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ALLEGORY AND AUTHORITY:

AN EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS OF MATTHEW 13

Lucian López

Can the parables of Jesus be interpreted allegorically? Or perhaps better stated, *should* the parables of Jesus be interpreted allegorically? Since the Enlightenment, the medieval Church's tendency to interpret parables (and much of scripture) allegorically, with the intention of bolstering authoritative systematic teaching, has been viewed with suspect or outright avoided by many exegetes. The inclusion and emphasis of the word "should," from the above question presupposes authority, and as I will discuss later, the question of allegory is inseparable from the question of authority due to this particular history. Indeed, anything *can* be interpreted allegorically, from a television program, to the plant that a friend gave me (that only began to really blossom once I gave it away). Perhaps by intuition, but all my life I have taken for granted an allegorical interpretation of the parables of Jesus. However much this was informed by years of Catholic up-bringing, especially influenced by late antique to medieval theologians, is impossible to determine. Or perhaps as a human who dreams at night, this is an instinctive resource for processing sublime truths. Could this have been part of Jesus' own process for composing his parables, and what, in the end, did Jesus intend with his parables? Could an exegetical analysis of Jesus' parables not only allow for, but give us

reason to interpret Jesus' parables allegorically, if not in a new way than previous generations?

As a point of departure, this paper will analyze the parable of the sower – perhaps the most beneficial for this purpose. The parable of the sower is one of the most unique parables found in the Gospels. In this parable, Jesus offers us his own interpretation the parable, discusses why he speaks in parables to begin with, and can even be said to be a parable about parables. It is clearly about varied forms of receptivity of God's word, but Jesus couples this with a discussion about how parables themselves delineate between those who perceive and those who do not. In all three synoptic accounts, Jesus quotes from the book of Isaiah, highlighting the fact that “though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not understand” (Mt. 13:13). The parable of the sower is also present in the Gospel of Thomas, though without the interpretation.¹ This paper will employ an exegetical analytic overview of the parable in its historical and literary context, and then review the history of various interpretations along the discussion of the appropriateness of the use of allegory. By analyzing this process in light of the allocation of authority in interpretation, I hope to propose some useful questions for further study on the subject of parable interpretation.

PART ONE

The parable of the Sower is found in the thirteenth chapter of Matthew. In previous chapters Jesus is depicted healing various people (lepers, the centurion's son, the demon-possessed), and commissioning the twelve after his baptism and Matthew's unique infancy narrative. It is at this point in the narrative that Jesus' teaching begins to take a significant turn. The parables give a first hint of judicial elements of urgency, as well as the ministry of Jesus “couched in terms of the Old Testament expectation.”² Of the parables in chapter thirteen, the parable of the sower is perhaps the least dire in terms of eschatological consequences. A sower sows

seed on good ground and on three different kinds of bad ground. The consequence of having bad soil is that the seed will not bear fruit. In the parable of the weeds, the weeds are burned; in the parable of the net, the bad fish are thrown into “the furnace, where there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth” (Mt. 13:50).

The eight parables found in chapter thirteen may form a chiasmic structure, whose central message can only be found through this interpretation. They form a “series of four couplets that progressively reveal their messages by means of images of planting, growth, values, and responsibilities.”³ The parable of the sower is only a part of this overall message, introducing the theme of receptivity or understanding, “and the last parable (the householder) includes a question and an exhortation based on the disciples’ understanding.”⁴ The disciples are regarded as “teachers” that will have in their storehouses both “the old and the new” (Mt. 13:52).

To what could Jesus have been referring as things “old,” and “new?” In order to understand this distinction, one has to consider the make-up of the audience to which these teachings were addressed. The parables would have been delivered on the Sabbath, most likely in Capernaum where he had ministered in the synagogue, and in a boat so that he could be more clearly seen and heard.⁵ In chapter twelve, Jesus had been criticized for picking grain on the Sabbath, and in chapter thirteen, Matthew states that these lessons transpired “that same day” (Mt. 13).

