

Parable and Dogma

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The Ethel M. Wood lecturer is instructed that he is to avoid subjects which are controversial. Strictly interpreted this might be held to preclude any theological lecture whatsoever. What was probably intended, however, was that he should avoid matters of denominational dispute, and with this he now has no difficulty in complying, inasmuch as denominational dispute has as good as disappeared from the theological scene. This disappearance registers less a fundamental change than a shift of the location of controversy to within theology itself, which continues to exhibit, if not acute conflicts, at least considerable tensions. One such tension, which is indeed to be expected at a time when predominantly analytical methods of study are overtaken by strong movements in the direction of synthesis, is that between biblical and systematic theology.

The biblical theologian is not infrequently aware of the systematic theologian breathing down his neck in pursuit of a body of biblical material that shall be sufficiently coherent for the purposes of a systematic theology, and he is not insensitive to the exasperation he arouses when he fails to produce it. He knows that he must appear awkward and unco-operative, constitutionally incapable, it would seem, of giving straight answers to plain questions, but in this he cannot entirely help himself. For he finds himself faced with unresolved tensions within the diverse biblical material itself. It is, for example, simply a matter of fact that in the constitution of the gospels there is such a hiatus between the narratives of the passion of Christ and the accounts of his Galilean ministry in respect of persons involved and issues at stake, that it is hardly possible to show the one as patently the outcome of the other so as to provide, if required, a firm historical as well as theological basis for a doctrine of the death of Christ. Another such tension, emerging where least to be expected and where the gospel material is commonly supposed to be at its most straightforward, arises from the presence of so much parable in it.

Parable, when to what is specifically so called is added what is

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of the same kind even if not so designated, forms such a substantial and pervasive element in the synoptic gospels and their individual sources that it has to be reckoned with in any systematic presentation of the gospel. Whether such a predominance of parable in teaching was a unique phenomenon at the time cannot be said with certainty, since causes were not operating to secure

the survival of the same amount of the utterances of a Hillel or a Shammai as of Jesus, but it is unique in relation to what has survived. Once past Nathan's parable to David the scholar has to scratch hard over the extensive area of the Old Testament to find parallels; the intertestamental literature including that of Qumran does not add a great deal, while the rest of the New Testament, including the Fourth Gospel, adds hardly anything at all. What is the explanation of this, and what was the place of this concentrated element of parable in the wider context of the synoptic gospels and of their 'gospel'?

Until the end of the nineteenth century there was hardly any problem here. In that allegorical exegesis which, despite occasional protests,¹ had reigned supreme from the time of Origen both as a method of interpreting the Bible and of securing its unity and coherence, parable, with which this mode of exegesis was in any case felt to have a natural affinity, was subject to a process of decoding into doctrinal statements already established on other grounds. To refer yet once more to the hackneyed example of Augustine's interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan, which he would seem to have received from tradition, and which, even if over elaborate, may be taken as representative—the man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho indicates the fall of Adam, the Samaritan is Christ, being placed on his ass means being united to the incarnation, the inn is the church, the innkeeper St Paul (perhaps an individual Augustinian touch here), and the two pence the sacraments. Here then there were being taught by Christ in advance and in encoded form for future decipherment some of the fundamentals of Catholic Christianity as it was to emerge, and this had been the parable's purpose.² Why there should have been this curious arrangement in which fundamental theological truths had to be secured by being uttered twice and in two such different modes, once explicitly in the doctrinal language fitted for them and then over again in the language of cipher, is a question which does

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not seem to have been discussed as such. To judge from scattered statements part of the explanation might have been that for scripture to be cryptic corresponded closely with its nature as a religious book, while there are occasional hints that this might have been God's way of giving professors of theology something to occupy them.³

All this was brought to an end by Adolf Jülicher's book *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*.⁴ It is unfortunate that this book was never translated into English and was known by most only at

¹ Notable protests were made by Luther, though they were not sustained subsequently by Lutheranism. This type of exegesis could continue into this century—see, for example, Cosmo Gordon Lang's book *The Parables of Jesus* (London 1906).

² In *Quaestiones Evangeliorum*, II.19.

³ Cf. Origen, *De Principiis*, IV.1.7, as the doctrine of providence is not weakened by human inability to understand all visible events, 'so neither is the divinity of Scripture, which extends to the whole, lost on account of the inability of our weakness to discover in every expression the hidden splendour of the doctrines veiled in common and unattractive phraseology'. IV.I.15, of the impossibilities included in Scripture 'for the sake of the more skilful and inquisitive, in order that they may give themselves to the toil of what is written, and thus attain to a becoming conviction of the manner in which a meaning worthy of God must be sought out in such subjects.'

