

A HISTORICAL-CRITICAL SURVEY OF JESUS' PARABLES AS LENS FOR SOCIOECONOMIC AND RELIGIOUS LIFE OF FIRST CENTURY PALESTINE WORLD

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Abstract

The significance of the Parables of Jesus as an important element of Jesus' teaching has long been recognized. They reveal Jesus' teachings on matters of faith and life. However, the paper focuses on the parables as sources of the life of the days of Jesus. Ignorance of the religious, economic, and political life of the time accounts for many misinterpretations and misapplications of the parables in the Bible. The paper adopts survey methods and demonstrates how Jesus' parables serve as a reliable (with particular reference to the Socio-economic and Religious) source of the Palestine world of the First Century C E. It further demonstrates how the knowledge of the then world will enhance one's understanding of the teachings of Jesus. It recommends that the parables should be read not only for spiritual truths but as lenses to the life of the times of Jesus.

Keywords: Parables, Economics, Religion, Lens, Palestine.

Introduction

Both Hebrew and Greek words for Parable *Mashal* and *parabole* respectively cover a variety of literary forms such as proverbs, fables, and riddles comparisons. Parables in a way are stories taken from everything in life to illustrate truths or lessons. Parables form the most basic elements of the teachings of Jesus. They among others serve as a source of Jesus' teachings on matters of faith and life. For example, they convey Jesus' teachings on spiritual truths such as prayer, spiritual growth, faith, ethical principles, family life, kingdom life, and values for life here and the hereafter. The parables of Jesus are drawn from the daily life of Palestine. One can safely say the parables contain authentic information about the lifetime of Jesus. They reveal the complexity, conflicts, and conditions of that world. Through the parables the reader can be transported into the world of First Century Palestine to see among others, daily paid labourers waiting in marketplaces for employment, the tax collectors and Pharisees praying in the temple among others. However, as Klyne R Snodgrass (2018:30). has noted, that the parables do not necessarily portray everyday events, some do and some do not.

However, the paper focuses on the socio-economic and religious (beliefs and practices) life of the people as portrayed in the Gospel parables. It describes the daily life of the people of Jesus' time, through the lenses of selected parables of Jesus. It concludes with some insights from the study as it relates to the understanding and interpreting of the parables in particular and the Bible in general.

The Antecedents of the Parables of Jesus

Parables are universally acclaimed figures of speech. They have been in use as methods of teaching before and after Jesus to the present day. It thus follows in the words of R D. Culver

((2002:130) “Jesus was not thought to be doing anything unusual when, as a Jewish rabbi, he employed many parables in His discourse”. However, as many scholars have noted the antecedents of Jesus' parables must be sought not in Greek and Greek orators but in the Old Testament (OT) and the Jewish fathers. Klyne Snodgrass (2018:44). writes that ‘the primary influence on Jesus' use of parables is the O T. the form of Jesus' parables, the parabolic way of thinking, the images used, and the use of parables in wisdom literature and especially as prophetic instruments all point in that direction.

The Old Testament Parables

The Old Testament is rich in its use of parabolic illustrations. Some of its parables resemble in form, spirit, and language the parable of Jesus. For example, the parable of the wicked husbandman would recall that of the vineyard in almost identical language (cf. Isaiah 5)

Rabbinic Judaism Parables

G P. Anderson (2013:653) notes that the rabbinic parables are the closest to Jesus' parables in time and form. In comparison, he concludes “Nonetheless, the parables of Jesus adjudicatory and more provocative, more self-referential, and more eschatological than the rabbinic counterparts.

Some scholars have recognized some remarkable resemblance between Rabbinic parables and Jesus' parables. The similarity is in the manner of introducing the parables, in tone, purpose, and content. But there is no dissenting voice concerning the inferiority of the Rabbinic parables to that of the Gospel. In the ark of parables, Jesus has no peer. He handled them with great skill.

The source of Jesus' Parables

The sources of Jesus' parables are three folds: The Scripture, the kingdoms of nature, and human life. The pages of the Gospels bear witness to the use Jesus made of the Old Testament. In the temptation he used the scripture as a weapon against the devil. “it is written you shall worship the Lord your God, and only him shall you serve” (Lk. 4:8 cf, Duet 6:13). But with particular reference to the parabolic sayings, Jesus then must have known about the use of *Mashal* an equivalence of the Gospel parable. He was equally familiar with many Old Testament parables which may have had considerable influence on his parables.

