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Parables as Allegories

A couple of Jesus's better-known parables are explicitly presented as allegories.

He explains the parable of the sower (Mark 4:2–9; cf. 4:13–20) this way:

seed	=	the word
birds eating seed on path	=	Satan snatching away the word
rocky ground	=	trouble or persecution
thorns	=	cares of the world, lure of wealth
good soil	=	those who accept the word and bear fruit

He explains the parable of the weeds (Matt. 13:24–30; cf. 13:36–43)

this way:

sower	=	Son of Man
field	=	the world
good seed	=	children of the kingdom
weeds	=	children of the evil one
enemy sower	=	the devil
harvest	=	end of the age
reapers	=	angels

Inspired by these explanations, biblical interpreters once wondered if all the parables might be allegories, and they devised elaborate explanations that unveiled secret theological or spiritual messages.

For example, Origen (third century) read the parable of the good Samaritan as providing an allegorical account of God's plan of salvation:

man who fell among robbers	=	Adam
Jerusalem	=	heaven
Jericho	=	the world
the robbers	=	the devil
the priest	=	the law
the Levite	=	the prophets
the Samaritan	=	Christ
the donkey	=	Christ's body
the inn	=	the church
the two coins	=	the Father and the Son
promise to return	=	second coming of Christ

Augustine (fourth century) proposed a similar reading, with additions:

binding of wounds	=	Christ's restraint of sin
pouring of oil	=	comfort of good hope
pouring of wine	=	exhortation to spirited work
the innkeeper	=	the apostle Paul

But Augustine disagreed with Origen on the two coins. They were not "the Father and the Son," but rather Christ's twofold commandment to love God and neighbor.

While creative, such interpretations are rejected by most scholars today. Jesus did not originally intend for his parables to be read in this way, nor did the Gospel authors anticipate that their readers would interpret them in such a fashion. Furthermore, most scholars

would caution that if construals such as these are allowed, clever interpreters will be able to make parables mean almost anything they please.