

# PARABLES IN MATTHEW

## TRADITION, INTERPRETATION AND FUNCTION IN THE GOSPEL

### I. INTRODUCTION: CROSSAN ON PARABLES IN MATTHEW AND MATTHEW AS PARABLE

In his most recent book on parables, John Dominic Crossan considers the Gospel of Matthew as a whole to be a “parable”<sup>1</sup>. In describing the shift from parables told *by* Jesus to parables told *about* Jesus, he claims, “when challenge parables<sup>2</sup> *about* Jesus get big enough, we call them gospel”. According to Crossan there is an inner connection between the two different types of parables. “Parables by Jesus begot parables about Jesus”<sup>3</sup> and by doing so, they “increase in animosity from challenge through attack to dismissal”<sup>4</sup> of Jesus and his message.

The chapter on the Gospel of Matthew in particular is entitled “Rhetorical Violence”<sup>5</sup>, and Crossan contends that the first Gospel should be understood as a “polemic attack parable”<sup>6</sup>.

According to Crossan this development can be seen clearly in Matthew’s treatment of parables by Jesus. He takes over the “nastiest threats ever placed on the lips of Jesus” from Q 13,28f., namely that there “will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” for the heirs of the Kingdom. Matthew uses this sentence five times to conclude parables by Jesus<sup>7</sup>. Thus, these parables are

1. J.D. CROSSAN, *The Power of Parables: How Fiction by Jesus Became Fiction about Jesus*, London, SPCK, 2012.

2. Crossan differentiates between three sub-genres: 1) Riddle Parable; 2) Example Parable; 3) Challenge Parable, see *ibid.*, pp. 13-112.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 153.

4. *Ibid.*

5. The full title is “Rhetorical Violence: The Parable Gospel according to Matthew”, in CROSSAN, *Power* (n. 1), Chapter 8, pp. 177-195.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 195.

7. See “parable of the weeds” Matt 13,42; “parable of the net” Matt 13,50; “parable of the great dinner” Matt 22,13; “parable of the servants” Matt 24,51; “parable of the master’s money” Matt 25,30.

turned into “warnings or negative examples of impending punishment”<sup>8</sup>. Crossan concludes that, in using the parables of Jesus, Matthew escalates their challenge character to the level of rhetorical violence. According to Crossan, “that is not Jesus himself; it is Matthew who is speaking”<sup>9</sup>. In other words, by bringing the underlying judgment to the fore, Matthew misunderstands the parables of Jesus. His use of parables is more an *abuse*: putting them into his order, forming and subordinating them to his opinion and theology.

This is not the place for a full critique of Crossan’s new book. Just one brief remark: I find it difficult to widen the term ‘parable’ from the specific genre term for a short fictional narrative to a longer historical story like the Gospel. Thus, ‘parable’ is not a genre term any more but a metaphoric ‘code’ for a fictional story with factual characters<sup>10</sup>.

Nevertheless, we may bear in mind his harsh judgment that Matthew misinterpreted the parables of Jesus when discussing the parables in detail. I will be addressing only the parables of Jesus in Matthew and will avoid labeling the whole Gospel as a parabolic story.

However, the parables of Jesus play an important role for the Gospel as a whole.

Therefore, the following article addresses four general questions:

- 1) What is a parable in Matthew? Does Matthew consciously employ the genre of parables and how can we recognize parables in the first Gospel?
- 2) Where do the parables come from? In which way are sources used and interpreted in Matthew?
- 3) How are parables interpreted in Early Christianity? Is there one single meaning of a parable and is it possible to find the original message of a parable as intended by Jesus?
- 4) What role and function do parables have in Matthew? – and in particular: What is the contribution of the literary form of the Matthean parables to the message and theology of the first Gospel?

