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The Parables of Jesus – Complex Sources for our Knowledge of the Historical Jesus

Renate Banschbach Eggen
renate.eggen@ntnu.no

The parables of Jesus are complex means of communication. They do not represent a straightforward way of conveying a message. The way from the stories told by Jesus to the messages understood by us today is long, containing several components. A narrative, a process of understanding and the intended message are constituents of a parable. The parables' special character and purpose is anchored in the interaction of these components. However, when using the parables as sources for our knowledge of the historical Jesus each of these components also represents a source on its own.

At the same time these components represent stages on the way from the parables told by Jesus to our understanding of them today. At each stage interpreters are confronted with different alternatives and are forced to make decisions. Naturally, those decisions have an impact on the knowledge of the historical Jesus, which one may gain from these components. In the following I will focus on each component separately, the narrative, the process of understanding and the intended message.

1. The Narratives as Sources for Our Knowledge of the Historical Jesus

The narratives of Jesus' parables are short stories depicting processes or episodes from everyday life in first-century Palestine. They are descriptions of procedures, actions and emotions seen through the eyes of Jesus and communicated through his words. It is therefore natural to consider them as sources for our knowledge of the historical Jesus.

As an example, S. Scott Bartchy refers in his article "Der historische Jesus und die Umkehr der Ehre am Tisch"¹ to the Parable of the Great Feast in Luke 14:15–24. Bartchy considers the narrative of the parable as a story of an invitation to an exclusive dinner, described in a way that made it easy for Jesus' audience to identify with.² The situation then develops in an unexpected direction, which turns the familiar concepts of honor upside down. Even though the continuation of the narrative reverses the hearers' expectations, its beginning is considered to reflect familiar procedures and concepts within in the society in which Jesus lived and taught.

Halvor Moxnes regards in his book *Putting Jesus in His Place* many of the narra-

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- 1 S. S. Bartchy, "Der historische Jesus und die Umkehrung der Ehre am Tisch", W. Stegemann, B. J. Malina and G. Theissen (eds.), *Jesus in neuen Kontexten* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2002), pp. 224–229.
 - 2 Bartchy, "Der historische Jesus", p. 228.

tives of Jesus' parables as reflections of "the way in which life was localized." He also wonders, "if the way in which village life is presented," may be read as an indication of "whether Jesus understood the space of the village population as the space under domination and control."³ Both Bartchy and Moxnes consider narratives of Jesus' parables as reflections of the surroundings of Jesus seen through the eyes of Jesus. They refer to the narratives as a support to their view on the historical Jesus and the environment in which he lived and taught.

Many scholars consider the narratives of the parables to be amongst the most authentic sayings of Jesus.⁴ There are, however, elements of uncertainty related to the parables' narratives, which may result in different scholars gaining different knowledge from the same narrative. As with the sayings of Jesus in general we do not possess the original texts of the narratives. We merely have texts handed down by the Gospel writers, presenting the end-point of at least 40 years of oral and written transmission of the sayings of Jesus. It therefore cannot be ignored that the narratives may have been altered in one way or another. Accordingly, the original form and content of the narratives have been disputed issues in New Testament parable research. Scholars may reconstruct an original form of a narrative which is different from the one presented in the gospels. As an example, in studies of the Parable of the Seed Growing Secretly, we find that some scholars accept the narrative presented in Mark 4:26–29 as a whole, whereas others consider different verses as secondary and consequently do not take them into account in their interpretations.⁵

Different reconstructions of the original form of a narrative easily have an impact on the information a scholar gains from a parable. The close correspondence between an interpreter's choices concerning the narrative and the result of his or her interpretation is clearly visible in Gerd Theissen's analysis of interpretations of the Parable of the Seed Growing Secretly (Mark 4:26–29). He divides existing inter-