Also, a source of Jesus' parable is the kingdom of nature. The world around Jesus provided him with rich materials for his parables. Many of his parables were influenced by the agricultural settings of Palestine (Bock, 2002:199). Jesus knew how birds gleaned behind the sower (Matt 13:4) and the sheep followed the shepherd and how the shepherd put the sheep on his shoulders (Lk. 15:5).

Finally, human life was a source of Jesus' parables. One would see the poor little houses in the parable of the friend at midnight (Lk.11:7). Also, at sight were the beggars sitting in the streets or lying at the gates of the rich (Lk. 16:20). The parable of the leaven likely came from Jesus' personal experience as he watched his mother bake the loaves. A picture he later used to illustrate the gradual transformation of human society by the influence of God's kingdom. His knowledge of the plough may have come from Joseph or perhaps himself made for farmers.

The Purpose and Authenticity of Jesus' Parables

Jesus' audience was at home with the parabolic method of teaching. From this one can infer that Jesus intended to use the parables to quicken his hearers' understanding of his message. His purpose, therefore, was not to conceal the truth from them by the use of parables. Again, it will contradict his mission as God's messenger who has come to reveal God to man. With this understanding, how can Mark 4:11, 12 be constructed? It reads, "... but for those outsiders, everything is in the parable, so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand; lest they should turn again, and be forgiven."

This somewhat ambiguous passage has occasioned some differences among scholars. While its authenticity is not so much in doubt, one agrees with the interpretation that it be understood as the result of the hearers' feedback to the parables than the statement of the purpose.

It should be noted that Jesus' parables are not always very clear. They were designed to make the hearers think. Therefore, not all who had the parables grasped their meanings. Moreover, Jesus' parables are unique and cannot be separated from him. To fail to understand him is to fail to understand his parables.

After a thorough discussion on the authenticity of the parables of Jesus, G P. Anderson concludes "in short, the authenticity of the corpus of Jesus' parables is scarcely to be doubted. Even if it conceded that the parables have undergone substantial reworking in their transmission from the preaching of Jesus to their later from the Gospel...the authenticity of the core of these traditions enjoys widespread assent" (656-657).

Socio-economic and Religious life of the time of Jesus

The Social life of Palestine in the days of Jesus

The parable of the Richman and Lazarus Luke 16:19-21

There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

The parable of Jesus about the rich man and poor Lazarus underlines the enormous gulf that existed between the rich and the poor. It reveals the plight of the poor and the lifestyle of the rich. Certainly, there was a great deal of prosperity and as well a great deal of poverty in Palestine in those days. Herod the Great's reign ushered in peace and prosperity. Before them, there were frequent wars in the land which resulted in social unrest and economic depression. The wars left the farms desolate and the villages ruined. Also, there appeared Marauders, who operated mostly in Galilean and extracted from the unhappy people the little substance that remained for them.

The fertility of the land and the order restored by Herod produced wealth. The immense works which Herod constructed (Gundry, 2003: 13) and the rich presents he gave to the nearby cities are pointers to the wealth of Palestine. He was able to do all these mainly through taxes borne by the people. After his death, the Jews among other things complained that he enriched foreign cities and reduced the Jews to the greatest poverty.

The condition of a great number of the people was one of poverty, if not always of actual want. The poor ranged from beggars to daily paid labourers and peasants. The beggars sat in the streets or lay at the gates of the rich people's houses and temple gates (Acts. 3:1-2). They depended mostly on almsgiving which was a religious duty among the Jews.

The labourers assembled at market place expecting to be employed on daily basis (Matt 20:3). It was a serious case of a labourer finding no work for a day. For that meant hunger for the family. A denarius a day's wage, was only sufficient to feed an average family for a day. It seems in some cases the slaves were better off since they had an assurance of food, unlike the labourers who did not know where the next day's bread will come from. The debtors who were normally poor were arrested and imprisoned or doomed to slavery with their families until the whole debt is cleared. The appeal of the needy for help and justice often went unheeded (Lk. 18:1-8).

On the other hand, the few rich received and enjoyed the good things of this life (Lk.16: 25). They lived in beautiful houses with spacious courts and "lofty rooms decorated with costly marbles. They wore the most expensive materials "purple and fine Linen" (Lk. 16:19), and drank undiluted wine from crystal drinking glasses at a table. The priestly families were not left out. Marthan of the high-priestly family of Boethus was so pampered that she carpeted the whole distance from her house to the temple gate to see her husband Joshua B. Gamaliel officiates on the Day of Atonement, a day on which everyone had to go barefoot.

