

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 26

The Bible's Literary Context: Parables (Part 5 of 8-part series)

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Summary

In the last podcast episode we continued our series on studying the Bible in light of its various types of literature – its literary genres. We looked at an example related to the New Testament – how the literary features of Greco-Roman phantom tales and “post-mortem appearances” of the dead inform our reading of NT resurrection accounts. In this episode, we’re going to focus on a type of literature that appears in both testaments, but which is most familiar in the New Testament: the parable.

Transcript

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In the last podcast episode, we continued our series on studying the Bible in light of its various types of literature—its literary genres. We looked at an example related to the New Testament—how the literary features of Greco-Roman phantom tales and post-mortem appearances of the dead inform our reading of New Testament resurrection accounts. In this episode, we're going to focus on a type of literature that appears in both testaments, but which is most familiar in the New Testament: the parable.

In most basic terms, a parable is a short story with two levels of meaning—a literalistic (or surface) meaning to the story and a more abstract meaning (often a theological meaning when it comes in the New Testament). For this reason, it's common to describe a parable as a story where the elements of the story are familiar and coherent in a literal telling and a literal interpretation, but where those elements also might symbolize or represent something quite different in literal terms but still be conceptually related in the more abstract terms.

The familiar parable of Jesus about the Lost Sheep is useful for grasping what I'm talking about here. The narrative about sheep being lost and without a shepherd is quite easily understood literally. But the sheep, it turns out, represent people—in this case, people without Jesus, the Great Shepherd. People and sheep are literally distinct, but in the context of the parable, they are conceptually (or abstractly) related. The same goes for the shepherd and Jesus himself.

Scholars generally recognize seven parables in the Old Testament. They are:

- Nathan's parable to David about the poor man and his little ewe lamb (2 Samuel 12)
- The woman from Tekoa tells a story about her two sons (2 Samuel 14)
- The prophet of Yahweh whose performance parable (he actually acts things out) condemns king Ahab (1 Kings 20)
- The song parable of the vineyard in Isaiah 5
- The eagles and the vine in Ezekiel 17
- The lioness and her cubs in Ezekiel 19
- The parable of the vine (also in Ezekiel 19)

But, for the most part, discussion about parables is really New Testament oriented. What we're going to say will focus a lot on the New Testament, but it's applicable to the Old Testament parables, as well.

The interpretation of parables has long been in dispute by scholars. Craig Blomberg (professor at Denver Seminary) in his scholarly but (I think) accessible book entitled *Interpreting the Parables* summarizes the consensus of mainstream New Testament scholars in several ways, among them are (he writes):

1. Throughout the history of the Church, most Christians interpreted the parables as purely allegories.
2. Modern scholarship, on the other hand, has rightly rejected allegorical interpretation (so the consensus goes) in favor of an approach which sees each parable as making only one main point.
3. Nevertheless, the parables as they appear in the Gospels do have a few undeniably allegorical elements, but these are the exceptions and not the rule.
4. Thus, the occasional explicit interpretations of parables in the Gospels are additional exceptions to Jesus' usual practice and they, too, are not to be taken as normative.

Blomberg is actually less than comfortable with these conclusions. He notes that "Jesus' parables, according to the generally held principles of interpretation, are intended to reveal and not to conceal." The problem is that Mark 4:11-12 gives pretty much the opposite explanation as to why Jesus taught in parables. That passage reads:

¹¹And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, ¹²so that

**“they may indeed see but not perceive,
and may indeed hear but not understand,
lest they should turn and be forgiven.”**

We can see that what Jesus is telling his listeners (the disciples and others, but basically the disciples) is that those of you who believe understand the Kingdom of God. Your eyes have been opened. But for those who do not believe, these parables are what I'm going to use and they're just not going to get it. There's sort of a deliberate feel to it, like Mark 4:12 said, "lest they should turn and be forgiven" and "they may indeed hear but not understand." So parables, according to Mark 4, are really about concealing truths, not revealing them. It's kind of the opposite of the New Testament scholarly consensus. Blomberg, therefore, looks at the parables a bit differently. And he's not alone, as other scholars are with him in these points. But he contends basically two things:

1. The parables, as they stand in the Gospels, are much more allegorical than is usually acknowledged.
2. Many parables probably make more than one main point.

