

LITERARY FORMS: KEY TO INTERPRETATION GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

Parables

(Material taken from 30 Days to Understanding the Bible by Max Anders)

The Nature of Parables

One typical definition of a parable is “a saying or story that seeks to drive home a point the speaker wishes to emphasize by illustrating it from a familiar situation of common life” (F.F. Bruce, *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, vol. 4, p. 590). As J. Dwight Pentecost points out in his book, *The Parables of Jesus*, the word parable is used to describe a number of different figures of speech. For example, a parable may take the form of a simile, a stated likeness using the words like or as. Jesus said, “I am sending you out *like* sheep among wolves. Therefore be *as* shrewd as snakes and *as* innocent as doves.”

A second form a parable may take is that of a metaphor, an implied likeness. For example, Jesus urged His disciples, “Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32 NIV).

A parable may take the form of a similitude in which the truth being taught is based on what people generally do rather than on what a certain individual actually did. One example is when Christ stated, “the kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough” (Matt. 13:33 NIV). Anyone familiar with the bread-making process can learn the truth through this reference to a common procedure.

The form of the parable Jesus used most frequently to teach His hearers was the story. The story-parable teaches truth by relating a specific incident and calling attention to what one individual did. Consequently, Christ introduced story-parables with words such as, “There was a man who had two sons” (Luke 18:2 NIV) and, “In a certain town there was a judge” (Luke 18:2 NIV). The story-parable is what most people think of when they think of parables.

The common denominator among these and less-common forms of the parable is that all teach truth based upon transference from reality. The content is familiar and possible.

The Purpose of Parables

Jesus’ parables had two basic purposes. The first purpose was to reveal truth to believers. Parables can communicate truth more vividly and more powerfully than ordinary dialogue. The second basic purpose of parables is to hide truth from those who have already hardened their hearts against it.

The Interpretation of Parables

Proper interpretation of the parables demands the correct application of certain principles. The parables were not spoken in a vacuum. Each parable addresses a particular situation, problem or question.

The Historical Setting of Parables

You cannot understand the parable of the sower unless you understand the process of sowing seeds. You cannot understand the parable about putting new wine into old wineskins unless you understand thoroughly the process of winemaking in Jesus' day. We need to understand the details from the perspective of Christ's original hearers. Tools such as a Biblical encyclopaedia and a book on Biblical customs can help you understand the culture, customs, and daily life of those to whom Christ was communicating.

Different Literary Forms in the Bible

In education it makes a difference what kind of literature you are studying as to how you treat it. In poetry, you look for art, symbolism, hidden meaning, etc. In history, biology, physics, etc., you look for accuracy.

The same principle is true of the Bible. When trying to understand a particular Biblical book or passage, the reader must understand what kind of literature he or she is reading. This characterization of literature is called its "literary form."

The Didactic Form (Exposition)

Didactic or expository literature teaches truth in a relatively direct manner. The argument or explanation usually moves from point to point in a logical, highly organized fashion. Because the author employs comparatively few figures of speech, the meaning of a didactic passage is often easy to understand. The more difficult challenge becomes to obediently apply the truth in one's own life. Paul's epistles are clear examples of the didactic form. The meaning lies close to the surface in didactic literature. The most important guideline is to study the logical development of the argument. A second principle is to study the situation behind the statements. This will enable you to better understand both the argument of the book and the way in which the teachings of the passage apply in our present cultural context.

The Narrative Form

Narrative literature emphasizes stories. Begin with a close reading of the text, focusing on the narrative flow and the plot. Determine how the story book progresses. Is the movement of the book physical, spiritual, relational, or political? Look at the book as a whole, then analyze individual stories. What has changed by the end of the book, and why?

Who are the characters, and how are they presented? Note how the characters interact with one another and with God. Do they succeed or fail, and why?

Study the effect of the setting (geographical, temporal, or social) on the plot. An awareness of the prevailing social customs will greatly enhance your understanding of many of the biblical stories.

Note how the author uses literary devices such as repetition to emphasize certain elements of the narrative. Realize that the narrative sections express theological truths seen in living relationships, and consider what lesson(s) they illustrate. How might these truths be expressed in the lives of people in our time and culture?

