Parables as Persuasive Devices

Edited by
LAURI THURÉN,
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Towards a New Era in Parable Research

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Lauri Thurén, Antti Kyytsönen, and Katri Antin

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Introduction

From a Proclamation to an Invitation to Dance: Towards a New Era in Parable Research

Lauri Thurén, Katri Antin, Antti Kyytsönen

This volume hails a new dawn in the study of the parables of Jesus. Previously, these short stories have often been utilized for the purpose of seeking Jesus's or the evangelist's theological, historical, or artistic message or as inspiration for new theologies, moralities, or art. While these goals have proven feasible and fruitful, this book argues that it is high time to focus on the parables' persuasive function in their literary context. The overall topic of this collection suggests that the parables in their original setting are primarily persuasive devices and should be studied as such.

To be sure, most commentators offer some thoughts on this perspective, too, but it is seldom the focus and is thereby easily blurred by other questions. Reading the parables from a synchronic perspective, unaltered, and as they stand in their empirical literary context, and asking why the author and his protagonist told them, means a fundamental paradigm shift in the interpretation of any parable, including those told by Jesus. From this perspective, we are not only interested in *what* a parable says, but *how* and especially *why*.

Most of the articles in this volume originate from the international conference *Parables as Persuasive Narratives*, held in Joensuu, Finland, from March 22 to 24, 2023. The conference was organized by the research project "Parables as Persuasive Narratives," funded by the Research Council of Finland and the University of Eastern Finland (UEF). Since then, the ideas discussed at the gathering have been further developed and augmented with a number of additional articles. The first and last pieces, written by the UEF research team, argue that the main reason for telling a parable is not pedagogical, exegetical, hermeneutical, or proclamatory. Parables do not propagate some message by using substitute names; rather, they support the ideas that the speaker is promoting. Parables are used to persuade an audience to accept particular thoughts or guidelines and to act accordingly. To put it simply, parables are all about rhetoric.

To develop this thesis, challenging voices are important. Thus, several articles in the collection are devoted to insights that criticize or modify this basic idea. Moreover, the parables of Jesus are placed in their broader context through the discussion of contemporary early Jewish and Hellenistic parables and their inter-

pretations. Through this diversity, we hope to inspire further exploration of these much-studied narratives, which are but beginning to open their true nature.

The theme and main thesis of this volume can therefore be stated as follows: *A parable is a rhetorical tool by which the author aims to modify the audience's thoughts, emotions, values, and, ultimately, behavior*. According to this principle, a parable does not claim anything. It has no theological, ethical, social, political, exegetical, or any other message. Instead, it is utilized to support such a message and to make the audience accept such a claim, both of which can be explicit or implicit in the context.

Most importantly, the parables of Jesus in the New Testament should no longer be understood as a means of conveying theological information using substitute names for God, mortals, and their actions. In fact, there is next to nothing transcendent in the parables. Instead, they are immanent, earthly stories.[1] They are mostly sound, conventional, reasonable, and emotionally touching. As such, the parables are an attempt to make the speaker's messages, including theological ones, just as sound and moving. A key word here is interaction; a parable is an invitation to dance. It whirls the partners together in discussion to use their reasoning and common sense, knowledge and experience, imagination and empathy, and sense of social relations. Thus, a parable cannot be reduced to logical reasoning, an attempt to make an emotional impact, or any other single communicative tool. Instead, most aspects of human interaction are involved.

This suggested evolution in the way parables should be studied and understood has not developed in a vacuum. It appears in a continuum of studies currently being carried out by several European research groups as well as leading scholars further afield. Of particular importance is the burgeoning interest in reading Jesus's parables in their early Jewish and wider Hellenistic settings.[2] Moreover, recent advances in parable studies using modern argumentation analysis, narratology, and emotional studies have paved the way for understanding them in the context of the documents in which they occur.[3]

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[1] The personal God makes a single comment, in Luke 12:20, which is his only utterance in the New Testament. However, even this comment appears in a parable, that is, a fictitious story.

