

PARABLES, FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

Part III

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).

Recognizing the value of parables is simple, and it can be stated in terms equally as simple. As previously stated (Part I), *parables provide further light, they help explain previously revealed truth. That's really their sole purpose, and that's why the Lord used them.*

Parables constitute part of the different ways in which Scripture has been structured. They simply form additional revelation given to man, after a particular fashion, in order to help man see and understand the larger picture covered by the whole of Scripture.

Given During a Transitional Period

The parables in the New Testament are *quite unique*. They fit centrally within that period between the removal of the kingdom of the heavens from Israel (removed following the events in Matthew chapter twelve, though not announced until Matt. 21:43) and the calling into existence of the Church to be the recipient of that facet of the kingdom removed from Israel (Acts 2:1ff).

And the parables, not only fitting centrally within this period but also having to do with the kingdom of the heavens, *reflect upon that which had happened to Israel (in relation to this facet of the kingdom) and anticipate the Church being called into existence (also in relation to this facet of the kingdom).*

Thus, the parables within the gospel accounts become a primary means which God uses to reveal truths surrounding the kingdom of the heavens during *a transitional period*, as these truths pertain to both Israel and the Church. The parables, coming into full use in Christ's ministry and given almost exclusively during that period between the removal of the kingdom from Israel and the calling into existence of the Church to be the recipient of that which was taken from Israel, could be viewed in a fourfold respect:

- 1) They look back to *Israel*.
- 2) They have to do with *the kingdom of the heavens*.
- 3) They are essentially *prophetic in nature*.
- 4) They concern themselves mainly with *the Church yet future*.

(As previously seen, *parables are truths placed alongside of previous truths to provide additional light*. But in the sense that they fit within a transitional period and have to do mainly with the kingdom of the heavens in relation to the Church yet future, they actually relate previous truths to present and future truths. They take previous truths surrounding Israel and the kingdom of the heavens and relate these truths to the Church, about to be called into existence.

That is, *the parables take truths having to do with Israel and the kingdom in past time and present truths having to do with the Church and the kingdom in future time* [future from the time that the parables were given, *i.e.*, referring to time throughout the present dispensation and beyond]. *They help explain previously revealed truths surrounding the kingdom of the heavens as these truths now relate to the Church.*

And these truths center around "the word of the kingdom" [Matt. 13:8, 22, 23], which has to do with *fruit-bearing* [Matt. 13:19], *with the Messianic Era in view* [Matt. 13:19-23; 24:47-51; 25:19-30].)

The Beginning of Parables

Note again the timing of and reason for the introduction of parables in Matthew's gospel, chapter thirteen. These parables have to do with *fruit-bearing* in relation to *the kingdom of the heavens* (*cf.* vv. 11, 19, 22, 23).

This would be a reflection on the previous message concerning *fruit-bearing* as it pertained to Israel and the kingdom, and the parables would relate this past *fruit-bearing* to a future *fruit-bearing* as it would pertain to the Church and the kingdom (*cf.* Matt. 3:8; 21:19, 34, 41, 43).

That would be to say, *because* of the immediately preceding events (in ch. 12), events set forth in the parables could no longer have to do with Israel bringing forth fruit, for Israel could no longer bring forth fruit relative to the kingdom of the heavens. Thus, events in the parables, of necessity, would have to do with the new "nation" — *the Church* — about to be called into existence and mentioned shortly thereafter (Matt. 16:18; *cf.* I Peter 2:9-11).

And the parables themselves, consisting of one truth placed alongside of a previous truth, would simply relate things past to things future — things having to do with Israel and the kingdom (past) to things having to do with the Church and the kingdom (future).

Or, take the parable of the marriage festival in Matt. 22:1-14 to illustrate a somewhat different facet of the matter, though still remaining within

the thought of one truth being placed alongside of a previous truth.

In this parable, mention is made of the offer of the kingdom to and the rejection of the kingdom by Israel first (vv. 2-7 [note also that v. 7 anticipates events of 70 A.D., about thirty-seven years later, which were future destructive events resulting from Israel's past rejection]).

Then the remainder of the parable pertains to the Church (vv. 8-14). And one previous truth to which the parable relates can be found in Matt. 8:11, 12, the only prior mention of "outer darkness."

