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HOW TO UNDERSTAND THE PARABLES OF JESUS. A PARADIGM SHIFT IN PARABLE EXEGESIS

ABSTRACT

For many years, the exegesis of the parables of Jesus was determined by assumptions that were largely purported by Adolf Jülicher and subsequently underwent only insignificant modification. The *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu* (ed. R. Zimmermann, Gütersloh 2007), whose methodology and hermeneutics are explained in this article, takes a new route, as can be illustrated in four steps. From a historical perspective, parable exegesis is released from its close relationship to the search for the Historical Jesus and is given new distinction by a paradigm of Jesus "remembered". The customary religious-historical standardization of the parables (particularly with reference to rabbinical parables) is critically investigated from a traditio-historical perspective in order to again be able to highly value the extraordinary position of Jesus' parables. From the perspective of the literary form of the parables, all internal differentiation must be made invalid by the New Testament text record itself. Instead, the discussion of a comprehensive genre of "parable" utilises the genre consciousness of the early Christian authors; a genre that can be precisely defined by means of a literary-critical description in terms of the criteria of narrativity, fictionality, relation to reality, metaphor, appeal structure and co-/contextuality. From a hermeneutic perspective, this new approach consists of a conscious affirmation of a plurality of interpretations that is established by the texts themselves and that also guarantees the timeliness and liveliness of the interpretations in a variety of reading situations.

1. INTRODUCTION

Much has been written in the past decades about parables and parable interpretation — not only about the oldest forms of parables and the setting of their original development but also on their linguistic structure as poetic works of art and, finally, on the means of their comprehension and their lasting importance. Through form criticism, linguistics and reader-response criticism, the theoretical basis has become ever broader and more complex. Metaphor and narrative theories as well as speech act and communication theories have, with great scholarship, brought to the fore important findings for parable exegesis.

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However, the more differential the interpretative methods have become, the more complex the literary-scientific and philosophical base, the more we have lost sight of Jesus' parables themselves. In more recent works on parables, the number of parables discussed has steadily decreased. For example, Harnisch (2001:80-81, 177-296) accepts a total of ten texts as "dramatic narrative parables", according to his criteria, but discusses only five. In comparison, no parable work has taken into consideration in its interpretation the number of texts that Adolf Jülicher discussed in his extensive, two volume *opus magnum Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* (1910).

The project *Compendium of the parables of Jesus* (Zimmermann *et al.* 2007; hereafter *Compendium*) has seized upon this deficit as its starting point and, as indicated by the title, it is meant to be a compilation, translation and commentary of *all the parables of Jesus* in Early Christianity. However, aside from the primacy of the texts, it became clear in the process of interpretation that it is necessary to finally depart from Jülicher's influential frameworks. This begins with the choice of texts and concerns their traditional and historical roots; it touches upon the form critical internal differentiation and leads up to the hermeneutic goal of the interpretation (see, for details, Zimmermann 2008a). In order to be able to more clearly recognize the paradigm shift in terms of these issues, I would first like to recall the basic insights of the Jülicher tradition, in order then to distinguish from them the methodology employed in the *Compendium*.

2. BASICS OF THE PARABLE EXEGESIS ACCORDING TO THE JÜLICHER SCHOOL

The intention of the following is not to provide a survey of parable research (see Zimmermann 2008b), but rather to demonstrate some positions taken up in the various periods of parable research, as, within this framework, the paradigm shifts can be seen more clearly.

2.1   On history: Bedrock of the historical Jesus

While, within historical approaches, the search for the authentic words of Jesus has been on the decline, the parables have remained the vehicle through which scholars still hope to come very close to the proclamations of the historical Jesus, as they believe that Jesus' voice can be heard echoing in the parables. The historical enquiry was determined by Adolf Jülicher in his epochal work *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* (1910), and was expressed in 1947 in the famous dictum of the parable scholar Joachim Jeremias:

> He who works with the 41 parables of Jesus as they are presented to us
> in the first three Gospels stands on particularly solid historical ground;
> they are a piece of the bedrock of the tradition (Jeremias 1998:7).

The researchers of that period, however, were also of the opinion that Jesus' words in the Biblical texts were not passed on to us completely intact. Between Jesus' act of speaking and the act of writing the words down in the Gospels there is a gap of at least forty years — a span of time in which the texts, during the oral and written transferral process, were expanded, interpreted and changed. In accordance with the fundamental methodological conviction of that period, it was attempted to free the parables in the Gospels of their editorial embellishment in order to make Jesus' very own voice (*ipsissima vox*) audible again. The attempt was made "to win back the original place in the life of Jesus, (so that) Jesus' words could again receive their original sound" (Jeremias 1998:19).

Many scholars followed this historical line with some modifications. Like Jeremias, J.D. Crossan, in his first approach, attempted to anchor the parables in the life of Jesus and thus especially emphasized the eschatological dimension (Crossan 1973). He, and more recently Scott, spoke of the "original structures" of the parables (Crossan 1980:27; Scott 1989:74-76: *ipsissima structura*). Simultaneously, Jülicher's anti-allegorical approach was driven forward by socio-historical issues. The more recent works, above all, of W. R. Herzog II (1994) and L. Schottroff (2005), should be mentioned in this respect. They suggest an exact positioning of the parables and their first hearers within a socio-culturally determined social situation.

But regardless of whether these scholars focused on the voice, structure or situation of the parable speech behind the text, all agree in focussing on the historical background of the texts, not on the texts themselves.