Biblical exegetes emphasize the idea that it was within this context that Jesus was constructing his parables. The crowd included a mixture of his believing and receptive disciples, as well as those Pharisees and critics that would seek to trap him. Jesus was using veiled language to convey that “the Jewish leaders were being replaced as the custodians of the kingdom message.”⁶ Such a confrontation would be dangerous in Jesus’ mind, therefore the use of veiled language, such as that of a parable, would be a more

desirable approach. In this way, if one wishes to employ a *Sitz im Leben* interpretation of the parable, Jesus is thinking about the Pharisees and those that would reject him when he discusses the unfruitful soils. His faithful disciples are the good ground. In this sense, the “old and new” refers to the promise that the disciples will obtain new knowledge of the kingdom that sheds light on the old ritual practices and religious lore challenged in previous chapters.

On a practical level, Jesus would also be utilizing this parable to “explain why the word of the kingdom, as preached by John the Baptist, Jesus, and His disciples, had not been better received.”⁷ In this way, Jesus is offering a kind of apology, as well as encouraging the disciples’ perseverance.

Jesus is encouraging the disciples, who have only previously been commissioned in chapter ten, that they are to be the new administrators of God’s kingdom (replacing the Jewish leaders).⁸ Jesus is also encouraging the disciples’ patience, and “not to be disappointed with the response to their preaching of the kingdom and to keep sowing the Word, since response will come in the final harvest.”⁹ Here the parable of the sower introduces eschatological themes, which become stronger in the subsequent parables of this particular chapter of Matthew, as we will discuss in greater detail later.

Employing a *Sitz im Leben* approach to analyzing this parable reveals various elements included in the parable itself that would have resonated with the people of the time. Jesus’ deliberate use of certain symbolic objects may have carried a distinct significance for the hearers of Jesus’ time than for twenty-first century readers. The parable of the sower spoke of the activity of a peasant farmer, employing rather commonplace techniques to his sowing. Because the sowing was carelessly done “the sower might have been assumed by peasant hearers to be a small landholder and viewed negatively,” or sympathetically, if he were a “hired laborer or tenant farmer

struggling with hostile conditions.”¹⁰ Nevertheless, there may have been a handful of this very kind of sower either in the audience, or among the acquaintances of the audience members.

Additionally, Jesus may have had recourse to allusions that called to mind well-known Jewish texts such as Esdras, Genesis, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and various others,¹¹ or contemporary Jewish folk culture. Current events would also have been on the minds of his hearers, or Matthew’s own readers – a city dwelling community.¹² They would call to mind certain political rulers or news-worthy events.

One such example is that of the good soil yielding “a crop – a hundred, sixty, or thirty times what was sown” (Mt 13: 8). Some scholars suggested that this might be a literary exaggeration, but as Bailey points out, this was not necessarily the case. The reference to the crop yielding “a hundredfold,” may have resonated on a couple of different levels. Genesis 26:12 employs this expression to denote the manifold blessings of God. Also, Pliny described the imperial yield of Nero’s stalks of grain as being 360 stalks “obtained from one grain.”¹³ Had Matthew’s community been familiar with this legend, or a similar cultural tendency to associate royal power with fertility and good fortune, this would place Jesus deliberately alongside Nero as yielding a royal crop of abundance!

The method of seed-sowing as described in the parable may seem somewhat haphazard and reckless. Nevertheless, in ancient Palestine, it would be commonplace to scatter the seed around, much of it falling on the path. “In the absence of fences, paths ran around and through plots of ground that were usually topographically defined because of variations in the terrain. Inevitably some seed would fall in these paths,”¹⁴ leaving the seed as prey for the birds of the air.

The symbolic objects would have had cultural significance as well. The birds of the air would have required little explanation,

as birds often symbolized robbers or even satanic forces in ancient Judaism.¹⁵ In verse eleven, Jesus says, “The knowledge of the secrets/mysteries of the kingdom of God has been given you.” Baily suggests that the use of this term, “secrets/mysteries” refers back to “Old Testament secrets communicated through divine revelation and divinely interpreted,” such as that used in Daniel to signify the secrets to be prophetically interpreted.¹⁶ Bailey also points out the references to God as sower in Esdras 4, as well as various places in Jeremiah, Hosea, and Ezekiel where sowing and harvest were recognized metaphors for the eschatological expectation of the kingdom.¹⁷

