

Literary Characteristics of Parables

These observations on parables are drawn from Rudolf Bultmann's book *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*.¹ Bultmann discusses narrative parables, not parabolic one-line sayings.

Parables usually are concise. Only the persons who are absolutely essential to the story appear. In the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32), no mention is made of a mother. In the story of the friend at midnight (Luke 11:5–8), no mention is made of the householder's wife. Never more than three persons or groups appear in the stories, and no more than two seem to appear at a time.

Parables usually are told from a single perspective. There is one series of events, always told from the point of view of one person. In the parable of the prodigal son, no information is given about the father's mood or actions while the son is away.

Characters in parables usually are presented to the reader through a process of showing rather than telling. It is rare that anyone in a parable is described by the narrator. We are told that the judge is unjust (Luke 18:2) and that the bridesmaids are wise and foolish (Matt. 25:2), but this kind of description is quite exceptional. The character of the persons involved emerges from their behavior.

Feelings and motives are described only when they are essential to the point of the story. We are told of the distress of

the fellow servants of the merciless servant (Matt. 18:31), of the joy of the shepherd and the woman who found the lost sheep and the lost coin (Luke 15:6, 9), the compassion of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:33). However, in stories of the prodigal son and of the Pharisee and the tax collector, the feelings of the people involved are expressed not through descriptions offered by the narrator but rather through the words and actions of the characters themselves.

There is little interest in motivation. The prodigal son's motives in leaving home are not offered. Nothing is allowed to detract attention from the point of the story.

Often there is no expressed conclusion to the story. We are not told that the rich fool died (Luke 12:13–21). We are not told whether the good Samaritan had to pay additional money (Luke 10:35). The main point is made, and that is the end of the story.

Usually there is a bare minimum of event. We are not told what the prodigal son's particular brand of loose living was (Luke 15:13), or what the offense was for which the widow sought justice from the uncaring judge (Luke 18:3).

Often there is direct speech and soliloquy, which makes for simplicity and vividness, and also speed of narrative. In a number of parables, the main characters speak to themselves. See, for example, the prodigal son (Luke 15:17–19), the shrewd manager (Luke 16:3–5), and the rich fool (Luke 12:17–19).

Often there is repetition of phrases, which has a kind of underlining effect. In the parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14–30), we are told repeatedly of servants presenting their accounts to the master (Matt. 25:20, 22, 24).

Parables often exhibit end stress, which means that the most important point is scored at the last. The emphasis in the parable of the sower (Mark 4:3–8) is on the fourth type of seed, the only one to produce a lasting crop, just as the emphasis in the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:30–35) is on the third traveler, the one who does act as neighbor.

The stories and parables of Jesus involve the hearer or the reader. The parables lead to a verdict, which is based on antithesis and contrast. The reader is asked to affiliate with one side or the other.

1. Rudolf Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, 3rd ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 188–92.