

PARABLES, FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

Part I

The Use of, the Extent of, the Purpose for...

By Arlen L. Chirwood

In the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon Daniel had a dream and visions of his head upon his bed: then he wrote the dream, and told the sum of the matters.

Daniel spake and said, I saw in my vision by night, and, behold, the four winds of the heaven strove upon the great sea.

And four great beasts came up from the sea, diverse one from another (Dan. 7:1-3).

The same day went Jesus out of the house, and sat by the seaside.

And great multitudes were gathered together unto him, so that he went into a ship, and sat; and the whole multitude stood on the shore.

And he spake many things unto them in parables... (Matt. 13:1-3a).

Parables and figurative language (metaphors and other types of figurative expressions) are often thought of somewhat together, for parables usually employ a number of figurative expressions. But, whether appearing together or not, neither ever appears alone, apart from related Scripture.

Individuals in the Western world do not normally think or express themselves in parabolic or figurative fashions nearly as much as individuals in the Eastern world. It is quite common for those in the East to speak somewhat in parabolic senses or use figurative language extensively, but less common for individuals in the West. In

this respect, it sometimes becomes more difficult for those in the West to grasp certain things in Scripture when it comes to parables and figurative language than it does for those in the East, who tend to automatically think along these lines.

(This is also why those in the West often have similar problems with types and antitypes in Scripture. They find it difficult to think along these related lines as well. But for those in the East, seeing types and antitypes [or seeing parables or figurative expressions] are seeing that which is second-nature to the way they think. And this would go hand-in-hand with the manner in which God structured and made known His Word to man, given in a part of the world where this type use of language was well known, a use which has been carried down into modern times in the East.

This is not to say that God simply gave His Word to a people after the manner in which they thought and used language. Rather, it is to say that God, over centuries of time, brought into existence a people in the Middle East whose thoughts and use of language followed a manner in which He desired to communicate His Word to man.

This would be similar to how God brought about the means which He desired to use to record His Word in what we know today as the New Testament. This part of His Word was originally recorded in *Koine Greek* [*koine*, a Greek word meaning “common” — *Kione Greek*, a common language among the people]. This was a language in use throughout the Roman world in the first century, possibly being *the most accurately expressive language human history has ever known*.

God began to bring the use of *Koine Greek* in the later Roman world to pass through Alexander the Great’s conquests in the Middle East in the fourth century B.C., allowing *Koine Greek* [the language used by these conquering armies] to progressively spread and eventually become a chief means of communication throughout that part of the world. And, when the New Testament was penned in the first century A.D., this allowed God to have this particular means of communication at hand, ready for use by both those recording and those reading His Word.)

Thus, parables and the use of figurative expres-

sions — as the use of types in Scripture — form different methods of the way God gave His revelation to man. Parables and figurative expressions form *necessary parts* of this revelation and are given *after particular, God-ordained fashions*, in order to form the complete canon of Scripture, *exactly as God would have it exist*. They form integral parts of Scripture — parts of the whole — apart from which other portions of Scripture cannot be properly understood.

Then, putting it all together, one can, so to speak, run all the checks and balances he wants to run through “comparing spiritual things with spiritual” — whether parables, figurative language, types, etc. — and *he will always end up with the same uniformity and consistency throughout*. He must, for he is dealing with a Divine revelation which, in actuality, has only *one Author*; and this revelation emanated from an infinite, omniscient mind *wherein nonuniformity and inconsistency cannot exist*.

And that will speak volumes when it comes to the interpretation of parables, figurative language, and types. These simply form different methods which God used to communicate His Word to man; and the inexhaustible nature of that dealt with in the Word of God is no different in parables, figurative language, or types as it is in any other part of the Word.

Any part of the Word forms just as much a part of the Word as any other part. Parables, figurative language, and types *must* be looked upon after this fashion, for the whole of Scripture forms one complete, Divine revelation — given “in divers manners [‘in many ways,] in time past” — which *can only be perfect, to the minutest detail, in every respect*.

The Interpretation of Parables

Parables reflect on previous Scripture. They are given to explain, add further light to previously revealed truth. And the figurative expressions employed in parables or elsewhere in Scripture are *always* used after such a fashion that either the text renders them self-explanatory or their use is made

known in the context or in other portions of Scripture.