One thing that makes the parable of the sower unique and valuable is that it is one of the few that Jesus actually interprets for us. After giving us the parable, the disciples ask him why he speaks in parables (13:10). It is at this point that he includes the mysterious interlude where he quotes Isaiah, “You will ever be hearing but not understanding” (cf. Isaiah 6:9,10), an element that is found in all three synoptic gospels. In all three accounts, Jesus then goes on to interpret the parable, which may give us hope of understanding how Jesus himself would have allowed for interpretation. Nevertheless, most scholars agree that the interpretation is a later addition by the synoptic authors, usually on linguistic grounds alone.¹⁸ Part of this reasoning is that the interpretation is not included in the Gospel of Thomas (Thom 82:3-13). Some would dispute that the author of Thomas omitted the interpretation because doing so would add to a sense of a “secret” understanding of the parable, in line with a gnostic text such as Thomas’. However Thomas does not consistently omit allegorization throughout the gospel.¹⁹

But perhaps the very fact that in most cases Jesus does not take the time to interpret his parables says something about the way he wishes to impart knowledge, and the faith he has in his disciples’ ability to capture his meaning. This would presuppose a certain

amount of tolerance for allegorical situations on his disciples' behalf.

The actual literary structure of the parable as presented in Matthew sets up a dynamic which further emphasizes that some (the disciples) will hear and understand (be able to interpret) and some will not (the Pharisees and/or crowds.) Jesus addresses the crowds, and then separately addresses the disciples, giving them the solution.²⁰

The chapter itself is also "set apart" in its physical locale as Jesus goes to a new location in order to preach from a boat. In this way, Matthew illustrates that, though it is still the Sabbath, this is going to be a different kind of presentation by Jesus. Here, Jesus presents a series of parables that begin with: "the kingdom of heaven is like . . .," setting the scene for an allegorical, pedagogical style of teaching.²¹

Crossan discusses how parables themselves would have been familiar to ancient Jewish people of Palestine through their common use by rabbinical sources, but he emphasizes that the "rabbinical parables are closely tied to ethical problems of life or to exegetical difficulties in the biblical text."²² But he also clarifies: "this is exactly what the parables of Jesus are *not* doing."²³ But what, then, are Jesus' parables doing? And what significant difference served to awaken the disciples and shatter the expectations of the incredulous? Crossan outlines the dominant theories of recent exegetes who place the parables along a spectrum of realized to immanent eschatological significance. Either the parables spoke directly of Jesus' proclaiming that "today is the day" that fulfillment is in your midst, or "this will be happening very soon" – and in the case of the sower, that the word is being scattered among you this very minute, or very soon, or as a mediating position – a little of both.²⁴

The case for realized eschatology is certainly ratified by Luke 4:16-30 in which Jesus reads from Isaiah and openly declares:

“Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” And as for immanent eschatology, this is the way the early church interpreted much of Jesus’ teaching as martyrs were willing to die awaiting the parousia.

PART TWO

So much for an exegetical interpretation of the text. Yet there is something existentially indifferent about leaving the interpretation at this point in the analysis. If interpretation of scripture could solely be confined to what Jesus meant to those people sitting in front of him in ancient Palestine, (or even what the canonical authors wished to convey) one would have to ask with Kirkegaard if indeed one needed to go back in time and live when Jesus lived in order to have faith, or if one would at least have an advantage. But those reading the parables today are alive today, and the words resonate with us differently.

At this point, it might be useful to review the history of parable interpretation by various theologians since the time when allegorical interpretation came into question. Robert H. Stein discusses how the rejection of traditional allegorical interpretation of the parables originated with Luther and Calvin in the era of the Protestant Reformation and Enlightenment. “Both Luther and Calvin renounced the allegorical method of interpretation, calling the allegorizers ‘clerical jugglers performing monkey tricks’.”²⁵ Nevertheless, Stein comments that Luther was found to employ allegorical interpretation now and again, citing Luther’s use of the parable of the good Samaritan to refer to Adam and all humankind overcoming the antiquated priesthood of the Old Testament by being rescued by “the good Samaritan,” which represented Jesus Christ.²⁶