[2] A number of recent publications provide a detailed overview of continental studies, for example: Jens Schröter, Soham Al-Suadi, and Konrad Schwarz, eds., *Gleichnisse und Parabeln in der frühchristlichen Literatur*, WUNT 456 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021); Albertina Oegema, Jonathan Pater, and Martijn Stoutjesdijk, eds., *Overcoming Dichotomies: Parables, Fables, and Similes in the Graeco-Roman World*, WUNT 483 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022); Eric Ottenheijm, Marcel Poorthuis, and Annette Merz, eds., *The Power of Parables: Essays on the Comparative Study of Jewish and Christian Parables*, Jewish and Christian Perspectives 39 (Leiden: Brill, 2024); Katri Antin, "Parabolē as Prophecy in Early Christian Writings," in *The Parables and Their Reception*, ed. Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, Anders Martinsen and Ellen Aasland Reinertsen, Studies of the Bible and Its Receptions (Berlin: De Gruyter, forthcoming).

[3] For example, Lauri Thurén, *Parables Unplugged: Reading the Lukan Parables in Their Rhetorical Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014); Lauri Thurén, "The Jesus of the Text: Unmanipulated Parables as an Alternative to Historical and Theological Reconstructions," in

To be sure, scholars and clergymen have long tried to clarify the parables' function in their literary context, but this perspective has too often been overshadowed by theological and historical questions about how to describe Jesus's theological thinking or what the historical Jesus actually said. For the sake of academic transparency and credibility, however, it is important that the parables are scrutinized as any other literature with general, non-theological methodologies.

Because Jesus's parables are *per definitionem* narratives,[4] they must be analyzed with the best tools available in modern narratology. Since they are early Jewish stories, they must be read in conjunction with corresponding contemporary tales. Since the parables are pieces of literature, they must be scrutinized with methodologies used in literary studies. Since they typically draw on deep human feelings, psychological studies of emotions must be seen as important in their interpretation. Most of all, since all of Jesus's parables in their actual context serve his persuasion, they must be studied with methods of modern argumentation analysis.

A major step forward has been the recent interest in the parable genre.[5] Jesus's stories are no longer seen as *sui generis* or idiosyncratic religious innovations, with only a remote relationship to other early Jewish stories. Instead, the observation that Jesus's parables belong to a widespread narrative genre in the context of early Jewish and Hellenistic culture is returning to the fore. Placing these stories in their cultural and literary contexts enables us to understand their function and characteristics more effectively.[6]

Nordic Interpretations of the New Testament: Challenging Texts and Perspective, ed. Louise Heldgaard Bylund et al., Studia Aarhusiana Neotestamentica 5 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020), 261–82; Lauri Thurén, "The Final Countdown: The Last Judgment in the Light of Narratology and Argumentation Analysis," in *History and Theology in the Gospels*, ed. Tobias Nicklas, Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr, and Mikhail Seleznev (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 289–302; Lauri Thurén, "Early Jewish Parables and Fables as Non-Religious Narratives," *Sacra Scripta* XIX, 1–2 (2021): 175–91; Lauri Thurén, "Cracking the Code of Jesus's Parables with Argumentation Analysis," *Journal of Argumentation in Context* 12 (2023): 59–76; and forthcoming articles from the UEF research team of Katri Antin, Niilo Lahti, and Antti Kyytsönen.

[4] If no change takes place in an utterance, it is a metaphor, not a parable. Based on Rüdiger Zymner's and Ruben Zimmermann's suggestions, Thurén has defined a parable as a "narrative, non-historical, and metaphorical saying, appealing to an audience. It illustrates a general principle to be applied in a particular context;" Thurén, *Parables Unplugged*, 190, 369. See also Rüdiger Zymner, "Parabel," *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik*, ed. Gert Ueding (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2003), 6:502–14, here 502; Ruben Zimmermann, "Die Gleichnisse Jesu: Eine Leseanleitung zum Kompendium" in *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu*, ed. Ruben Zimmermann et al. (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2007), 3–46, here 25–28.

[5] For some recent approaches, see Eric Ottenheijm, Marcel Poorthuis, and Annette Merz, eds., *The Power of Parables*.

[6] In the same vein, comparative material is necessary for understanding the great myths in Genesis 1–11.

The novel idea at the heart of this volume, however, pertains to the very essence and function of the parable genre. The basic idea of the parable's function is simple: When the synoptic Jesus, and other early Jewish thinkers, wanted to convince their audience of something, they could hardly rely on their divine authority or personal prophetic aura, especially when speaking to antagonistic audiences. Thus, in order to justify their messages, they had to build on the audience's own reason, conventions, and emotions instead. In this task, the parables proved useful indeed, and any allegorical interpretation renders the parable unable to fulfill this function.

