The power of story

Introduction

a. When we think of parables we immediately think of the many parables that Jesus told. However, Jesus did not invent parables; they were a traditional way of helping people understand the things of God and were used widely by the rabbis at the time.

b. The reality of God is revealed in the word-pictures of a parable. Jesus and the rabbis of old taught about God by using concrete illustrations that reach the heart through the imagination. They challenged the mind on the highest intellectual level by using simple stories that made common sense out of the complexities of religious faith and human experience.

c. On the one hand, in finite terms God is beyond human comprehension, but on the other, his infinite majesty may be captured in vivid stories of daily life. The purpose of a parable is to connect us to the heart and mind of God who is invisible through the telling of stories that relate to the physical and tangible world in which we live.

d. Outside of the gospels there are very few parables in the bible. However, there is one well known parable delivered by the prophet Nathan to David after David's sin with Bathsheba (2 Sam. 12:1–15). Nathan told the story of a rich man who had many sheep, but he took one little lamb from a poor man, who loved this one lamb dearly.

e. When David heard that story, he was outraged and said, *"As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die, and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity."* David didn't understand until Nathan clearly said, *"You are the man!" (vv. 5–7).*

f. By hearing this story David is brought to the revelation of the reality of his actions and the sin he has committed. He is brought to a realisation of the enormity of his rebellion and how God feels about that. This is the purpose of parable – to connect us to God and bring us to a response.

2. What is a parable?

a. The word parable comes from two Greek words. *Para-*, a prefix that refers to something that is alongside something else. For instance, paramedics work alongside medical practitioners (doctors/nurses etc) as helpers. And *bolē* which means "to throw or to hurl." So parable means something that is thrown alongside of something else. In order to illustrate a truth he is teaching, Jesus throws a parable alongside of it.

b. The Hebrew word for a parable is (משל), *marshal,* and has a wide range of meanings. The word is stretched from its basic meaning of similarity or resemblance to cover any type of illustration, from a proverbial saying to a fictitious story. It may refer to a proverb, riddle, anecdote, fable, or allegory.

c. A *mashal* defines the unknown by using what is known. The *mashal* begins where the listener is, but then pushes beyond into a new realm of discovery. The rabbinic parable illustrates its point by redescribing, in drama, the nature of God and human responses to his love.

d. Both *parabolē* and *mashal* show a likeness between the images of an illustration and the object being portrayed. Jesus loved to use miniature plays to communicate his message. The

word-picture of the parable creates a drama that redescribes in clear terms the reality being illustrated. Jesus and the rabbis of old created these illustrations, and their stories became known as parables. The method of teaching developed first, then the term parable (*mashal* or *parabolē*) was used to describe the story illustrations that resulted.

e. The way the parables speak about God is deeply rooted in the historical and cultural background of the Hebrew Bible. The use of descriptive and poetic language to describe God and His ways are found throughout the Old Testament.

   i God is not simply powerful but one who *"kills and brings to life; he brings down to sheol and raises up" (1 Sam. 2:6)*.

   ii God does not simply free a people but leads them out of a house of bondage *"with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm" (Deut. 5:15)*.

   iii The Hebrew Bible describes a God who lays the foundations of the earth and shuts in the sea with doors (*Job 38:4, 8*),

   iv who seeks an unfaithful people with the longing of a rejected lover (*Hosea 2*)

   v and remembers a people with a mother's love (*Isa. 49:14–15*).

f. The biblical God speaks through images that touch hidden depths of human experience and cover the whole gamut of human emotion. He is a relational God and He seeks to reveal Himself in a way that will awaken our hearts and minds to connect with Him relationally.

g. Jesus knew well this medium of communication. It is very likely that it was in the synagogue that Jesus first heard men talking in parables. Jesus used the parable to drive home his message about God and God's relationship to every human being. The stress on human relationships emerges from the interaction among the stock characters within the drama of the Gospel parables.

3. The power of parables

a. The Gospel parables of Jesus are full of everyday ordinariness along with a God-consciousness. The unexpected usually enters into the drama with a surprise action by one of the leading characters or an unanticipated change of events. The stage of daily life becomes the scene for viewing the world from God's perspective. By putting God and his ways on open display for all to ponder, the parables create a new dimension. God enters the world of humanity with the challenge of religious conviction and corresponding action. The listener catches a glimpse of the divine character and the spiritual realities of life.

b. Parables use rich imagery of language to catch the listener unaware. At first it all seems so familiar, and then a shift develops in the plot of the story. The ordinariness of the parable is transformed by a surprising twist. A consciousness of God and his way of viewing the world enters the commonplace scene to communicate the divine message. The familiar setting of the parable allows each person to understand God's will. The local colour of the story is changed for a special purpose.

c. This storytelling methodology is present in both rabbinic and Gospel parables. They share many common motifs and literary types in this dynamic process, which demands interaction from every listener. Parables are a shadow of the substance. The physical reality of the parable reveals the natural affinity between the world in which we live and the spiritual dimension.

d. The rabbis talked about God in parables. The creative process brings life to simple stories about kings, householders, or fathers who resemble some aspect of God's character. How can one imagine what God almighty is like? Rabbinic parables constitute the strongest effort to reveal his nature. Community leaders and old rabbis tried to communicate the divine character and sought to comprehend God's will by telling stories about daily living. They recognized the affinity between the natural realm and the ways of God. So it is with Jesus and his Jewish parables.

