

Interpreting Parables: One Point or Many?

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Abstract

Two modes of parable interpretation have dominated much of church history. The first and most dominant was allegorization, in which each element in the parable narrative was contrasted with a real life referent, thought to communicate an enigmatic or spiritual truth. In contrast to the allegorical exegetical method is the single-lesson interpretive model, which advocates that parables teach a single lesson. None of these interpretive models are adequate, for they either oversimplifying or unnecessarily allegorising the parables of Jesus. The model recommended by Blomberg, which views the parables as teaching one, two, or three lessons, contingent on the number of main characters in the parables, avoids the pitfalls on the two extremes, and ought to be adopted as the standard evangelical model.

1. Introduction

Henry Bosch, author of *Our Daily Bread*, once wrote that although Socrates taught forty years, Plato fifty, and Aristotle forty, Jesus's public ministry lasted less than three years, yet the influence of his life far outweighs the combined 130 years of the three greatest philosophers

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of all antiquity. The same is true of his parables. Although wise-men before and after him taught in parables, those spoken by Christ remain the best known and most studied stories in the world. Such popular attractiveness in both academic and lay contexts, however, has not prevented their frequent misinterpretation. Snodgrass (2000:177) is more severe in his expression, writing that 'throughout much of the church's history the parables of Jesus have been mistreated, rearranged, abused, and butchered'. The proper interpretation of the parables, therefore, is not only academically pertinent, but also spiritually imperative.

Thus, the methodological question that all parable interpreters must face is this: what hermeneutical rule governs their proper interpretation? Space does not permit an in-depth analysis of the various interpretive methods. Rather, this article is rooted in the deduction that Blomberg's interpretive hypothesis is distinguished, receiving less attention than it truly deserves. Thus, this short representation is an endorsement of Blomberg's model of parable interpretation.

Because no hermeneutical model exists in a historical or academic vacuum, this article shall commence with is a brief historical survey of parable interpretation. With the contextual placement of Blomberg's model defined, the focus will shift to a brief exposition, evaluation, and endorsement of his proposed hypothesis.

2. A Brief Historical Survey

Until the late nineteenth century, the broad-spectrum approach to parable interpretation was allegoricalism (distinct from *allegory* as a literary form). It was believed that the only method to recognize the accurate meaning and teachings of the parables was through the allegorical interpretive model. The *modus operandi* of the allegorical

interpretive system revolves around the supposition that each element of the parable narrative symbolizes something other than itself, namely, a corresponding spiritual item. Thus, the task of the interpreter is, firstly, to *allocate*² the proper meaning to each story element, and secondly, to *decode* the spiritual teaching of the parable story in light of the one-to-one corresponding spiritual elements. This method remained unvarying, 'the only development being the extent of the allegorizing, as later writers went into more detail, and in the Middle Ages they utilized the fourfold-sense method' (Osborne 2006:308). To illustrate the highly subjective and miscellaneous connotations assigned to the parable elements, Snodgrass (2008:4) highlights a typical allocation of the interpretive keys to the parable of the Good Samaritan, as given by Augustine:

The man is Adam; Jerusalem is the heavenly city; Jericho is the moon, which stands for our mortality; the robbers are the devil and his angels who strip the man of his immortality and beat him by persuading him to sin; the oil and wine are the comfort of hope and the encouragement of work; the donkey is the incarnation; the inn is the church; the next day is after the resurrection of Christ; the innkeeper is the Apostle Paul; and the two denarii are the two commandments of love or the promise of his life and that which is to come.

The level of Augustine's allegorization is unique only in the number of elements given significance (no fewer than 18), for church fathers and theologians both before (e.g. Marcion of Sinope 85–160;³ Clement of

² The process of allocating the spiritual meaning of each parable element was highly subjective. Hence, I chose to use the word *allocate*, instead of the word *discover*.

³ According to Stein (1981:43), the earliest record of allegorizing parables is found in the writings of the heretic, Marcion of Sinop, who equated the good Samaritan with Jesus Christ, appearing for the first time in history between Jerusalem and Jericho (so Roukema 2004:56-74).

Alexandria 150–215;⁴ Origen 185–254⁵) and after him (e.g. John Cassian 360–435;⁶ Thomas Aquinas 1225–1274⁷) devotedly employed the allegorical interpretive method.

