

Parables and Hermeneutics

Jesus' parables reveal the range of different approaches to interpretation, or hermeneutical method. Compare historical and reader response approaches. From an historical perspective we can always try to put the parable in the context, the situation of the time. Some parables open up a narrative world, and invite a response from the reader. Which is correct? Will they lead to a 'right' interpretation?

Dodd's definition of a parable is "At its simplest the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to provoke it into active thought." This is often summarised as a story with a hidden meaning, but actually key active elements here are doubt and active thought. They stimulate engagement. This is a little different from suggesting that there is a single hidden meaning that can be explained easier and definitively. They are metaphors, rather than simply analogies as they are person-centred. They are vivid, drawn from everyday life. So they are about just and unjust managers, they are focussed on agriculture, or some other aspect of culture or working life. Other scholars suggest some parables contain self-evident truths, rather than the uncertain doubts to which Dodd refers.

Anthony Thiselton (Hermeneutics, An introduction, 2009, Eerdmans, Cambridge) thinks both views are a little right, and both are a little wrong. Parables have quite different patterns and are not easily analysed or simplified by these definitions. He argues, "A parable proper catches a listener off guard. It wounds from behind. How did the prophet Nathan approach King David when God told him to expose his adultery with Bathsheba? He could simply have confronted him, but confrontation is seldom wise with Oriental kings, even an Israelite king. He told him a story... The parable draws the listener into a narrative world, and gently the application places him under attack."

Thiselton considers the different approaches including existential, historical, rhetorical and post-modern.

There are existential readings of parables. For example, in the parable of the labourers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16) every worker receives an agreed upon wage. Some object feeling that justice is more important than grace, and the latecomers should not get as much as those who truly worked all day long. In tragic parables, such as the parable of the foolish maidens, the maidens presumptuously believed their wellbeing was guaranteed, that someone else would look after them and they were deceived because for a long time nothing happened.

The historical approach is concerned to establish whether the parable is authentically Jesus' words, whether it is based on the life of Jesus or the life of

the early Church, whether it relates to general truths or specific situations. Many parables are concerned with the Kingdom, a central element of Jesus teaching. Some parables cannot be understood unless groups such as Pharisees, or tax collectors are understood in their historical setting. It may be argued that if we understand these elements, we are more likely to have a better grasp of the meaning.

A third approach is rhetorical and literary criticism. This focuses on the literary style, rather than historical or theological. Here patterns of language and form are sought out in the text. As dynamic and potent words they invite a reader response. They can lead to a modification of the tradition. In some parables there is a profound reversal, such as the unforgiving servant. And so in reading parables reversals or unexpected turns should be a feature of how they are understood.

More post-modern approaches are drawn from the work of Paul Ricoeur and others. Ricoeur sees the world of the active agent, and the self as a narrative world. Readers therefore are participants, active agents and not simply spectators. Dialogue with the parables and the text is what is necessary.

Do parables have a correct interpretation? For some the answer is a clear 'yes', while other approaches suggest this is not the case. Can one interpretative approach be taken over the others? Or from the other approach, is it possible to mix post-modern or reader responses with historical approaches? Consider these questions with the parables you are studying and identify how different interpretations may be drawn from these and other distinctive hermeneutics.