2.2   On tradition: Something completely new?

The search for Jesus' authentic parables has also been influenced to a great degree by the conviction that the Jesus parables lifted themselves like an erratic block out of the tradition and the surrounding texts: "Jesus' parables are something completely new" (Jeremias 1998:8). Jülicher had indeed recognized the proximity of the parables to parallels in the Jewish (particularly) rabbinical literature but did this above all in order to use them as a contrast against which the mastery and originality of the Jesus parables should be silhouetted:

> The contradiction between Jesus' way of teaching and that of contemporary authors from Israel is huge. (…) Jesus (…) stands as the parabolist above the Jewish Hagada. His originality in contrast to them is proven

by his mastery. Imitators never achieve greatness, immortality (Jülicher 1910: I, 165, 172).

In the meantime, the situation has changed. Although Jülicher's anti-Jewish assessment was criticized by his contemporary Paul Fiebig (Fiebig 1912:119-222; see the debate in *ZNW* 13, 1912), within Jülicher's sphere of influence, it took until the last twenty years of the 20th century for the Jewish roots of and rabbinical parallels to the parables of Jesus to be perceived in independent research in a more nuanced way (seminally Flusser 1981; further Dschulnigg 1988). Since then, it has no longer been disputed that Jesus' parables must, at least purely formally, be placed within the scope of the Jewish style of narrative. In the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, for example, in the "Song of the Vineyard" (Is. 5:1-7), in "Nathan's Parable for David" (2 Sam. 12:1-15), in the plant fables of Jotham (Jdg. 9:7-15) and Joash (2 Kings 14:8ff.) or the eagle fable in Ez. 17:3-10, we find texts that formally and functionally can be considered to be the predecessors of the New Testament parables (see Westermann 1984). Additionally, the Hebrew term מָשָׁל has repeatedly been suggested as a possible root, the more so as the term in the Septuagint was translated in many cases with the Greek παραβολή.

The fact that Jesus can be seen "as a Jewish parable poet" (Kollmann 2004) and that, particularly in the rabbinical parables, there is an abundance (Thoma & Lauer name, depending on the method of counting, 500 to 1400 parables; see Thoma & Lauer 1986:12) of comparative texts, can now be considered as a general consensus.

2.3   On form: Similitude, parable, and example story

Classifying the parabolic material into three subforms — similitude, parable and example story — was one of Jülicher's main endeavours. Bultmann (1995:181-184) added "figurative aphorism" ("Bildwort") as a basic form of similitude parallel to simple metaphors and comparisons. According to Jülicher, *similitudes* ("Gleichnis im engeren Sinn") or *aphoristic sayings* reflect a daily life experience that could happen anywhere. The meaning of this typical occurrence in a theological context is absolutely clear:

> They bear no interpretation, they are as clear and transparent as possible, they need practical application. If one (…) holds a mirror before someone so that he sees his ugliness or the dirt that disfigures him, no explanatory words are needed. The mirror interprets better than it in truth could be achieved with the longest descriptions (Jülicher 1910: I, 114).

The *parable*, in contrast, tells an extraordinary story (mostly in Aorist) which must be interpreted. It is not clear how to understand it. Finally, the *example story* is a special form of parable in which the narration and the theological message approach each other on the same level. Example stories are also less figurative and can serve as a direct model of behaviour.

This form critical approach and differentiation has influenced at least German parable exegesis up to the present day, becoming a canonical spectrum for classifying the early Christian parables.

Although this classification has had less impact in the English-speaking world (e.g., Dodd), classification into subgenres is still very common here. K. Snodgrass most recently differentiated among five categories — "aphoristic sayings", "similitudes", "interrogative parables", "narrative parables" and the so-called "'How much more' parables" (Snodgrass 2008:11-15).

2.4   On hermeneutics: One-point approach (*Tertium comparationis*)

Jülicher wanted to counteract the sometimes wild allegorization of parables — an arbitrary determination of meaning and an appropriation inappropriate to the text — that was taking place during his era. Thus he propounded the clarity and unambiguousness, particularly of similitudes.

Although his narrow interpretation has often been criticized (Berger 1984a: 40-45), it has subtly and lastingly influenced parable research up to the present day. During the phase of linguistic parable research, the metaphor was rehabilitated as the explanatory key (Funk 1982), socio-historical methods have further differentiated the context of origin (Schottroff 2005) and theological approaches have devoted new attention to allegory (Blomberg 1990). As different as these interpretive attempts and their results may be on their own, they resemble each other in the sense that each postulates that parables have a clear, unambiguous meaning. This is particularly significant in the case of Blomberg, who brings the theological intention of allegory to a head in three main themes and, in the end, in the comprehensive message of the "Kingdom of God" (Blomberg 1990: chap. 9). Thus we still hear the resonance of Jülicher's decision that the interpretation of the parables allows no leeway but instead must lead to unambiguous and clear results.

3. ON HISTORY: THE PARABLE TELLER REMEMBERED

3.1   Parables and the historical Jesus

Jesus was a narrator of parables. This impression arises not only from the abundance of parables within the early Christian Jesus tradition in different sources. A reflection, visible in the Gospels, classifies Jesus' message as a whole as figurative speech (Mk 4:33f.; Jn 16:25). The most recent phase of research on the historical Jesus has again confirmed this basic conviction (Funk 1996:136, 165; Theißen & Merz 2001:286-310; Schröter 2006:188-213).

However, the multiple traditions of individual parables demonstrate that the transferral process also left its marks on the texts. Thus, it can scarcely be assumed that the parables given to us in the early Christian texts were told by Jesus in exactly these words. In some instances, it is even improbable that certain parables originate from Jesus. However, where and with which criteria and value scale should one differentiate among them? Can exegetes truly make binding statements about the authenticity of individual parables? Is it possible to reconstruct Jesus' original words as former scholars like Jeremias tried to do? And, if so, with what intention? Do not dogmatic pre-determinations often enough steer the choices and evaluations that are made?