⁴ Marburg, Vol. 1 1888, Vol. 2 1898.

second-hand from summaries of its conclusions in other books on the parables, so that its full measure was seldom taken. For it could be said in retrospect that it was responsible for one of the deepest scars left by biblical criticism on the body of Christian tradition. This was not by reason of its governing principle that a genuine parable has a single discoverable point (a principle that has had to be modified at times though it has on the whole weathered well); and still less by its Aristotelian type logic which was manifestly not a key to the thinking behind the parables; but rather by its opening up a vista of a Christian tradition that was marked from the first by two forms of statement, the doctrinal and the parabolic, distinct in form and distinct perhaps also in origin, and so raising the question of how they belonged together if the one was no longer to be simply subsumed in the other. Exploration of the subject since Jülicher has shown how complex it is at every stage, and how difficult it is to be precise at any point.

In the first place there has been a fresh appreciation of the profusion and variety of the material to hand. It is characteristic of the Old Testament that it says what it has to say with a veritable riot of figurative speech and a minimum of technical religious language. The word ‘mashal’ and its synonyms, which underlie the ‘parabole’ of the gospels, cover a wide range of utterance varying from, at the one end, the brief and self-explanatory proverb, through manifold forms of extended metaphor to, at the other end,—and this is most surprising—the riddle or enigma. Such figurative speech was evidently most at home in the Wisdom tradition, where the mood is more universalist, static and tranquil, and the emphasis is on how things are in virtue of the divine creation and regulation of the world and by providential instruction. But it was not absent from prophecy, which is more particularist, dynamic

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and turbulent, and is concerned more with what things are to become through divine judgement and restoration; nor in increasingly bizarre form from prophecy’s extension in apocalyptic. Moreover, Wisdom could be identified not simply with divine instruction in general but with the Torah, which thus takes on the cosmic status of Sophia,⁵ and Moses could be regarded as a wise man as well as a prophet; and by the first century A.D. there had emerged into prominence the scribes, who were exegetes of scripture, and especially of the Torah, and who, to judge from the exiguous evidence available, would also on occasion use parable.⁶ When, therefore, in Matt. 23:34 Jesus, speaking apparently as the divine Wisdom, is made to say: ‘Behold, I send you prophets and wise men and scribes’, or when Paul in 1 Cor. 1:20 asks the rhetorical question: ‘Where is the wise man, where is the scribe?’, were these intended as individual designations of distinct figures, each recognisable for what he was partly by the way he spoke in pursuit of a particular vocation? Or could they overlap, or flow into one another, or even become synonyms? And could a single person be all at once, or sometimes one and sometimes another? These are difficult questions to answer. The biblical critic will be, or ought to be, haunted by the fear that they are maladroit, that his method may be seriously mishandling his subject matter, and that by, processes of dissection and dismemberment he may fail to grasp what is a rich and subtle living

⁵ Ecclus, 24.23.

⁶ See P. Fiebig, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu im Lichte der rabbinischen Gleichnisse des neutestamentlichen Zeitalters* (Tübingen 1912); I. Abrahams *Studies in Pharisaism and the Gospels*, First Series (Cambridge 1917), ch. xii.

whole. Nevertheless, he can hardly help asking them if he has amongst his tasks to bring each of the diverse types of material in the gospels into the sharpest possible focus in order to understand it the better, and to determine how they belong together in relation to a single person, in the hope of arriving this way at an identity for Jesus, or at least for his voice, behind the inevitably composite Christ of a systematic theology.

Thus, was Jesus a prophet? Competent studies have arrived at the conclusion that he was, and was recognisable as such, on the basis not only of statements in the gospels about him or by him, but also of similarities as to modes of speech and dominant concerns between some strands in the synoptic sources and the Old Testament prophetic literature.⁷ But what is the relation of these strands to other strands? Is it to be concluded that he was ‘amongst other things’ a prophet, and if so what are these ‘other things’, and how is he a prophet ‘amongst’ them? In particular, when he spoke

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in parables was it *qua* prophet and in the service of prophecy, or in the service of some other things? Rudolf Bultmann, whose overall designation for Jesus was that of eschatological prophet, also judged some of the parabolic material—though not the majority of the parables proper—to have been wisdom sayings in general circulation which the tradition came to place in the mouth of Jesus.⁸