The Poetic Form

Poetry appeals to our emotions and our imagination. What are some principles that will help you properly interpret the poetic passages in Scripture? First, recognize that each psalm has a controlling topic or theme and that the stanza patterns can assist you in discerning the flow of thought. Second, group parallel lines and try to identify which type of parallelism is being used. Third, be alert to the frequent use of figurative language. Fourth, when possible, identify the historical background of the psalm. Fifth, study the messianic psalms (2, 8, 16, 22, 40, 45, 69, 72, 89, 102, 109, 11 and 132) first in the light of their immediate historical purpose at the writer's time (primarily referring to David's situation). Then consider which elements, because of what they involve, must ultimately refer to the Messiah.

The Proverb

This distinctive literary form concisely states a moral truth, frequently reducing life to black-and-white categories. As does poetry, proverbs often use parallelism to make their point. Metaphors and similes are two other frequently employed literary devices. Although individual proverbs do appear in other books of the Bible, the book known as Proverbs is the only place where proverbs are the major literary form.

The key to interpretation of proverbs is to realize that a proverb is a general guideline that offers wise advice rather than establishing a strict, invariable rule by which God works. Second, consider whether the context is important. Third, extract the timeless principles embodied in the proverbs from their ancient cultural context and apply them to current situations.

The Prophetic and Apocalyptic Forms

Much of the Bible is prophetic. The Old Testament books from Isaiah to Malachi are prophetic. The New Testament book of Revelation is the primary example of a special category of prophetic literature known as apocalyptic. Apocalyptic literature focuses on the cataclysmic events having to do with the end of the world and God's ultimate triumph over evil. Apocalyptic literature makes especially heavy use of symbolism and vivid imagery.

The first principle to understand Biblical prophecy is, as with any literary form in the Bible, study the passage in terms of its history, context, and literal meaning. Second, identify exactly to whom or to what the passage refers. Third, distinguish between direct predictions and types. Direct prediction refers to a prophecy that has a single fulfillment. A type is "a preordained representative relationship which certain persons, events, and institutions bear to corresponding persons events and institutions occurring at a later time in salvation history" (Henry Virkler, *Hermeneutics*, p. 184). Finally, always take care to remember that the main purpose of prophecy is not to inspire debate or dogmatism about the future but to encourage faith in God and holy living in the present.

THE NEW TESTAMENT: THE GOSPELS

Introduction

There are 3 main eras of the New Testament:

- Gospels—The life of Jesus of Nazareth as told in the Gospels
- Church—The formation of the Christian Church
- Missions—the expansion of the Church into the Roman empire through missions

The Gospels

The word “gospel” simply means good news and so therefore the four gospels are the good news of Jesus Christ. Not only do they teach us the teachings and life of Jesus Christ during his ministry, but they are also historically accurate. Those who would endeavour to decry the teachings of Jesus come up against the stone wall of the accuracy of the Biblical accounts which is not surprising when you consider the character of the writers of the gospels. Matthew and John were both disciples of the Lord Jesus. Mark became a disciple of Peter so that in a sense Mark is Peter’s gospel and, of course Luke was a disciple of the apostle Paul.

All About Jesus

Each Gospel tells the same story, often describing the same events in almost the same words. Why, then, are their four accounts of Jesus’ life in the New Testament? The reason is that each of the Gospel writers shapes his account of Christ’s life for a different group of people in the first century Roman Empire. Matthew shaped his account for the Jewish reader, emphasizing how Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament’s prophecies about the Messiah. Mark shaped his account for the Romans, to show that Jesus was man of action. Luke shaped his account for the Greeks, to show that Christ was the ideal human being. John’s Gospel emphasizes Christ’s deity, and was written to stimulate saving faith in Jesus, the Son of God.

(taken from The Bible: The Smart Guide to the Bible Series by Larry Richards)

The birth of Jesus split history like a thunderbolt on a hot July evening. Everything before His birth we call B.C., before Christ. Everything after, we call A.D., Anno Domini, in the year of our Lord. His story, predicted throughout the Old Testament, is told in the four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. While the Gospels are biographical, they are actually thematic portraits of Christ’s life that place very little emphasis on His early life and follow the chronology of His life, but not slavishly. Not all the Gospels cover the same events in His life. When all four Gospels are put together and “harmonized,” only about fifty days of Jesus’ active ministry are dealt with.