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- 3 H. Moxnes, *Putting Jesus in His Place: A radical Vision of Household and Kingdom* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003).
 - 4 A. Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu im Allgemeinen* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2nd edn, 1910; repr., Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1979), p. 24; C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London: Fontana Books, rev. edn, 1961), p. 13; H. Weder, *Die Gleichnisse Jesu als Metaphern: Traditions- und redaktionsgeschichtliche Analysen und Interpretationen* (FRLANT 120; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 3rd rev. edn, 1984), pp. 15–16; J. R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable: Metaphor, Narrative, and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), p. 2; C. L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1990. repr., Leicester: Apollos, 1992), p. 21; G. Theissen and A. Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* (trans. J. Bowden; London: SCM, 1996), pp. 337–339; A. J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 1; R. Zimmermann, "Gleichnisse als Medien der Jesuserinnerung: Die Historizität der Jesusparabeln im Horizont der Gedächtnisforschung", R. Zimmermann (ed.), *Methodische Neuansätze zum Verstehen urchristlicher Parabeltexte* (WUNT 231; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008) pp. 87–121 (88).
 - 5 Dodd, Jeremias and Blomberg for example base their interpretations on the image-text as it is presented in Mark. 4:26–29. C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London: Fontana Books, rev. edn, 1961), p. 132; J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (trans. S. H. Hooke; London: SCM, 3d rev. edn, 1972), pp. 151–152; Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, pp. 263–265. Weder, however, omits v. 28. H. Weder, *Die Gleichnisse Jesu als Metaphern: Traditions- und redaktionsgeschichtliche Analysen und Interpretationen* (FRLANT 120; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 3rd rev. edn, 1984), p. 117. Jülicher considers v. 29 to be secondary. A. Jülicher, *Auslegung der Gleichnisreden der drei ersten Evangelien* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2nd edn, 1910; repr., Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1979), p. 545.

pretations of this parable into dialectical and hermeneutic interpretations and points out, that without omitting v. 29, the dialectical interpretation can hardly be made.⁶

Jesus lived and taught 2000 years ago in surroundings quite different from ours. The distance in time, place and culture is one of the major challenges within New Testament research. It is impossible for New Testament scholars of today to know exactly how Jesus' hearers understood the narratives of his parables. Consequently, different scholars may decide differently on the question if the narratives of Jesus' parables describe routines, emotions or actions familiar to his first audience, or if they confront their hearers or readers with something unexpected, contradictory or impossible.

The narrative of the Parable of the Lost Sheep (Matt. 18:12–14 par. Luke 15:4–7) describes a situation from sheep husbandry. Interpreters have discussed if the shepherd's reaction to the loss of one sheep should be considered as natural,⁷ or if abandoning ninety-nine sheep in order to find one that is lost, has to be judged as very unusual.⁸ The same is the case for the narrative of the Parable of the Sower (Mark 4:3–8 par. Matt. 13:3–8; Luke 8:5–8). New Testament scholars have been divided on the question if the yield described in the narrative is typical⁹ or extraordinary.¹⁰ The answers to these questions may have an impact on our picture of the historical Jesus, on how familiar we consider him to have been with routines and processes in the everyday life of his audience.

When using the parables' narratives as sources for our knowledge of the historical Jesus we have to take into account, that the knowledge we gain, may be influenced by decisions concerning the original form of the narrative and the way in which the narrative is understood. These decisions may be taken by ourselves or by scholars, whose approaches we use as a basis.

2. The Process of Understanding as Source for Our knowledge of the Historical Jesus

Parables differ from non-parabolic texts by not conveying their messages directly. Consequently, understanding the parables requires a special way of understanding. Since the parables are considered a central part of Jesus' preaching and teaching, the question how one should proceed in order to attain a parable's intended message, is a crucial issue in New Testament parable studies. If we could know exactly

6 G. Theissen, "Der Bauer und die von selbst Frucht bringende Erde: Naiver Synergismus in Mk 4,26–29?", *ZNW* 85 (1994), pp. 167–182 (171).

7 For example Jeremias, *The Parables*, p. 133; Weder, *Die Gleichnisse*, p. 174.

8 For example B. B. Scott, *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), pp. 415–416; Hultgren, *The Parables*, pp. 53–54; A. Oveja, "Neunundneunzig sind nicht genug (Vom verlorenen Schaf) – Q 15,4–5a,7", R. Zimmermann (ed.), *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2007), pp. 205–219 (206).

9 For example E. Linnemann, *Parables of Jesus: Introduction and Exposition* (London: SPCK, 1966), p. 181 n. 13; J. D. Crossan, *Cliffs of Fall: Paradox and Polyvalence in the Parables of Jesus* (New York: Seabury / Crossroad, 1980), p. 46; N. A. Dahl, "Parables of Growth", *ST* 5 (1951), pp. 132–166 (160–162).