4. Jesus' parables and Jewish haggadah

a. One-third of the recorded sayings of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels are in parables so it is important we understand the nature of parables so that we can receive the revelation that Jesus was seeking to bring.

b. While the parables have a message that transcends time, the reinterpretation of the illustrations in a new context often has distorted the authentic meaning. Far-fetched allegories can undermine the force of the parabolic messages that the original audiences heard. Jesus' Jewish culture and his devotion to Torah open up much of the deeper meaning of the parables for us. Ancient Judaism is the backdrop for Jesus and his parables. In fact, Jesus' parables are prime examples of Jewish *haggadah*.

c. *Haggadah* is familiar to us from the celebration of Passover – the story that is told during the Passover meal is a *haggadah. Haggadah* is a genre of Jewish literature that is storytelling that has a meaning. Generally speaking, whatever is not *halakah* (legal lore) or *midrash* (Bible exposition) may be called *haggadah*.

d. Regarding the purpose of haggadah, the rabbis teach us, *"If your desire is to know Him who spoke and the world came into being, then study Haggadah and from this study you will know Him who spoke the world into being and you will cleave to His ways."*

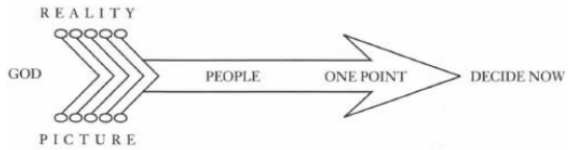
e. *Haggadah* bridged the gap between the common people and the highly educated even enabling children to connect with God as we see in the telling of the Passover *haggadah*. By focusing on the heart and the imagination, *haggadah* reaches people on all levels, from the learned to the untutored, in the ways of Torah. The intellect grasps the meaning of the biblical text. But *haggadah* penetrates the heart with the message that every human being is created in the image of God.

f. All parables fall within the realm of *haggadah*, even though *haggadah* encompasses much more than parables. The rabbinic parable describes the relationship between God and his people. The unknown God is revealed in what is known by human experiences of life. Parables illuminate and clarify the meaning of the sacred text.

g. The parables of Jesus and those of the rabbis have much in common. As *haggadah* they tell a story about God and invite their listeners to align to his ways.

5. One purpose of parables

a. The parables are designed to portray a reality. In a world of metaphorical redescription, the reality behind the parable is dramatized in word-pictures. One must carefully consider the relationship between the picture and the reality while recognizing that the metaphor and the object are not one and the same. The parables give only a pictorial representation. We discover points of contact between the reality being portrayed and the picture. But the picture is not the reality.



b. In some ways, these points resemble feathers that guide an arrow. A parable of *haggadah* may have multiple points of comparison between the picture and the reality, but it has **one purpose**. The multiple points of comparison are like the feathers aligned with the shaft of an arrow when it is aimed at a target. Because of the feathers the arrow flies steadily toward a specific destination in the same way that a parable is told to make **one point**.

c. A forceful illustration makes it difficult to ignore the call for an immediate reaction. The parable is designed to elicit a response, a decision. The parables of Jewish *haggadah* present a spiritual reality in pictures. They begin with God and involve people. They communicate one message and urge a decision. The drama leads in one direction to communicate a single message. The parables enable the listener to see things the way God sees them.

6. Six components of the classic form

a. **Opening statement**. The opening statement may be a single word, such as "To" or "Parable." The standard phrase*, "A parable, to what may the matter be compared? To a …,"* became the accepted form to introduce a parable. Often in the Gospel texts Jesus introduces a parable by saying, *"The kingdom of God is like . . ."* It is probable that these introductory formulas became more standardised in the written form of the parables. In the oral form, such introductions were brief. The opening statement serves to prepare the audience. It builds anticipation for a parable.

b. **Introduction of the cast**. The characters of the parable are crucial for the plot and final outcome of the story. The parable of the Prodigal Son begins by saying, *"A man had two sons."* The father and his two sons are important for the story, even though the traditional Christian interpretation has focused on the first part of the drama, which involves the resolution of the conflict concerning the prodigal son. The elder brother, however, is also one of the man's two sons. The careful interpreter will always pay close attention to every actor in the drama.

c. **Plot of the story**. At this juncture the drama begins. What is the story about? The listener is orientated to the dramatic movements of the plot. The listener begins to participate in the action by identifying with the characters. The story line is driven by the development of the parable's plot and the motivation of its characters.

d. **Conflict**. The classic form of parable often introduces a major conflict. It may be a family crisis, such as in the parable of the Prodigal Son. It may be connected to the relationship between the master of an estate and his servants or a very wealthy person and the poor outcasts of the community. The conflict focuses on the major problem and begs for a solution.