Or was Jesus a rabbi? Here the evidence is more fugitive and inconclusive, and even the propriety of the use of the word ‘rabbi’ in the question is debated.⁹ But it is possible to point to similarities of form in the gospel picture of the ‘teacher’ or ‘master’ accompanied by his ‘pupils’ or ‘disciples’, as well as, occasionally, to similarities of content of teaching. The question could be specially pertinent in relation to parables, since, as P. Fiebig and others have shown, the ‘closest parallels in form to at least one type of gospel parable—the type introduced by a question, ‘To what is it like?’ or ‘With what shall we compare it?’—and to some extent in content in the use of certain stock figures—father and son, king and servants, invitation to a feast etc.—are to be found in parables recorded as told by rabbis. But for the rabbi, it would seem, the parable was a tool of exegesis which he used in the exercise of his vocation, and the ‘it’ in the formula ‘To what is it like?’ pointed to a passage in scripture which required the parable to illuminate it or resolve its difficulties. Is it then to be concluded that ‘amongst other things’ Jesus was an exegete or scribe despite appearances in the gospels to the contrary? Along this line of enquiry the hypothesis has been advanced that the parables are to be understood as a kind of rump of Jesus’ synagogue sermons, what was remembered from his exegetical preaching, and that the lectionary passages

⁷ See esp. C. H. Dodd, ‘Jesus as Teacher and Prophet’, in edd. G. K. A. Bell and A. Deissmann, *Mysterium Christi* (London 1930), pp. 53ff; F. Gils, *Jesus prophète, d’après les Evangiles synoptiques* (Louvain 1957); F. Schnider, *Jesus der Prophet* (Freiburg 1973).

⁸ *Theology of the New Testament*, Vol. I (London 1952), ch. 1, and *History of the Synoptic Tradition* (Oxford 1963) *passim*.

⁹ See M. Hengel, *Nachfolge and Charisma* (Berlin 1968), pp. 46ff. E. Lohse, art. ἑαββι, ραββουσι, in *TDNT*, vi, pp. 961ff.

prescribed for reading in the synagogue should be combed to see how far individual parables could best account for themselves as having originated as suitable illustrations for a preacher expounding this or that combination of Old Testament texts.¹⁰ Such a hypothesis will have difficulties of detection of its own over and above those attached to any theory of gospel origins based on appeals to the Jewish lectionary, but it could not be ruled out in advance. For it at least takes its starting point from observed parallels with one type of Jewish activity at the time, the scribal and exegetical, and could be held to provide a more intelligible

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setting for the parables than the wandering preacher or the lakeside pulpit of the gospels.

Variety of a different kind, and with it added complexity, is introduced by critical analysis, whether operating at the sourcecritical, form-critical or redaction-critical levels. For this brings to light forces that have been at work modifying parables in their shape, and consequently in their intention, in the course of a living and moving tradition which, up to and including the writing of the gospels, did not consist solely in the repetition of what had been uttered in the past, but also involved, naturally and very properly, the application of what had been said to subsequent and significantly different situations as an authoritative and contemporary word to those situations. Thus, at the level of selection and redaction it can hardly be coincidence that the predominant, perhaps exclusive sense to be given to parable in Mark's Gospel is that of 'enigmatic saying', and that this accords with the note of secrecy and mystery pervading that gospel. Or, that the more elaborate paradigmatic type often regarded as the parables of Jesus par excellence—the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, Dives and Lazarus—and those in which the characterisation is achieved by the use of monologue or soliloquy by the principle figure—the Prodigal Son, the Unjust Steward, the Unjust Judge, the Rich Fool, the Pharisee and the Publican—are all confined to the material peculiar to Luke's Gospel.¹¹ All three levels of analysis could be involved in assessing so brief a parabolic saying as that about the lamp, according as it appears in the form 'Does a lamp come in order to be placed under a bushel or under a bed, and not in order to be placed on a lampstand?' (Mark), or 'They do not light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but upon a lampstand that it may light all that are in the house' (Matt.), or 'No one takes a lamp and covers it with a vessel or puts it under a bed, but upon a lampstand for all who enter to see the light' (Luke), in order apparently to make the respective points that a present and puzzling obscurity of the word heralds a future revelation (Mark), that the disciples as the light of the world are to behave as such (Matt.), and that truth will out (Luke).

What is bound to strike here is the fragility of the instrument. Some might prefer to say its elasticity. Once metaphor is extended beyond the proverb which, by reason of a succinctness of expres-

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¹⁰ See C. H. Cave, 'The Parables and the Scriptures', *NTS*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (July 1965), pp. 374ff.

¹¹ See M. D. Goulder, 'Characteristics of the Parables in the Several Gospels', *JTS*, n.s. Vol. xix, Part I (April 1968), pp. 51ff.

-sion, is able to maintain its shape in all weathers, but has not yet arrived at some recognised form—the epigram, the hymn, the lyric—where it is sufficiently controlled by rules, it is at its most fragile and vulnerable. It is a delicate construction of the mind, which may indeed have some rules of its own—the rule of only two, or at the most three, figures in a story, for example—but these may be inadequate to protect it once it is launched on the wind and is at the mercy of the elements. The man who chooses to talk consistently in parables must surely recognise that in doing so he is putting himself and the truth at risk, and if he lives to see what is done with his parables he is likely to find himself from time to time expostulating: ‘Clumsy oaf! That is not what I said or meant at all’. Nevertheless, he may still maintain that for all its fragility no other instrument will do for the particular subject in hand.