Stein credits Adolf Julicher for ending the “Babylonian captivity of the parables to the allegorical method of interpretation,” by pointing out that the parables did not consist of “a string of

metaphors, each having its own point of reference . . . ,” but “. . . a single metaphor with one basic point of reference.” Stein calls this an overcompensation for previous errors, pointing out that “the very fact that the early church could add allegorical details to the parables should have revealed that Jesus could have done the same.”²⁷ Also, Julicher emphasized that each parable revealed a general moral truth, which always tended to back up Julicher’s own “nineteenth-century liberalism.”²⁸

It is at this point that we begin to observe more historical/anthropological approaches to scriptural exegesis. C. H. Dodd “pointed out that the parables should be interpreted in light of their original context or *Sitz im Leben* (situation in life) of Jesus.”²⁹ Rather than be concerned with the parables’ theological significance for today, as Christians are wont to do, Dodd would recommend reading the parables to understand the impact Jesus intended. In addition, redaction criticism focused on the authors of the texts as theologians themselves, crafting a body of work intended to convey its own message.³⁰ Stein celebrates this method as, rather than trying to attempt an archaeological deconstruction of the texts, scholars take the “canonical form” of the parable and learn the “inspired and authoritative meaning” as is. Both of these methods are utilized commonly and to some extent interchangeably by modern exegetes, as in fact I do in the first section of this paper.

But again, we find ourselves at this existential road block. How can modern students “become the crowd” and hear the parable spoken today? Various other methods of interpretation have been suggested that smack of Jungian dream interpretation or Joseph Cambell’s synthetic deconstruction of all human myth. A structuralist approach seems to revive the allegorical interpretation, but in a different sense. This interpretation “proposes to uncover the timeless underlying substructural (and usually existential) primordial concepts characteristic of all humanity found in the

parable.”³¹ In this sense, the parables are like dreams, heavily laden with symbolic elements that speak of subconscious desires, motivations, and intentions. Yet, protests Stein, such an approach reduces all parables “and literature to universal anthropological truths, and” adds Stein, “it is interesting to note that these are usually the particular anthropological truths of the structuralist interpreting the text.”³² Stein is concerned with the highly subjective nature of this interpretation, which would only be appropriate if the purpose of such an interpretation were to reveal to the reader his or her own particular truths, but perhaps a wider panorama would be more elusive (but impossible?)

Similarly, other methods such as aesthetic criticism, celebrate the polyvalent and plurisignificant aspect of each parable. They describe parables as a “language event” in which the author and context are not only insignificant, but it is not even the reader who interprets the parable, but the parable that interprets the reader.³³ Stein responds, “One cannot be certain whether the aesthetic critics are to be interpreted literally in what they say or whether they are defining the metaphorical function of metaphor metaphorically.”³⁴

Stein receives all of these interpretations with a great deal of skepticism. First, he notes that these are highly subjective methods of interpretation. Second, they are equating all poetic/allegorical/mythological language events with the parables of Jesus. This might include myths of world religions, fairy tales, fables, and perhaps even science fiction stories! “The parables of Jesus are not simply parables,” protests Stein, “they are parables *of Jesus*.”³⁵ Third, such interpretation rejects the post-enlightenment world of science and historical-critical studies and creates what is almost a “new gnostic mystery religion!”³⁶ Fourth, he states that “the sharp distinction between metaphor and simile, parable and allegory is exaggerated.”³⁷ But perhaps more to the point, he rather humorously recalls the story of the prophet Nathan utilizing a parable about a poor man with

one sheep in order to move the heart of king David (2 Sam. 12:1-13). David exclaims “I have sinned against the Lord,” not “I have experienced a parable.”³⁸

