

## Making Sense of the Parables

*An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* by Robert Stein

QUESTION #1: What is your favorite parable?

QUESTION #2: What makes this parable valuable for you?

QUESTION #3: Have you ever created your own parable to make a point or teach something?

Class Objective: Our objective is to understand how to interpret the parables so that we can apply the truth intended by Jesus in our lives.

### The History of the Interpretation Methods

#### I. The early church (First century to 540 A.D.)

##### A. Allegory

1. Definition: #1 The expression by means of symbolic fictional figures and actions of truths or generalizations about human existence. *Merriam Webster's Dictionary*

Definition: #2 A *parabole* is an illustration, a comparison, or an analogy, usually in story form, using common events of everyday life to reveal a moral or spiritual truth.

*Unknown Greek Dictionary*

Definition: #3 A parable is a figure of speech in which there is a brief or extended comparison.

Because the Hebrew word *mashal* is not only used for a parable but also for a proverb, riddle metaphor, simile, and a similitude (a simile in story form), all these types of figures of speech are in view in better understanding variations within the category of a parable.

2. The early church practice of allegorizing various difficult or unacceptable O.T. passages was naturally incorporated into the interpretation of the parables. In other words, the parables were assigned deeper spiritual meanings that were made acceptable through the use of allegory.
  - a. The figures or characters in the parable and the actions would be assigned symbolic substitutes that would explain the passage or parable's deeper spiritual meaning.
  - b. Parables do have a deeper meaning, but there are a number of communication and language guidelines that must govern the interpretation.
  - c. The problem: The interpreter's "expertise" was the primary governing principle.
  - d. Example: **Luke 10:25-37** (Parable of the Good Samaritan)

#### Clement of Alexandria (150-215 A.D.)

Good Samaritan = Neighbor..... = Christ

Thieves..... = Rulers of darkness

Wounds..... = Fears, lusts, wraths, pains, deceits, pleasures

Wine..... = Blood of David's vine

Oil..... = Compassion of the Father

Binding Wounds..... = Love, faith, hope, and salvation

**Origen (184-253 A.D.)** - He incorporated the 3-fold sense of Scripture (literal, moral, spiritual)

The man going down to Jericho.. = Adam  
Jerusalem..... = Paradise  
Jericho..... = The world  
Robbers..... = Hostile influences and enemies of man  
Wounds..... = Disobedience or sins  
Priest..... = Law  
Levite..... = Prophets  
Good Samaritan..... = Christ  
Beast..... = Body of Christ  
Inn..... = Church  
Two denarii..... = Knowledge of the Father and the Son  
Innkeeper..... = Angels in charge of the church  
Return of the Good Samaritan... = Second coming of christ

**II. The middle ages (540-1500)**

A. Allegory - The 4-fold sense of Scripture was introduced, adding an anagogical sense that referred to the heavenly abode of the saints.

Example: Luke 10:25-37 (Parable of the Good Samaritan)

**Venerable Bede (673-735)**

The man going down to Jericho.. = Adam  
Jerusalem..... = City of Heavenly Peace  
Jericho..... = The moon which signifies variation and change  
Robbers..... = Devil and his angels  
Stripping him..... = Stripping Adam of his glorious vestment of immortality and innocence  
Wounds..... = Sins  
Priest..... = Priesthood of the O. T.  
Levite..... = Ministry of the O. T.  
Good Samaritan..... = Christ  
Oil..... = Repentance  
Beast..... = The flesh in which the Lord came to us

**III. The Reformation and Post-Reformation Period (1500-1888)**

A. Allegory - The 4-fold sense of Scripture was denounced by Martin Luther who likened the allegorizers of Scripture to “clerical jugglers performing monkey tricks.” Luther considered Origen’s exegesis as “worth less than dirt.” For Luther, the Scriptures were to be interpreted “literally,” not allegorically.

Note: That being said, Luther then proceeded to exegete the parables allegorically.

**Martin Luther (1483-1546)**

The man going down to Jericho.. = Adam & all mankind  
Robbers..... = Devils who robbed and wounded us  
Priest..... = Father (Noah, Abraham) before Moses

Levite.....	= Priesthood of the O. T.
Good Samaritan.....	= Lord Jesus Christ
Oil/wine.....	= Whole Gospel from beginning to end
Oil.....	= Grace
Wine.....	= Cross Christian called to bear
Beast.....	= Christ the Lord
Inn.....	= Christianity in the world (church)
Innkeeper.....	= Preacher of the Word of God

#### IV. Within the Last Century or so

##### A. Similitude

##### 1. Adolf Julicher (1888)

In 1888, Adolf Julicher “demonstrated in an irrefutable way that the parables were not allegories. In contrast to an allegory, which he defined as a series of metaphors in which each metaphor has its own meaning and significance, Julicher defined a parable as a similitude which has only a single point of comparison.

Each parable is therefore a single picture which seeks to portray a single object or reality. The details of the picture (parable) as a result do not serve any function in and of themselves but simply provide background or give coloring for the single point or reality which the picture is seeking to portray.”

##### a. The problem

Julicher overreacted against the allegorical interpretation and denied the presence of any allegorical element.

##### b. The answer according to Robert H. Stein (copyright 1981)

- 1) It would appear to be a wise rule not to interpret the parables of Jesus or the details of the parables allegorically unless such an interpretation is absolutely necessary.
- 2) We should find allegory in the parables of Jesus only when we must, not simply when we can.

##### 2. C.H. Dodd (1936) & Joachim Jeremias (1947)

Jeremias took Dodd’s interpretative ideas and systematized them and created four principles for interpreting parables

##### a. The principles

- 1) Seek the one main point of the parable. Do not seek allegorical significance in the details of a parable unless it is absolutely necessary.
- 2) Seek to understand the context in which the parable was uttered.
- 3) Seek to understand how the evangelist (human author) interpreted the parable.
- 4) Seek what God is saying to us today through the parable.

**Looking Ahead:** Craig Blomberg’s 1990 First Edition/2012 Second Edition book *Interpreting the Parables*, Simple 3-Point Parables, Complex 3-Point Parables, 2-Point & 1-Point Parables, The Theology of Parables: The Kingdom & the Christ.