8. CROSSAN, *Power* (n. 1), p. 191.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 195.

10. But even this use of fictional, factual etc. is not linked to the discussion in literary scholarship, see G. GENETTE, *Fictional Narrative, Factual Narrative*, in *Poetics Today* 11 (1990) 755-774; F. ZIPPEL, *Fiktion, Fiktivität, Fiktionalität: Analysen zur Fiktion in der Literatur und zum Fiktionsbegriff in der Literaturwissenschaft*, Berlin, Erich Schmidt-Verlag, 2001; C. KLEIN – M. MARTINEZ (eds.), *Wirklichkeitserzählungen: Felder, Formen und Funktionen nicht-literarischen Erzählens*, Stuttgart – Weimar, Metzler, 2009.

## II. PARABLES IN MATTHEW – SOME GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

1. *The Parable Genre in Matthew*

Which texts does Matthew consider to be parables? The number of parables in Matthew is controversial<sup>11</sup> and depends to a great extent on the definition of a parable. A relatively safe initial reference point is the technical term *παραβολή*. Matthew included the *παραβολή* term from Mark, but waited until the parabolic discourse to employ it. The term *παραβολή* does not appear prior to chapter 13, but then no less than 12 times<sup>12</sup>. Thus, the Evangelist concentrates the *παραβολή*-term on chapter 13 in order to mark this whole speech as a coherent unit.

However, Matthew does not limit the parable genre to texts that are explicitly given this classification. This becomes clear even in the parabolic discourse in chapter 13. Only four texts are explicitly introduced with the term *παραβολή* although one usually counts 7 or 8<sup>13</sup> parables in the discourse. In particular, the parables that have not been taken over from Mark (13,44.45.47.52) are introduced only with the comparative sentence (Ὅμοια ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν, v. 44). Nevertheless, no one would dispute that these are parables. This is all the more true because in the concluding verse 13,53 Matthew characterizes the previous texts explicitly as *παραβολαί*. The fact that Matthew in no way limits parables to chapter 13 is revealed by the use of the term *παραβολή* in Matthew 15,15; 21,33.45; 22,1 and 24,32.

In contrast to the scholarly tradition dating back to Jülicher, the Evangelist does not differentiate among sub-genres. Both extremely brief texts of only one verse (e.g. the parable of the leaven, Matt 13,33) as well as

11. According to Jeremias' list there are 23 parables in Matthew, see J. JEREMIAS, *The Parables of Jesus*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963, pp. 247-248. He is followed by J.R. DONAHUE, *The Gospel in Parable: Metaphor, Narrative, and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels*, Philadelphia, PA, Fortress, 1988, p. 63, who assumes that among these there are only 4 from Mark. Carlston, however, views Matthew as having drawn 13 parables from Mark see "The Markan Parables in Matthew", in C.E. CARLSTON, *The Parables of the Triple Tradition*, Philadelphia, PA, Fortress, 1975, Chapter 2, pp. 10-51. According to Münch there are 21 parables in Matthew see C. MÜNCH, *Die Gleichnisse Jesu im Matthäusevangelium: Eine Studie zu ihrer Form und Funktion* (WMANT, 104), Neukirchen-Vluyn, Neukirchener Verlag, 2004, pp. 326-327.

12. See Matt 13,3.10.13.18.24.31.33.34(twice).35.36.53.

13. Matt 13,52 is debated. Roloff argues correctly, that "seven" is used as a symbolic number (e.g. of divine unity); however, there are no convincing reasons on a formal or thematic level to exclude Matt 13,52, see J. ROLOFF, *Jesu Gleichnisse im Matthäusevangelium: Ein Kommentar zu Matt 13,1-52*, ed. H. KRELLER – R. OECHSLEN (BTS, 73), Neukirchen-Vluyn, Neukirchener Verlag, 2005, pp. 4-5.

longer narrations with several scenes (Matt 21,33-46, the parable of the wicked tenants) can simply be identified as παραβολή. Compared with longer genres, these are always “miniature narrations”. Parables are brief narratives.

