

how to study

THE BIBLE

— gospels —

HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE: GOSPELS

DESERT SPRINGS CHURCH

Charles Simeon (1759-1836), an English evangelical clergyman, is known in his teachings and writings for the principle that “the point of the text should be the point of the sermon.” By “text,” of course, he meant the Bible. We could equally say that, for all Christians, “the point of the text should be the point of application.” The point of the text should also be the point of discipleship, as we seek to encourage, warn, build up, and counsel others.

If the point of the text is the starting place for everything, then finding out the point of the text is of first importance. And since this is not subjective, with each person determining the text’s meaning in a different manner, there are rules and principles to follow. And there are various tools and techniques to help us in following the principles. That’s what this seminar is all about: the point of the text, and how to get there.

Here’s one more quote from Charles Simeon:

“My endeavor is to bring out of Scripture what is there, and not to thrust in what I think might be there. I have a great jealousy on this head; never to speak more or less than I believe to be the mind of the Spirit in the passage I am expounding.”

LESSON 1

TEN BASICS OF GOSPEL INTERPRETATION

Nathan Sherman

1.1 READ THEM AS EYEWITNESS ACCOUNTS

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus... Luke 1:1-3

Think of the oral tradition of the gospel accounts, not like the telephone game, but like karate.

1.2 FORGET HARMONIZING WITH THE OTHER THREE

Our God does not waste words. And he gave us four distinct gospel accounts.

1.3 READ THEM AS FACT AND THE *INTERPRETATION* OF FACT

Ancient historians tell history differently than modern historians do.

The gospel writers' placement and arrangement – not to mention their language, emphases, and structure – have interpretive value.

The gospel writers preach, they don't just record or inform.

1.4 FORGET SPECIALIZED AUDIENCES

It's better to not assume a specialized audience, but the broadest audience and widest distribution – Jew and Gentile, Christian and non-Christian.

1.5 DON'T FORGET, THEY'RE ABOUT JESUS

Assume that a story or scene has more vertical and theological purposes rather than moral and horizontal.

1.6 NOTE THEIR UNIQUE PLACE IN REDEMPTIVE HISTORY

The gospel accounts stress not only the revelation of the promised Messiah, but the realization of the promised kingdom.

Related, some promises and commands weren't meant for you. When are we in the story?

1.7 THEY ROLL DOWNHILL TOWARD THE CROSS AND RESURRECTION

"A passion narrative with a long introduction."

1.8 INTERPRET THE GOSPEL ACCOUNTS AS GOSPEL ACCOUNTS

Gospel accounts were not a new or unfamiliar genre.

1.9 FOR ALL THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF EACH, THE FOUR TELL OF THE ONE GOSPEL

We can't so emphasize each gospel account's distinctiveness that we call each one a different gospel.

1.10 READ THE GOSPEL ACCOUNTS WITH SUSPENSE, DRAMA, AND AWE

“So anyone who thinks that he has understood the divine scriptures or any part of them, but cannot by his understanding build up this double love of God and neighbor, has not yet succeeded in understanding them.” – Augustine

Bauckham, Richard

1997 *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences.* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

Bauckham, Richard

2006 *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony.* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

Blomberg, Craig

1977 *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey.* Nashville: Broadman and Holman.

Pennington, Jonathan

2012 *Reading the Gospels Wisely: A Narrative and Theological Introduction.* Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

Roberts, Mark D.

2007 *Can We Trust the Gospels? Investigating the Reliability of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.* Wheaton, IL: Crossway.

LESSON 2

STRUCTURE AND CONTEXT

Ryan Kelly

2.1 BASICS OF STRUCTURE

*Every text of Scripture has a structure;
Structure helps to reveal emphasis (or emphases);
Emphasis shapes interpretation and directs application.*

Different genres utilize different structures of language
and require different tools for interpretation.