Although dissenters were present (e.g. John Chrysostom 347–407;⁸ Theodore of Mopsuestia 350–428;⁹ John Calvin 1509–1564¹⁰), their

⁴ Clement allegorized the parables more fully than anyone before him. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, he attributed a spiritualized element to the wine (the blood of David's wine), the oil (compassion of the Father), the wounds (fears, lusts, wraths, pains, deceits, and pleasures), and even to the binding of the wounds (love, faith, hope, and salvation) (Stein 1981:44).

⁵ Origen was so regular and *effective* with the allegorical method that he became known as the father of symbolic interpretation. Origen believed that Scripture 'contains three levels of meaning, corresponding to the threefold Pauline (and Platonic) division of a person into body, soul, and spirit. The bodily level of Scripture, the bare letter, is normally helpful as it stands to meet the needs of the more simple. The psychic level, corresponding to the soul, is for making progress in perfection. ... [The] spiritual interpretation deals with "unspeakable mysteries" so as to make humanity a "partaker of all the doctrines of the Spirit's counsel"' (Trigg 1983:120-121, 126).

⁶ Adding an additional dimension to Origen's threefold method, Cassian was an Origenist monk who proposed that Scripture speaks in four senses, namely, (a) the literal, (b) allegorical, (c) moral, and (d) anagogical senses. In explanation, Cassian wrote that 'the only Jerusalem can be understood in four different ways, in the historical sense as the city of the Jews, in allegory as the Church of Christ, in anagoge as the heavenly city of God "which is the mother of us all" (Gal. 4:6), in the topological sense as the human soul' (John Cassian, trans. Colm Luibheid 1985:160).

⁷ Thomas Aquinas inherited the fourfold method of biblical interpretation from his Christian ancestors, and seemingly left the method largely unaltered (Lusk 2000). However, his commentary on the parable of the Good Samaritan (in *Catena Aurea*) essentially became a compendium of scholastic and earlier allegorical interpretations (Stein 1981:48).

⁸ 'As an exegete, Chrysostom is of the highest importance, for he is the chief and almost the only successful representative of the exegetical principles of the School of Antioch. Diodorus of Tarsus had initiated him into the grammatico-historical method

voices were not only too soft, but too often they were inconsistent in applying the very method [non-allegorical interpretation] they advocated (Osborn 2006:308). Throughout the first 1800 years, the church essentially followed the Alexandrian interpretive method, allegorizing the parables.

The definitive break with allegorizing, filtering into mainstream theological thought, came only in 1888, through the two volume work on the parables by German New Testament scholar, Adolf Jülicher, whose work was ostensibly a vehement reaction to allegoricalism. In his two volume form-critical work entitled *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* ('The Parable-talks of Jesus'), Jülicher rejected allegory 'wholesale' (both as genre and interpretive method), identifying parables as extended similes that cannot be interpreted metaphorically. Jülicher's conclusion was threefold:

1. Parables contain a single picture and teach a single maxim, having only one point of contact between image and object (Osborn 2006:309; Snodgrass 2008:4-5; Plummer 2009:6).

of that school, which was in strong opposition to the eccentric, allegorical, and mystical interpretation of Origen and the Alexandrian School' (www.newadvent.org). For his protest against allegorizing, see John Chrysostom, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Homily 64.3.

⁹ Theodore likewise was a strong opponent of allegorism practiced by the Alexandrian school, staunchly defended the principle of grammatical-historical interpretation, namely, that the text should be interpreted according to the rules of grammar and the context of history (Ramm 1970:48; Virkler 1999:62).

¹⁰ Although Martin Luther was himself a protester of the allegorical method of interpreting Scripture, often referring to allegorizing as *silly*, *absurd* and even *altogether useless* (Plummer 2009:11), it was Calvin who *consistently* (in both practice and theory) rejected the allegorical method in his interpretation of the parables. See Torrance D W and Torrance T F (1972).

2. Parables that contain allegorical elements are later explanatory additions inserted by the disciples. He encouraged attempts to discovering (reconstructing) the original parable forms.
3. Parables may be categorized into three groupings, namely, similitudes, parables proper, and example stories.