Accordingly, Jesus and other ancient orators often told example stories describing ordinary life to illustrate a principle in a way that the audience could accept. They would then apply this principle to some theological issue, relying on the audience's acceptance of the parable illustrating the principle.

Reading the parables as devices of persuasion requires a specific methodology, including approaches from modern argumentation analysis, narrative analysis, and emotional studies. Moreover, the text must not be altered by curtailing it for the sake of redaction criticism or by adding new information due to historical interests. In a synchronic study following the principles of modern narratology, such procedures are not only superfluous but also run the risk of changing the parable so that its message and function are lost.[7]

In this volume, several approaches arguing this view will be offered alongside others to challenge or augment it, so that it constitutes a modern, multifaceted study of parables as persuasion. Several parables in the Synoptic Gospels and the Scriptures and in early rabbinic, patristic, Greek, and Roman documents are studied using various methods, some of which have not yet often been utilized in biblical studies. The contributing scholars approach these narratives from multiple angles and with different questions, appreciating the parables' rich contextual world with its numerous dimensions. The various themes and details highlighted in the parables reflect the diversity of the interpretations and approaches.

In the first section of the book, scholars of the UEF team discuss a novel way of understanding, how the parables of Jesus aim to influence their audiences in the gospel narratives and the readers of the synoptic authors.

Lauri Thurén argues that a paradigm shift is taking place. Instead of reading the parables as boxes full of history or theology, scholars have begun to focus on the parables' function in their literary context. The parable genre is not to be seen as another way of proclaiming truths but as supporting such claims. Its main advantage – often neglected by later interpreters – is that its truth value and effect do not depend on the authority of the speaker but on the story's capacity to resonate in the audience's thoughts and emotions. All parables can be convert-

[7] For more on these principles, see Thurén, *Parables Unplugged*, and his article in this volume.

ed into rhetorical questions, and due to its interactive character, a parable can appeal to antagonists, too. In contrast, the non-original allegorical reading of a parable diminishes this function and leaves it open to secondary interpretations not designed by Jesus the protagonist or the evangelists. Thus, instead of resorting to allegory, the parable's fundamental function as a persuasive device in its literary context should be considered.

To this end, novel methodologies are required. *Niilo Lahti* applies cutting-edge argumentation analysis, more specifically an integration of extended pragma-dialectics and a 3D model of metaphors, to scrutinize exactly how parables are designed to persuade their audience. In so doing, he aims to specify the parables' persuasive role as metaphoric argumentation in an article that illustrates how new sophisticated methodologies can contribute to parable studies.

Next, *Antti Kyytsönen* penetrates the parables' persuasive function from the specific angle of how emotions are utilized in this task. He argues that the parables do not just draw on the audience's customs and reason but work especially by evoking the kinds of emotion that affect and move them.

Katri Antin examines the diverse views of parables and parable telling in Matthew 13 and 21–22. Antin argues that these different views serve the characterization and plot development of the story. She illustrates how narrative criticism can be applied to better understand how parables are used in different literary contexts.

Finally, the whole UEF team illustrates what the new perspective of the parables means in practice by scrutinizing the parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matt 18:23–34). They argue that several classical issues pertaining to this parable are unnecessary, as new and even more intriguing questions arise when studying the narrative as persuasion in its immediate and the larger literary context.

The second section of this volume is in dialog with the main thesis of the book and seeks to challenge it in several ways. These scholars ask whether the parables' historical and scriptural backgrounds need to be considered, too, while illuminating their role as persuasive devices.

Anders Martinsen discusses how members of Matthew's community could have received the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matt 18:23–35). Martinsen supports reading the parable as it is in the Gospel, but he also argues that both the context of the Gospel and historical knowledge can help interpret the parable. He illustrates this approach by studying the literary and social expectations regarding violence and anger of the ancient world.

Samuel Tedder supports the idea of the parables' persuasive function and an approach that focuses on existing versions instead of possible historical predecessors. However, he also argues that parables often draw on the audience's cultural competence, especially their familiarity with the Scriptures. Therefore, the principle of 'unplugged reading' should be expanded so that the effect of this intertextuality can be better understood.