With epistles: _____

With poetry: _____

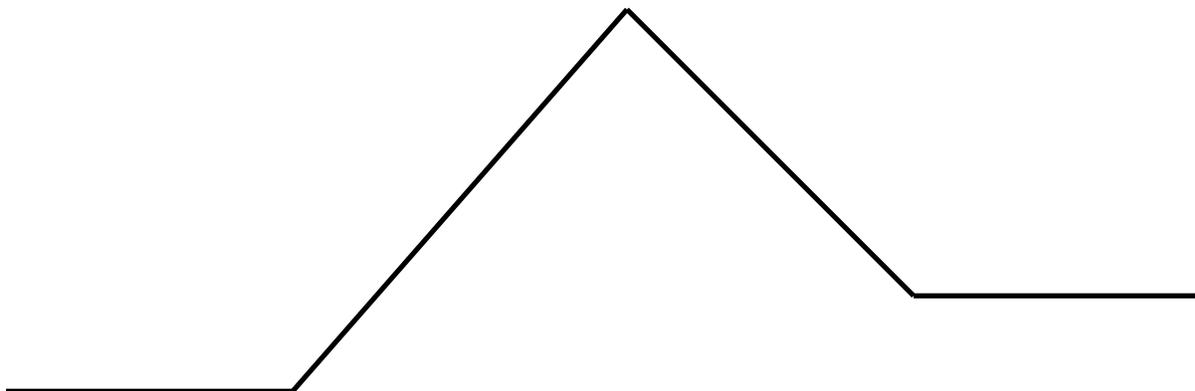
With apocalyptic: _____

With history/narrative: _____

What genres do we find in gospel accounts? _____

Three tools for interpreting gospel narratives: _____

PLOT ARC



2.2 THE STRUCTURE OF MATT 8:5-13

5 *When he had entered Capernaum, a centurion came forward to him, appealing to him,*

6 *“Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering terribly.”*

7 *And he said to him, “I will come and heal him.”*

8 *But the centurion replied,*

*“Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof,
but only say the word, and my servant will be healed.*

9 *For I too am a man under authority, with soldiers under me.*

*And I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes,
and to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.”*

10 *When Jesus heard this, he marveled and said to those who followed him,*

“Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith.

11 *I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham,
Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven,*

12 *while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness.
In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”*

13 *And to the centurion Jesus said, “Go; let it be done for you as you have believed.”*

And the servant was healed at that very moment.

What is the climax of this scene? _____

What surprises occur in the story? _____

What is the emphasis (or emphases)? _____

2.3 THE CONTEXT OF MATT 8-9

What do we find in Matt 5-7? _____

Note the summary in Matt 7:28-29

28 *And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching,*
29 *for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.*

What kind of stories occupy Matt 8-9? _____

A leper healed (8:1-4)

Centurion's servant healed (8:5-13)

Peter's mother-in-law and many others healed (8:14-17)

A scribe challenged with the cost of following Jesus (8:18-22)

The disciples rescued from the storm (8:23-27)

Two demon possessed men healed (8:28-34)

Paralyzed man healed (9:1-8)

The call of Matthew (9:9-13)

The question of the disciples' fasting (9:14-17)

A woman healed, a girl raised (9:18-26)

Two blind men healed (9:27-31)

A mute man healed (9:32-34)

Summary (9:35)

And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction.

Major Emphasis of Matt 8-9: _____

Minor Emphasis of Matt 8-9: _____

What word or theme do the scenes of Matt. 8-9 have in common? _____

7:29

8:9-10

8:26-27

9:6, 8

10:1

Who does Jesus heal in Matt 8-9? _____

How does Jesus heal in Matt 8-9? _____

Why does Jesus heal in Matt 8-9? _____

2.4 THE CONTEXT OF MATT 1-4

Repeated Language/Theme: _____

After the genealogy in 1:1-17 (which itself implies fulfillment)
each scene has an explicit OT quotation and fulfillment language.

2:22-23

2:5-6

2:15

2:17-18

2:23

3:3

4:14

Repeated Language/Theme: _____

1:21, 23, 25

2:15

3:17

4:3

4:6

How does this insight give focus to Matt. 1-4? _____

2.5 THE CONTEXT AND STRUCTURE OF MATT 21-22

TWO QUESTIONS ABOUT AUTHORITY

Matt. 21:23 the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" **24** Jesus answered them, "I also will ask you one question, and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things. **25** The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?" And they discussed it among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' **26** But if we say, 'From man,' we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet." **27** So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.