That, in essence, is why there are four Gospels in the New Testament. These four men all knew Jesus intimately. They all spent years with Him. They all had different perspectives from which they observed His life. They were writing for different audiences. Matthew was Jew and a tax collector. Luke was a Gentile and a physician. They would each have significantly different perspectives on the life of Jesus, and by having books written by both of them, we have a more complete picture. The same is true of Mark and John.

The New Testament opens with the four books called Gospels because they present the “good news” (the literal meaning of gospel) that God has come to die for man so that man can live with God. The four Gospels are targeted at different audiences, and each emphasizes a distinctive aspect of Jesus’ identity and mission. Together these complementary accounts provide a rich and clear picture of Jesus. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the Synoptic (literally, “seen together”) Gospels because, in contrast to John, they view Christ’s life from much the same

viewpoint and share many common details. John is different from the Synoptic Gospels and stands alone as a unique picture of the life of Christ.
(Taken from 30 Days to Understanding the Bible by Max Anders)

The Gospel of Matthew

(Following material taken from The Revel Bible Dictionary)

The first of the New Testament's four accounts of Jesus' life on earth. Written for Jewish Christians, it serves as a bridge between Old Testament and New Testament. Matthew demonstrates that Jesus truly is the Old Testament's messianic King, but a Servant King, whose present Kingdom is ethical and moral and is rooted in redemption.

Matthew's Gospel was directed to Jewish Christians and intended to demonstrate that Jesus is the OT's Messiah as well as the Son of God. Matthew quotes some 50 times from the OT, and alludes to OT passages at least 70 more times, to show that Jesus' identity can be established beyond a doubt. The birth of Jesus is foretold in the OT (*compare* Mt. 1:23 with Isa 7:14; Mt. 2:6 with Mic. 5:2; Mt. 2:15 with Hos. 11:1; Mt. 2:16-18 with Jer. 31:15; Mt. 3:3 with Isa.40:3), and even the details of his death are predicted there (*compare* Mt. 26:15 with Zech. 11:12, 13 and Jer. 18:2-12; Mt. 27:34 with Ps. 69:21; Mt. 27:35 with Ps. 22:18; Mt. 27:39 with Ps. 22:7; Mt. 27:46 with Ps. 22:1). Thus, not only is Jesus seen to be the Messiah but his death and resurrection are shown to be elements of God's plan from the beginning. In hesitating about and then rejecting Jesus, his contemporaries rejected their Messiah and the very Son of the Living God (Mt. 12:23; 13:55, 56; 14:2; 16:14).

Yet, even the Scriptural proof would fall short of answering all the questions of Matthew's Jewish readers. They would wonder what happened to the victorious Messiah portrayed in the OT and to the Kingdom the prophets said he would establish. Matthew is conscious of this objection and some 51 times speaks of the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of heaven, or simply the Kingdom. Matthew also calls on his readers to look ahead. He portrays Jesus at history's end and teaches that when Jesus returns, the prophets' vision will be fulfilled. Jesus will judge evil and punish the wicked, demonstrating at last the full meaning of the rule of God over the earth and his universe.

Theological Contributions

Matthew's Gospel—with its interweaving of OT passages with events related to Jesus' birth, ministry, and death—demonstrates the essential unity of the OT and NT. The Christ of the New Testament is the Messiah predicted in the Old Testament. The person of Jesus is the unifying element between old covenant and new covenant, the OT community of faith and the new community established after Christ's death and resurrection. In this context, several themes found in Matthew are theologically important. These themes are Christology, Kingdom, ethics, discipleship and eschatology.

1. *Christology.* This study focuses on the person of Christ. In Matthew, we see Jesus Christ as the Son of God (1:21, 23; 11:25-27; 26:28, 29) and as the messianic King (1:17; 2:2, 4; 11:2,3). However, Immanuel ("God with us") is portrayed as a Servant King, come to die in order that he might bring those who believe into his Kingdom.
2. *Kingdom.* This "kingdom" speaks of the rule of God over the universe and on earth. Matthew, especially in chapter 13, shows that Jesus established an unexpected expression of God's kingdom, unlike the earthly kingdom of OT prophecy, but nevertheless a valid expression of God's rule on earth. The present form of God's Kingdom is expressed not in earthly rule but in personal relationships, demonstrated not by force of arms but by the moral transformation of its citizens.
3. *Ethics.* These are expressed in the Sermon on the Mount (chs. 5-7) and reflect a vision of Jesus' present Kingdom as God's rule within human hearts. The Law forbids murder and adultery, but Jesus calls for a people free even from the hate and lust that lead to these sins.