Such conclusions were extremely influential in the subsequent works by scholars such as C. H. Dodd (1961) and J. Jeremias (1954),¹¹ who further developed Jülicher's thesis by attempting not only to reconstruct the parables (by removing allegorical features added by the church), but also by emphasizing the importance of cultural, historical and eschatological context of the parables¹² (Snodgrass 2004:180). The literary-critical method of parable interpretation ensured further branching in terms of hermeneutical approaches. For example, the redactional-critical method introduced a number of significant 'developments'¹³ in terms of parable interpretation, chief among which were the focus on (a) highlighting of distinctive theological emphases of parallel versions, and (b) the setting of individual passages within a larger context contained by the outline of a particular Evangelist¹⁴ (Blomberg 1991:4-5). In addition, redaction critics began to consider

¹¹ Particularly noteworthy is Jeremias's depictions of the ten ways in which the early church altered the parables. According to Snodgrass (2004:180), this provided the blueprint for reconstructing the original form of the parables and their subsequent meaning.

¹² Especially important to mention are the works of Derrett (1970; 1977-1978) and Bailey (1976), both giving due emphasis to Jewish and Palestinian culture in attempts to interpret parables correctly. These included comparing Jesus's parables to rabbinic parables. Such emphases in parable interpretation even became a method in its own right.

¹³ I use this word with caution, for the various critical literary approaches are not immune to abuse.

¹⁴ Such emphases came to the forefront especially through the works of Carlston (1979), Labrecht (1981), and Donahue (1988).

the parables and their function within a specific gospel (Bailey 1976) or chapter (Kingsbury 1969).

A key figure in the single-point parable interpretation is Gordon Fee, who has done much to popularize this hermeneutical method. In his book *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth* (Fee and Stuart 1993), he likens interpreting parables to interpreting a joke, in which the initial points of reference serve merely as a build-up to the final punch-line (139). Thus, the interpreter must avoid complicating the parables by adding additional lessons, drawn from merely context information.

The end of the 1960s also marked the birth of several new liberal-critical approaches to parable interpretation, such as the new hermeneutic,¹⁵ structuralism,¹⁶ and post-structuralism.¹⁷ Such methods waned both in popularity and credibility by the mid to late 1980s. As Snodgrass (2004:185) so aptly expressed, 'Partly because of modern literary criticism and reader-response approaches to literature, we have

¹⁵ The new hermeneutic refers 'to a movement which emphasizes the subjectivity of the process of interpreting the biblical text' (Blomberg 1990:134). The chief work is that of Thiselton (1970).

¹⁶ Structuralistic interpretations emphasize the thorough analysis of the form and structure of the parables, so as to derive the true meaning of a particular narrative text. As Snodgrass (2004:183) explains, structuralists 'did not seek the historical meaning of Jesus or of the evangelists. Instead, they compared both surface and deep structures of various texts to chart the movements, motives, functions, oppositions, and resolutions within the text.' The most notable structuralist work was that of Funk (1966).

¹⁷ According to Blomberg (1991:5), the two signature methods of poststructuralist interpretation of the parables are *reader-response criticism* (the interpretive method focusing on the readers of the text, whereby meaning from a particular text may be derived mainly through the readers' interaction with the text), and *deconstructionism* (the view that text cannot have an objective meaning in any sense of the word). See Seung (1982) and Tompkins (1980).

come full circle. Some scholars and their followers now allegorize in ways not unlike Augustine's.'

In the last ten years or so, a number of interesting models for parable interpretation have surfaced in scholarly circles. For example, some have suggested that the parables are in fact anti-ecclesiological rhetoric, aimed at rich authority figures and institutionalized powers of Jesus's day, who consistently ignored and perpetuated the plight of the poor (see Schottroff 2006). Others, like Hultgren (2000), rejected sweeping generalizations in parable interpretations (e.g. one point per parable, many points per parable, parables as apologetic against critics), and attempted to focus on interpreting each parable in its own right and canonical context (see Hultgren 2000; Kistemaker 2002). While others have even argued that 'various interpretations of biblical passages [i.e.: parables] are valued in their own right and given a level of authority and influence which sometimes equals or exceeds the inspired text' (Plummer 2009:6; cf. Treier 2008). Lastly, Young's (2008) work is worthy of mention, who expressed that although the parables generally teach a single lesson, they are open to diverse interpretations (i.e. the lesson is contingent on who is assumed to be addressed is being addressed). However, none of the above models have gained much support from their contemporaries.