Which brings us to the point – parables must move the hearer to some kind of realization about themselves in relation to the kingdom. “A parable is a literary or speech form,” describes Malina and associates, “in which a parable teller describes a scenario while intending the scenario to refer to something more and/or something other than what is actually described.”³⁹ Such a definition would not be so controversial if Jesus was in fact describing the process for sowing seed in ancient Palestine. In order to arrive at “something more” there must be a hearer to interpret the parable (and usually “something more” means there is at least one symbol to be translated allegorically). Jesus himself warns that some will understand and some will not. The question of authority enters in when one attempts to determine who has the last word in the interpretation. There is a subjective element to this – each individual needs to hear and be moved to compunction in his or her own context. Nevertheless, there is an element of universality and authority – the hearer is in relation to an Other – Jesus, the herald of the kingdom and the kingdom himself, the eternal Son of Man who sits at God’s right hand on his cherubim throne and who made the heavens and the earth – he is the one who addresses us with the parables. Stein emphasizes this understanding when he states, “What the church seeks in the parables is not some word from the labyrinthine depths of man’s inner psyche but rather a word from outside, a Word from the very heart of God, himself.”⁴⁰

But there are two elements that must be separated in order to understand the difficulties that these various interpretations really pose. First, Stein mentions “the church.” Never in Stein’s article does he discuss the central debate surrounding allegorical interpretation, at least not explicitly, and that is in the tension between church authority to interpret, and the individual’s mystical

response to the word of God being sown.

From the outset of this controversy, at the heart of the cultural shift from medievalism to Enlightenment, Platonic ecclesiology to the Protestant Reformation, allocation of authority was the central question in rejecting allegorical interpretation. Church and society had gotten into the habit of extrapolating authoritative statements about systematic theology, as well as mainstream medicine and folk magic, through the practice of allegorizing everything from scripture to the natural world. The Enlightenment, and the Protestant Reformation as a part of this, rejected the traditional medieval method of argumentation based on allegory and authority, and favored other more empirical methods. It is understandable that in this context Luther, Calvin, and their followers would reject allegorical interpretation in their own respective projects.

Second, Stein seems to confine the “labyrinthine depths of man’s inner psyche” to some place outside the kingdom, as though by Christ’s incarnation he did not unite divinity and humanity to the extent to which self-knowledge in humility is in itself revelatory of the kingdom. Such criticism belies a negative anthropology at the service of attachment to residual medieval ideals of authority.

But a responsible exegetical interpretation of Jesus’ parable of the sower would take into account Jesus’ own intention of allowing for allegorical interpretation, or at least that this was the understanding of the evangelists who canonically transmitted this parable to subsequent generations. The disciples are “set apart” in the very literary structure of the parable as those who understand (are able to interpret), and this is met with a sense of eschatological (whether immanent or realized) urgency. The chiasmic structure of the chapter rounds off the end of Jesus’ argument with a promise that the disciples, after learning how to interpret, will have in their arsenal things “old and new.” This refers to their store of both Old Testament images and the ways in which Jesus updates them in his

own teachings by means of crafting the symbols in new and surprising ways.

As previously stated, Jesus himself makes a distinction between the crowds and disciples in the way in which Matthew portrays his going aside (set apart) and explaining the meaning of the parables. “However the formal structure is to be best represented, the movement from crowds to disciples is fundamental to the dynamic of the materials: the parables have value ultimately only for those who are or will become disciples.”⁴¹ Here we are allocating authority clearly to Jesus, and those privileged who understand are the faithful disciples. The way in which we determine authority will change the way this is interpreted: are the disciples the institutional church whose teaching office has the ability to interpret the words and commands of Jesus, or are the disciples those privileged few who are capable of tolerating a mythical/allegorical outlook on life, one that does not necessarily stop at the parables of Jesus, but at any poetic sign that speaks to the archetypal elements of the inner workings of the soul?

Perhaps Crossan’s conclusion states it best. Rather than interpret Jesus’ parables as an effect of the controversy of Jesus’ interaction with the Pharisees, Crossan places the parables as the cause of a controversial relationship between Jesus and his would-be adversaries, describing the parables as *ontologico-poetic*. By this he means that the parables “are the primary and immediate expression of [Jesus’] own experience of God. They are the ontologico-poetic articulation of the kingdom’s in-breaking upon himself.”⁴²

He states:

Jesus’ actions and controversies, and eventually Jesus’ death, are the result and not the referent of the parables, they are the effect and not the cause of these images. The referent is the ineffable mystery of the kingdom’s presence to Jesus and of his own experience of it. The parables are then the primary language of a religious experience and as such they are part of the experience itself.”⁴³

In this way, Jesus' parables can be likened to the poetry of John of the Cross. As legend would have it, John of the Cross wished to express his mystical relationship through his poetry. Only reluctantly, at the promptings of his community, did he publish the commentaries on each stanza.

