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## **The Inexhaustible Meaning of Parables (Comment from Origen)**

Origen (185-ca. 254) was an early Christian theologian associated with Alexandria in Egypt and Caesarea in Palestine. He is often remembered for producing elaborate allegorical interpretations of parables, most of which would fall out of favor with mainstream biblical scholarship with the development of critical methodologies.

Origen was aware, however, that parables can possess an almost inexhaustible supply of meaning, enough to confound any interpreter who thinks to have mastered them:

The writers of the Gospels have withheld any detailed exposition of the parables, because the things signified by them were beyond the power of words to express. Not even the whole world itself could contain the books that might be written to fully clarify and develop the parables. But it may happen that a receptive heart will grasp something of them. Purity of intent enables greater discernment of the parables, that they might become written on the heart by the Spirit of the living God.

But someone might then reply that we act with impiety when we want to give the parables' symbolic meaning, as if we had the authority to expound what is secret and mystical. This is sometimes claimed even in cases where one might suppose that we had some reasonable knowledge of their meaning.

But to this we must respond that, if there are those who have obtained some gift of accurate apprehension of these things, they know what they ought to do. But as for us, we readily acknowledge that we fall short of the ability to see into the depth of the things here signified.

We do better not to venture to commit to writing those things of which, even after much examination and inquiry, we have only some crass perception, whether by grace or by the power of our own minds. But some basic things, for the sake of our own intellectual discipline, and that of those who may chance to read them, we are permitted to some extent to set forth. (*Commentary on Matt. 14.12*)<sup>1</sup>

1. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 10 vols. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1885–96), 9:502.