The search for the authentic Jesus parable is erroneous in its very starting point, for in looking back to the original situation it deconstructs the text as it exists in the sources. The idea of historical positivism and the idealism of the pure and only true starting points thus influence the thought processes. In many cases it assumes that Early Christianity could have, arbitrarily or with a particular theological purpose, invented parables that corrupt and modify Jesus' message. In the end, scholars working along these lines are better acquainted with Jesus' intentions than the Evangelist — and at this point a hermeneutic of suspicion ("Hermeneutik des Verdachts") should begin to develop.

Our approach thus consciously forgoes attempts at literary critical and historical reconstruction in which oral pre-stages or original stages of the parables are reconstructed. Nevertheless the historical question should not be completely discarded. We can follow the sources, according to which Jesus is perceived as the narrator of parables. While narratorship of the rabbinical parables was spread out amongst a multitude of rabbis, the parables of Early Christianity, from the first source to the Gospel of Thomas, have almost always been attributed to Jesus. Jesus is the narrator of parables par excellence. However, the Early Christian texts do not use this to make a statement about a historical fact; rather they reproduce the conviction that Jesus is remembered as the narrator of parables. If we take up the new paradigm of "memory" in Jesus research (Dunn 2003; Claußen 2007), the historical question for parables

changes as well. This memory, manifested in the introductions and narrative presentations of the parables should be the starting point of our investigation. I will not affirm that all of the parables attributed to Jesus were told by Him, nor that they were told in the same words as they appear in the sources. Instead, I will disregard this question completely. The interesting question is rather why this remarkable concentration and reconnection of the parables to Jesus happened. In my opinion, we can recognize a convergence between form and content here. Parables are a predestined medium of the remembering of Jesus (this in detail in Zimmermann 2008c). Remembering does not occur speechlessly and freely but rather takes place in particular forms and media (Erll & Nünning 2004). One form that is used in the remembering process is something which is not an empty vehicle of memory but — based on the "semantization of forms" (Nünning 2005:603) — can rather definitively affect the object of memory — in terms of content. The fact that we remember Jesus as the person who spoke of God figuratively, in parables, converges with the Christological avowal that Christ himself is the "image of God" (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15) who makes the Father visible (Jn 1:17; 14:7). The parable narrator is himself the "parable of God" (according to Jüngel 2001:491, 495; Schillebeeckx 1992:555-556).

3.2 Methodological consequences, selection and order of the texts

The modified historical perspective has led to the fact that it is no longer only the parables from the oldest sources that are taken into account, but rather all parables that tradition had ascribed to Jesus. In the *Compendium*, therefore, we have taken up all of the parable texts of the Early Christian writings in which Jesus has been named as speaker, regardless of how plausible these attributions might be in each individual case.

The methodological consequences of this are limitations on the historical-diachronic enquiry:

1) The parable texts (as found in the sources) are considered as a medium for remembering Jesus.

2) Parables may be surveyed historically as a mirror of the real-life world, which may be enlightened by socio-historical methods.

3) Parables are part of a process of literary reception and production. In this way, on the one hand, marked meanings and motifs are absorbed. On the other hand, the parables themselves set in motion a process of transferral and reception.

In the *Compendium* parable texts have been arranged according to source, and parables with more than one reference are always discussed in terms of the oldest source while parallel traditions are considered as an early "Wirkungs-geschichte" (history of impact). In the arrangement and selection of the para-bles, Q, plausible due to multiple traditions and reconstructed as a working hypothesis (cf. Robinson, Hoffmann & Kloppenborg 2000; Hoffmann & Heil 2007), is regarded as a separate source, not least because the parallel tradi-tion suggests 28 parables in Q. In addition to the Synoptics, the parables of the Gospel of John have also been taken into account in larger parable collections (for a detailed account, see Stare 2008). The exclusion of John from parable research is a relic of the Jülicher tradition that is not justified due to linguistic reasons. In the Fourth Gospel there are also texts that, as fictional narrative texts with dimensions of transfer, fulfil all the criteria of the genre of the parable (see below), for example, John 10:1-5 (shepherd and sheep), John 12:24 (the dying grain of wheat) or John 16:21 (the woman giving birth). The parables of the Gospel of Thomas, as well as a few parables in Agrapha, dispersed words, have also been commentated. The *Compendium* thus brings together the translation and commentation of a total of 104 parable texts.

4. ON TRADITION: *MASCHAL*, EXAMPLE OR FABLE?

The dependency of the New Testament parables on Jewish traditions cannot be questioned. However, a closer look demonstrates that this line of tradition is not as clear as it is portrayed in current publications. Older Form Criticism, oriented along the genre paradigm of a normative grid of classification (Zym-ner 2003a:10-23), already had difficulties with the fact that such a variety of texts from the Hebrew Bible was described with the same term. *Maschal* is not a narrower term of genre but rather serves "for the description of a series of literary genres (…) in the OT: proverb, teaching saying, teaching speech, par-able, oracle speech" (Eissfeldt 1913:20). The concrete references are indeed numerous. In addition to many references in the prophetic (Ez. 12:22f.; 18:2f. etc.) or wisdom texts (Ps. 49:5; summarily then Prov. 1:1; 10:1; 25:1), in which many single sentences and proverbs are called *maschal* (for example, 1 Sam. 10:12: Is Saul also among the prophets?), there are also seven references in the Bileam narrative in which Bileam's figurative speech, thriving with com-parisons, is characterized as *maschal* (Num. 23:7, 18; 24:3, 15, 20f., 23).