THREE PARABLES FROM JESUS

Parable of Two Sons

28 "What do you think? A man had two sons. And he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' **29** And he answered, 'I will not,' but afterward he changed his mind and went. **30** And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, 'I go, sir,' but did not go. **31** Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you. **32** For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him.

Parable of the Tenants

33 "Hear another parable. There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants, and went into another country. **34** When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. **35** And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. **36** Again he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them. **37** Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' **38** But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.' **39** And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. **40** When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" **41** They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons." **42** Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes'? **43** Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits. **44** And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him." **45** When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them. **46** And although they were seeking to arrest him, they feared the crowds, because they held him to be a prophet.

Parable of the Wedding Feast

Matt. 22:1 And again Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying, **2** "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son, **3** and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding feast, but they would not come. **4** Again he sent other servants, saying, 'Tell those who are invited, "See, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast.'" **5** But they paid no attention and went off, one to his farm, another to his business, **6** while the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them. **7** The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. **8** Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding feast is ready, but those invited were not worthy. **9** Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find.' **10** And those servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good. So the wedding hall was

filled with guests. **11** “But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment. **12** And he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?’ And he was speechless. **13** Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ **14** For many are called, but few are chosen.”

15 Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words.

THREE QUESTIONS PUT TO JESUS

Question of Taxes to Caesar

16 And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone’s opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances. **17** Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” **18** But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? **19** Show me the coin for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. **20** And Jesus said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” **21** They said, “Caesar’s.” Then he said to them, “Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” **22** When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away.

Question about the Resurrection

23 The same day Sadducees came to him, who say that there is no resurrection, and they asked him a question, **24** saying, “Teacher, Moses said, ‘If a man dies having no children, his brother must marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother.’ **25** Now there were seven brothers among us. The first married and died, and having no offspring left his wife to his brother. **26** So too the second and third, down to the seventh. **27** After them all, the woman died. **28** In the resurrection, therefore, of the seven, whose wife will she be? For they all had her.” **29** But Jesus answered them, “You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God. **30** For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. **31** And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God: **32** ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not God of the dead, but of the living.” **33** And when the crowd heard it, they were astonished at his teaching.

Question about the Greatest Commandment

34 But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. **35** And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. **36** “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” **37** And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. **38** This is the great and first commandment. **39** And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. **40** On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

ONE QUESTION TO END THEM ALL

41 Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question, **42** saying, “What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?” They said to him, “The son of David.” **43** He said to them, “How is it then that David, in the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying, **44** “‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet”’? **45** If then David calls him Lord, how is he his son?” **46** And no one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

What is the contested point (also the recurring theme)?

How does the narrative (or story) shape emphasis and application?

LESSON 3

PARABLES

Ronald Giese

THE LOST SHEEP (MT 18:12-14)

Mt 18:10 “See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven. (12) What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? (13) And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. (14) So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

THE UNFORGIVING SERVANT (MT 18:23-35)

Mt 18:23 “Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. (24) When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. (25) And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. (26) So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ (27) And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. (28) But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’ (29) So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ (30) He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. (31) When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. (32) Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. (33) And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ (34) And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. (35) So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

3.1 WHAT GUIDES POINTS OF COMPARISON

Example #1: Ps 92:12

“The righteous flourish like the palm tree”

Points that preachers/authors have taught from this comparison:

1. Can weather ups and downs. One website has: “The palm grows slowly, but steadily, from century to century, uninfluenced by those alternations of the seasons which affect other trees. It does not rejoice overmuch in winter’s copious rain, nor does it droop under the drought and the burning sun of summer. Neither heavy weights which people place upon its head, nor the importunate urgency of the wind, can sway it aside from perfect uprightness.”
2. Longevity. The palm tree grows to a great height, up to 75ft tall, and can reach an age of 100-200 years. Parallel is that the righteous will live a long life.
3. Giving. One website has, “The palm is a huge blessing to the people living in desert regions. It is A GIVING TREE. In fact, there is not a single part of it that is not of use. The trunk gives timber, midrib of the leaves are used to make crates and furniture, leaflets are used to make baskets, leaf is used a fuel, fruit stalks are used to make ropes, fibers for cordage and packing materials, seeds are ground and fed to cattle, fruits give syrup, vinegar, alcohol, wine and honey. Last but not the least, the fruits form the diet of people living in Arabia and Persia. The palm tree teaches us to be a giving people, giving in every possible way; giving of our time, knowledge, finances, resources and energy.”
4. Fruitfulness. The date palm produces fruit every year, and in large of clusters. The righteous will produce fruit, and be like the branch that produces fruit, in which Jesus is the vine (John 15).
6. Steadfast Character / Consistency. One website worded it this way: “The palm tree is perennially green throughout the year. Be it summer, spring, autumn or winter it never changes. We, ourselves, should strive for consistency and always be a source of encouragement to the people around.”
7. Content / Using Available Resources. One website has: “The palm tree grows in sandy soil which has the least amount of resources. Less water, less salt, less fertility, less nourishment. Nevertheless the date palm grows and flourishes in this soil, in fact towering majestically over the other desert plants. Lack of fertile soil stunts the growth of most desert plants but not the

date palm. Similarly no matter where we are planted (good soil, average soil, not so good soil), God gives us the grace to thrive, and flourish majestically, like the palm tree.”

- 8. Praise. Palm trees remind us of praise, or characterize praise, since their leaves were used to welcome the Messiah (John 12:13).

Ps 92:12 in context

(12) The righteous flourish like the palm tree and grow like a cedar in Lebanon.

(13) They are planted in the house of the Lord; they flourish in the courts of our God.

Notes: _____

(14) They still bear fruit in old age; they are ever full of sap and green,

Notes: _____

(15) to declare that the Lord is upright; he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him.

Notes: _____

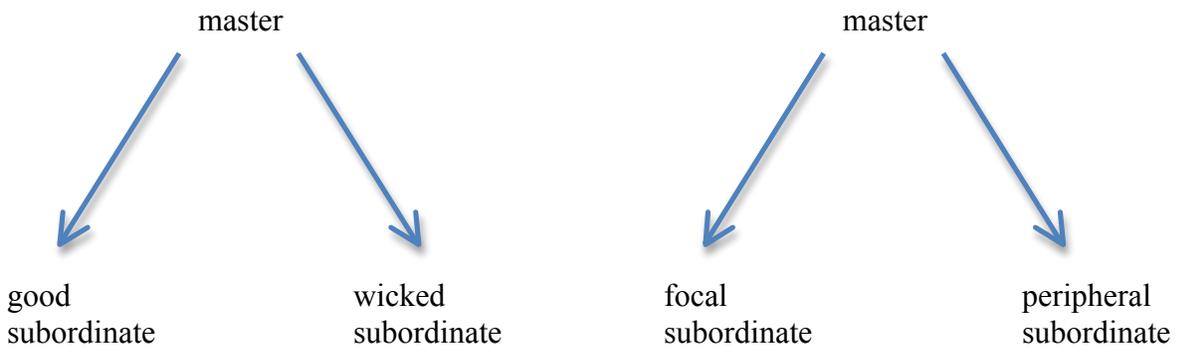
3.2 HOW MANY POINTS OF COMPARISON?

3.21 THREE-POINT PARABLES

These have, of course, three main characters.

Quite frequently, these characters include an authority figure and two contrasting subordinates.¹

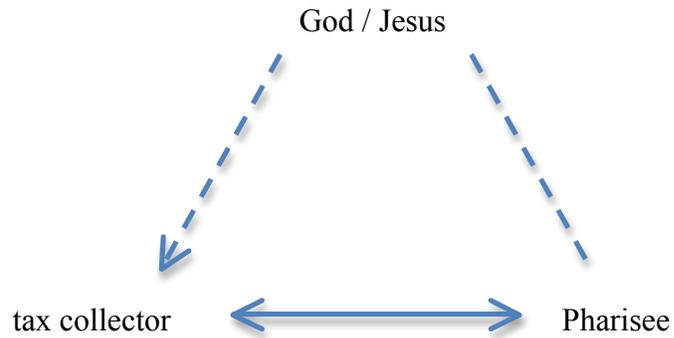
Here's how Blomberg charts this:



¹ Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, p. 171.

