imbedded in the story as it is told and retold. The same parable of The Feast may serve again as paradigmatic instance. First, in Luke 14:18–20, and despite the fact that in 14:16b the master had "invited many," only three guests have their refusals recorded. One had bought a field, another five yoke of oxen, and a third had got married. This same triad, reminiscent of Olrik's "Law of Three," reappears in Matt 22:5–6, although here it is almost totally swallowed up in the plurality of servants and refusals of that version: "But they made light of it and went off, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them." But in *Gos. Thom.* 64 there are four guests and four refusals recorded and that is surprising within the "Law of Three." When you look closely at the four dialogues between servant and guests, the second one is doubly different from the other three. While they begin with "My master invites you" and conclude with "I ask to be excused (from the dinner)," that second one begins with, "My master has invited you" and concludes without any polite request to be excused. It seems most likely that *Gos. Thom.* is interpreting the parable internally by adding in that second instance to bring the total number up to four. This confirms what was seen already from external interpretation. The original three excuses involved claims against merchants, preparing a wedding for a friend, and buying a farm. That is, only two out of three involved business. But, since the concluding aphorism turned the parable against "businessmen and merchants," *Gos. Thom.* added in another commercial enterprise. Thus, he created his new second excuse, "I have just bought a farm" on the model of the old final one, "I have just bought a farm," and so had three out of four guests excused for the commercial activities which the ascetic Thomas considered an obstacle to heaven.

Second, we already saw that Luke had allowed the outcasts of Israel into The Feast instead of the authorities to whom Jesus was speaking. But that was not enough to fill the banquet. Therefore, besides those outcasts in 14:21, from "the streets and lanes of the city," the servant is commanded in 14:23 to "Go out to the highways and hedges, and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled." The new guests from near at hand are the outcasts of Israel but those from afar off are the gentiles. By these internal details Luke has interpreted the parable as an allegory of the history of salvation.

Third, after setting up The Feast in contextual parallelism with The Tenants, as seen above, Matthew also inserts internal details that draw attention to that interpretation. In The Tenants, instead of the single servants of Mark 12:2–5 and Luke 20:10–12, the owner in Matt 21:34 "sent his servants" and in 21:36 "again he sent other servants." Then, in parallelism with that plurality, and again in contrast with the single servants of The Feast in Luke 14:17–23 and *Gos. Thom.* 64, the king in Matt 22:3 "sent his servants" and in 22:4 "again he sent other servants." But by far the most striking interpretation through added internal detail is the incident of the wedding garment present in this parable only in Matt 22:11–14. This is best seen as Matthew's own creation and it interprets the parable as an allegory of Christian history, just as Luke had done, but now with a special terminal warning for Christians themselves. In Matthew's reading, God has invited his people to come to the marriage feast of Jesus. Their refusal has been punished by the destruction of "their city," presumably of Jerusalem by Titus in 70 C.E. Now the gentiles have taken their place at the feast. But, and this is characteristically Matthean, even among those actually at the feast, there are "both good and bad" (22:10). On the last day, at the final judgments, God will review the guests, and then it will not be enough to be at the feast, it will be necessary to be properly attired as well. Matthew, in other words, thinks certain members of the Church are destined for eternal condemnation. Possibly their attitude toward the Mosaic Law was one of which he disapproved. So also, in the preceding parable of The Tenants, the replacement tenants in 21:41 must make certain to "give him the fruits in their seasons." It is not enough just to have received the [Vol. 5, p. 152] vineyard. And in the Wheat and Weeds, a parable recorded both in Matt 13:24–30 and *Gos. Thom.* 57 but interpreted only in Matt 13:36–43, Matthew knows that there are both wheat and weeds in the kingdom, but "at the close of the age," in the last judgment, "the Son of man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth" (13:40–41).

All of those differing interpretations, with the difference most obvious in the case of The Feast, but actually present everywhere among the parables, should not be considered as the interpreter's failure but rather as the parable's success. It is a parable's destiny to be interpreted and those interpretations will necessarily be diverse. When the diversity ceases, the parable is dead and the parabler is silent.

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