Nonetheless, the use of the terminus מָשָׁל and, in the LXX, παραβολή demonstrates that the authors of the Old Testament indicate by this a defini-tion of genre that implies a functional understanding of parable. Through an exact analysis of all references, Karin Schöpflin was able to demonstrate that, if one understands genre in a different way and compares the different texts in this regard, one finds a comprehensive and unifying element so that one

could translate מָשָׁל as "equal word/comparison word". "A מָשָׁל occurs through a process of comparison. The comparison can initially occur either in an analogy relationship or in a contrast relationship of two semantic units" (on this Schöpf-lin 2002:22-23). In addition, Bernard B. Scott pointed to the mysteriousness — requiring interpretation — as an important aspect (Scott 1989:13).

It is not difficult to recognize that such a genre consciousness also definitively influenced the New Testament authors, who, with a correspondingly functional definition, unify a multitude of textual forms under the term παραβολή (see Scott 1989:13, 21).

However, there is no close and simple continuity from the Hebrew root to the New Testament parables to the rich rabbinical parables as some investigations presume (e.g., Young 1989 in his subtitle: "Rediscovering the roots of Jesus' teaching"). Indeed this diachronic issue is limited primarily because most of the rabbinical parables in their edited written versions can be dated not much before the third/fourth century (for example, the Pesiqta de Rav Kahana in the 5th century A.D.). Even if individual texts can be followed back in their literary rough draft to the pre-rabbinical times (PesK 11:3) or into the 2nd century (PesK 1:3, according to Thoma & Lauer 1986:63-64), there is scarcely a basis for traditional-historical hypotheses. The term מָשָׁל is used only three times in the Mischna (mSuk 2:9; mNid 2:5; 5:7; on this Neusner 2006:259–261).

In contrast, examinations that instead synchronically point out parallels between the rabbinical parables and the parables of Jesus in terms of genre, motif, subject and style are more helpful (see Flusser 1981; Dschulnigg 1988; Young 1989; *idem* 1998; F. Stern 2006). Also fruitful for dialogue has been the inner-Jewish discussion about the role of parable in the Midrash, particularly the question as to whether the *nimschal*, that is the added practical discussion, should be seen as a part of the actual parable (Goldberg 1981; Boyarin 1985) or as a secondary expansion (D. Stern 1991; Thoma & Lauer 1986). In this case, the importance of the literary context in the understanding of a parable was recognized anew, allowing the embedding in the Christian or Jewish context to become the starting point for intertextual comparison (Hezser 2008).

Attempts to place the New Testament parables within the scope of Greco-Hellenistic literary history and ancient rhetoric have pointed in a completely different direction (Berger 1984b:1110–1124; Rau 1990:18-107; Dormeyer 1993:140-158). As Jülicher had already observed (Jülicher 1910: I, 69ff., on this Alkier 1999:41-47), Jesus' parables fulfil the argumentative function of persuasion and, because they were primarily classified with oral speech (see Dormeyer 1993:140ff.), they were able to be placed within the scope of the teachings of ancient rhetoric. This was even easier because the New Testament terms παραβολή, and, up to now overlooked, παροιμία, were used within the systems of ancient rhetoricians such as Aristotle or Quintilian. Aristotle, in the second book of his *Rhetoric* (Arist.

Rhet. 1393a.28-31), and Quintilian, in the 11th chapter of the fifth book of his *Institutio Oratoria* (Quint. *Inst*.), introduced, within the main category of the example (παραδείγμα), the παραβολή, as one of the means of formation and persuasion of oration. Even if the systems provided by the rhetoricians cannot be transferred offhand to the New Testament texts (more in 3.3.1.; further Zimmermann 2008d), it has doubtless been correctly recognized that Jesus' parables must be viewed against the background of ancient literature and rhetoric. Even the category of "allegory" (Greek ἀλληγορία), excluded by Jülicher, must be rehabilitated in this context for its proximity to the New Testament parables should not be overlooked. This rehabilitation has found only limited success in the German-speaking sphere (on this, see Klauck 1986; Erlemann 2008); however, English language parable literature is more open to including the allegory as a category of interpretation of the New Testament parables (see Boucher 1977; Sider 1985; Blomberg 1990 [= Germ. 1998]).

Finally, a proximity to fable has been postulated since Jülicher (1910: I, 94-101) through the recognition of parallels in form between the New Testament parables and the ancient fables such as those of Stesichorous and Aesop (Harnisch 2001:97-105; Beavis 1990; Vouga 1992). In such cases, it was not only the narrative or "funny" moment that was recognised as a parallel structure. For F. Vouga, the comparison with the fables is also illuminating in a historical-transferral way because "the Aesopian tradition explicitly reflects the transition from the oral tradition to the literary composition of narrative miniatures" (Vouga 2001:153). The Early Christian parables of Jesus can be placed, in terms of literary history, within the scope of Hellenistic-Roman rhetoric, as well as into the framework of the Hebrew *maschal* or Jewish genres of narrative. Just as the New Testament itself in many ways marks a synthesis of the Greco-Hellenistic and oriental-Jewish worlds, there are in the New Testament parables also characteristics from both traditions. It would, however, not do justice to the concrete texts to try to place them into one or the other tradition based, for example, on a literary form such as the length or function in context. In this way, it had been stated that shorter sentences (e.g., similitudes, according to Jülicher) can be more readily classified into the *maschal* tradition and long parables into Hellenistic rhetoric. However, such a division does justice neither to terminological usage of the different domains of tradition nor to the complexity of the New Testament findings.