This consideration sharpens the original question of the place of parable in the context of the gospels and the gospel, for this now becomes the question of the co-existence and co-ordination of two kinds of language and of what they are fitted for, the language of ‘is like’ and the language of ‘is’. The language of parable is analogical and suggests; the language of theology is substantial and states. The language of parable is random, being drawn from here and there in human life; it is light of touch, indirect in manner, oblique in reference, delivering a glancing blow at its object, and even in the form of extended metaphor or narrative never wholly loses the quality of simile—‘the kingdom of God is like...’ ‘Listen. A man had two sons...’ The language of kerygma, even if it is parabolic in the sense that all language about God or even about life in depth has to be metaphorical, goes beyond this and belongs to the privileged vocabulary of theology; it is heavy in character, direct in reference, and aims to secure its object—‘The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has drawn near...’ ‘Jesus is Lord’. ‘You are the body of Christ’.

These two languages may co-exist, but it is not immediately evident how they are to be co-ordinated if the one is not simply a function of the other. So, some of the more massive theologies of our time, which have been centred upon the proclamation of objective saving events—such as, for example, the salvation-history of Oscar Cullmann or the dogmatics of the later as compared with the prophetic exegesis of the earlier Barth—have found themselves

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unable to make much use of the gospel parables. R. W. Funk poses the problem sharply when he writes: ‘The *Gattung* gospel tends to make *explicit* what is only implicit in the parable—and thus violates the intention of what may be the dominant mode of discourse in which Jesus taught. One could put it more incisively: the mystery of the kingdom held in solution in the parables precisely as mystery, tends to be profaned, made public, by the *Gattung* gospel. If we permit the “gospel” to be defined by Jesus’ parables, the question then arises: has the *Gattung* known as “gospel” not already transgressed the intention of the “gospel” as defined as parable?’¹²

¹² ‘The Parables: A Fragmentary Agenda’, in edd. D. G. Miller and D. Y. Hadidian, *Jesus and Man’s Hope* (Pittsburgh 1970, p. 295.

This question has commonly been regarded as resolved by the emergence of what might be called a critical orthodoxy on the subject. This has largely come about by an unusual consensus of German and British scholarship in two books, C. H. Dodd's *The Parables of the Kingdom*¹³ and J. Jeremias' *The Parables of Jesus*.¹⁴ The governing principle of both is that when the proper surgery has been performed on them the parables are shown to have their sharp point in relation to the basic message of Jesus as this can be reconstructed from elsewhere in the gospel material. They are comments upon, ancillary statements of, and in particular defences of, some aspect of that message and of the situations which it had brought about. Thus Dodd, convinced on other grounds that this basic message was one of 'realised eschatology', that is, that the consummation of all things, of which the kingdom of God was an image, had arrived without remainder in the actions, words and presence of Jesus, found this confirmed in the parables themselves, once they had been docked of all futurist references, which represented the later adaptations on the part of those who were unable to hold on to this central conviction and had reverted to a more traditional attitude orientated towards the future. In parables of seed and harvest the emphasis was to be seen as falling on the harvest as a symbol of the present time of salvation, the sowing having already taken place in the past history of Israel. Shorn of hortatory or moralising conclusions or of allegorical elements within them parables of wealth, of payment, of reckoning etc. appear as pointers to that unique crisis with which the contemporaries of Jesus were confronted simply by belonging to that generation. Jeremias, whose book builds upon that of Dodd and is a very learned refinement of it, was convinced on other grounds

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that the basic message of Jesus was one of an eschatology in the process of realising itself—that he had brought about a situation which was already critical in the present moment but was also at the same time impending and looked to a future fulfilment; and he found this accent in the parables, again when pruned of later accretions or transformations, and with it the authentic voice of Jesus. In detailed expansion of this general position Jeremias succeeds in bringing all the parables or parabolic sayings into a unity under an umbrella of some eight aspects of the ministry and message of Jesus—the Great Assurance, Now is the Day of Salvation, God's Mercy for Sinners, the Imminence of the Catastrophe, the Challenge of the Crisis, Realized Discipleship, the Via Dolorosa of the Son of Man, and the Consummation.¹⁵ It follows that the parables contain an implicit Christology, a hint at least of the person of Jesus himself, which some scholars have wished to see as explicit.¹⁶ Thus, not by allegorising but by critical dissection, the hiatus between dogma and parable is overcome. The dogma is the eschatology, and the parable assists, substantiates or defends it.

