

Aesop's Fables — Two Examples

The Bundle of Sticks

An old man on the point of death summoned his sons around him to give them some parting advice. He ordered his servants to bring in a faggot of sticks, and said to his eldest son: "Break it." The son strained and strained, but with all his efforts was unable to break the Bundle. The other sons also tried, but none of them was successful. "Untie the faggots," said the father, "and each of you take a stick." When they had done so, he called out to them: "Now, break," and each stick was easily broken. "You see my meaning," said their father.

Union gives strength.

The Fighting Cocks and the Eagle

Two game cocks were fiercely fighting for the mastery of the farmyard. One at last put the other to flight. The vanquished Cock skulked away and hid himself in a quiet corner, while the conqueror, flying up to a high wall, flapped his wings and crowed exultingly with all his might. An Eagle sailing through the air pounced upon him and carried him off in his talons. The vanquished Cock immediately came out of his corner, and ruled henceforth with undisputed mastery.

Pride goes before destruction.

Judges 9:7-15 — Jotham's Parable

⁷ When Jotham heard about this, he climbed to the top of Mount Gerizim and shouted, "Listen to me, citizens of Shechem! Listen to me if you want God to listen to you!

⁸ Once upon a time the trees decided to elect a king. First they said to the olive tree, 'Be our king!'

⁹ But the olive tree refused, saying, 'Should I quit producing the olive oil that blesses both God and people, just to wave back and forth over the trees?'

¹⁰ "Then they said to the fig tree, 'You be our king!'

¹¹ But the fig tree also refused, saying, 'Should I quit producing my sweet fruit just to wave back and forth over the trees?'

¹² "Then they said to the grapevine, 'You be our king!'

¹³ But the grapevine also refused, saying, 'Should I quit producing the wine that cheers both God and people, just to wave back and forth over the trees?'

¹⁴ "Then all the trees finally turned to the thornbush and said, 'Come, you be our king!'

¹⁵ And the thornbush replied to the trees, 'If you truly want to make me your king, come and take shelter in my shade. If not, let fire come out from me and devour the cedars of Lebanon.' "

The Parables of Jesus

1. What exactly is a parable? Is a parable the same as an allegory? Is it the same or related to a fable (e.g., Aesop's Fables)? How is a parable related to a metaphor or analogy?
2. In what books of the Bible are the parables of Jesus found? Are there similar books that do not have any parables?
3. [We will not be getting into this deeply but you should be aware that there are some significant differences between the synoptic and abstract gospels. If you want to probe deeper, go to http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Synoptic_Gospels.]
4. Were any parables told in the Old Testament? If so, how many and what were they? (Numbers 23:24, Judges 9:7-15, 14:14, 2 Samuel 12:1-4, 14:5-20, 1 Kings 20:35-43, 2 Kings 14:9, Isaiah 5:1-6, 28:24-28, Ezekiel 14:2-9, 17:3-10, 24:3-5)
5. How many parables of Jesus are there?
6. Do any parables of Jesus appear any place other than the Christian Bible?
7. What is the purpose of a parable? Why not plain text?
8. When did Jesus start telling parables? Why then?

The Parables of Jesus — Notes for Leader

1. Let's start with the lowest level word: metaphor. A metaphor is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denoting one object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them. That is, a metaphor is language that directly compares seemingly unrelated subjects. For example, "You are my sunshine." Another: "He has the wild stag's foot."

An analogy is the inference that if two things agree with each other in some respects, they will probably agree in others. For example, "shells were to ancient cultures as dollar bills are to modern culture." An analogy is often used to make a difficult idea or an archaic subject easier to understand. For example, the URL of a web site is like the title on the tab of a file folder.

Though it is similar to other rhetorical comparisons, an allegory is sustained longer and more fully in its details than a metaphor, and appeals to imagination, while an analogy appeals to reason or logic. An allegory can be quite long and complex. For example, *Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyon, *The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighier, George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, or a film like Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

A fable or parable is a short allegory with one definite moral. Fables tend to be longer than parables, e.g., Aesop's Fables such as *The Ox and the Frog*, *The Bundle of Sticks*, *The Cat and the Birds*, *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*, *The Fighting Cocks and the Eagle*, and *Jupiter and the Monkey*. There are many fables that have similar meanings to Biblical and Jesus' parables, but many more that present good advice that is not at all Biblical, for example, you can't please everybody, a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, if words don't suffice then blows must follow, or misery loves company.

2. Most of the parables of Jesus are found in the three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). Only one parable (in three parts) is found in the gospel of John.