In attempting to systematize the examples set out by Quintilian, one arrives at the difficulty of constructing a clear hierarchy and definition of the main groups. As described at the beginning, Quintilian would like to unite "exempla (more narrowly defined)" and "similitudines" under the heading "exemplum". This differentiation is then secured, on the one hand, by the historical examples (*Inst*. 5.11.6-16) and on the other by the similitudes (5.11.22-31). The "fictional exempla" (*Inst*. 5.11.17-21), however, take up a strange in-between

position and the fables and paroimia are subsumed under them but are not (yet) named "similitudo". If one does not want to find in *Inst.* 5.11.17-21 an anticipatory digression on the later παραβολή, then the discussion can be explained reasonably only on the basis that Quintilian's dichotomy does not agree with the Aristotelian differentiation between historical and fictional examples. Instead "fictional examples" are also placed under the "exempla more narrowly defined" or must even be separated as a third group.

Intermediate summary: The classification of the parables of Jesus into their Jewish or Hellenistic literary environments could be just as wrong as the erratic isolation of earlier times. Jesus' parables can only be suitably understood if we observe them in their literary pre-field and environment. Their impact can, however, only be suitably appreciated if we recognize the creative and innovative handling of the documented forms and motifs. Even if later Jewish tradition — completely independent of Jesus — brought forth a much greater abundance of rabbinical parables, there are still comparatively few texts in the oldest sources (see above). As the more recent genre research has emphasized, genres are "forms of re-use" that, however, are not only used in order to give form to a message but rather, in terms of a dynamic use of the concept "genre", are changed and varied in their form by the message. However, this embedding in the literary-historical domain should not lead to transmission-historical narrow-mindedness or even monocausal genealogical deductions. Traditional forms were used on purpose in order to say something new. The New Testament parables are thus also a separate, new grouping that must be appreciated in form, diversity and quantity, but above all in terms of their message.

5. ON FORM: PARABLE — NOTHING MORE!

5.1   Criticism of the Jülicher differentiation

The definition of a comprehensive genre "parable" is also new. The internal differentiation, advanced by Jülicher and Bultmann, into "similitude", "parable", and "example story" (for Bultmann also "figurative saying") is subject to fundamental critique. The New Testament authors use in παραβολή a genre term, inspired by the broadness of the Hebrew *maschal*, that is employed for both very short texts as well as for so-called long parables. Even the so-called "figurative sayings" do not possess only one scene; instead, actors in the plot are mentioned (e.g., brothers, lord, doctor, pupil, teacher) and there is even direct speech — all these are criteria that identify these texts as narrative texts. Certainly these narrative elements are reduced to a minimum; nevertheless, no genre criteria can be derived in terms of quantity. The length or, in this instance, the brevity of the text cannot be

put forth as a genre characteristic, for in the end even the so-called long parables remain miniature narratives within the greater scope of literary criticism.

The early Christian authors refer to all texts as "παραβολή", which Jülicher and the exegetes in his tradition wanted to differentiate into several minor (subordinate) genres. If we take Luke as an example, he uses the term παραβολή, for so-called figurative sayings (Lk. 5:36; 6:39) as well as for so-called similitudes (Lk. 14:7; 21:29), for parables (according to Jülicher) such as Lk. 8:4, 9, 11 and Lk. 18:1 and, finally, for the so-called example stories (Lk. 12:16; 18:9). Apparently the Early Christian authors had no concept of subgenres, but yet there was a consciousness of the parable-genre (= *Gattungsbewusstsein*) indicated by their introducing of some texts by means of this term.

It is also not possible to differentiate contextually according to the field of subject (everyday events — extraordinary cases). While Jülicher (1910: II, 514-538) and Bultmann (1995:188-189), for instance, agreed that the Parable of the Sower should be classified as an extraordinary case, according to the definition of a "parable (proper)", Jeremias reminded us of the practice of sowing in ancient Palestine. According to Jeremias (1998:9),

> [T]he normal procedure of sowing is portrayed here (…) one recognizes it when one knows how sowing is carried out in Palestine — before plowing! Therefore, the sower in the parable walks over the unsown field of stubble (…) That which appears to the westerner to be clumsiness proves to be the rule for Palestinian circumstances.

Other examples also cast doubt on the criteria of the extravagant. "Does it appear almost sensational" (Harnisch 2001:67) if a judge gives in to a persistent widow because he wants some peace and quiet (Lk. 18:2ff.) or if a man fulfils a friend's urgent plea (Lk. 11:5-8)? And which father would not be glad and celebrate the return of a son thought to be lost (Lk. 15:11-32)? An extraordinary case? One can also ask the opposite: Is it such a daily occurrence when a blind man offers to lead the blind (Q/Lk. 6:39), when a man finds treasure in a field (Mt. 13:44) or when a master goes away and leaves his house in the care of his slaves (Mk. 13:34-37)?

The borders between the daily and the extraordinary, between general and individual are fluid. Things that appear to be everyday, such as bread preparation, turn out to be unusual when one looks closely (amount of dough, no kneading; see Ostmeyer 2007). Events that appear extraordinary (such as the nocturnal arrival of a bride-groom in Mt. 25:1-13) can on the other hand be explained through deepened knowledge of the socio-historical background (Zimmermann 2002). The judgement of extravagant traits is, to a great extent, dependent on the knowledge of the figurative area and the communication situation that how-

ever are often no longer available to us or that remain hypothetical constructs. Therefore, deriving a genre criterion from this seems problematical.

Finally, systems are taken to absurdity because scholars who cling to the same internal differentiation then assign individual texts to different categories (see the table in Zimmermann 2007:22). A differentiation by scholars that leads to results with no basis for consensus is useless. Furthermore, the systems of ancient rhetoric do not correspond in any way to the differentiation introduced by Jülicher (Zimmermann 2008d).