The life in the Home - the parable of the friend at midnight (Lk. 11: 5-8)

..." which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, a friend lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him and he will answer from within, do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything? I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his importunity he will rise and give him whatever he needs.

This parable presents a poor man with his family living in a one-roomed house. Houses in Palestine then were different in size and elegance. The small houses of eight or ten yards square and the mansions of the rich which may be two or more stories high and embellished by rows of pillars and architectural adornment. In this room, one end of the floor was raised higher than the other. It was where the family put their sleeping mats. Their animals were kept on a lower level (France, 2013:33). The cloak worn during the day would be used as cover at night. Those who were better off had beds on a portable frame of wood with short legs. The domestic animals stayed on the lower part and fed "from a manger of mud moulded on the edge of the upper half of the room (Matthew, 15,17) unless in a house where there was one room with a flat floor and an adjacent small stable. On one side of the room stood a wooden chest that contained the family's best robes (Gundry, 2003: 31). and perhaps the wedding dress and the silver and gold ornament of the wife (Matthew; 16) to prevent the moth from getting into the chest its lid was fit very closely. It was a usual practice to keep the lights burning throughout the night. The little lamp was filled with olive oil and set on a stand when lighted.

The door was bolted with a long wooden bar across it through the rings. The wooden door was pended by lifting the latch or bar.

Most travellers in Palestine in the time of Jesus travelled after dark to avoid the scorching midday heat. This friend arrived when the day's bread has been eaten. The poor had no chairs in their houses. They took their meals sitting on mats spread on the floor. The home was seen as a training ground for the Jewish way of life. At the entrance of the house and on the upper part of the right-hand doorpost was where the Mezuzah was put. It contains the Shema or the Credal statement which was written by hand on the Parchment "Hear O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord...". The Hebrew word for the Almighty could be seen through a small opening in the case. The use of the Mezuzah is based on the injunction "and you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and your gates" (Deut 6:9) they are a continual sign of God's presence, a reminder that the house should be sanctified by the thoughts, actions, and words of its dwellers.

The Economic life of Palestine in the days of Jesus

Sowing and ploughing – The parable of the Sower (Lk. 8: 5-8, cf Matt13:1-23)

A sower went out to sow his seed; and as he sowed, some fell along the path, and were trodden underfoot, and the birds of the air devoured it. And some fell on the rock; and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew with it and choked it. And some fell into good soil and grew, and yielded a hundredfold."

Concerning the order of sowing and ploughing in first-century Palestine, there is no consensus among scholars as to whether sowing precedes ploughing (Keener, 2014:137). or ploughing before sowing. Both situations, scattering of seeds before ploughing and ploughing before planting, could be applied (Osborne, 2014:67). It is most likely that the situation Jesus had in mind was scattering by hand into the ground (Kapolyo, 2006:1137) before ploughing.

A farmer scattered his seeds either by hand or using cattle, a sack with holes was filled with corn and laid on the back of the animal. As it moved the seed was thickly scattered. Some of the seeds fell on the path which ran through or alongside the field. It was often rumped down by travellers and beasts of burden or eaten up by birds. Jesus and his disciples passed through one of these paths on the Sabbath when they plucked the heads of grain and ate (Matt 12:1). Some fell on stony ground and after springing up soon withered away under the scorching heat of the sun because they lacked the depth of soil in which to take firm root.

Some others felled among thorns and were choked by thorn – bushes, thistles are of "three different varieties with sharp spines, a bright orange-flowered kind" others fell on good soil and yielded many fruits. The good ploughman had to keep his mind concentrated on what he was doing to avoid ploughing a crooked furrow. (Lk. 9:62). The hand-held plough usually had one handle. It was light and wooden often had an iron point (Keener, 2015). Men ploughed with an Ox and Carmel yoked side by side.

The process of reaping involved three categories of people, the reaper, the binder, and the gleaner. The reaper grasped a handful of stalks in his left hand with the sickle in his hand cut them down. He then gathered them in his arm and laid them behind him. Then came the

binder who tied the stalks into sheaves and set the sheaves into heaps. The heaps were laid on the backs of a donkey and carried to the threshing floor. There were different occupations in first-century Palestine. Among others are: Shepherding, poultry and Tax collection.