The English word “parable” is an Anglicized form of the Greek word *parabole*, which is a compound word comprised of *para* (meaning, “alongside”) and *bole* (meaning, “to place,” or “to cast”). Thus, *parabole* simply means “to place [or ‘to cast’] alongside.” The word, when used relative to Biblical teaching, refers to additional truths placed alongside of previously revealed truths in order to provide further light concerning the prior truths.

In this respect, parables in Scripture and the previous truths to which they relate are somewhat like types and antitypes. One will *help explain* the other, for they both relate to counterparts. And a rejection of one will *negatively reflect* on one’s understanding of the other.

So, what can be said about the interpretation of parables? The same thing which can be said about the interpretation of types can also be said about the interpretation of parables. Parables and types must be interpreted after the same fashion as that to which they relate is to be interpreted.

And that to which they relate, generally, are not parables or types, though one parable or type could relate to another parable or type. But, with the existence of the latter, there must also exist a nonparabolic or a nontypical section of Scripture back behind or out ahead of that to which all of the parables or types on a particular subject would relate.

A parable is not simply “an earthly story with a heavenly meaning,” as some state; nor, as stated by others, is a parable given only to illustrate “one central truth,” from which “details” cannot be gleaned.

The first statement really says *nothing* when it comes to the true nature of parables, and the second statement *runs completely contrary* to any correct thought about parables when viewed strictly from a Scriptural standpoint.

The reason for parables, as previously stated, was given by Christ Himself when He first began to teach through the use of parables (Matt. 13:10-17). Christ used parables during the latter part of

His earthly ministry in order to reveal *additional truths* to those who had received *His prior teachings*, for, having received the previously revealed truths, *they could then understand* the additional related truths taught by the parables.

However, through this method of teaching, these additional truths were *meaningless* to those who had rejected His prior teachings. They had no point of reference, leaving the parables to stand alone; and, resultingly, *they couldn’t understand* that which was being taught.

(And teachings with this type dependency on other Scripture is not at all peculiar to the parables. Note the central subject matter of the parables in Matthew chapter thirteen — *the Word of the Kingdom, and fruit-bearing in relation to the kingdom.*

Unless a person has some type foundational understanding of this overall subject, he cannot begin at this point and expect to properly understand the subject at hand. He has no foundation as a point of reference, upon which he can build. After all, these parables appear at a point part way through the Book of Matthew, and they are removed much farther yet from the foundational truths set forth by Moses in the beginning.

This will explain why certain Biblical truths appear relatively simple for one person but seem next to impossible to grasp for another person. For one “instructed unto the kingdom of the heavens” [Matt. 13:19, 52], understanding things relating to *the Word of the Kingdom* may appear relatively simple and easy. But for one not so instructed, the matter would not be that way at all.

And this is why God placed all of these foundational truths at the beginning of His revelation to man. God expects man to begin where He began, at the beginning of His revelation. And this is where man *must begin* if he is to properly understand the foundational truths as God set them forth, allowing a person to then correctly build thereon.)

Revealed Truth in Parables

The extent to which different parables deal with revealed truths could vary. A parable could reveal numerous detailed truths, providing numerous points of additional information to help explain

the previously revealed truths (Scripture reveals nothing which would limit the use of parables in this respect). On the other hand though, the revealed, detailed truths covered in some parables could be considerably less than revealed, detailed truths covered in other parables.

They would be very much like types in this respect. A particular type deals with truth relating to only part of a complete picture (all the types together form the complete picture), but types *vary* as to the amount and what part of the complete picture each portrays.

The method of the interpretation of parables, as also previously stated, is simple. Though quite a bit of symbolism is usually involved (as is also present numerous other places in Scripture, types included), parables are to be interpreted and understood after the same fashion as the Scriptures to which they relate. As in the interpretation of types and antitypes, parables are to be interpreted in conjunction with their counterparts in other sections of Scripture.

The parable is not to be interpreted one way and that to which it relates another way, as the type is not to be interpreted one way and the antitype another way. In each instance, both are to be understood and interpreted in the light of one another, for they form *inseparable units*.

The type and antitype, or the parable and the prior portion of Scripture to which it relates, in each case, deals with *the same thing* and is to be looked upon and understood *after the same fashion*.

Thus, to place parables in their correct perspective — beginning with the parables in Matthew chapter thirteen — note that to which the previously revealed truth pertained and that to which these parables pertained, *which, of necessity, must be the same*.