A differentiation with regard to the field of reference (daily activities – unusual, isolated case) as was suggested by Jülicher is, in any case, dubious and arbitrary. I have established this point in previous publications<sup>14</sup> and shall not consider it again here with regard to Matthew’s parables. Parables are both realistic and metaphoric at the same time. Even the seemingly simplest reference to a daily activity such as the preparation of bread dough turns out, when viewed more closely, to be overdetermined. The manner in which the narrative unfolds also includes transfer signals (e.g. the amount of dough or the hiding of the leaven in the parable of the leaven, Matt 13,33) and thus demonstrates that meaning is “carried over” (in line with the Greek etymology of “metaphors”). Furthermore, Christian Münch has shown that Matthew demonstrated a pronounced awareness of the parable genre, in particular through the use of such texts in his Gospel and his introductions and conclusions to them<sup>15</sup>.

Genres are typified forms of communication that are recognized by participants within a communication community. With a flexible, dynamic definition of genre<sup>16</sup>, one can identify the criteria which allow such communication to take place. In other words, because Matthew and his audience recognize certain characteristics of texts, they can communicate through various types of texts by discerning their purpose.

Today’s readers no longer have access to the genre awareness of the participants in ancient communication. However, we can legitimately assume that characteristics which manifest themselves in the text can still be recognized today. Thus, I would postulate that there is a congruency between an understanding of a parable constructed in the present day and the understanding of the early Christians – at least if a present-day definition for the

14. See R. ZIMMERMANN, *Parabeln – sonst nichts! Gattungsbestimmung jenseits der Klassifikation in ‚Bildwort‘, ‚Gleichnis‘, ‚Parabel‘ und ‚Beispiel Erzählung‘*, in ID. (ed.), *Hermeneutik der Gleichnisse Jesu* (WUNT, 231), Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2011, 383-419; ID., *Die Gleichnisse Jesu: Eine Leseanleitung zum Kompendium*, in ID. – D. DORMEYER – G. KERN et al. (eds.), *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu*, Gütersloh, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2007, 3-46, here pp. 19-23.

15. See MÜNCH, *Gleichnisse* (n. 11), pp. 129-160 (Gleichniseinleitungen); pp. 249-290 (Gleichnisschlüsse).

16. See H. FRICKE, *Definieren von Gattungen*, in R. ZYMMER (ed.), *Handbuch Gattungstheorie*, Stuttgart, Metzler, 2010, 10-12.

most part refrains from the introduction of additional interpretive criteria (e.g. Jülicher's classification) and places literary criteria in the foreground.

The following definition of a parable, though utilizing modern and scientific language and therefore not claiming to be an historical re-construction, arises inductively through the observation of ancient texts:

*Definition of a "Parable"*<sup>17</sup>

A parable is a short narrative (1) fictional (2) text that is related in the narrated world to known reality (3) but, by way of implicit or explicit transfer signals, makes it understood that the meaning of the narration must be differentiated from the literal words of the text (4). In its appeal structure (5) it challenges the reader to carry out a metaphoric transfer of meaning that is steered by co-text and context information (6).

With a view towards specific attributes, we can differentiate six characteristics of parables

- Parable =
- 1) narrative
  - 2) fictional
  - 3) realistic
  - 4) metaphoric
  - 5) active in appeal and interpretation
  - 6) co-text and context related

Using this definition in the "Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu", we have identified a total of 53 texts in the Gospel of Matthew as parables (see table)<sup>18</sup>.

17. According to *Leseanleitung* (n. 14), p. 25, see also the English summary in R. ZIMMERMANN, *How to Understand the Parables of Jesus? A Paradigm Shift in Parable Exegesis*, in *Acta Theologica* 29 (2009) 157-182.

18. See the table in *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu* (n. 14), pp. 392-394. The numbers should not be understood as absolutes as there are always borderline cases that do not clearly fulfill all criteria (e.g. Matt 5,14).