Central to this reconstruction is the search for the *Sitz im Leben* of each of the parables, meaning by this technical term of form-criticism the particular circumstances or aspects of the ministry of Jesus, in distinction from the circumstances of the early church, which give it its sharpest point. It

¹³ London 1935.

¹⁴ Eng. Tr. London 1954.

¹⁵ Op. cit., Part III.

¹⁶ See J. J. Vincent, 'The Parables of Jesus as Self-Revelation', in *Studia Evangelica*, TU 73 (Berlin 1959), pp. 79ff.

could be said that in this way it renders the parables expendable, when they are attached inseparably to, and are exhausted in, a historical situation which was unique and unrepeatable—the arrival or approach of the kingdom of God for a certain generation—and which, moreover, was itself to be overtaken by a further situation, the death and resurrection of Jesus, which was then to constitute the core of the proclamation of the gospel. This, however, would not necessarily be a valid criticism, for it could be maintained that it is of the nature of parables to be expendable, and that the speaker intended them to be so once they had performed their limited and ancillary task.

The correctness of the analysis may indeed be questioned in some instances, though whether they are of a sufficient number to lead to a serious modification of the reconstruction as a whole would be a matter of detailed examination. Here a single brief illustration must suffice, though it concerns a passage which is important for any consideration of the subject, the collection in Luke 15 of the

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three parables of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin and the Prodigal Son, introduced as a reply to an objection from ‘The Pharisees and the Scribes’ (whoever is precisely intended by these somewhat stock figures) to Jesus’ association with sinners. Jeremias, like others before him, has no difficulty in showing that Matthew’s parallel version of the parable of the Lost Sheep is secondary in comparison with Luke’s, and illustrates one of the laws of transformation in being told to disciples and by means of a moralising conclusion applied to the behaviour of Christians to one another. He is, however, here as elsewhere content to take the Lukan version as it stands, despite its interpretation that there shall be more joy in heaven over one sinner repenting than over ninety-nine in no need of repentance,¹⁷ which is awkward in two respects. For it introduces a concept of the righteous without need of repentance which it would not be easy to locate elsewhere in the message of Jesus, and which, while it might have a certain plausibility in the parable of the Lost Sheep, since straying sheep was a biblical image for sinners, would be wholly artificial in the plainly twin parable of the Lost Coin, since lost coins were not such an image and could hardly be such. And secondly this interpretation is a deflection from the action common to both these parables, which is the indefatigable search by the person concerned for that which is too valuable to afford to lose. Further, the following parable of the Prodigal Son has suffered a similar deflection, and hence an assimilation to the previous two parables, by the addition after ‘This my son was dead and is alive’ of the words ‘was lost and is found’, since these do not correspond to anything in the action of the parable. Thus it is possible that the original intentions

¹⁷ Op. cit., pp. 28f, 106f. How curiously reduced and forced Jeremias’ interpretation thus becomes may be seen in his comment: ‘The *tertium comparationis* in Lk. xv.4-7 is not the intimate bond between the shepherd and the flock (as in Jno. x, though this does not suit Lk. xv.8-10), nor is it the unwearied search (as in Mt. xviii.12-14, in the present context), but simply and solely the joy. As the shepherd rejoices over the lamb (sic) brought home, and the poor woman over her recovered drachma, so will God rejoice. The future tense in Lk. xv.7, is to be understood in an eschatological sense: at the final judgement God will rejoice when among the many righteous he finds one despised sinner upon whom he may pronounce absolution, nay more, it will give him even greater joy. Such is the character of God; it is his good pleasure that the lost should be redeemed, because they are his; their wanderings have caused him pain, and he rejoices over their return home’. This amounts to saying that the figures in these parables contribute virtually nothing to their meaning, which is deduced rather from the setting provided for them in the gospel.

of these parables were other than they are now made to appear, and that the polemical setting arising from the circumstances of the ministry of Jesus to which they are now addressed has been the creation of Luke or of the tradition he has used.

A more general, and possibly far-reaching criticism could be made that in this reconstruction the term *Sitz im Leben* is being used in a significantly different sense from that which it originally has in form-criticism, where it refers to the situation which best accounts not for the content of a passage but for the particular form of utterance the passage takes, whether that form be regarded from an aesthetic or a sociological point of view. For, whatever the

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subsequent use made of parable in the tradition, it is not obvious, nor perhaps likely, that it elects itself as a form of utterance for proclaiming an eschatological message or for defending it. That it could be so used appears from such passages as ‘Those who are whole have no need of a physician but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous but sinners’, or ‘If I by the spirit of God cast out demons, then indeed the kingdom of God has come upon you. How can anyone enter the house of the strong man and despoil his goods unless he first bind the strong man and then he will despoil his goods?’¹⁸ But these are generally instances of a brief parable or parabolic saying firmly geared to a context and forming a step in an argument. It could be otherwise with the longer self-contained parables, which are sometimes ill-fitted to this purpose even in their present contexts, when indeed they have one. The judgement that all parables are combative in character may be a correct one, but it may be still an open question why they are so.