10 For example Jeremias, *The Parables*, p. 150; Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable*, p. 34; A. J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 188.

which type of cognitive effort, intellectual commitment or emotional engagement the historical Jesus expected from his hearers in order to understand the parables' intended meaning, we could gain considerable insight in Jesus' self-understanding. It could provide us with knowledge about for what purpose Jesus used parables instead of conveying his message in a non-figurative way, and it could give us some insight into what he considered to be his role in the relationship between God and man. On this background, it seems natural to consider the process of understanding as a significant source for our knowledge of the historical Jesus.

The Synoptic Gospels contain clear instructions for how to proceed in order to find the intended meaning of Jesus' parables.¹¹ However, the way of proceeding presented in the Gospels has widely been rejected as inadequate. It is considered to be the evangelists' own doing, based on an erroneous conception of Jesus' parables and their purpose.¹² *Consequently*, throughout the history of New Testament parable research, scholars have argued for other ways of understanding the parables of Jesus.

Adolf Jülicher argues in his seminal work on the parables for a way of interpreting the parables, in which a close similarity between a parable's message and what is described in the narrative is fundamental.¹³ Due to this similarity the parables function as illustrations of Jesus' message. They are didactic means and as such they make the messages of Jesus easier to understand. According to Jülicher, Jesus did not expect more from his audience than even uneducated persons could manage. By using parables, Jesus made his message accessible for everyone. The way of proceeding that Jülicher argues for as the original way of understanding makes Jesus appear as a great teacher, who was both able and willing to adapt his message even to the mentally poor.¹⁴

In a number of approaches after Jülicher, the close similarity between a parable's message and what is described in the narrative remains to be a crucial point in the process of understanding. Some scholars advocate the opinion that the parables' main purpose is to make Jesus' message easier to understand,¹⁵ whereas others take several purposes into account.¹⁶ In Joachim Jeremias' approach, the similarity between what is described in a parable's narrative and its message first and foremost serves to strengthen the parables' persuasive power. Jeremias is convinced that Jesus used many of his parables in situations of conflict, as "weapons of

11 The most explicit instructions are to be found in Mark 4:14–20 (par. Matt. 13:18–23; Luke 8:11–15). The same way of proceeding becomes visible in the applications which follow many of the parables.

12 Adolf Jülicher laid the foundation for the rejection of the gospels way of interpreting the parables. His work determined the course for subsequent New Testament parable research. An analysis of Jülicher's argumentation and subsequent positions is presented in R. B. Eggen, *Gleichnis, Allegorie, Metapher: Zur Theorie und Praxis der Gleichnisauslegung* (TANZ 47; Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempto, 2007), pp. 9–84.

13 Jülicher, *Gleichnisreden Jesu*, pp. 69–70.

14 Jülicher, *Gleichnisreden Jesu*, p. 191.

15 S. J. Kistemaker, *The Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), p. 13. E. Rau, *Reden in Vollmacht: Hintergrund, Form und Anliegen der Gleichnisse Jesu* (FRLANT 149; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990), pp. 26, 37.

16 For example K. Erlemann, *Das Bild Gottes in den den synoptischen Gleichnissen* (BWANT 126; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1988), p. 25. Erlemann considers the purpose of the parables to be both a didactic, argumentative and pragmatic one.

controversy.”¹⁷ Thus, the process of understanding that Jeremias considers as the most original one makes Jesus appear more as a gifted rhetorician than a teacher.

Many of the approaches in New Testament parable research are based on the view that Jesus’ parables are meant to communicate something about the kingdom of God. In contrast to that, William R. Herzog II proceeds in his study on the assumption that the “concern of the parables was not the reign of God but the reigning systems of oppression that dominated Palestine at the time of Jesus.”¹⁸ Further, he does not regard the narratives of Jesus’ parables as figurative texts, but as analytical presentations of the oppressing reality of Jesus’ original audience.¹⁹ The narratives both uncover social and political structures, on which the exploitation of the poor is based, and they show ways to respond in order to break the cycle of exploitation and poverty. This view implies that the parables’ narratives reflect the social and political situation in first-century Palestine in a realistic and analytical way. Consequently, understanding the messages of Jesus’ parables does not require a special method. The parables convey their messages in a direct and nonfigurative way, making their hearers realize their situation as one of oppression and social injustice, and stimulating them to do something about it. The conception of the historical Jesus conveyed in Herzog II’s approach is that of a “pedagogue of the oppressed.”²⁰