*Table.* Parables in Matthew  
(following the “Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu”)

	Nr.	Matthean Order	Title of the Parable (English/ German)	Parallels
Sermon on the mountain (Matthew 5-7)		Matt 5,13	On Salt (Vom Salz)	Q 14,34f.; Mark 9,49f.; Luke 14,34f.
		Matt 5,14	On Light and a City on a Hill (Von der Bergstadt)	EvThom 32
		Matt 5,15	A Lamp on a Lampstand (Die Lampe auf dem Leuchter/Vom Licht auf dem Leuchter)	Q 11,33; Mark 4,21; Luke 8,16; 11,33; EvThom 33,2f.
		Matt 5,25f.	On the Way to Court (Der Gang zum Richter)	Q 12,58f. Luke 12,58f.
		Matt 6,22f.	The Eye as the Lamp of the Body (Vom Auge als des Leibes Licht)	Q 11,34f.; Luke 11,34-46; EvThom 24,1-3
		Matt 6,24	No One Can Serve Two Masters (Vom Doppeldienst)	Q 16,13; Luke 16,13; EvThom 47,1-2
		Matt 6,26.28-30	Do Not Worry (Sorgt euch nicht)	Q 12,24.26-28; Luke 12,24.26-28; EvThom (P.Oxy.655) 36,1-4; Agraphon 124
		Matt 7,2	The Measure of Judgment (Parabel vom Maß)	Mark 4,24; Luke 6,36
		Matt 7,3-5	A Speck and a Log (Vom Splitter und dem Balken)	Q 6,41f.; Luke 6,41f.; EvThom 26 (P.Oxy.1)
		Matt 7,6	Pearls before Swine (Von der Entweihung des Heilige)	EvThom 93; cf. Agraphon 164
		Matt 7,7-11	Ask, Seek, Knock (Vom bittenden Kin)	Q 11,9-13; Luke 11,9-13
		Matt 7,13f.	The Narrow Gate (Von der engen Pforte)	Q 13,24-27; Luke 13,24-27
		Matt 7,15-20	A Tree and Its Fruit (Vom Baum und seinen Früchten)	Q 6,43-45; Matt 12,33-35; Luke 6,43-45; EvThom 45,1-4
		Matt 7,24-27	Wise and Foolish Builders (Haus auf Fels und Sand)	Q 6,47-49; Luke 6,47-49
		Matt 9,12f.	A Physician (Vom Arzt)	Mark 2,17; Luke 5,31f.; cf. Luke 4,23; EvThom 31
	Matt 9,14f.	Question about Fasting (Vom Bräutigam, oder: Die Fastenfrage)	Mark 2,18-20; Luke 5,33-35; EvThom 104,3	
	Matt 9,16f.	An Old Cloak and New Wine (Vom alten Mantel und vom neuen Wein)	Mark 2,21-22; Luke 5,36-39; EvThom 47,3-5	

	Nr.	Matthean Order	Title of the Parable (English/ German)	Parallels
		Matt 9,37f.	Laborers for the Harvest (Arbeiter für die Ernte)	Q 10,2; Luke 10,2; EvThom 73
		Matt 10,24-25a	A Disciple and His Teacher (Vom Schüler und Lehrer)	Q 6,40; Luke 6,40; John 13,16; 15,20
		Matt 11,16-19	Children in Marketplaces (Von den spielenden Kindern)	Q 7,31-35; Luke 7,31-35
		Matt 11,27	The Son and the Father (Von der Lehre des Sohnes)	Q 10,22; (Luke 10,22); John 5,19-23; 8,35
		Matt 12,(22)25-28	A Kingdom Divided Against Itself (Beelzebulgleichnis)	Q 11,14-20; Mark 3,22-26; Luke 11,14-20
		Matt 12,29	A Strong Man's House (Beelzebulgleichnis)	Mark 3,27; Luke 11,21f.; EvThom 35
		Matt 12,33-35	A Tree and Its Fruit (Vom Baum und seinen Früchten)	Q 6,43-45; Matt 7,15-20; Luke 6,43-45; EvThom 45,1-4
		Matt 12,43-45	A Final Condition Worse Than the First (Beelzebulgleichnis)	Q 11,24-26; Luke 11,24-26
Parable discourse (Matthew 13)		Matt 13,3-9.18-23	The Parable of the Sower (Vom Sämann)	Mark 4,3-9.13-20; Luke 8,5-8.11-15; EvThom 9; Agraphon 219
		Matt 13,24-30.36-43	The Wheat and the Weeds (Vom Unkraut unter dem Weizen)	EvThom 57
		Matt 13,31f.	The Mustard Seed (Vom Senfkorn)	Q 13,18f.; Mark 4,30-32; (Luke 13,18f.); EvThom 20
		Matt 13,33	The Leaven (Vom Sauerteig)	Q 13,20f.; Luke 13,20f.; EvThom 96
		Matt 13,44	The Treasure in the Field (Vom Schatz im Acker)	EvThom 76; 109
		Matt 13,45-36	The Pearl of Great Price (Von der Perle)	
		Matt 13,47-50	The Net (Vom Fischnetz)	EvThom 8
		Matt 13,52	The Householder (“Vom rechten Schriftgelehrten”)	–
		Matt 15,13	Plants Not Planted by the Heavenly Father (Vom Ausreißen der Pflanze)	EvThom 40
		Matt 15,14	The Blind Leading the Blind (Vom Blinden als Blindenführer)	Q 6,39; Luke 6,39; EvThom 34
		Matt 15,16f.	Clean and Unclean (Von Reinheit und Unreinheit)	Mark 7,14-23; EvThom 14
		Matt 15,26f.	Bread Tossed to Dogs (Von Kindern und Hunden)	Mark 7,27f.