It is in part dissatisfaction with this strictly historical interpretation which has led more recently in some quarters to a different approach. It may be called broadly speaking literary-critical, though it is for that reason in its own fashion theological. It argues for a relative autonomy for the parables and for sufficient attention to be given to what they are in themselves as internal organic unities of form and content apart from any immediate reference to anything outside themselves. This is not unrelated to the marked pre-occupation with language and its possibilities that is widespread in philosophy of more than one kind from the analytic to the existentialist, in anthropology and some of the sciences, in literary criticism and in theology itself, especially where it is concerned with hermeneutics and the relation between what the text meant for the writer and what it may mean now. Man is a linguistic animal and his existence a linguistic existence. Language does not simply clothe thought; it may precede and determine it. Integral, perhaps original to language is metaphor, which is not an ornamental form of expression for what could be equally well or even better said otherwise, but is itself a mode of enquiry into the world and of cognition. In Middleton Murry’s words, ‘Metaphor is as ultimate as speech itself and speech as ultimate as thought’.¹⁹ It stands permanently alongside the conceptual and univocal language

¹⁸ Mark 2.17; Matt. 12.28f.

¹⁹ *Countries of the Mind: Essays in Literary Criticism*, 2nd Series (Oxford 1931), p. 1, quoted S. Teselle, *Speaking in Parables* (London 1975). p. 46.

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of discursive reason, and is not there simply to be displaced by it. Insight and understanding of existence proceed from movements of the imagination which take shape in fresh combinations of words whereby they can convey more than they ordinarily do. Parable is extended metaphor, a possibility of speech to be considered in its own right along with other possibilities—the poem, for example, or the novel—and it involves a coherent and self-contained organisation of form and content through which something is seen anew. It must be respected and received in the first instance for what it is, and due regard should be paid to the fact that it is found so plentifully at the heart of the gospel traditions.

So along this line the philosophical theologian P. Ricœur observes of the parables of Jesus that they are ‘a language which from beginning to end thinks through the Metaphor and never beyond’, and reaches the conclusion that in them as a whole we are given ‘more to think through than the coherence of any concept offers’, and that ‘taken together they say more than any rational theology’.²⁰ Dan Otto Via’s book on the subject, both in its general treatment and in exegesis of individual parables, rests on the conviction that the parables are aesthetic objects which by speech and action dramatize man’s existential possibilities.²¹ In having their own distinctive characters and their autonomous world they resist more than do other types of gospel material the efforts of evangelists to make them part of, and subsidiary to, the structure of a gospel as a whole. In her exploratory and engaging study *Speaking in Parables* Sallie TeSelle claims for the Christian tradition from Jesus in his parables, Paul in his letters and Augustine in his *Confessions* through to the present day a vein of what she calls ‘intermediary theology’. This has always been indirect in its method, reflecting upon and grasping its object by way of metaphorical clarity and precision, and it remains for that reason foundational, capable of renovating thought and language including what she calls the ‘tired clichés’ of Christianity. It lies somewhere behind systematic theology, though precisely where and how is the problem.²² The way from the one to the other may be, as R. W. Funk remarks, ‘circuitous and tortuous’.²³

A literary critical approach of this kind may well appear strange to biblical scholars, whose own disciplines may not have prepared them to assess it, and it has weaknesses of its own. The parable

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²⁰ ‘In Listening to the Parables of Jesus’, *Criterion*, Vol. 13 (1974), pp. 18ff.

²¹ *The Parables* (Philadelphia 1967).

²² Op. cit., esp. chs. 2 and 3.

²³ Op. cit., p. 300. ‘In earlier periods, the church did not hesitate to extract theology from the parables via the allegorical method, but there the parables were being taken up, naively, into a faith already well articulated. Where the parable is respected as parable, the tendency was and is to let them speak for themselves. That intuition is no doubt correct. I have endeavoured to suggest in another place that parable and discursive theology lie on opposite ends of the language spectrum. The parable funds faith with foundational language at the threshold of faith-gives faith permission, grants the rights and the rites of passage, “celebrates”. Theology, on the other hand, is faith reflecting upon itself in a discursive mode.’

