

Parable versus Proverb

by

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Parable Versus Proverb

What is the difference between a *parable* and a *proverb*? Are they different or basically the same? More importantly, why does the Greek word for parable appear in the first three Gospels but not in John and why does the word for proverb appear in John but not in the first three Gospels? One of the most important texts relating to this subject is Matt 13:10-18:

10. *And the disciples came and said unto Him, "Why speakest Thou unto them in parables?"*
11. *He answered and said unto them, "Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries (secrets) of the Kingdom of Heaven: but to them it is not given.*
12. *For whosoever hath, to him shall be given and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath.*
13. *Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand.*
14. *And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias, which saith, **By hearing ye shall hear and shall not understand and seeing ye shall see and shall not perceive.***
15. ***For this People's heart is waxed gross and their ears are dull of hearing and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and should understand with their heart and should be converted and I should heal them.***
16. *But blessed are your eyes for they see and your ears for they hear.*
17. *For verily I say unto you, that many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which you see and have not seen them and to hear those things which ye hear and have not heard them.*
18. *Hear ye therefore the parable of the sower.*

From these verses we can see that a parable is something that is used to deliberately hide information. In this case, it is the secrets of the Kingdom of Heaven. However, the meaning of the parable can be discerned by those to whom it is *given to understand*. What does it take to be one of those to whom such understanding is given? To answer these questions, we have to investigate the context of Isaiah's statement in Isa 6:9,10 which Jesus is quoting. It will also be necessary to examine any other instances where these or similar words of Isaiah's are quoted. We will also examine the Greek words that have been translated as *parable* and *proverb*.

The first six chapters of Isaiah are addressed to Judah and describe them as the children who are rebellious against God. God states that the Judahites of the Southern Kingdom are people who show themselves to be lacking in discernment. Because of their behaviour, God states He is about to remove their support and sustenance and in Isa 5:24,25 it states:

24. *... for they have cast away (rejected) the law (teachings) of the Lord of Hosts and have despised (shown contempt for) the word of the Holy One of Israel.*
25. *Therefore the anger of the Lord is kindled against His people (of Judah) and He has stretched forth His hand against them and hath smitten them.*

These words are followed by the pronouncements in Chapter 6:

9. *And He said, "Go and tell this People, 'Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed but perceive not.'*
10. *Make the heart of this People fat and make their ears heavy and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and convert and be healed.*

In these chapters, Isaiah has been speaking to the Southern Kingdom only. Because this takes place prior to the Captivity of Judah, there is no significant Edomite component present in the Kingdom. The command concerning the blindness and deafness of the Judahites was to remain in force until the complete removal of the ten tribes and the Judean nation (which is fulfilled in 70 AD). Isaiah's prophecy refers to *the ground*, which is that part of the planet that has belonged to God personally, from the beginning. Hence the prophecy applied until the time when the deportation and dispersion of all Israel was complete.

During the Captivity, Edomites occupied the emptied Israelite land. On the return of the Judahites who were to build the Temple, the Edomites began to work their way into the Judahite population. By the time of Jesus, the Edomites dominated the ruling classes. Nevertheless, they are not included in the repentance aspects of Isaiah's prophecy (or any other aspect of it) because God states He has hated Esau from before he was born. This confirms that Isaiah's words were directed only to the Israelites of the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Esau's descendants, the Edomites, were the instigators and maintainers of much of the unbelief in the Judahite population by means of the Edomite distortion of the Scriptures and their Traditions. The people of Israel have always been quick to accept the emotionally palatable versions of Scripture promulgated by men rather than to adhere to the narrow and seemingly more rigorous version of the truth. (We need look no further than the success of the Good News Bible and New International Version for proof in this day and age.) As God is unchangeable, He is not likely now to take notice of any penitent behaviour by the Edomites and heal them.

Jesus' statement to the disciples was, therefore, quite literal – to *you* it has been given but not to *them* (the mixed crowd of Judahites and Edomites). What was the purpose of such discrimination? The first indication is given by Isaiah when he describes Judah as a vineyard that God has prepared, but will now allow to be trodden down (Isa 5:5) and he continues in verses 13 and 14:

13. Therefore my people are gone into captivity, because they have no knowledge; and their honourable men are famished and their multitude dried up with thirst.

14. Therefore hell (Sheol) hath enlarged herself and opened her mouth without measure: and their glory, and their multitude, and their pomp, and he that rejoiceth, shall descend into it.

This is the condemnation of those of Judah who would not believe God. Jesus said essentially the same thing in Matt 7:13:

Enter ye in at the straight gate: for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leadeth to destruction and many there be which go in thereat.

Hence, at the time of Jesus, all of Judah and all of the Dispersed Ten Tribes were outside the Kingdom because of their collective unbelief. But when Elijah bewailed the lack of belief in those around him, God told him there were yet 7000 who had not bowed their knee to Baal. This is a symbolic number that stands for those in the greater nation who are separated to God. These are the Elect, those who are typified by the description in Acts 13:48:

And when the Gentiles (The Nations of Israel) hearing this, they were glad (rejoiced), and glorified the word of the Lord: and as many as were ordained (predestinated by Jehovah) to eternal life, believed.