	Nr.	Matthean Order	Title of the Parable (English/German)	Parallels
		Matt 16,2-3	The Signs of the Times (Von der Beurteilung der Zeit)	Q 12,54-56; Luke 12,54-56; EvThom 91
		Matt 18,3	Becoming Like Little Children (Stillkinder)	Mark 10,15; Luke 18,17; EvThom 22
		Matt 18,12-14	The Lost Sheep (Vom verlorenen Schaf)	Q 15,4-5a.7; Luke 15,4-7; EvThom 107
		Matt 18,23-35	The Unmerciful Servant (Der Schalksknecht)	–
		Matt 20,1-16	The Workers in the Vineyard (Von den Arbeiter im Weinberg)	–
Trilogy		Matt 21,28-32	The Two Sons (Von den Ungleichen Söhnen)	–
		Matt 21,33-46	The Wicked Tenants (Die bösen Winzer)	Mark 12,1-12; Luke 20,9-19; EvThom 65
		Matt 22,1-14	The Wedding Banquet (Von der königlichen Hochzeit)	(Q 14,16-23;) Luke 14,12-24; EvThom 64
Eschatological Discourse: Matthew 23-25		Matt 24,28	A Corpse and Vultures (Vom Aas und den Geiern)	Q 17,37; Luke 17,37
		Matt 24,32f.	The Fig Tree (Vom grünenden Feigenbaum)	Mark 13,28-29; Luke 21,29-31
		Matt 24,40f.	One Taken and One Left (Mitgenommen oder zurückgelassen)	Q 17,34f.; Luke 17,34f.; EvThom 61,1
		Matt 24,43f.	The Thief in the Night (Vom Dieb)	Q 12,39f.; Luke 12,39f.; EvThom 21,5; cf. Agraphon 45
		Matt 24,45-51	The Faithful and the Wicked Servant (Vom treuen und untreuen Haushalter)	Q 12,42-46; Luke 12,42-46
		Matt 25,1-13	The Ten Virgins (Von den zehn Jungfrauen)	cf. Q 13,24-27
		Matt 25,14-30	The Talents (Von den anvertrauten Geldern)	Q 19,12f.15-24.26; Mark 13,34; Luke 19,12-27
		Matt 25,32f.	The Sheep and the Goats (Von den Schafen und Böcken)	–

## 2. *The Parables in the Composition of the Gospel (Especially the Parable Speech in Matt 13)*

Where do parables occur in the Gospel of Matthew? Is there a purposeful parable arrangement? The restriction of inquiry to the so-called “long



parables” has blinded us to the abundance of parables in other parts of the Gospel. In the Sermon on the Mount alone, one can identify 13 parables. Here and there we can observe concentrations of parables (e.g. the parable trilogy within the discourse on the end of the age<sup>19</sup>). Along these lines, the following clusters are usually named in Matthean scholarship:

- 1) Matt 13: parabolic discourse (8 parables)
- 2) Matt 21,28–22,14 trilogy of parables (see Olmstead 2003) (3 parables)
- 3) Matt 24,28–25,33 parables in the eschatological discourse (8 parables)

Let us focus for a moment on the so-called “parabolic discourse” in Matthew 13 because, as we saw above, the Evangelist restrains from using the term “parable” until this moment and then uses it often. Based on the stereotypical concluding sentence, this speech can be located within one of the five extended discourses.