Next, *Ernest van Eck* offers a further critical and constructive perspective on the Joensuu approach. Although he also respects the existing parable texts, he calls for a more culturally sensitive reading of them. According to van Eck, social-scientific criticism helps us avoid anachronistic or ethnocentric interpretations of the parables. Ultimately, his analysis of the Parable of the Unjust / Wise Steward in Luke 16 yields surprisingly similar, but simultaneously very different results, to Thurén's 'unplugged reading'.

Lotta Valve illustrates the benefits and limitations of classical exegetical approaches, such as redaction criticism, historical analysis, and narratological studies, in order to interpret a highly enigmatic parable, the Parable of the Automatic Seed (Mark 4:26–29). While many intriguing features and details become more understandable, explaining the parable's suggested main function in the literary context as an exhortation to the disciples apparently requires additional methodology. Thereby, the article demonstrates the need for a novel understanding of the persuasive function, as discussed elsewhere in this volume.

Lastly in this section, *Vesa Ollilainen* reviews the parable hermeneutics of four prominent scholars who represent the Third Quest for the Historical Jesus and concludes that E. P. Sanders perceives the parables of Jesus primarily from a didactic perspective; N. T. Wright's analysis takes an apocalyptic metanarrative view; James Dunn is mainly concerned with their metaphorical features; and John P. Meier focuses on the narrativity of the parables. In his assessment of the four scholars, Ollilainen illuminates the potential and the challenges in the combination of historical and literary aspects in each framework. These evaluations outline the merits and pitfalls of integrating text-level scrutiny of the parables with a historical lens.

The third section of this volume broadens the view of parabolic rhetoric by focusing on rabbinic and patristic parables. By studying roughly contemporary Jewish narratives to the parables of Jesus, their role and function may be better understood.

Eric Ottenheijm explores parable theory in Mark and rabbinic *midrash* of Song of Songs. Despite a temporal gap of centuries between the two sources, the similarities prove striking. Both are used as a means of teaching, although the teacher does not retain full control in either case. Ottenheijm utilizes literary rhetoric, sensorial regimes of seeing, hearing, and touching, as well as the parables' mysterious aspects relating to the Kingdom of God and the Torah in his analysis. He argues that parables are meant to engage their audience despite their enigmatic nature.

Tobias Ålöw's contribution builds an interpretation of the Matthean Kingdom parables in the context of rabbinic *meshalim* and vice versa. He compares two rare *meshalim*, which refer to מלכות שמים, with Matthean parables referring to ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν. While Jesus's parables introduce challenging ideas that transform the worldview of his listeners and invite them to participate in the

Kingdom, these *meshalim* illustrate and clarify pertinent existing teachings within the Jewish tradition. Thus, the function of the Kingdom parables of both the Tannaim and the Matthean Jesus is to convince their respective audiences, but importantly of two different things and in two different ways.

In their articles, *Lieve Teugels* and *Marcel Poorthuis* scrutinize several rabbinic and patristic parables to illustrate their typical function, especially with regard to their persuasive or rhetorical and exegetical or hermeneutical character. Contrary to a number of earlier scholars, Teugels and Poorthuis criticize any sharp distinction between the two. Teugels finds both difference and correspondence between rabbinic parables and those of Jesus. Like the parables of Jesus, a typical *mashal* also stimulates "the audience to draw conclusions based on a short, fictive narrative about familiar things." Therefore, no strict distinction or mutual exclusion is advisable. A corresponding overlapping or dualistic character of the parables is demonstrated by Poorthuis in his scrutiny of the phenomenon of "parables on parables." He shows that while rabbinic parables are often exegetical, explaining the Scriptures, a simultaneous rhetorical function cannot be ruled out.

Albertina Oegema approaches the emotional persuasiveness of parables from a narrative ethical perspective through an analysis of fatherly happiness. She compares the emotion in the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32) with the early rabbinic parable of the father's banquet for his son's wedding. Oegema's approach takes into consideration each text's unique rhetorical context, culture, and social milieu that render emotions as social constructs. As a result, the fatherly happiness in the two examples is different but both strive to persuade their audience.

This volume culminates in two articles that illustrate the importance of the wider literary context in understanding the function of the parables of Jesus.

Ruben Zimmermann focuses on a seemingly tiny detail: the role of fish in early Christian parables and the Babrian fables. In so doing, he studies the extent to which intertextual and other external knowledge of the images utilized in the parables is needed to understand them. More generally, Zimmermann emphasizes the multiple ways in which the parables challenge and engage their readers. His study both subtly criticizes and reinforces the basic understanding of the parables as persuasive devices, as presented in the earlier articles of this volume.