Blomberg goes on to admit, though (and I'll quote him again here) that:

Beyond this, little agreement exists, and it's easy to swing too far back in the direction of deriving too many points from a passage. One noted writer has recently argued for seeing a theological cluster of points in each passage, and in his exposition, these may number as many as ten. Without going to these extremes, however, one does have to be willing to look for multiple points in a parable.

Catch what Blomberg just said. He's saying, "Look, they're a lot more allegorical than the mainstream scholarly position would contend, and so we need to be open to allegorical meaning in the parables. But we don't want to go too far. We don't want to make everything in the parable allegorical." If I would restate Blomberg's two points a little more positively, I would do it something like this. When approaching a parable, we have to recognize, again, two things:

1. They're going to be allegorical. That is—catch this—they are going to be *at least* two levels of meaning. My own two cents here on furthering this thought would be that only taking parables literally (or even primarily literally) is to interpret them out of their own literary context. I mentioned this first item and have added a little elaboration to it because I've often encountered Bible teachers or pastors (or whatever) that want to look at a parable and take everything absolutely literally. Frankly, what results in that is kind of bizarre in certain contexts. So what I'm saying is that parables are not meant to be taken only literally. If you do that, you're interpreting them out of their own context. This whole series has been

devoted to the idea that interpreting the Bible in context means interpreting it in its OWN context, not ours or some context that we want to be the case.

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2. Going back to Blomberg's notion that parables will make at least one main point (at least one, but there may be others) and that there will be a more abstract meaning that corresponds to that literal meaning. Just to elaborate a little bit, the passage in which a parable is found often has Jesus telling us what his main thought was. I don't know if you've noticed that as you read through the Gospels. If you look at the parables, Jesus will often give the parable, and then when he gets to explanation (either someone asks him or he follows it up right away, or even sometime later), he'll tell people what the main idea was—what the point was. He also often tells you if he had more than one thought for using that parable. In other words, we probably ought to let the New Testament (Jesus' own interpretation of parables—his own technique or method, if you will) influence the way we look at parables. We'll never find Jesus abstracting every blasted feature of a parable. So frankly, I think we ought to discipline ourselves not to do that. Let's use Jesus as an example for how to interpret the parables.

The real problem, as many see it, is whether to look for an abstract meaning in the entirety of the parable (in every detail, as I just mentioned), or whether each element of a parable ought to be abstracted as many times and as often, as frequently, and as creatively as possible. Ancient interpreters were notorious for doing this. They were notorious for taking every last little word of a parable and finding some abstract meaning, which resulted in dozens of presumed "meanings" for any given parable. To avoid this sort of abuse, Blomberg and others that I've read have some safeguards. They have some recommendations. So I'm going to give you this list as well. This is more or less a summary:

1. Modern interpreters should look for meanings in those points of parables that Jesus' original audience would have discerned. That's another way of saying that we should restrict the points for abstraction (for allegorizing an interpretation) to the ones Jesus' hearers would have understood—not points that WE would understand and they wouldn't. The Gospels frequently restrict the points this way, as I mentioned before. They have Jesus (or the writer) telling us what elements Jesus was focused on when giving the parable. I think that's a good warning against abstracting a parable for our own time and context. That's a flawed interpretive strategy. We can apply it to our context, but to say that this parable *means* X, Y, or Z—that only a modern would connect with—that is a flawed strategy. It's, frankly, taking a parable out of its own context.
2. Blomberg specifically advises "the main characters of a parable will probably be the most common candidates for allegorical interpretation and the main points of the parable will most likely be associated with those

characters." That's frequently overt in the parables. If you read them, you'll see this happening. It's very common. It's where the writer tells the readers what to focus on, and so it becomes a good, guiding rule of thumb for us.

3. We ought to recall that Mark 4 said the parables were for obscuring the teaching about the Kingdom of God for those who weren't following Jesus. That means that the parables are really about the Kingdom of God—the reign of God and the realm of God. As such, they ought not to be seen as focused exclusively on Israel or exclusively on the Church, but on the collective people of God—the present believing community of God and the one who reigns as king—Jesus. Ideas that are peripheral to these core issues take the interpreter beyond the purpose of the parables that Jesus himself just told us. As such, we ought to be very wary of taking parables any further than he did.

I hope these guidelines for interpreting parables are useful. We know they're important because of why Jesus used the method. Their purpose, and therefore their context, needs to frame our method of interpretation lest we go beyond what the New Testament actually demonstrates.