Matthew 7,28 (cf. 19,1)	Καὶ ἐγένετο ὅτε ἐτέλεσεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς τοὺς λόγους τούτους,
Matthew 11,1	Καὶ ἐγένετο ὅτε ἐτέλεσεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς διατάσσων τοῖς δώδεκα μαθηταῖς αὐτοῦ,
Matthew 19,1	Καὶ ἐγένετο ὅτε ἐτέλεσεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς τοὺς λόγους τούτους,
Matthew 13,53	Καὶ ἐγένετο ὅτε ἐτέλεσεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς τὰς παραβολὰς ταύτας,
Matthew 26,1	Καὶ ἐγένετο ὅτε ἐτέλεσεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς πάντα τοὺς λόγους τούτους,

The sentence is exactly the same in Matt 7,28 and 19,1; Matt 26,1 differs only by adding the word πάντα. In 11,1 and in 13,53, the unspecified “words” (λόγοι) are made concrete by being identified as “commandments” (11,1) or “parables” (13,53). Thus, there can be no doubt that Matthew understood the section 13,1-52 as a discourse within a cycle of five. At the same time, the mode of speech varies because Jesus does not speak from beginning to end. Instead shorter sections are repeatedly interrupted by narrative details. In this way, the disciples ask questions (Matt 13,10) and several introductions to Jesus’ speeches are given (Matt 13,11.18.24.31.33).

In Matt 13,36 there is a break because there is a change of scene. Although 13,1 relates that Jesus leaves the house (“Jesus went out of the house”), he returns in 13,36 (“Then he left the crowds and went into the house”). The

19. See W.G. OLMSTEAD, *Matthew’s Trilogy of Parables: The Nation, the Nations and the Reader in Matthew 21:28–22:14* (SNTS MS, 127), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

first part is specifically directed towards the “crowd” (see ὄχλος in v. 2.34.36); the disciples’ instructions begin at v. 36 (μαθητῆς, see also Matt 13,52).

It is striking that Matthew evenly distributes the 8 parables in Matthew 13; there are exactly 4 in each of the two sections. However, he only introduces the first four, those addressed to the “crowd”, with the term παραβολή. Are the parables therefore directed outwards in particular? Do they have a specifically missionary function within the Gospel’s claim to universality, the desire to reach the entire world (Matt 28,16-20)? Are the parables addressed only to the ‘outsiders’, to the “crowd,” whereas the disciples are taught with plain speech?

There is little doubt that the discourse in Matthew 18 is addressed to the inner community. And there is also little doubt that with the “lost sheep” (Matt 18,12-14) and the “unmerciful servant” (Matt 18,23-35) two important parables are included in this discourse. Thus, parables are also addressed to the insider, to the disciples. Therefore, do we have to conclude, that the Evangelist is inconsistent? Or would it be better to be cautious with hasty conclusions?

Once again, in view of our findings, the limitation of inquiry to the so-called long parables concentrated in clusters can and must be criticized. Beginning with Matthew 5 and the introductory passages in the Sermon on the Mount and continuing all the way to the final discourse on the end of the age (Matthew 24-25), Jesus’ speech is permeated with parables. Jesus’ speech as a whole is parabolic speech – the Evangelist himself says this in Matt 13,34:

ταῦτα πάντα ἐλάλησεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἐν παραβολαῖς τοῖς ὄχλοις καὶ χωρὶς παραβολῆς οὐδὲν ἐλάλει αὐτοῖς,

Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing.

It is not the different addressees upon which one should focus, but rather, it is the function of parabolic speech in general that should be reconsidered. Why is the Matthean Jesus telling parables? Before answering this question, I would like to take a look at the treatment of the sources.