In this sense, parables do extend beyond those found in the Gospels, but are a way of receiving and expressing intimacy with God in this life. They are a theological experience of self-knowledge, found in everyday experience, and couched in symbolic form. They are a way of seeing and hearing the world around us, and they are ways in which the world both reveals and conceals the Divine Presence.

The question of allegorical interpretation of parables, or of any part of scripture, will never be satisfactorily addressed until theologians tackle larger ecclesiological and anthropological questions, such as allocation of authority in ratifying religious experience. As always, however, people will be moved by what moves them, and impressed by religious truths only insofar as they experience them first hand. True existential authority, tried in the fires of disillusionment and experiential confirmation, will always exist elusive of structured authority.

Notes

- 1 John Dominic Crossan, "The Seed Parables of Jesus," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 92, 2 (1973): 244.
- 2 Mark L. Bailey, "The Parable of the Sower and the Soils," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 155 (1998): 176
- 3 Bailey, "The Parable of the Sower and the Soils," 173.
- 4 Bailey, "The Parable of the Sower and the Soils," 178.
- 5 Bailey, "The Parable of the Sower and the Soils," 177.
- 6 Bailey, "The Parable of the Sower and the Soils," 187.
- 7 Bailey, "The Parable of the Sower and the Soils," 178.
- 8 Bailey, "The Parable of the Sower and the Soils," 175.
- 9 Bailey, "The Parable of the Sower and the Soils," 185.
- 10 Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 102
- 11 cf. Esdras 4:26-32; Jer. 31:27; Ezek. 36:9; Hos. 2:23; Bailey, "The Parable of the Sower and the Soils," 179.
- 12 Malina et al., *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 102
- 13 Bailey, "The Parable of the Sower and the Soils," 183.
- 14 Bailey, "The Parable of the Sower and the Soils," 180.
- 15 Bailey, "The Parable of the Sower and the Soils," 172
- 16 Bailey, "The Parable of the Sower and the Soils," 175.
- 17 cf. Esdras 4:26-32; Jer. 31:27; Ezek. 36:9; Hos. 2:23; Bailey, "The Parable of the Sower and the Soils," 179.
- 18 Crossan, "The Seed Parables of Jesus," 250.
- 19 Crossan, "The Seed Parables of Jesus," 250.
- 20 John Noland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, (Grand Rapids: Paternoster Press, 2005), 522.
- 21 Noland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 521.
- 22 Crossan, "The Seed Parables of Jesus," 264.
- 23 Crossan, "The Seed Parables of Jesus," 264.
- 24 Crossan, "The Seed Parables of Jesus," 264.
- 25 Robert H. Stein, "The Parables of Jesus in Recent Study," *Word and World*

5,3 (1985): 249.

- 26 Stein, "The Parables of Jesus in Recent Study," 249.
- 27 Stein, "The Parables of Jesus in Recent Study," 250.
- 28 Stein, "The Parables of Jesus in Recent Study," 250.
- 29 Stein, "The Parables of Jesus in Recent Study," 250.
- 30 Stein, "The Parables of Jesus in Recent Study," 251.
- 31 Stein, "The Parables of Jesus in Recent Study," 252.
- 32 Stein, "The Parables of Jesus in Recent Study," 253.
- 33 Stein, "The Parables of Jesus in Recent Study," 254.
- 34 Stein, "The Parables of Jesus in Recent Study," 254.
- 35 Stein, "The Parables of Jesus in Recent Study," 253.
- 36 Stein, "The Parables of Jesus in Recent Study," 254.
- 37 Stein, "The Parables of Jesus in Recent Study," 254.
- 38 Stein, "The Parables of Jesus in Recent Study," 255.
- 39 Malina et al., *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 102
- 40 Stein, "The Parables of Jesus in Recent Study," 253.
- 41 Noland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 522.
- 42 Crossan, "The Seed Parables of Jesus," 265.
- 43 Crossan, "The Seed Parables of Jesus," 266.