In Matt. 8:11, 12, "outer darkness," a negative aspect of the message having to do with the kingdom of the heavens, had to do with those in Israel; but in Matt. 22:8-14, "outer darkness" is used pertaining to those in the Church (though not yet called into existence), those to whom the kingdom was to be offered following Israel's rejection. This is how parables form additional truths placed alongside of previously revealed truths in order to cast additional light on the previous truths, light which invariably has to do with some aspect of how the offer of the kingdom now relates to the Church.

(The whole of the matter surrounding Israel's rejection [as set forth in Matt. 22:2-7] can be seen in the previous chapter of Matthew's gospel in the parable leading into the announcement concerning the kingdom being taken from Israel, in the parable of the Householder and His vineyard [21:33-41; cf. vv. 42-45].

And this parable reflects back on a large segment of Israel's history, which reached an apex [as it pertained to unfaithfulness] *through the events of Matthew chapter twelve, which led to and anticipated that seen throughout succeeding chapters, leading into the crucifixion* [cf. Matt. 23:37-39].)

The Olivet Discourse Parables

Then in the Olivet Discourse parables (Matt. 24:32-25:30) everything is projected out into the future. These parables begin with a reference to Israel (referenced metaphorically by a "fig tree"

[24:32-36]), seen in the latter days (during the Tribulation) with "leaves" *but no fruit*. In relation to the kingdom of the heavens, *Israel will not be allowed to bear fruit*; but in relation to the earthly segment of the kingdom, *Israel will one day be very fruitful*. And this parable reflects back on — providing additional light for — that seen in the preceding part of the Olivet Discourse (vv. 3-31).

The parables then continue with a reference to the days of Noah (24:37-39). The judgment of the Flood, as seen in Genesis chapters six through eight, appears as the central subject from which foundational truths pertaining to "the coming of the Son of man" are drawn. The "Flood," in the typical structure of Genesis chapters five through nine, foreshadows *the coming Tribulation* (with "Israel," typified by *Noah*, passing safely through the Tribulation). Thus, that seen in the parable referencing the days of Noah provides additional information relating to the preceding parable and that to which it relates — information particularly surrounding Israel during the Tribulation.

Then, the remaining four parables (Matt. 24:40-25:30), having to do with the kingdom of the heavens (25:1), have to do with those to whom the kingdom was offered following that time when it was taken from Israel. These parables *can only have to do with Christians* (though *the one new man* "in Christ" had yet to be called into existence), for, since the kingdom of the heavens is in view, these parables *cannot possibly relate to Israel*.

These parables have to do with Christian activity during the present dispensation, in relation to judgment and the outcome of this judgment at a future time (referring to events surrounding the judgment seat of Christ and beyond). And the entirety of that dealt with in these parables has to do with the kingdom which follows (the kingdom of the heavens, which is not only the central subject throughout Matthew's gospel [and the other gospel accounts] but is clearly stated to be the central subject during the course of these parables).

And, beyond the preceding, each of these

parables has to do with different facets of truth dealing with the same subject. Note, for example, how the last of these four parables, the parable of the talents, begins in Matt. 25:14. Literally, from the Greek text, the verse would read:

"For it [the parable of the ten virgins immediately preceding] is just as a man..."

That which follows in the parable of the talents is simply another facet of that which has preceded in the parable of the ten virgins. *It is an explanation of the preceding parable*, using another parable. That is to say, *the parable of the talents has been placed alongside the parable of the ten virgins to provide additional light, to help explain the parable of the ten virgins*.

And that is the manner in which all four of the parables in Matt. 24:40-25:30 are structured. The first would be placed alongside of preceding revelation to help explain that revelation. Then each of the following three parables would be placed alongside of a preceding parable to help explain that parable.

A succinct Overall Picture

Thus, the parables in the gospel accounts have to do with *both Israel and Christians in relation to the kingdom of the heavens*. In this respect, they are inseparably connected with the removal of the kingdom from Israel and the offer of the kingdom to "a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof"; and they provide innumerable truths surrounding the offer of the kingdom to this new nation, drawing from the previous offer to Israel.

To overlook, ignore, misunderstand, or limit the use of parables is to fail, in varying extents, to provide oneself with a series of explanatory helps which the Lord has provided. And doing such will always be to one's own detriment in Biblical study.