To sum up: The points of criticism mentioned here make it clear that the differentiation of the New Testament parable material into "figurative saying", "similitude", "parable" and "example story" impose upon the New Testament texts an inappropriate logic that should no longer be supported. Thus it is time, not only to depart from the sub-genre "example story" but also to give up the terms "figurative saying" and "similitude". Attempts, like those of K. Berger, K. Erlemann or more recently K. Snodgrass, to suggest an internal differentiation of the parable material are extremely complex and have not yet been able to bring about a consensus.[1] Thus, I consider Aristotele's wise advice in the *Nicomachean Ethics* to be fitting here that it is a sign of a well-educated spirit when no greater precision is claimed than is allowed by the object.[2]

Based on the genre consciousness and use of terminology of the New Testament authors as well as the abundance of textual material, "parable" appears to me to be the only suitable genre description for the New Testament parable material: parables — and nothing else!

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1   K. Berger differentiated 12 categories, amongst others "Metaphorische Personalprädika-tion" or "Gleichnis-Diskurs" (see Berger [1984a:25–62; *idem* 2005:81-120]); K. Erlemann elaborated ten "Grundformen" (basic forms) and six "größere Texteinheiten" (comprehen-sive text units) (see Erlemann [1999:63-98]); K. Snodgrass suggested — as indicated above — six categories: 1. similitudes (double indirect); 2. interrogative parables (dou-ble indirect); 3. double indirect narrative parables; 4. juridical parables, a particular type of double indirect narrative parables; 5. single indirect narrative parables; 6. "how much more" parables (a logic used with other categories) (see Snodgrass [2008:11-15]).

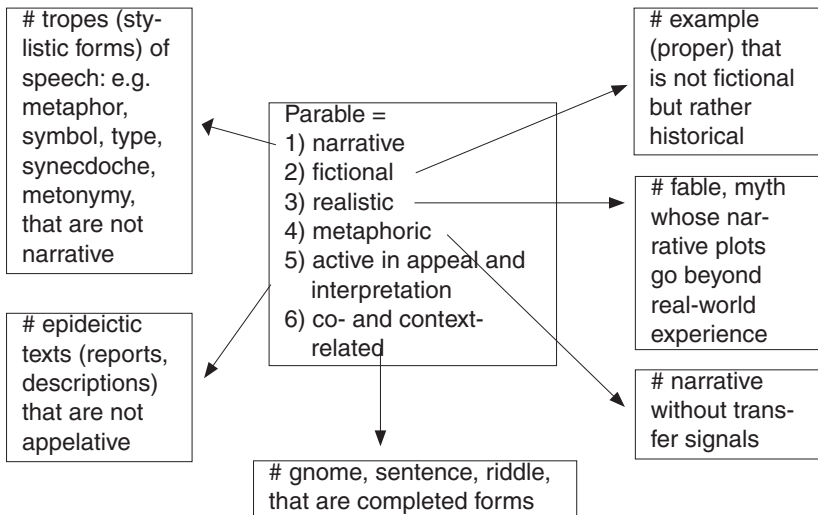2   Arist. *Eth. Nic.* I 1.1094b.12-27:

   Our discussion will be adequate if it has as much clearness as the subject-matter admits of, for precision is not to be sought for alike in all discussions, any more than in all the products of the crafts ... For it is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits. (Translation W.D. Ross.)

5.2   The genre "parable" and its characteristics

Regardless of the differences in linguistic organization, the texts that are named παραβολή, in the Synoptic Gospels and παροιμία in John, demonstrate unifying characteristics that seem to justify speaking here of a common "genre". "Narrativity" and "metaphoricity" are often designated as the most prominent criteria (Ricœur 1982:248; Heininger 1991:21-30; Söding 2003; Dormeyer 2008 among others), although some also include "brevity" (Crossan 1980:2-5; Rau 1990:73-83; Scott 1989:35: "a short narrative fiction"). In any case, these characteristics are closely connected to other criteria that, for the purpose of precision, must also be mentioned (Erlemann 1999:75-76 designates as many as 12 common characteristics). Drawing on the description suggested by R. Zymner (2003b:502), the following definition is used:

> A parable is a short narrative (1) fictional (2) text that is related in the narrated world to known reality (3) but, by way of implicit or explicit transfer signals, makes it understood that the meaning of the narration must be differentiated from the literal words of the text (4). In its appeal structure (5) it challenges the reader to carry out a metaphoric transfer of meaning that is steered by co-text and context information (6).

From the point of view of attributes, we can differentiate six characteristics of parables that will be explained further below (see for details Zimmermann 2008e:409-419): A parable is 1) narrative, 2) fictional, 3) realistic, 4) metaphoric,

tropes (stylistic forms) of speech: e.g. metaphor, symbol, type, synecdoche, metonymy, that are not narrative

example (proper) that is not fictional but rather historical

Parable =
1) narrative
2) fictional
3) realistic
4) metaphoric
5) active in appeal and interpretation
6) co- and context-related

fable, myth whose narrative plots go beyond real-world experience

epideictic texts (reports, descriptions) that are not appelative

narrative without transfer signals

gnome, sentence, riddle, that are completed forms

5) active in appeal and interpretation, 6) co-text and context related. To define does not only mean to determine, but, in its most innate meaning, also to limit. Thus, in the description below, the demarcation of parables from other genres shall also be indicated in an ideal-typical way:

5.2.1 Narrative

Parables are short narratives in which at least one action sequence or change of status is reported or imagined. Parables are different from figurative stylistic forms/tropes (word metaphors, symbols, metonymy) or comparisons. In Q/ Lk. 17:24 (Son of man like lightening from heaven) or Mt. 10:16 (sending the disciples like "sheep among the wolves") one has merely comparisons. In Mt. 5:13–16 ("You are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world") the particle of comparison is missing; instead simple sentence metaphors in the form "A is B" have been constructed. However, the sentences are missing any evidence of a plot; therefore, because of a lack of narrativity, these are not regarded as parables.