At this point, it is perhaps important to note that in the last three decades a number of prominent scholars have returned to the allegorical model of parable interpretation. For example, Dominic Crossan initially rejected allegory but later conceded that the parables are indeed paradoxical and polyvalent (Crossan 2008; cf. Tolbert 1979).¹⁸

¹⁸ Mary Ann Tolbert likewise saw the parables as allegories, but argued for a limit in the number of parallels between object and real life, caused by the parables' placing in numerous contexts by the disciples (Thiselton 2009:56).

Likewise, Ulrich Luz 'tried to justify allegorizing—both the allegorizing of the ancient church and present-day allegorizing' (Snodgrass 2004; cf. Luz 2001). The crowning work on parable interpretation, however, belongs to Craig Blomberg, who brought much-needed order and common sense to the allegorical interpretive model.

From the above survey, it is clear that over the past two millennia, the pendulum of parable interpretive method has swung from subjective allegorization, to Jülicher's single point hypothesis, to a kind of poststructuralist polyvalence theory of unrestricted lessons in each parable as required by the context of its application. The following section is a brief outline of Blomberg's thesis, as he attempts to advance the methodological gap in parable interpretation.

3. Blomberg's Thesis

Blomberg's (date) primary concern is one of methodology, namely, to offer a responsible and controlled allegorical approach to parable interpretation that neither oversimplifies nor allegorizes unconstrained the message of the text. The tenets of Blomberg's thesis may be summed up in the following two broad points: (a) the parables of Jesus are sufficiently similar to other demonstrable allegorical works (e.g. rabbinic literature) that they too must be recognized as allegories,¹⁹ thus requiring *controlled* allegorical analysis (68); (b) the primary details

¹⁹ According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word *allegory* in common usage means 'an extended or continued metaphor'. In light of this, parables are in some sense extended metaphors. As Hultgren (2000:13) correctly noted (referencing the conclusions of Brown 1965:324), 'parable and allegory were not sharply differentiated in the world of Jesus and his contemporaries'. It is therefore not wise to divide so sharply between the two.

which disclose an allegorical level of meaning are the narrative's principal characters (68). In other words, narrative characters control the degree of allegory. Hence, the parables of Jesus generally contain one, two, or three narrative characters, and hence each parable makes one, two, or three points appropriately (166). Additional details only provide local color and or human interest to enhance the fictional picture constructed.

3.1. Apologetic for Point 1: Parables Are Essentially Allegories, and Allegories Are Essentially Extended Metaphors

Space constraints permit only a brief statement on the nature of allegory. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word *allegory* in common usage means 'an extended or continued metaphor'; thus parables are in some sense extended metaphors (Tate 2008:148). In fact, it seems that numerous literary linguists view parables as an extension of metaphor, or extended metaphors.²⁰ Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that 'parable and allegory were not sharply differentiated in the world of Jesus and his contemporaries' (Hultgren 2000:13, quoting the conclusion of Brown 1965:324). Evidently, then, the line between parables and allegories is a fluid one, and any attempt to sharply divide them is misplaced.

Reflecting on past scholarship, Snodgrass (2008:16) expressed his sentiments, writing that 'tremendous effort has been expended trying to distinguish parable and allegory, but in the end we must admit that the effort is a complete failure, despite the gallons of ink expended. ... Parables are allegorical, some more so than others.' This was likewise expressed by Ryken (2004:407): 'despite all that some (though not all)

²⁰ For parables as extended metaphors, see Wilder (1964), Funk (1966), Via (1967), and TeSelle (1975).

biblical scholars have said to the contrary, the parables fit any standard literary definition of allegory' (Ryken 1984). The parables are therefore allegories, differing only in degree to which they are symbolic.²¹

This is one of the three foundational deductions of Blomberg, offering the following points as evidence.

Firstly, although the parables were generally restricted to the Greek pater of rhetoric (i.e. Aristotelian), the specific Hebrew background of allegorical parables should be the key to understanding the parables of Jesus, especially since his parables used the language and thought forms of Aramaic (36). In other words, there is virtually no difference in structure or form between rabbinic parables, and the parables of Jesus. In fact, the parables may contain subtle allusions to various Old Testament texts not usually discussed as background to for these stories (45). Thus, 'it was unfair to oppose the parables of the rabbis so diametrically to those of Jesus (37). In light of this, Blomberg believes that rhetorically, the Aristotelian distinction between simile and metaphor is greatly exaggerated, for these two forms of writing and speaking were not poles apart in the Greco-Roman world (37).