Shepherding – the parable of the lost sheep, Lk. 15: 3-6.

So, he told them this parable: “What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in this wilderness, and go after the one which is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbours, saying to them rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost.

Shepherding has always been a principal occupation of Palestinians. It was common in the North and Eastern areas where the grass was more plentiful and luxuriant”. The shepherd was normally the owner and the caretaker of small flocks, while a rich proprietor with large herds entrusts his sheep to the care of hired shepherds who received their wages either in cash or kind. The wolf was the greatest enemy of the shepherd as he defended his flock. The difference between the hireling and the good shepherd was that the good shepherd risks his own life fighting the dangerous animals in defence of the sheep while the hired shepherd fled for his life (Jn. 10: 11-12).

The shepherd knew all his sheep and he gave them names and they know his voice and came whenever he called them and they know his voice and came whenever he called them and follow him. But they fled at the approach of the other stranger’s voice. Protection and provision are the two things sheep need from the shepherd. It was the shepherd’s duty to lead his sheep to pasture and refreshing streams every day. Also, he was to guard them against dangers, to watch them their wanderings lost lest any should be missing, and to gather them into a fold at night. He counted his Sheep every night before putting them in the Sheepfold.

The Sheepfold was usually a large natural or artificial cave among the hills and mountains or open spaces made of a circular wall of stone. On its top [were thorn-bushes or hedges to hinder or discourage hostile intruders, such as wolves, Jackals, bears, and thieves.” The shepherd was entered by a single door that was closed at night. Sometimes several flocks in the same vicinity occupy the same fold. At daybreak, different shepherds called their sheep which responded immediately and followed the shepherd. Sheep often got lost.

This occurred more easily at night when during the milder part of the year, they occasionally remained out under the open sky with their Shepherd. The shepherd, on discovering that a sheep was missing, secured the safety of the rest and went in search of the missing one in the whole surrounding loyalty. On finding the sheep, which was usually weak and exhausted, he put it not on his shoulders and brought it back to the rest of the flock. He then called together his friends and his neighbours, saying to them “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost” (Lk. 15:6).

It is noteworthy that the high appreciation of shepherd life in the Old Testament gave way to a high degree of depreciation – during the first century Palestine. In the Old Testament, God himself is likened to a good shepherd. At the time of Jesus, the shepherd was regarded as

having an untrustworthy character and his testimony was not fully accepted in the court. The shepherds were despised on account of his flocks eating private property and his non-observance of the Sabbath days and synagogue meetings. According to S.W. Baron (n.d: 254). “the rabbis' preoccupation with raising the educational level of the masses make them frown upon light-hearted ignorance of the averaged shepherd”.

In the parable of the prodigal son, it is reported he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country who sent him into his fields to feed swine and he would gladly have fed on the pigs that the swine ate. The people of Palestine kept poultry. While speaking of Jerusalem Jesus used the picture of a hen covering her chicks with her wings as it sees the shadow of an eagle across the sky. (Matt. 23:37). Jesus also talked about the crowing of the cock. The reference to Pig keeping in this parable shows that pig keeping was a practice at that time. But pig keeping was a distasteful occupation among the Jews on account of their religion (cf. Lev. 11:7). One would suspect no pig was kept in Jewish territories. This is inferred from Jesus' reference to “A far country” (Lk 15: 15) again it was in a Gentile country of the Gerasene that Jesus cast from a man an unclean spirit which entered the swine (Mk 5:1 ff). Pigs were regarded as unclean and abode of evil things.

The parable of the Pharisees and the publican speaks (Lk. 18:10-14) of two men who went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other tax collector...” There are other numerous references to tax collectors in the Gospels. Jews of Palestine at the time of Jesus were subjected to paying two broad categories of tax: civil or secular taxation which was imposed over and above the religious dues. Civil taxation comprises poll taxes, land taxes, toll charges, sales taxes and inheritance taxes (Snodgrass, 60). The poll tax paid to Rome was a symbol of Israel's subservience to foreign rule (Bock, 2002:328). From the period of their return from exile in Babylon the Jews, except for a brief interval, had been subjected to foreign taxation. They paid taxes to the Persian king during the time of Ezra (Ezra, 4:13, 30, 7:24). The Ptolemies probably farmed taxes to the highest bidder. Taxes probably consisted of tribute, duty on salt, a third of the produce of all that was sown, pay tax, and customs duty. The house of Herod derived revenue from tolls, land tax, property, income taxes, and duties from trade.