The remainder continued in their unbelief and they will be judged at the Second Resurrection, before the Great White Throne. But by what mechanism was the understanding given to those who were able to receive it? It came as a consequence of their own actions earlier in their lives. For example, the common perception concerning the mental abilities of the apostles and disciples is that they were simple fishermen. But this is contradicted by the statements of the men themselves – John 1:35-49

tells us these men knew of and were expecting the Messiah and they were actively involved in studying the Scriptures. Furthermore, after Jesus had explained only the Parable of the Sower and after He had spoken the other parables of the Kingdom, Jesus asked the disciples if they had understood all these things, to which they replied *Yea, Lord* (Matt 13:51).

Thus we see that for the prepared and fertile mind of those who are actively seeking to understand and believe Jesus, it takes a minimum amount of explanation and the secrets begin to be revealed. This is confirmed in Acts 8:31-38 (the Ethiopian was an Israelite living in Ethiopia) and Acts 18:24-28. The explanations that Jesus gave to the disciples certainly became public knowledge when the Gospels were published, but were nevertheless known before publication as the disciples talked with the people.

Not all things in the Scriptures are revealed immediately – not even the disciples had perfect understanding of all that occurred around them. This was particularly evident in connection with the feeding of the 4000 and the feeding of the 5000 (Matt 16:8-12)^(A). This additional understanding comes with additional study. Each layer of Scripture that is peeled back reveals more layers underneath, but we have to acquire more knowledge before we can penetrate them. In the case of the Apostles, they received a tremendous boost in their understanding when Jesus taught them during the forty days after the Resurrection and they continued to learn more after Pentecost.

The words of Isaiah quoted by Jesus in connection with the Parable of the Sower are found in the accounts of this event given in Matthew, Mark and Luke. And Isaiah's words also appear in three other places – John 12:40, Acts 28:26,27 and Rom 11:8.

The reference to these words in John 12:40 is not given in the context of a speech. Jesus had arrived in Jerusalem for His final Passover and the Scribes and Pharisees had been trying to snare Him in His own words. Also, the Greeks (the representatives of the Dispersed Ten Tribes) had arrived during this time and spoken with Jesus. It is at this point in time, near the end of Jesus' ministry, that John makes an observation about the whole mental attitude of the Judean nation:

- 37. *But though He had done so many miracles before them, yet they believed not on Him:*
- 38. *That the saying of Esaias the prophet might be fulfilled, which he spake, Lord, who hath believed our report? and to whom hath the arm of the Lord been revealed?*
- 39. *Therefore they could not believe, because that Esaias said again,*
- 40. *He hath blinded their eyes, and hardened their heart; that they should not see with their eyes, nor understand with their heart, and be converted, and I should heal them.*
- 41. *These things said Esaias, when he saw His glory, and spake of Him.*

Paul makes reference to Isaiah's words in Acts 28:26,27 when he speaks about the Jews and Judeans in Rome who would not believe his testimony about Jesus. Paul also refers to these words in Rom 11:8 in combination with excerpts from Deut 29:4 and Isa 29:10. Deut 29:4 states:

Yet the Lord hath not given you an heart to perceive and eyes to see and ears to hear unto (until) this day.

The Israelites of the Exodus had not needed the ability to mentally perceive and understand because they had seen for themselves the miracles in Egypt and the miracles of the previous forty years in the wilderness. But Moses was speaking to the next generation of Israelites who had seen only a few of God's miracles and were about to enter into the Promised Land. They were now going to need to pay attention and learn about God mainly from the rituals of the Levites, the Law and the writing of Moses. These words are a prelude to the prophecies given in the remainder of that Chapter and in Chapter 30. For example, in Deut 30:11-19, Moses tells the people that they have the ability within themselves to believe, understand and obey God and the consequences of not doing so:

11. *For this commandment which I command thee this day, it is not hidden from thee, neither is it far off.*
12. *It is not in heaven, that thou shouldest say, Who shall go up for us to heaven, and bring it unto us, that we may hear it, and do it?*
13. *Neither is it beyond the sea, that thou shouldest say, Who shall go over the sea for us, and bring it unto us, that we may hear it, and do it?*
14. *But the word is very nigh unto thee, **in thy mouth, and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it.***
15. *See, I have set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil;*
16. *In that I command thee this day to love the LORD thy God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commandments and his statutes and his judgments, that thou mayest live and multiply: and the LORD thy God shall bless thee in the land whither thou goest to possess it.*
17. *But if **thine heart turn away, so that thou wilt not hear, but shalt be drawn away, and worship other gods, and serve them;***
18. *I denounce unto you this day, that ye shall surely perish, and that ye shall not prolong your days upon the land, whither thou passest over Jordan to go to possess it.*
19. *I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live:*

Paul's inclusion of Isa 29:10-14 confirms the tenor of the prophecy against Judah (given in Isa 6:9-10):