3. A synoptic gospel is one which gives a general view of the whole story; it is characterized by comprehensiveness or breadth of view. The gospel of John is non-synoptic, i.e., indirect or abstract, and has many differences with the synoptic gospels. [Look it up at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Synoptic_Gospels]

4. There are many parables, allegories, and analogies in the Old Testament. For example, here are 12 parables in 7 different books.

| Old Testament Parables | | | |
|------------------------|--|-------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1 | Jews and Moabites (analogy) | Of Balaam | Numbers 23:24 |
| 2 | Trees make a king (parable) | Jotham | Judges 9:7-15 |
| 3 | Strong brings forth sweetness (riddle) | Samson | Judges 14:14, 18 |
| 4 | Poor man's ewe lamb (parable) | Nathan | 2 Samuel 12:1-4 |
| 5 | Two sons fighting (allegory) | Woman of Tekoah | 2 Samuel 14:5-20 |
| 6 | Escaped prisoner | Son of a prophet | 1 Kings 20:35-43 |
| 7 | Thistle and cedar (parable) | Jehoash, King of Israel | 2 Kings 14:9, 2 Chronicles 25:18 |
| 8 | Vineyard and wild grapes (allegory) | Isaiah | Isaiah 5:1-6 |
| 9 | Farmer prepares his fields | Isaiah | Isaiah 28:24-28 |
| 10 | Lion's whelps | Ezekiel | Ezekiel 14:2-9 |
| 11 | Boiling pot (analogy-parable) | Ezekiel | Ezekiel 24:3-5 |
| 12 | Great eagles and wine (parable) | Ezekiel | Ezekiel 17:3-10 |

5. How many parables of Jesus are there? A difficult question. The Catholic Encyclopedia lists 33 parables. The NIV Study Bible lists 40, although five appear in different gospels in different forms. For example, in the parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14-30, one servant was given 5 talents, one was given 2 and another was given 1. It is clear to me that this is not the same parable recorded in Luke 19:12-26 in which the master give ten minas to each to ten servants, yet the NIV considers it the same. Small but similar differences exist with four others as well.

The Catholic Encyclopedia does not recognize several short parables that they apparently consider analogies such as Matthew 13:52 (He said to them, "Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old.") or Matthew 9:16 (new cloth on an old coat). This is understandable, but it is not at all clear why parables such as Matthew 24:45-51 (faithful and wise servant) and Luke 14:16-24 (great banquet) were excluded from it.

Counting analogies such as "the Kingdom of God is like [blank]" one could come up with as many as 60 parables. I lean to the NIV Study Bible list of 40 plus the five additional ones that Jesus told at other times in a different form plus one in John for a total count of 46.

6. Do Jesus' parables appear other places? Yes and no. The noncanonical Gospel of Thomas contains up to 15 parables of which two are unique. The author of this

Gospel did not have a special word for “parable,” making it difficult to know what he considered a parable. The noncanonical Apocryphon of James also contains three unique parables of Jesus. They are known as “The Parable of the Ear of Grain”, “The Parable of the Grain of Wheat”, and “The Parable of the Date-Palm Shoot”. These are not recognized by any major Christian denomination.

7. Mark 4:10-12, Matthew 13:10-17 and Luke 8:9-10 offer an explanation as to why Jesus would teach in parables. These verses say that whenever Jesus would go off by himself (away from the crowds of followers he attracted), those close to him and the disciples would ask about the parables. He told them that they had been given the secret of the Kingdom of God but that outsiders did not have this secret, so everything to them is given in parables, never to be fully understood, otherwise they might find forgiveness, citing variations of Isaiah 6:9-10. Matthew 13:12 adds: “Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.”

Mark 4:33-34 and Matthew 13:34-35 repeat that Jesus would only speak to the “crowds” in parables, while secretly, in private, explaining everything to his disciples.

Stephen L Harris has, on the other hand, surmised that Jesus used parables because they provoked thought and coaxed the listeners into participating more actively as they considered the parables’ ambiguous content. According to him, the belief that Jesus taught secret meanings to his disciples is a product of the Early Christian tradition and does not originate with Jesus himself.

The Jewish Encyclopedia states: “The simple meaning of these parables, however, was lost later on, and they were taken to be allegories and mysteries, especially when they alluded to the Messianic expectations, about which it was not safe to speak in public, as they assumed the end of the kingdom of Satan.

Another possible reason for parables is that they are memorable stories that could be transmitted orally for years before being written down.

8. After some time into his great Galilean ministry, teaching and performing miracles, Jesus begins to gain great popularity. This posed a threat to the established Jewish leaders and opposition started to build against him. After calling Matthew (Levi) to follow him, Levi holds a great banquet at which time the Pharisees complained that Jesus was not following their customs and he was eating with tax collectors and sinners. He said to them, “Can you make the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; in those days they will fast.” He then told the parable about patching an old garment with new cloth and the one about putting new wine in old wineskins.