Finally, *Serafim Seppälä* discusses how notable theologian Ephrem the Syrian understood the parables of Jesus. Interestingly, his reading of them comes very close to that suggested by our persuasive interpretation: A parable generally illustrates a single and obvious basic point. Ephrem identifies a parable's logical internal structure to find its pattern and then applies it to general theological or human themes. For him, the parables, and the discussion inspired by them, have a persuasive function. To be sure, this early father knew the parables' allegorical

interpretations, too, but they apparently emerged from the allegorical reading of the Old Testament.

Altogether, this volume suggests – and also challenges – the thought-provoking argument that the parables' main function is not as a means of proclamation but of engaging the audience in interaction. The parables are persuasive, non-theological narratives. While there are different views regarding the amount of historical or scriptural knowledge required to understand them, most scholars agree that the parables serve their purpose without reference to the speaker's authority or to theological revelation. Rather, they draw on the audience's own reason, conventions, knowledge, emotions, and imagination.

If this initiative is taken forward, we will witness the liberation of the parables from their too-long Babylonian captivity and the era of utilizing them primarily as raw material for historical or theological constructions.

New angles on old narratives can help us discover how, through these stories, the protagonist Jesus sought to influence his audience and make them react in certain ways. When the parable's function as persuasive device is centralized, we begin to better understand what the authors– the evangelists– wanted to achieve with these stories in their own, later settings. Consequently, classical historical and theological questions will also benefit from the new studies.

In summary, this volume aims to demonstrate that when reading the parables, it is vital to scrutinize their purpose. Jesus and other storytellers did not share these tales to disseminate information but to engage their audiences in order to modify their thoughts, values, beliefs, and, ultimately, behavior. By emphasizing this perspective, this book is a sign of a new approach in parable research in which old and novel questions and methods cooperate to generate new understanding of some of the most influential narratives in civilization. Like the parables themselves, this volume does not proclaim a specific message but invites its readers to engage in meaningful interaction. Like a good parable, this book invites its audience to dance.

Part One

Parables as Pieces of Persuasion

How Does a Parable Function?

On the Threshold of a Rhetorical Turn

Lauri Thurén

1 A Precision Tool for Persuasion

The tide is turning in terms of understanding Jesus's parables. Previously, these stories were often surveyed as unique pieces of theological, mainly allegorical, proclamation or sources for reconstructing the historical Jesus and his environment. However, his literary counterpart, the protagonist of the Synoptics, never uses parables for such reasons. In using them, the Jesus who appears in these documents does not want to share any theological, social, or cultural information. Instead, he always uses parables to persuade his audience. Consequently, for scholars, it is time to focus on the parables in the way they were meant to be understood: not as sources but, rather, as devices.

To be sure, the parables are rich stories and appeal to their audiences in various ways. Their later religious, literary, and artistic interpretations offer vast and stimulating fields of study. However, these interpretations are the focus of patristics, dogmatics, and the study of art, not biblical exegesis seeking the parables' meaning and function in New Testament documents. The parables were not originally written to function as a platform for theological or artistic constructions. Nor were they preserved as sources for redaction criticism or the search for the historical Jesus. My research question is as follows: In addition to all these interesting but secondary perspectives, would it be possible to focus on the function of the parables as they stand in the New Testament? Could they be scrutinized in their actual literary context, without any modifications? The task is not as simple as it sounds, and it is seldom undertaken.

Studying the parables as persuasive devices means taking a quantum leap forward. It can be characterized as a *rhetorical turn* in parable research.[1] To be sure, Adolf Jülicher categorized the parables as rhetoric.[2] However, this was done

[1] According to Daniel Chandler (*Semiotics: The Basics* [London: Routledge, 2017], 149), the term *rhetorical turn* originally referred to "a change in emphasis in the discourse of the humanities and social sciences reflecting a recognition [– –] that rhetorical forms are deeply and unavoidably involved in the shaping of realities." See also Herbert W. Simons, ed., *The Rhetorical Turn: Invention and Persuasion in the Conduct of Inquiry* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1990). This development is only slowly affecting Biblical studies.

[2] Adolf Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* I & II, 2nd ed. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buch-

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