Both in Herzog II’s approach and in the approaches discussed previously, the process of understanding is mainly considered as a process of cognitive understanding, whereas scholars who represent the New Hermeneutics within New Testament parable research, such as Ernst Fuchs,²¹ Eberhard Jüngel,²² John Dominic Crossan,²³ Wolfgang Harnisch²⁴ and Hans Weder,²⁵ hold a quite different view. According to their approaches, the parables are not meant to convey messages that should be understood intellectually. The parables’ purpose is to make their audience experience the kingdom of God. As language events the parables of Jesus are able to make the kingdom of God happen. They confront their recipients with new dimensions of reality, thus forcing them to make existential decisions. In these approaches the special character of Jesus’ parables is not anchored in their figurativeness, but in an extraordinary linguistic character. These approaches inevitably convey a picture of the historical Jesus as a person who masters a special form of communication, who through his words is able to make the Kingdom of God happen in our lives.

Different concepts of the process of understanding convey different pictures of

17 Jeremias, *The Parables*, p. 123.

18 W. R. Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville: Westminster / John Knox, 1994), p. 7.

19 Herzog II, *Parables*, pp. 27–29.

20 The approach of Herzog II is based on Paulo Freire’s pedagogy of the oppressed (Herzog II, *Parables*, pp. 16–29).

21 E. Fuchs, *Hermeneutik* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 4th rev. edn, 1969).

22 E. Jüngel, *Paulus und Jesus: Eine Untersuchung zur Präzisierung der Frage nach dem Ursprung der Christologie* (HUT 2; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 3rd rev. edn, 1962).

23 J. D. Crossan, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus* (Sonoma: Polebridge Press, 1992).

24 W. Harnisch, *Die Gleichniserzählungen Jesu: Eine hermeneutische Einführung* (UTB für Wissenschaft: Uni-Taschenbücher 1343; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985).

25 Weder, *Die Gleichnisse*.

the historical Jesus. Scholars who argue for a certain way of understanding the parables of Jesus implicitly argue for a certain conception of the role of Jesus within the relationship between God and man. Different ways of understanding imply different pictures of the historical Jesus. Consequently, the knowledge of the historical Jesus that a scholar may gain from the process of understanding, may vary considerably.

3. The Parables' Messages as Sources for Our Knowledge of the Historical Jesus

So far we have discussed the narratives and the process of understanding as sources, which means we have been focusing on Jesus as subject. He is the one who tells the narratives and he is the one who chooses parables as means of communication, expecting his audience to apply certain ways of understanding. In the following, we will turn our attention to the messages of Jesus' parables. This means we will be focusing on Jesus no longer as the subject, but as object of the parables,²⁶ as the one whom the parables' may tell something about. Since the parables represent an essential part of Jesus' teaching, we do expect that their messages not only concern matters related to God and man, but also tell us something about Jesus and his role within the relationship between God and man.

However, when using the parables' messages as sources, one has to keep in mind that a parable's message usually is the result of a scholar's interpretation. The scholar applies a certain way of understanding on the parable's narrative. Since scholars may decide differently both on the narratives' original form, on the narratives' content and on the original way of understanding, different scholars may arrive at quite different messages for the same parable. The multiplicity of messages developed from the Parable of the Seed Growing Secretly through the history of New Testament parable research testifies to this.²⁷ One should therefore suppose that the messages of the parables are not suited as sources for our knowledge of the historical Jesus at all. There seems, however, to exist an exception when it comes to information about Jesus and his mission.

Comparisons of different interpretations of the same parable show that different scholars in fact arrive at quite similar information about the mission of Jesus, even though they may represent completely different positions in New Testament parable research. It seems as if those parts of the messages, which concern the role of Jesus, are less affected by the decisions of an interpreter than one should ex-

26 The differentiation between Jesus as subject and Jesus as object is introduced by S. Byrskog, "The Transmission of the Jesus Tradition", T. Holmén and S. E. Porter (eds.) *The Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus* (4 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 2011), 1465–1494 (1476).