10. *For the Lord hath poured out upon you the spirit of deep sleep and hath closed your eyes – the prophets (who see into the future) and your rulers (literally, your heads), the seers hath He covered.*
11. *And the vision of all is become unto you as the words in a book that is sealed, which men deliver to one that is learned, saying “Read this, I pray thee” and he saith “I cannot; for it is sealed”.*
12. *And the book is delivered to him that is not learned, saying, “Read this, I pray thee” and he saith “I am not learned”.*
13. *Wherefore the Lord said “Forasmuch as this People draw near Me with their mouth and with their lips do honour Me, but have removed their hearts far from Me, and **their fear toward Me is taught by the precept of men:***
14. *Therefore, behold, I will proceed to do a marvellous work among this People, even a marvellous work and wonder: for the wisdom of their wise men shall perish and the understanding of their prudent men shall be hid.*

The covering of the seers refers to the mantle wrapped around the head when people of those days lay down to sleep. It builds on the imagery of the people not being able to see. Thus it was, to uphold the prophecies concerning these people, that Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables. This was the mechanism by which He deliberately hid the information from the unbelievers while still being able to reveal it to the ones to whom it was given to understand.

There are two Greek words translated as *parable*:

parabole: Occurs 50 times in the New Covenant and is transliterated as *parable(s)* on 45 occasions. The Greek word is derived from *paraballo*, to cast or throw or lay beside of; metaphorically, to compare, and hence the literal meaning denotes a placing beside, a comparing. The English word *parable* is thus only a transliteration of the Greek, not a translation, and this prevents us from understanding its proper meaning.

Parabole signifies a placing of one thing beside another with a view to comparison. (In classical use it was one of the subdivisions of *paradeigma* – an example, a presentation of an analogous case by way of illustration.) The two words, *parabole* and *paraballo*, occur in Mark 4:30, which in the AV reads: *And he said, Whereunto shall we liken the kingdom of God? or with what comparison shall we compare it?* This indicates that the proper meaning is *a comparison*¹. Hence it focuses on likeness rather than *representation* (which is the role of the metaphor). The story in the parable may be true or imaginary, but the events must be possible, or likely to have happened. (Where they are impossible, such as trees or animals speaking and reasoning, we have a *fable* and if the fable is explained, we have an *allegory*).

When we translate *parabole* as *comparison*, together with the correct translation of the word rendered as *sower*, we find Jesus saying to the Disciples *hear ye therefore the comparison of the sowing*. This focuses our attention on the comparison to be found in the action of sowing seed, what is being sown and what happens to it, not on the person who is doing the sowing.

Cremer^(B) states that *parabole* refers to an utterance which involves a comparison. He also states that the Hebrew equivalent, *mashal*, covered both a complete parable and “a single figurative saying, a proverb”. He continues:

Parabole serves, therefore, in the usage of the LXX, to denote either a dictum whose significance arises either from application to or derivation from a concrete case, or one whose proper meaning is not that expressed by words, but becomes clear only through the intended application.

The clause, *whose proper meaning is not that expressed by words*, shows us the precise manner in which we can have ears to hear but still not hear. As Cremer states, it conceals from one class what it reveals to the other.

Paroimia: Occurs five times in the New Covenant – four times in John and once in 2 Peter. The lexicons all give essentially the same meaning to this word – . It is derived from *para*, beside, and *oimos* a way or path, hence it is a way side saying, a bye word, a common remark, proverb, dark saying. Bullinger^(C) states that the Hebrew equivalent, *mashal* has a wider scope than the simple meaning of *proverb*. The corresponding Hebrew verb means to rule, control, to have or exercise control which, according to Bullinger, gives the noun the connotation of *a rule* and hence a ruling principle. Hence the Proverbs of Solomon become the Rules of Solomon – for such they are – rules for guiding life.

1 The Greek verb, *sugkrino*, means to combine, compound, to compare, to estimate by comparing with something else or to match. It is used in literal comparisons of like with like, such as 2 Cor 10:12, as opposed to comparisons using different things where one is a tangible item (such as a seed) and the other is an intangible item, such as the Word of God. What complicates the comparisons used by Jesus is the fact that the tangible items are in themselves symbols and the true comparison lies in understanding the applicability or aptness of every aspect of the symbols.

Thus, *marshal* was applied to any saying that needed an explanation and hence it was associated with *parabole* in some LXX verses. However, a *parable* is an illustration whereas a *proverb* is a saying that requires explanation when first encountered and its purpose is to provide guidance for day to day living.

As John presents Jesus as our God, he does not use *hidden comparisons* because he is hiding nothing from us. On the other hand, he does use *pithy rules* because we are being instructed in the way we are to live. The secrets concerning the Kingdom of God were hidden in comparisons because the secrets were not and are not for general consumption by all and sundry – otherwise they cease to be secrets. The very meaning of the Greek word used to describes these particular messages re-enforces that point. The great mistake of modern men is to assume we know more and are better informed than our ancestors of Jesus’ day. Consequently, the old Sunday School attitude that the parables are simple stories that are easy to comprehend is quite wrong. It takes time and effort to gain a working knowledge of the Bible’s theme but without that knowledge, the hidden comparisons will remain hidden, or at best, dimly perceived through a thick veil of misinformation.



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* Papers are available by request or via some British-Israel World Federation bookshops.

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