

PARABLES, “THROUGH PEASANTS EYES!”

Study 2, Introduction, Part II.

PARABLES ARE WHERE YOU FIND THEM

1. There are 6 different types of formats where parables are found. It is crucial for their interpretation to see how they function in these different settings; the 6 types are;
 - a. Parable in theological dialogue
 - b. Parable in a narrative event/story.
 - c. Parable in a miracle.
 - d. Parable in topical collection.
 - e. Parable in poem.
 - f. Parable standing alone.
2. Each requires a brief examination.
 - a. The first is a parable in ***theological dialogue***. An example is between Jesus and Rich Ruler, Luke 18:18-30. The climax of the parable is in the telling of the Camel and the Needle. The parable has a crucial function in the climax of the entire discussion and cannot be isolated from it.
 - b. The Parable of the banquet at the house of Simon the Pharisee in Luke 7:36-50, is the example of a parable in a ***narrative event***. The parable of the Creditor and the Two Debtors are part of the story. There is dialogue, but the dramatic actions of the silent woman are the focus of the entire scene.
 - c. Luke 13:10-17, is a story of the healing of a woman with a spirit of infirmity. This becomes a debate between Jesus and the head of the Synagogue. This parable type overlaps with another one of the 6 types. Yet is a ***miracle story*** and again the parable of the Ox and Ass function as a crucial part of the whole story.
 - d. Luke 11:1-13, we have a ***topical collection*** on the part of prayer. The Parable of the Friend at Midnight, see Luke 11:5-8, is one part of that collection. One must examine these collections carefully. There can be a number of sayings that can be grouped together. It is difficult to catch the breaks in thought and how to interpret the material.

- e. In Luke 11:9-13, we have a carefully composed *poem* on prayer. Jesus gives three striking parables in the central stanza of the poem. Their function in that climax is the key to understand the entire poem.
 - f. Finally, a parable *stands alone*. In Luke 17:1-10, we have three topics, in rapid succession, each of which has some parabolic speech. There is the parable of the Millstone and the topic of judgment on the tempter. This is followed by the parable of the Mustard Seed and the apostles' request for faith. Then come the dramatic parable of the Obedient Servant in verses 7-10. These three stand relatively alone with no clear connection to what surrounds them and no specific context.
3. We must come to understand the larger unit of the Scripture to understand what the parable is about. We must know the content of that section of Scripture to determine the content of the parable. With a working definition of what parables are in the New Testament and when they occur, we must then ask how they're to be interpreted and that is the next class.

THE INTERPRETATION OF PARABLES:

1. In the play, "Hamlet," Shakespeare uses the phenomena of a play inside a play. In Act 3, scene 2, Hamlet wants to catch 'the conscience of the king.' Observers see 2 things, they see the play about the murder of Hamlet's father and the conflict between Hamlet and His Uncle King. Hamlet uses the play and the actors to communicate with his uncle. The audience shifts from watching the play to watching the interaction between Hamlet and his uncle.
2. The parables of Jesus are a similar situation. The play is between Jesus and His audience. Many times the audience are His enemies and there is sharp contrast involved. The parable is the play within the play. Hunter sees parables as weapons of war in against the powers of darkness which took Jesus to the cross. In some cases like the scene at the house of Simon The Pharisee, is a long play and within that play a parable is told.
3. In other cases the play is quite short like in Luke 18:9 when it's just part of a verse. Sometimes it's missed entirely like in Luke 17:7-10. We must know the audience and try to understand the original audience to the topic discussed in the parable. Hence, there are always two levels of interest that we need to focus; "The theological debate between Jesus and His audience and the use Jesus makes of parables in communicating with the audience." This brings us to the aspect of the relationship between Jesus and his listeners.

THE STORY TELLER AND HIS LISTENERS:

4. If you listen to an Englishman tell the story of King Arthur and his court, the teller and listener throw a mental switch. Everyone knows how knights are to behave in the days of knights and the round table. We know how Sir Lancelot acts around ladies, those in peril, and the oppressed and his view of honor. The storyteller has a grand piano in which he plays. The known life of Lancelot is the piano and the story brings bits of humor, irony and variations of the theme, the known pattern is highlighted, reinforced, rejected, intensified in that play. Imagine an Englishman telling the same story to Alaskan Eskimos. The music will not be heard, the Native Alaskans don't share a common culture and history with the story teller. The people who hear the depths of what is being said in a parable are first century Palestinians. We in the west are separated from them in time and distance, 2000 years have passed and what can be done?