27 Adolf Jülicher interpreted the Parable of the Seed Growing Secretly as an assurance that the Kingdom of God would come, completely independent of the efforts of man. Jülicher, *Auslegung*, p. 545. According to Charles H. Dodd the message of the parable is: "That is what the Kingdom of God is like. It is the fulfillment of the process." Dodd, *The Parables*, p. 134. According to Joachim Jeremias the parable was addressed to Zealots to keep them from trying to bring on the kingdom of God by force. Jeremias, *The Parables*, p. 152. Mary Ann Tolbert's interpretation leads to the following message: "How some people upon hearing the word, can accept it and bring forth fruit is unknown." M. A. Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary-historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), p. 162.

pect.²⁸

A closer look at parables, which by many scholars are interpreted as messages that in a more or less explicit way deal with the mission of Jesus, shows that the narratives of these parables contain a clear difference in authority between the persons or elements in the narrative, for example between a sheep farmer and his sheep, a sower and his seed or a king and his servants. A comparison between the messages, which the interpreters arrive at, and the narratives of the parables, which represent the starting points for the interpretations, shows that the person with most authority in the narrative is understood to be referring to God or Jesus and that the person's actions, thoughts or emotions are understood as equivalents to God's or Jesus' actions, thoughts or emotions. The shepherds concern for the lost, for example, is interpreted as God's or Jesus' concern for the lost. The Sower's spreading of the seed is understood as referring to Jesus' spreading of the word.

Clear differences in authority within the parables' narratives seem to limit an interpreter's choices within the interpretation process considerably. This may explain why information about the role of Jesus is less affected by the interpreters' decisions than one should expect.

4. Conclusion

Since the parables of Jesus represent an essential part of his teaching and at the same time are considered to be some of the most original sayings of Jesus, it seems natural to consider them as important sources for our knowledge of the historical Jesus. However, when using the parables as sources, one is confronted with their complexity. A parable consists of a narrative, which is presented in the Gospels, a certain way of understanding, which usually is chosen by the interpreter, and the message, which is the result of applying the chosen way of understanding to the narrative. All three components may convey information about the historical Jesus.

Both the type of information that may be conveyed and the influence of an interpreter's decisions on this information vary from component to component. The narrative and the process of understanding may tell us something about Jesus as the subject, as the one who tells the parables. When it comes to the message of Jesus' parable, however, the information we may gain concerns Jesus as an object, as the one whom the message tells something about.

The impact an interpreter's decisions may have on the information gained from one of the three components varies considerably. An interpreter may choose to accept the narrative as it is presented in the Gospels, or may consider parts of it as secondary. He or she may also decide if the actions or procedures described in the narrative are to be understood as common or extraordinary. Both decisions may

28 In my study "Do the Parables tell us Something about the Mission of Jesus?", S. Byrskog and T. Hägerland (eds.), *The Mission of Jesus: Second Nordic Symposium on the Historical Jesus. Lund 7–10 October 2012* (WUNT II 391; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015 [forthcoming]) different interpretations of the Parable of the Lost Sheep (Matt. 18:12–14 par. Luke 15:4–7), the Parable of the Sower (Mark 4:3–8 par. Matt. 13:3–8; Luke 8:5–8), the parable of the Seed Growing Secretly (Mark 4:26–29) and the parable of the Weeds among the Wheat (Matt. 13:24–30) were analyzed in search for comments which refer to the mission of Jesus. To each of these parables interpretations of a number of key New Testament scholars were compared. The comparison shows a common understanding of what the four parables tell about the mission of Jesus.

have an impact on the conception of the historical Jesus that is communicated.

Since the Gospels' way of interpreting Jesus' parables widely is considered to be secondary, the interpreters themselves decide in which way the parables should be understood. This means they decide to which purpose the historical Jesus used parables instead of conveying his message directly, which type of cognitive effort or emotional engagement he expected from his audience. Different decisions result in considerably different conceptions of Jesus' self-understanding, of what he himself considered to be his task within the relationship between God and man.

In a number of parables the mission of Jesus is a main or secondary topic of the intended message of the parable. The intended message is, however, seldom formulated explicitly, it is usually the outcome of a process in which the interpreter applies a certain way of understanding to the narrative. Consequently, the interpreter's decisions concerning the narrative and the way of understanding have an impact on the message's content. Surprisingly, the information about the mission of Jesus, which different interpreters gain from the same parable, varies much less than one should expect. It seems obvious that in these cases there are factors at play, which overrule the decisions of the interpreter.

Using the parables as sources for our knowledge of the historical Jesus requires that one is aware of the complexity of parables and of the different factors that are at play at different stages within the process of parable interpretation.