e. **Conflict resolution.** The parable will lead the listener on a path toward a resolution of the conflict. The audience actively participates in the process. Conflict resolution invites listener involvement with the plot of the drama. Sometimes the parable is left without a clear resolution and invites the audience to decide the matter. Usually, however, the parable leads the listener to an early resolution of the conflict and illustrates the resemblance between the fiction of the parable and the reality of life.

f. **Call to decision and/or application.** In the Gospels, Jesus often calls the listener to a point of decision. But both Gospel and rabbinic parables frequently make an application for life. The rabbis will use the word *kakh*, *"thus it is also with . . ."* They apply the parable to daily living or illustrate the purpose of the story.

g. The classic form of rabbinic parables, as with so much Jewish *haggadah*, speaks to the heart and the imagination of the people and calls for a response. The call to decision and/or application is the major turning point of the parable. Here the storyteller is describing the significance of his or her tale and explaining the central theme.

7. Jesus' parables

a. The Gospels portray Jesus as an itinerant teacher who taught in parables. As Jesus travels from place to place, he sits down in a boat to teach the people, or upon a mountain, or on the plain. He also appears sitting in the temple giving instruction. His disciples ask him questions, and he gives his response.

b. The rabbis frequently taught their followers in the open air of the great outdoors. As a teacher told a parable, the setting of the mini-drama may have been seen by the listeners somewhere around them. The open fields of harvest or the fishermen's nets around the Sea of Galilee may have been the actual background for the presentation of some Gospel and rabbinic parables.

c. As has been mentioned, around one-third of all the recorded words of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels are uttered in parables. Indeed, parables seem to characterise the method of Jesus' instruction. It has been said of preachers that the most important part of their proclamation is illustration. We use illustrations to simplify, to clarify, to heighten people's ability to understand what we are saying.

d. But when Jesus uses parables to illustrate a point, there is another, somewhat mysterious, element, which sometimes gives us pause. After Jesus preached the parable of the sower, He said, *"He who has ears, let him hear"* (Matt. 13:9). Why would He say that? We're almost certain that everyone who was present had two ears.

e. But Jesus was talking about people who have an ability to hear, to understand, and to embrace the truth. In the Greek language, there's hearing, and then there's obeying what you hear. Obeying what you hear means really hearing it—a hyperhearing or superhearing. When Jesus says, *"He who has ears, let him hear,"* He understands that some people might audibly hear His teaching, but it will not pierce their understanding or their hearts. So Jesus makes a distinction between those who hear and those who don't hear.

f. Once when Jesus was alone with the Twelve, they asked Him about a parable. He told them:

Mark 4:11–12 *And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables,* ***12*** *so that "they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven."*

g. Although Jesus taught in the way of a Jewish rabbi using parables there is a big difference. His contemporaries said of Him:

John 7:46 *The officers answered, "No one ever spoke like this man!"*

h. The crowds who listened to the sermon on the mount recognised he had authority that they had not encountered before.

Matt.7:28-29 *And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching,* ***29*** *for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.*

i. Everything He said had substance to it. Everything He said carried the very weight of His own authority. Jesus uniquely taught from the standpoint of the authority of God Himself.

John 12:49 *For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak.*

8. Conclusion

a. It comes as a surprise to some that Jesus did not invent the parable, but he was employing a traditional method of teaching that was used widely in first century Judaism. Because of this lack of knowledge, at some times in history Jesus' words have been misunderstood.

b. At one point, it was thought that parables were allegories – stories where each character is a hidden reference to a certain person or situation. For example, Augustine read the parable of the Good Samaritan as an allegory – the man traveling on the road was Adam, the man who helped was Jesus, the inn was the church, the innkeeper was Paul, etc.

c. Among first century rabbis, however, this interpretation would have been foreign to the way a parable was told. In Jesus' culture, a parable was a story from human experience that helps explain a spiritual reality. It is the product of the language of Hebrew which does not have many abstract terms to describe God, so instead uses physical imagery. The rabbis used parables especially for theology – to explain why God does things the way He does.

d. Jesus, like other rabbis, teaches theology at a very high level by describing God as a king who throws a banquet and invites the outcasts, or a shepherd who looks for his sheep. Beyond just defining him, Jesus paints a picture of God's character in vivid colours. His stories go beyond just defining and explaining, they elicit an emotional reaction.

e. People can feel the irony of a majestic king sitting at a table with beggars and outcasts, and sense the shocking grace the king is showing them. And they can imagine the anguish that a shepherd endures and his great joy when he finds a lost sheep. This is exactly the point – Jesus was a passionate teacher whose goal was not just to give people an intellectual knowledge of God, but to teach them about God's powerful love for them, and cause them to return that love to Him.

f. As we look at the parables in coming weeks the purpose is to connect us to the heart of God seeing in each story the point that Jesus is making and responding to that message with our hearts and minds. To have "*ears to hear" (Matt.13:9)* and engage with our God who wants to be known.