3.22 TWO-POINT PARABLES

Luke 18:9-14



Matthew 24:43-44

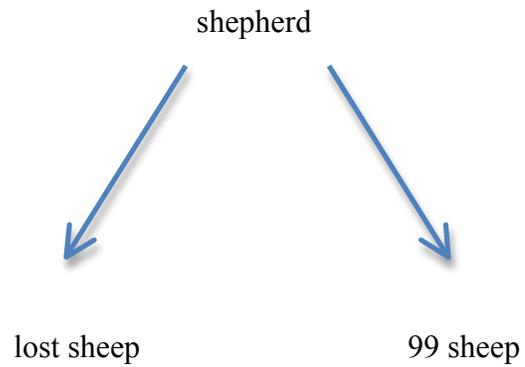


Luke 18:1-8



3.23 GOING FROM STRUCTURE TO EMPHASIS / CONTEXT

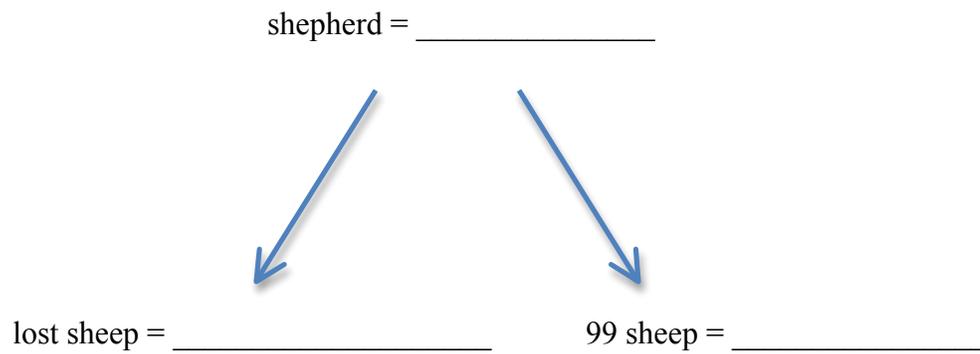
THE LOST SHEEP (MT 18:12-14)



CONTEXT OF MT 18:12-14 (WHAT COMES BEFORE IN CH. 18)

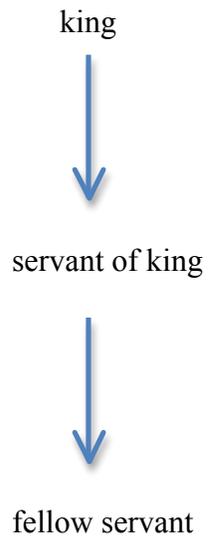
HOW DOES CONTEXT INFORM CORRESPONDENCE?

THE LOST SHEEP (MT 18:12-14)



EMPHASIS OF MT 18:12-14

THE UNFORGIVING SERVANT (MT 18:23-35)



“TALENT” AND “DENARIUS”

REVIEW OF CONTEXT OF MATTHEW CH. 18

HOW DOES CONTEXT INFORM CORRESPONDENCE?

THE UNFORGIVING SERVANT (MT 18:23-35)

king = _____



servant of king = _____



fellow servant = _____

EMPHASIS OF MT 18:23-35

Snodgrass comments on this order of action:

Neither Matthew nor Jesus is legalistic, neither promotes salvation by works ... but both insist that discipleship includes obedience. All the focus on obedience, however, is based in God's prior action. The indicative of God's forgiveness precedes the imperative of our response. In Matthew, as elsewhere in both Testaments, the ethic is a responsive ethic, a response to God's grace and calling.²

Blomberg notes:

Jesus' ministry is littered with would-be followers who fall by the way, just as the forgiven servant subsequently demonstrated no understanding of the implications of the forgiveness shown him.³

² Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories With Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), p. 74.

³ Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, p. 241.

3.3 WHAT IS A PARABLE?

Let's go from modern times back to the time of the Old Testament in terms of a definition for the word "parable."

MODERN TIMES

The words "parable" usually means a brief story, in which one or more of the characters stand for someone or something else. A *longer* story like this we call "allegory" (like John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*), and something *shorter* than a parable, where there is no story but just a statement ("God is a king") is what we call "metaphor."

NEW TESTAMENT TIME

The Greek word *parabole* (the "e" at the end is pronounced like a long "a," or "a" as in "late") meant a lot more than what we mean by the English word "parable" (definition above). Here's an example:

And he [Jesus] said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Physician, heal yourself.'

Lk 4:23

The word "proverb" here is actually the Greek word *parabole*. It's the same word Jesus uses for parables. But this is not a short story; rather it is what we would call a metaphor.

English translations of the book of Hebrews also, in two places, don't use the word "parable" even though it is the Greek word *parabole*. In Hebrews 9:9 the Greek *parabole* is translated as "symbol" (NASB), "symbolic" (ESV), "illustration" (NIV), and "figure" (KJV). In Hebrews 11:19 the Greek *parabole* is translated as "type" (NASB), "figuratively speaking" (ESV), and "figure" (KJV).

OLD TESTAMENT TIME

The Hebrew word *mashal* is very similar to the Greek *parabole*, only there might more even more of a wider circle of meaning with *mashal*.

CONCLUSION

The Greek *parabole* and the Hebrew *mashal* does not mean what we mean by the English word “parable.”

The best way of describing a *mashal* is that it is *tropic* language (the “o” is long, as in “rope”), or that a *mashal* is the header for kinds of tropes. A trope is basically figurative language, and thus includes metaphors, similes, stories that function as allegories, even at times taunts or jokes.

3.4 BIBLIOGRAPHY

Parables in General – Beginning Level

Unfortunately there is no good book on parables for the beginning level. All the books on the market now discuss more academic things like the historical methods for interpreting parables, such as Jülicher's work in 1888.

Parables in General – Intermediate Level

Stein, Robert H.

1981 *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press.

A relatively short paperback (180 pages total including endnotes and indexes), this covers academic approaches to the parables through the middle ages and modern ages, but does it in a fairly quick and summary fashion (Blomberg, below, is a slower pace and more detailed). At page 82, halfway through the book, Stein starts looking at each parable in terms of context, historical background, and interpretation/application.

Parables in General – Advanced Level

Blomberg, Craig L.

1990 *Interpreting the Parables*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity.

A thick paperback (327 pages of text), this goes over every parable. Part 1 of the book (pp. 1-167) has a lot of interaction with scholarship, and will be too academic for most lay-level readers. It includes not only mainline methods for interpreting parables, but interpretive methods like constructionism, deconstruction, reader-response, etc. But readers at all levels will benefit from Part 2 of the book, which is a categorization of one-point, two-point, and three-point parables, with lots of examples.

Snodgrass, Klyne R.

2008 *Stories With Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

At almost 900 pages (hardback) this is the thickest book on parables I've come across. Pages 1-59 discuss parables in general (what they are, how to interpret them, and parables in writings outside of the Bible). Then pp. 61-566 discuss all of the major parables. In this larger section where Snodgrass looks at each parable, most lay people (even more interested in biblical studies) will wish for more cultural background and a little less scholarly interaction (Snodgrass looks at similar parables or sayings in things like Dead Sea Scroll, Gospel of Thomas, and early Christian and later Jewish writings).

Books on Hyperbole in Gospels

Stein, Robert H.

1985 *Difficult Sayings in the Gospels: Jesus' Use of Overstatement and Hyperbole*. Grand Rapids: Baker.

A great book, at a beginner and intermediate level, that explains the cultural background for some of the most difficult sayings of Jesus, such as the idea of hating mother and father in order to become his disciple.