Parables are miniature narratives that concentrate on essential meaning and, in extreme cases, are made up only of a verb or a subject of action. In many cases, however, they tell of various characters in complex relational constellations with various levels of plot. Nonetheless, the narrative remains limited to only a few sentences and thus differs from longer narrative genres (epos, novel, short story etc.).

5.2.2 Fictional

A parable is a "fictional narrative"; it is invented — in contrast to a "factual narrative" that is based on historical events that have happened (or are believed to have happened) (Genette 1992:66). Although "factual narratives" are to a great extent also fictional, and thus there remains only the "fiction of the factual" (White 1991:145–160; on ancient times, see Backhaus & Häfner 2007:1-29), there are narratives that from the very beginning make no claim to a historical reference. This is the kind of invented and composed narratives that are dealt with here.

Even ancient rhetoric differentiated between historical and invented examples. Aristotle, in the second book of *Rhetoric* (20), within the framework of his comments on argumentation under the heading "examples" ($\pi\alpha\rho\alpha\delta\epsilon\acute{\iota}\gamma$-$\mu\alpha\tau\alpha$), defined the $\pi\alpha\rho\alpha\delta\epsilon\acute{\iota}\gamma\mu\alpha$ in the narrower sense as a historic example and removed from them the "artificial" or freely invented examples for which, among others, the term $\pi\alpha\rho\alpha\betao\lambda\acute{\eta}$ was used. An analogous procedure took place in Quintilian. A New Testament example of this can be found in Mt. 12:40: "Jonah was in the sea-monster's belly for three days and three nights,

and in the same way the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the bowels of the earth." This is without doubt a small narrative that is being metaphorically transferred to a different subject (Son of Man). However, the narrative is not fiction, as it refers to an event that is historically conceived (the prophet Jonah). Thus, it is not a parable in the sense used in the *Compendium*. Other Biblical examples would be the Johannine Semeia narratives, such as the wedding at Cana-in-Galilee (Jn 2:1-11), whose metaphoric character can hardly be denied within the perspective of a narrative exchange of roles (see Zimmermann 2004:203-215) but which is defined in terms of its narrative framework as a factual narrative.

5.2.3   Realistic

A parable demonstrates a close relationship to reality; it portrays the real world. A parable may be invented, but — to use the words of U.H.J. Körtner — it is an "invented truth" (Körtner 2001:370-373). That which is narrated in parables could have indeed taken place in that way; they are "realistic" (see Erlemann 1999:75: "pseudorealistic"). In this way parables are clearly different from fantastic narratives (science fiction) or apocalyptic visions. This relationship to reality also differentiates them from fables, in which, for example, animals or plants can speak and act anthropomorphically or from myths, which extend beyond the general world of experience (with Zymner 2003b:502).

5.2.4   Metaphoric

Based on internal or external transfer signals (Zymner 1991:87-96), a parable points to a statement that lies outside the primary level of meaning. A parable thus has a "transferred" or literally a "metaphoric" ($\mu\epsilon\tau\alpha$-$\phi\acute{\epsilon}\rho\epsilon\iota\nu$ = transfer) meaning. In other words, a semantic transfer of meaning takes place between two different domains of meaning. The metaphoric understanding implied here is linked to the "interaction theory of the metaphor" described by I. Richards and M. Black and further developed by P. Ricœur. According to this theory, a metaphor is not limited to a substituted word but rather always includes a section of text (Ricœur 2004; for an overview Zimmermann 2000) within which an interaction is created between two or more semantic domains. It is also possible for individual parables to contain additional word metaphors in the sense of metonymy or synecdoche or symbolic elements. However, it is the function of a parable text as a whole that is primarily designated here as "metaphoric".

5.2.5   Active in interpretation — Appellative

A parable appeals; it wants to be interpreted. The metaphoric character especially underlines the fact that the meaning of a parable is not captured in the actual letters. The metaphoric process has not already been completed; it must be carried out repeatedly in the act of reading. Hence R. Zymner applied the idea of the "appellative structure" from reader response criticism (Iser 1975) to the parable (Zymner 1991:60-62). The parable is thus active in interpretation, because it expects the reader to construct meaning. Simultaneously it is open to interpretation, because the construction of meaning is not designated but rather always takes place in different ways. Narrative elements such as rhetorical questions, an open end, etc. especially evoke the process of interpretation. They push the reader or hearer towards taking a position. They move him or her to an insight, a deeper understanding, or even to action.

5.2.6   Co-text and context-related

Parables are embedded in larger narrative contexts or in speeches and arguments that greatly influence the constitution of meaning and the direction of the reader. A parable's relation to context is thus to be viewed as constitutive. The transfer signals, which point out the metaphorical character of a parable, as well as provide the impulses for understanding, which pre-structure the text's creation of meaning, are often found not exclusively in the parable itself. Only the concrete location within a collection of sayings, within the literary environment or in the context of the entire work allow an attribution of meaning (as, for example, is visible in the parallel traditions of parables). Further, even the speaking and reading situation as well as the world of the communication situation including the common linguistic traditions are included as co-texts in the hermeneutic process (see Heininger 1991:26).