RECAPTURING THE MIDDLE EASTERN CULTURE THAT DEFINES PARABLES

5. To try to hear precisely the unseen 'grand piano' is the major task of this study. The present writer has already spent 25 years and is fully aware of its dangers and complications. He has four tools.
 - a. The cultural aspect of the parable (p) in the wide circle of Middle Eastern (ME) friends who roots are in isolated communities to find out how the changeless Middle Eastern Culture sees things.
 - b. To study the text in original languages to see how they have understood the text from the second to twentieth centuries. Remember, translation is always interpretation. A p passes through a translator's mind on its way to becoming a new language. A careful reading of this of such translations, one can begin to understand how Middle Easterners understand such texts.
 - c. Look for parallels in literature as close to the New Testament as possible. (Other sources)
 - d. The literary structure of the p or p passage must be examined w/care.
6. The question comes to discussions with 'contemporary peasants,' the other 3 seem non problematic. How do we know their culture hasn't changed over the centuries? If we can confirm ancient culture, we can find it surviving in contemporary ME culture. For example, the ME gentlemen

walks down the street. The Father in the prodigal Son p of Luke 15:20 runs down the street. The village patriarch running down the street would be humiliating and degrading. Can we confirm this as the same as a ME gentleman in Jesus' day? Ben Sirach, a gentlemen scholar of Jesus in his day, tells us that a 'gentleman is known by his walk.' (Sir. 18:20). Hence NT literary form confirms what we discovered in isolated ME today from Syria to Egypt.

7. But what if we don't have any literature that surrounds the NT world? What if the Sirach text had not been written? We can't do wishful thinking and believe that a new Dead Sea Scroll will show up to answer such questions. If we wish to interpret any p, it is to choose a path through a forest of alternatives, all which are culturally conditioned. If we didn't discover Sirach's gentlemen walk, then the running of the Father to the Prodigal Son would not be significant. But to do so is to make a judgment. So we could go back to our western culture for a base of interpretation that the run is nothing special. For Americans those in the p start acting like Americans, French like the French, Germans became like Germans and so forth.
8. When there is no alternative, it is better to start with the ME cultural pattern with full awareness that if we discover more evidence, our present assumptions can be affirmed, denied or revised. In the meantime, we do our best. The question isn't if we should make judgments, but whose culture will inform our judgments? Ours or someone else's?
9. Another illustration is found in Luke 2:7, "She laid him in a manger." We assume that Jesus is born in a stable, because there is a manger. This judgment is culturally conditioned as we westerners put animals in mangers. The ME farmer reads this text and assumes that Jesus was born in a private home. In the ME the villager's home is one room with a lower level at one end where the family donkey and cow are brought in at night. The family lives at the upper level. They raised terrace has mangers built in the floor at the end nearest the animal, hence a private home. The author has seen homes that were built in the 11th century. We are faced with three alternatives;
 - a. We can continue with our own Western view that Jesus was born in a stable.
 - b. We can say we don't have any 1st century evidence about where animals were kept, so where Jesus was born is lost to us. We shouldn't even guess, Luke 2:7 remains obscure.

- c. We can tentatively agree that we know that the peasant world has not changed over the last 1000 years. We can assume that it was the same culture centuries before. The assumption of the birth in the private home fits the text and everything we know about the gregarious nature of close knit ME culture, there is no reason with this evidence not to affirm birth in a private home.
10. The site of Jesus birth is not crucial. Deciding on b. and suspend interpretation, not much is lost on the case of Luke 2:7. But in p much can be lost because the very heart of the teaching of Jesus appears in p. To suspend interpretation is unthinkable. We can't read our own culture into the p, once we become aware of what we're doing. The third alternative, becomes the methodological assumption that is applies to this study when no alternative evidence is available. *In short p are a story of people who lived in a certain time and place.* We cannot interpret these stories w/o making culturally influenced decisions as we proceed. We will us all the best evidence at our disposal irrespective of its incompleteness. Finally, what kind of culture questions are we opened to ask?
11. In understanding the culture that informs the p is an internal question. We are not primarily concerned with geography, dress, formal customs, weather, and agricultural year. Rather we are interested in how people act, feel and respond. We want to ask the 5 key questions at crucial points in each p in order to recapture the music of the storyteller's piano. These questions are;
- Response
 - Value Judgment
 - Relationship
 - Expectation.
 - Attitude.
- How is a father supposed to respond when a prodigal son returns home? What is the relationship between a master and his student? What value judgment does the listening audience make when it fails to attend the banquet? What is the attitude of ME listeners to an imperialistic ruler? What kind of her does the audience expect in the p of the Good Samaritan? One time we ask these to the people themselves in the story and we ask them of the listening audience.
12. Some may object to do this is to 'psycho analyze' the characters in a p is irresponsible. The reality is that every culture has a 'grand piano'

mentioned above with an entire complex of attitudes, value judgments and known responses. This whole communication system also existed between Jesus and his first listeners. In this communication system the meaning is to be found. It is precisely there where the theology of the p is found and the failure to ask about the ME response is to substitute other responses is failure to understand the p itself. It is analogous to looking at the placid surface of the water on a rocky shore and failure to put on a rubber mask to see the fascinating world of color and motion beneath the surface. Speculative mind reading of the characters in the parables is not the point. Rather we seek out the basic ME responses to the human situations reflected in the p.