may prove too small a unit for such large deductions to be made from it. Exegesis here will be more than ordinarily bedevilled by doubts whether the text to be expounded is the text as it stands, which may have been partly spoiled by later adaptation, or some hypothetical reconstruction of an original aesthetic object. And it leans heavily on existentialist modes of thought. Nevertheless its concentration on the character of parable as the main clue to its understanding may be valid and may have an important contribution to make. As an alternative to the existentialism I would like to suggest, though very tentatively, that in what some scholars have called 'the language event' of the gospel there were from the first two languages and not one, that parable was one of these, and that it performed within the strategy of the gospel as a whole the functions of a kind of natural theology. This is, of course, a question-begging term. I use it only as better fitted than existentialist modes of expression to focus that appeal to the natural order which is of the essence of parable, and I would stress 'a kind of natural theology'. For in those doctrinal systems which have admitted it natural theology has tended to consist in a somewhat formal argument to the existence, nature and activity of God from certain regular and approved aspects of nature. This would not answer to the logic of the parables. It will depend here on what is to be meant by the word 'natural'.

That the raw material of the parables of Jesus is the observable world of daily life is a point made, if only in passing, in almost any study of the subject, and sometimes deductions are made from this fact.²⁴ The point can strike with greater force when it is made intuitively by the non-professional, as in Pasternak's *Dr Zhivago* when the character Uncle Koila observes: 'It has always been assumed that the most important things in the Gospels are the ethical teaching and commandments. But for me the most important thing is the fact that Christ speaks in parables taken from daily life, that he explains the truth in terms of everyday reality'; then adding as his deduction, 'The idea that underlies this is that communion between mortals is immortal, and that the whole of life is symbolic because the whole of it has meaning'.²⁵ The point deserves to be dwelt upon. The language of the parables is entirely secular—with the possible exception of Abraham's bosom in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. This is even underlined by

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the rare instances of God appearing within the parable, for in the parable of the Prodigal Son what prevents a straight identification of the father in the parable with God is the fact that God appears alongside him in the son's words 'I have sinned against heaven and before thee'. Moreover, it is a wide range of daily life that is drawn upon. Simply to list the characters in the parables and their actions shows, at least in comparison with such contemporary parallels as we possess, a relative paucity of stock figures and situations and a high proportion of what is fresh and unexpected, which might suggest the observation of a roving and catholic eye. It is important at this point, however, to avoid sentimentality and not to draw superficial conclusions about the secularity of the gospel. For it would seem that there is seldom a straight carry over from what we would call the natural order into the parable. Even in the appeal to the organic processes of nature there is evidence of invention and contrivance. It is the smallest of seeds that produces the

²⁴ Apart from books on the Parables, see Amos N. Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric* (London 1964), pp. 82ff.

²⁵ London 1958, pp. 47f.

largest of trees; an enemy sowing tares in another man's field corresponds to no known agricultural behaviour and is fantastic; and there are still some who remain unconvinced by Jeremias' argument from rabbinic sources that ploughing after sowing, which he finds implied in the Parable of the Sower, was good Palestinian practice.²⁶ The statements that the birds of the air do not sow or reap nor the lilies of the field toil or spin only make their point by being from one point of view ridiculous.

The natural here would plainly have to be expanded to include human nature, to which the majority of the parables refer, but again not for the most part human nature in its normalities or as it were on its best behaviour. Rather the opposite—'which of you will not get up at midnight if not because he is your friend at least because of his need?'; the judge who is the negation of what being a judge is in respecting neither God nor man and who satisfies the widow's demands simply to get rid of her; the steward whose shrewdness consists in swindling his way to security on the backs of his master's debtors; the owner who breaks all known rules of business in paying all workers the same irrespective of man-hours; the banker who renounces the rules of banking by cancelling a debt large or small; the epicurean complacency of the successful farmer who feels he can relax when his barns are full; the absentee landlord who sends one rent collector after another undeterred by the

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fact that they are all beaten up; the bouleversement of the rich man and Lazarus; the cartoon of a Pharisee and a publican at prayer. Johannes Weiss spoke in this respect of the strong element of the grotesque.²⁷ This would appear to be too frequent to be simply fortuitous, and to lie too near the basic structure of parables to be put down to superficial deformations brought about in the course of tradition. The natural then would have to be expanded to take in a large measure of the contrivance of art. While the parables never fall outside the sphere of daily life they are often based on daily life as it is pushed to its limits. Hence C. H. Dodd's well-known statement that from them we can better reconstruct the background of petit bourgeois and peasant life in Palestine than for any other province in the Roman Empire except the Egypt of the papyri²⁸ is less helpful than would be a careful observation of the highly artificial situations which are constructed upon that background. Or as G. Eicholz observes in his essay with the intriguing title *Das Gleichnis als Spiel*,²⁹ in comparing the exegesis of Jeremias and Schlatter of the Parable of the Good Samaritan, the speculation of Jeremias whether the story reflects an actual occurrence on a specially dangerous road is of minor importance. It could have happened between almost any two points on almost any road in Palestine. What is of crucial importance is the evidence of constructive art in the deliberate juxtaposition of priest, levite and Samaritan, much as if a modern story began with 'There was an Englishman, a Scotsman and an Eskimo'.