6.   ON HERMENEUTICS: OPENING HORIZONS OF UNDERSTANDING

6.1   The reader orientation of parables

Parables are puzzles. They are not clear and explicit. They do not follow the laws of philosophical or mathematical logic; just as they are not mere platitudes. This is confirmed not merely by looking at the abundance of interpretations in later exegesis and reception history; already the differences in the perception of these texts within the first decades of their reception — the way in which these differences, based on the parallel traditions of Matthew, Luke,

or the Gospel of Thomas, can be derived — document an abundance of interpretation. Even on the narrative level of the Gospels, the necessity of interpretation is literarily demonstrated. The disciples approach Jesus and say to him: *Explain to us the parable* (…)! (Mt. 13:36.) Furthermore, explicit interpretations are provided for two parables (Parable of the Sower: Mk 4:13-20par.; Parable of the Wheat and the Darnel: Mt. 13:36-43). The Markan parable theory or hardening theory can, on a pragmatic level, also be understood as a literary expression of the ambivalence towards the interpretation of the parables. Clearly these texts were not immediately understandable and for some were completely inaccessible, which led to the theological working model of "hardening" (see Erlemann 2008). The traditional-historical references, for example to the Hebrew *maschal*, also fit into this picture because the *maschal* can be explicitly understood as a puzzle (for example, Ez. 17:2; Prov. 1:6).

Certainly, there may be metaphors that bring immediate insight. But even in such cases, a hermeneutic process is taking place – one that merely reaches its goal surprisingly quickly. Jülicher correctly recognized that the process of understanding works partially with a suggested explicitness of the figurative field. The implicitness with which agreement is expected is thus an aspect of the rhetorical function to which the parable is subject.

The intended comprehension of a parable succeeds, however, only when the action, sometimes something very trivial like the placement of a lamp, is transferred to a religious dimension. No matter how "illuminating" the imagined scene may appear to be at first glance, the process of transferral is anything other than unambiguous. The reduction, postulated by Jülicher, to a single *tertium comparationis* (the third of the comparison) must certainly fail here. There may be a reduction in the possibilities of meaning: In the Jesus metaphor of the door (Jn 10:7), one can, for example, rule out that the material composition of the door (made of wood) should be transferred. Nonetheless, there remains a whole range of aspects and functions of the door (exit, entrance, opening etc.) that open up meaningful interpretations. The occurrence of transferral, which is called here "figurativeness" or "metaphoricity", implies inexplicitness for it is indeed pre-structured through transfer signals in the text and context. However, the completion of the task — the actual finding of meaning on a higher level — is left to the reader.

The ambiguity of a parable thus corresponds to its structure of appeal. Because the meaning of the figurative language is not exactly defined in the text, it must first be sought and found by the reader. Because parables are so open to interpretation, they are at the same time active in interpretation – that is, they evoke an interpretation. Formulated in another way, parables invite readers and hearers to open themselves up to a process of understanding. The hearing of the explicitly formulated appeal in Mk 4:9 lies in the parable

text itself. It goes beyond the challenge of auditory perception. The parables do not only want to be heard or understood cognitively, they also want to be comprehended, felt or even lived. By mapping out their own world, in which sometimes figures of identification act and speak, are led into crises and exit from them, parables literally pull the readers into their world. They can, as C. Link so well formulated it, become "habituated image worlds". "Understanding here is based on (…) the possibility of 'entering into' the scenario and taking over the role of its actors" (Link 1999:149).

However, parables are not merely games that lead us into an imaginary world, such as the fictive Internet world "second life". The engagement with the parable text helps the readers to see themselves and their concrete lives in a new light. The understanding of the parables then involves "subjecting oneself to the text and gaining from it an expanded self, an outline of existence that is a truly appropriate counterpart to the world outline" (Ricœur 1974:33). To put it in the words of tradition: Parables want to lead to faith or, more concretely, to life from faith.

6.2   The binding openness of the interpretation of parables

It is not the individual interpretive steps run through in the commentaries of the *Compendium* that are new territory but rather the integrative combination of different aspects that, in the consistent application to each text, goes beyond earlier interpretations. While linguistic-narrative interpretations or the consistent integration into socio-historical contexts have often been understood differently, the *Compendium* aims at emphasizing precisely the connections of different interpretive dimensions. Furthermore, it is unusual that the summarizing interpretation does not offer only one path of comprehension — instead several interpretive scopes are developed. Figurative texts such as parables elude one-sided definitions. Their attractiveness is found precisely in a certain openness of interpretation that, however, must not be confused with arbitrariness. Based on historical semantic linguistic conventions or on philological insights, limits can be defined beyond which an interpretation is wrong or unclear. Within these limits, however, various or even contradictory interpretations are possible. These deviating interpretive variations are discussed alongside one another without being played off against each other. The early Christian tradition of interpretation, for example, of Q parables in Matthew, Luke, or the Gospel of Thomas demonstrates that this multitude of understanding is built into the texts themselves. This is not something to be complained about, for in this way, the meaning of the parables can be newly discovered and filled with life in very different situations.

The conscious confirmation of the plurality of interpretation of the Jesus parables was also implemented in the work on the *Compendium*. The *Compendium* is not the commentary of a single author, but a collective effort of 45 authors who come from very different traditions. These divergent standpoints are visible in translation and interpretation; however, through common basic convictions as well as the uniform structure of the commentary, they have indeed led to a unity in the entire work.

The readers will also read the parables of Jesus from different standpoints, areas of interest and motivations. They also can select from the abundance of socio-historical and tradition-historical information and interpretations. The intent of this openness is, however, not a postmodern relativization of un-ambiguousness but rather to challenge the reader to reach his or her own interpretation of a parable. Taking the appeal structure of the texts seriously does not mean offering the reader a finished interpretation that needs only be accepted. On the contrary, the *Compendium of the parables of Jesus* wants to strengthen that which is already given in the parables themselves. They want to pull the reader into a process of understanding and believing. Should this new approach — or the *Compendium* as a whole — succeed here and there in providing such midwifery services, then it will have fulfilled its goals.

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