The ethics of Jesus are rooted in the moral transformation which Christ lived, died, and rose again to make possible.

4. *Discipleship*. This is defined in Mt. 16:24-27 and is illustrated throughout the book. Citizens of God's Kingdom express their allegiance to Jesus by obeying his Word.
5. *Eschatology*. A fifth major theme in Matthew is the future, which Jesus graphically portrays. Christ will come again at history's end. He will appear in power and glory, to judge the earth and openly establish God's rule (Mt. 13:24; 20:1-16; 22nd 1-14; 25).

<u>Structure of Matthew</u>		
I.	Introduction: Jesus' birth	1,2
II.	Early Ministry in Galilee	3,7
	Narrative:	3,4
	Discourse:	5-7
III.	Ministry of Healing	8-10
	Narrative:	8:1-9:34
	Discourse:	9:35-10:42
IV.	Second Ministry in Galilee	11-13
	Narrative:	11,12
	Discourse:	13
V.	Mission and Miracles	14-18
	Narrative:	14-17
	Discourse:	18
VI.	Ministry in Judea	19-25
	Narrative:	19-22
	Discourse:	23-25
VII.	Death and Resurrection	26-28

An Overview of Matthew

Matthew has a number of clear reasons for writing his Gospel:

1. To show the connection between Jesus and the Old Testament
2. To record the extensive teaching Christ gave to his disciples
3. To set out how Christ expected his disciples to behave
4. To answer questions raised by members of the church, eg. About the early life of Jesus or his coming again

The Gospel does not claim to have been written by Matthew but early tradition firmly states that he was its author. We know little of him, since he is only mentioned in 9:9 and 10:3, except that he was a tax collector who was personally called by Jesus. His name means 'gift of God'. Elsewhere he is called Levi (Mk. 2:14)

The issues which concern Matthew most suggest that the majority of his readers would have been Jews. Most would already be Christians but he may be writing to persuade others that Jesus was the Messiah the Jews had expected for so long. Yet he does not ignore the Gentiles

altogether and he may be writing with a view to answering some of their questions about the Jewish origin of their faith.

We cannot say when it was written. It must have been written after Mark wrote his Gospel since Matthew is familiar with Mark. But it cannot be too late because the problems of the Jewish Christians with which he deals gradually became less important. Many dates between AD 50 and 90 have been suggested.

Matthew is a very orderly Gospel. It sandwiches sections of Jesus' teaching between sections describing his activities. In his desire to show that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah he frequently quotes from the Old Testament. There are 65 references in all to the Old Testament. Matthew speaks about the kingdom of heaven (33 times) which is appropriate for the Jewish background he is writing from, whereas other Gospels speak about the kingdom of God. Alone among the Gospels Matthew speaks of the church. He writes as a pastor, dealing questions and problems.

The Message of Matthew

(following taken from Opening up God's Word: The Compact Survey of the Bible by John Balchin)

1. Jesus is the Messiah
 - He comes from Jewish ancestry 1:1-17
 - He fulfills Old Testament prophecy eg. 1:23; 2:6, 18, 23; 4:15, 16 etc.
 - He comes to save people from sin 1:21
 - He goes first to Israel 15:24
 - He illustrates his attitude to the Old Testament 5:17-48
 - He challenges religious leaders who mislead God's people 16:5-12; 23:1-36
 - He will one day act as judge 25:31-46

2. Jesus speaks of a kingdom
 - He explains what the kingdom of God is: not a place, but God actively ruling his world 9:35
 - He himself is also king 2:2, 16:28
 - He announces its revolutionary entry qualifications eg. 5:3, 10, 20; 7:21; 19:14, 23, 24
 - His kingdom is already present 12:28
 - His kingdom is yet fully to come 16:28
 - Its growth is certain even if it is hidden 13:1-23
 - It deserves to be man's greatest priority 6:33; 13:44-46

3. Jesus underlines the law
 - He strengthens the law 5:17-48
 - He summarises the law 22:37-40
 - He interprets the law 23:23

4. Jesus commissions his church
 - As a moral community 5:20
 - As a disciplined community 18:15-18
 - As a forgiving community 18:21-22
 - As a praying community 18:19-20
 - As a witnessing community 28:19-20