²⁶ See J. Drury, 'The Sower, the Vineyard, and the Place of Allegory in the Interpretation of Mark's Parables', *JTS*, n.s. Vol. xxiv, No. 2 (Oct. 1973), pp. 367ff.

²⁷ See J. Schniewind, *Das Evangelium nach Markus* (Göttingen 1949), p. 77.

²⁸ *Op. Cit.*, p. 21.

²⁹ In *Tradition and Interpretation: Studien zum Neuen Testament and zur Hermeneutik* (Munich 1965), pp. 57ff.

Once more the critic, be he now three parts literary critic, has to make a judgement. Are these characteristics of the parables, supposing them to have been accurately detected, due to the pressures of a dogma—justification by faith, the operation of divine grace, the presence of the kingdom or of divinity itself in the ministry of Jesus and its attendant circumstances—so that the choice of figures and the construction of stories are determined by that? Or do they have an independent origin and stand more in their own right as so many mirrors held up to the life from which they are drawn, and as statements of how things are for this observer? If they are combative in intent, is it because they seek to establish theological positions that have already been taken up but are being called in question, or because they seek to undermine the normal and accepted and to gain a new perception of the world by appeal to the

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world? Are the parables defences of a gospel full-shaped, its end wrapped up in its beginning, or are they a preamble to it while it is still taking shape?

If it is the former then the task of the exegete could be to complete the work which the tradition and the evangelists for some reason only managed to get half done, to close the gap and to draw the parables right inside the kerygma of saving history, and in this way to have something to offer to the systematic theologian. Since the gospel is in the end. Christ, and the parable is a function of the gospel, perhaps the Good Samaritan is after all Christ. If it is the latter then the task might be to keep them apart, concluding from the partial failure of the evangelists that there was something about the parables which continued to resist their doctrinal intentions, and then to allow each form of utterance, parable and kerygma, to have its own force. And the force of the parabolic element might be held to lie less in the constant repetition, exposition and application of the parables of Jesus than in an inducement of men by the parables of Jesus to a way of perception, and so perhaps to parables of their own. This need not mean that parable and gospel are not related. They will be related in emanating at whatever remove from a single person, and to be unified in thought is part of the definition of being a person. Exploration of their relationship and of their need of each other might be one avenue to the understanding of the New Testament. It could, however, mean that despite heavy appearances to the contrary in the gospels themselves the mission of Jesus was not from the first and always a single, uniform and univocal phenomenon, but was at least two-pronged in its approach.

The point at issue may be illustrated in conclusion by a brief reference to the Fourth Gospel, which here as elsewhere proves illuminating and baffling. For what is to be made of a writing which may legitimately be classed as a gospel in being a narrative of the acts and words of Jesus and of his death and resurrection, but which contains neither the Greek word 'parabole' nor a single parable of the synoptic type, if we exempt the buried instance of the Shepherd and Sheep in John 10:1-6 (Jeremias calls it simply 'a bad parable') which is called by the author a 'paroimia', a synonym for 'parabole'. Part of the answer is suggested by the only other passage to use this word 'paroimia', John 16:25-30

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where towards the end of the last discourse Jesus observes that he has spoken to the disciples in parables (en paroimiais), but that the time is coming when he will no longer speak to them in parables but will tell them plainly (parrēsia) of the Father; and on what he then proceeds to say the disciples comment that now he speaks openly and not in parable. That is, there are no individual parables because all the words of Jesus in this gospel are parable: only parable now has to mean something like the cryptic operating as the symbolic. And not only his words; for in this gospel also the actions of Jesus are designated 'semeia', with the emphasis on their symbolic and signficatory character, and the same character belongs to his death. In this way diverse materials are assimilated to one another and are woven into a whole, which is reinforced by literary media, such as the use of the verbal double entendre and the theatrical device of dramatic irony.³⁰ All is now figurative, but that now means that all is religious, expressed in the language of 'is' rather than 'is like', and applied directly to Jesus and his circumstances. This is the more so if Bultmann's view is correct that in the 'I am' sayings the 'I am' is not the subject of the sentence but the predicate—'the living bread it is I'—for this presupposes the existence of supernatural entities (heavenly bread, living water, true light) with which Jesus now identifies himself. In this way the Fourth Gospel becomes a powerful coherent unity, and as the history of the Church in the following centuries was to show it offered itself more immediately for the development of articulated and systematic doctrine. But can it be denied that in the process of its composition daily life and the observable world have slipped away and are nowhere to be seen?

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³⁰ See D. W. Wead, *The Literary Devices in John's Gospel* (Basel 1970).