The Romans adopted an indirect way of collecting these taxes. They formed tax collecting companies that had a chairman and offices in Rome. These are said to be the real publicans. These companies bought from the authorities at public auction the revenues of a given province. They often underlet certain of the taxes to private companies which employed either slaves or some of the lower classes in the land as tax gatherers. The tax collectors exacted more than was their due hence John the Baptist's injunction to them “Collect no more than is appointed you” (Lk. 3:12). Those of this profession like Zacchaeus were rich.

The Religious life of Palestine in the days of Jesus

The conflicts between Jews and Samaritans are portrayed in the parable of the good Samaritan recorded only in Luke's gospel (10:30-37).

“A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance, a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to

where he was; and when he saw him, he had compassion, and went to him and bound up his wound, pouring on oil and wine; then he set him on his own beast and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying taking care of him and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back”.

“A man” of this parable was probably a Jew who by race and religion was an enemy of the Samaritan who rendered him unexpected help in his hour of need. Bitter animosity and rivalry had existed between Jews and Samaritans for centuries. The Samaritans were descendants of the surviving Israelites of the Northern kingdom. They mixed and intermarried with the imported foreign population after the fall of Samaria. But they claim descent from the people of Israel that remained loyal to God. They built their temple on Mount Gerizim and accepted the five books of Moses rejecting the rest of the Old Testament books. They believed in the unity of God and looked forward to the coming of a Messiah like Moses. The cause of the enmity between Jews and Samaritans was both racial and religious. The Samaritans were of mixed race and religion. Their religion was a mixture of Judaism and their peculiar forms of idolatry which was forbidden to the Jews. Nehemiah and Ezra insisted on a strict separation between the Jews who had returned from exile and the Samaritans. They also refused their offer of cooperation in the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. The religious separation became final when the Samaritans probably in the fourth century B.C. E built a rival temple on the mount which they believed was the true dwelling place of God on earth.

The piety and attitude of the Pharisees to the Publicans – The parable of the Pharisees and the Publican Lk. 18:10-14

Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector, I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get. But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a Sinner.

In their real zeal for the law, the Pharisees went beyond the requirements of the law. The law of Moses stipulates only one day fast in the year which was the day of atonement (Lev. 26:29, Num 29:7). But the Pharisees fasted twice a week, on Monday and Thursday in which it was believed Moses ascended and descended from the Mount.

The Pharisees were meticulous about the payment of tithes. They gave a tithe of all their income. The law demanded only tithe on the main crops (cf Num 18:21, Deut. 14:22). But they tithed on small seeds that grew in their gardens such as Mint, anise, and cumin (Matt. 23:23). They bought and sold among themselves to avoid contamination from un-tithed goods.

They paraded their virtue in prayer to be seen by Men (Matt. 6:1). Among the Jews, there were three hours of prayer. 9 a.m., 12 noon, and 3 p.m. prayers offered in the temple were believed to be particularly effective and meritorious. People went to the temple to pray (Lk. 18:10). They normally stood when praying in the temple courts and prayed aloud in a low voice.

The Jews wore Phylacteries. Phylacteries are little leather boxes that contain four texts of scripture written on parchment. They wore two, one on the left hand and the other on the forehead, in obedience to the command “And you shall bind them as reign upon your hand and they shall bind them as a sign upon your hand and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes” (Deut. 6:8). But the likes of the Pharisees broadened their phylacteries so that they should be more conspicuous to display their piety (Matt. 23:5).

The Pharisees were unable to march their ideals with performance (Matt. 23:1-3). Hence Jesus called them hypocrites and blind guides (Matt. 23:13, 16). He also likened them to whitened sepulchres, attractive on the outside but filled with the bone of dead men. Nevertheless, Jesus recognized them as successors of Moses, they “sit on Moses’ seat” (Matt. 23:2). Their piety was respected and they ranked high among others as models of piety.

Conclusion

The Parables of Jesus, apart from their spiritual and moral lessons, give today's readers insight into the world of Jesus' time. They were everyday materials taken from social, economic, and religious institutions and practices, that furnish today's world with the lives and times of the world in which Jesus lived. Thus, it is safe to conclude that the parables of Jesus are reliable sources of the history of first-century Palestine. The understanding of the world of that time aids one's understanding of the parables themselves and the teachings of Jesus Christ.

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