Secondly, although form critics have pointed out the tendency of oral traditions to allegorize simple stories like some of the parables, this hypothesis is counterbalanced by the even more common tendency to abbreviate and de-allegorize them (41).

Thirdly, interpreting the parables emblematically is an unavoidable method of exegeting parables. Those who deny it in theory cannot avoid it practice (41). A great example of this inconsistency between theory and application is Dodd. Although he advocated a non-allegorical

²¹ An attractive model was proposed by Frye (1957:89-92), namely, an allegorical sliding scale continuum.

exegetical framework for interpreting the parables, Dodd wound up 'conceding that the natural meaning which Jesus most likely intended is that the vineyard is Israel; the tenants, the Jewish leaders; the servants, the prophets; and the son, Jesus' (Black, in Blomberg 1990:42). Blomberg then continues on the topic of the nature of parables, noting that it is not multiple points of comparison which make a narrative an allegory; rather, any narrative with both a literal and a metaphorical meaning is in essence allegorical (42).

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, identifying a narrative as an allegory is a far cry from imposing an allegorical interpretation on a passage which was never intended to contain second level meaning (43).

3.2. Apology for Point 2: Main Characters of the Parables Control the Extent of the Allegory

Blomberg admits that viewing parables as allegories permits many of them to make more than one main point, but does not *per se* establish how many points to look for. Although lengthy, his reflections (1991:6) deserve full mention:

Newer movements like poststructuralism often support allegorical interpretations but from the standpoint of an unlimited polyvalence. Form criticism and redaction criticism suggest ways in which the tradition and the evangelists have creatively handled their sources, but they do not successfully dislodge the parables *en masse* from their well-established position as among the most undeniably authentic teachings of Jesus. In fact, more of the material sometimes assigned to later tradition may be authentic than is usually recognized. Structuralism and the literary study of parables as narratives point to a consistent triadic design for many of the stories and suggest the possibility of identifying

a central lesson with each of three main characters. Here lies an attractive middle ground between the Procrustean bed of Jülicher's one main point and the sea of relativism of some kinds of poststructuralist polyvalence. Perhaps the parables can be classified according to the number of main characters and the nature of the relationships among those characters. Perhaps each main character discloses an important lesson which a given parable wishes to communicate. Perhaps those lessons emerge as one treats the parables as allegories, at least to the extent that one assumes that the central actors represent spiritual counterparts.

He further adds that hermeneuts should carefully note that 'elements other than the main characters will have metaphorical referents only to the extent that they fit in with the meaning established by the referents of the main characters, and all allegorical interpretation must result in that which would have been intelligible to first-century Palestinian audience' (163).

Some scholars (e.g. Crossan 1980; Luz 2001; Ryken 2007) have admitted that parables often teach more than one main lesson. Even Fee has admitted that the kingdom parables have a two-fold thrust (already/not yet), communicating two lessons (1993:145). In light of viewing parables as extended metaphors, the important question that remains is to discern when to stop interpreting. 'As with metaphor, parable interpretation is about understanding the limit—and the significance—of the analogy' (Snodgrass 2008:28). But can the limits be set purely by observing from context the intent of the analogy, as further suggested by Snodgrass? The answer is no, for discovering the intent is not always possible. Some have suggested the feasibility of utilizing stock imagery for determining the extent of the allegory. For example, a father, a master, a judge, or a king always denotes God. Likewise, a son always represents Jesus, a fig tree, vineyard, or vine

always represent Israel or God's people. However, although understanding of stock imagery in parable interpretation is essential, it cannot set the limit for what is to be interpreted, and what is to be considered context. Therefore, viewing parables as allegories controlled by the main characters and limited by the historical, cultural, and religious context, as well as the specific location within the extant sources (Anderson 2008), yields much fruit in terms of understanding the parables of Jesus.

In light of the above, Blomberg offers the following classification of the parables:

Simple three-point parables: three main characters, including an authority figure (master) representing God, and two contrasting subordinates (good/wicked subordinate or focal/peripheral subordinate), representing respectively God's people and those who reject him. Examples include *the prodigal son* (Luke 15:11-32), the parables of *the lost sheep and the lost coin* (Luke 15:4-10; Matt. 18:12-14), the parable of *the two debtors* (Luke 7:41-43), and *the two sons* (Matt. 21:28-32).

Complex three-point parables: more than three main characters, ultimately displaying the same triangular structure as the simple 3-point parables.²² In other words, one particular role (usually the good/wicked subordinate) may be expressed and illustrated in multiple examples (e.g. priest and Levite in the Good Samaritan). Examples include the parable of *the talents* (Matt. 25:14-30), the parable of *the workers in the vineyard* (Matt. 20:1-16), and the parable of *the sower* (Matt. 13:1-23).

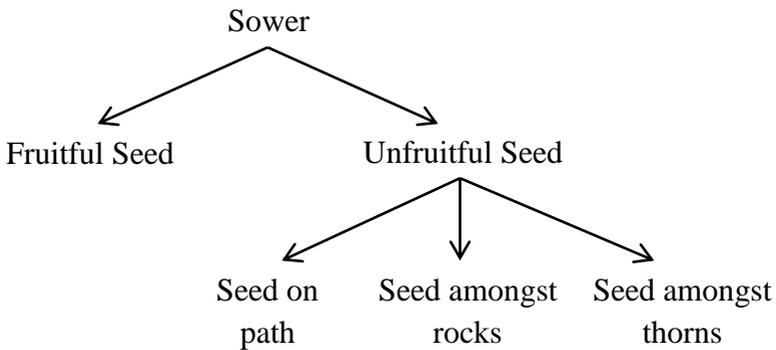
Two and one-point parables: only two or one main character per narrative, signifying less elaborate allegories. Examples of two-point

²² An exception is the parable of *the wicked tenants*, which defies the suggested categorizations, may make as many as four points.

parables include the parable of *the Pharisee and the tax collector* (Luke 18:9-14), the parable of *the two builders* (Matt. 7:24-27), and the parable of *the unprofitable servant* (Luke 17:7-10). Examples of simple one-point parables embrace parables such as *the mustard seed and leaven* (Luke 13:18-21) and *the tower builder and the warring king* (Luke 14:28-33).

4. An Example: The Parable of the Sower (Matt. 13:3-23; Mark 4:3-20; Luke 8:5-15)

The parable of the sower is a complex three point parable, describing in detail four types of soils. More specifically, 'the three unfruitful soils are pitted against the fruitful one, and the sower is the unifying figure or third main "character"' (Blomberg 1992:226).



Applying Blomberg's interpretive hypothesis, the parable of the faithful and unfaithful servants yields three lessons: (1) Like the sower, God sows his Word indiscriminately, amongst all kinds of people. (2) Like the three kinds of unfruitful soils, many who hear his Word will respond inadequately, be it (a) complete lack of positive response as a

result of the lure of evil, (b) fleeting superficiality camouflaged as true dedication, or (c) genuine interest accompanied by conviction that simply falls short of due to the rigorous demands of discipleship. (3) Like the fruitful soil, the only genuine response to God's Word is the obedience and perseverance which demonstrates true regeneration (Blomberg 1992:228).

For purposes of contrast, it is helpful to end this short discourse with a contrast between the Blomberg's interpretative model and the single-point method represented by Fee.

The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard (Matt. 20:1-16)	
<i>Key lessons according to Blomberg</i>	<i>Key lesson according to Fee</i>
1. None of God's people will be treated unfairly—no evil will be shortchanged. 2. Many seemingly less deserving people will be treated generously, due to God's sovereign choice. 3. All true disciples are equal in God's eyes.	God is gracious, and the righteous should not begrudge God's generosity.

It would be unwise and unwarranted to discard wholesale the conclusions of the single point parable interpretive scheme, for it certainly identifies the central thrust of the parable. Yet, however succinct and precise this conclusion, it seems forcefully oversimplified. Although in the case of two or three point parables it may be possible to gather the lessons into a single proposition or sentence, this may result in generalization, robbing the parable of its particular spectrum of application and context. The opposite seems less likely. In other words, it is rather implausible to propose that the three lessons drawn from

each of the main characters results in unnecessarily cluttered and effusive conclusions.

5. Conclusion

Although summarising the meaning of the parable under a single sentence is possible, it often leads to oversimplification, and consequently to a loss of important truths. At first glance, it seems that the hypothesis put forward by Blomberg avoids the pitfall of both uncontrolled allegorization and rigid one-point per parable interpretation. His interpretive model likewise permits a more natural integration of the various interpretive methods—methods in which canonical context, and cultural background studies remain the major focus.

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