### III. PARABLES FROM DIFFERENT SOURCES - CASE STUDIES

In the following I would like to examine four case studies that demonstrate how Matthew treats parables from different sources. I will begin

with the texts that have been transmitted multiple times and end with the “Sondergut”. The traditions of the, in my opinion, later Gospel of Thomas will not be considered. I will be loosely following the process that we chose in the annotation of the parables in the “Gleichniskompensium”.

1. *Parable from the Quadruple Tradition Mark/Q/Matt/Luke:*  
*The Parable of the Mustard Seed (Q 13,18f.; Mark 4,30-32/Matt 13,31f./Luke 13,18f.)*

The tradition of the parable of the mustard seed is exceptional in that it demonstrates a “quadruple tradition”, meaning that in addition to Matthew and Luke, the parable is also found in Q and in Mark<sup>20</sup>. This parable is also an example of the so-called “Kingdom of God parables” which are characteristic of Matthew.

From the viewpoint of redaction criticism, Matthew’s version can be seen as a connection or even conflation of the versions in Mark and Q. Carlson states: “By conflating Mark and Q he has made the text into something different from either”<sup>21</sup>. While the parable is introduced by a question in Mark and probably in Q, Matthew starts with a statement (“The Kingdom of heaven is like ...”).

When the mustard seed has grown, it is “the greatest of all shrubs” in Mark, and a “tree” in Q, but in Matthew it is both: “the greatest of all shrubs *and* becomes a tree” (Matt 13,32), meaning that Matthew combines Mark and Q.

The use of tenses is even more surprising. In Mark the parable is told in the present tense; in Q the aorist is used to recount a past event: a person took the seed and threw it into his garden; it grew up and developed. In Matthew, however, multiple tenses are utilized. It starts

20. There are different explanations concerning the tradition history of this parable: Some argue for an oral tradition behind the different versions, see H. MCARTHUR, *Parable of the Mustard Seed*, in *CBQ* 33 (1971) 198-210, p. 209 n. 201; others for different stages of a literary development, see F. KOGLER, *Das Doppelgleichnis vom Senfkorn und Sauerteig in seiner traditionsgeschichtlichen Entwicklung: Zur Reich-Gottes-Vorstellung Jesu und ihren Aktualisierungen in der Urkirche* (FzB, 59), Würzburg, Echter, 1988; I.H. JONES, *The Matthean Parables: A Literary and Historical Commentary* (SupplNT, 80), Leiden – New York – Köln, Brill, 1995, pp. 322-328; on the double tradition of Q and Mark in general, see R. LAUFEN, *Die Doppelüberlieferungen der Logienquelle und des Markusevangeliums* (BBB, 54), Königstein/Ts. – Bonn, Peter Hanstein, 1980, pp. 174-197 (on the mustard seed).

21. CARLSTON, *Parables* (n. 11), p. 26.

with the aorist (a past event), but then a double change of the tenses takes place:

ὅταν δὲ αὐξήθῃ μείζον τῶν λαχάνων ἐστὶν καὶ γίνεταί δένδρον, ὥστε ἔλθεῖν τὰ πετεινὰ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καὶ κατασκηνοῦν ἐν τοῖς κλάδοις αὐτοῦ.

but when it has grown (aorist) it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes (present tense) a tree, so that the birds of the air come (aorist inf.) and make (present tense) nests in its branches.

This, at least, brings the criteria of a clear use of tense to mark subgenre<sup>22</sup> to an end.

If we look first at the actual historical background, the stark contrast between small and large (in the superlative: the smallest seed – the largest garden plant) speaks most strongly for ‘black mustard’ (*brassica nigra*), which has the smallest seeds (about 0.95–1.6 mm) and the largest bushes (about 2m and even 2.5–3m at the Sea of Galilee<sup>23</sup>) of all the kinds of mustard brought together under the term σίναπι<sup>24</sup>. However, this is still not a tree. Especially in combination with the “birds of heaven”, the mention of a tree points instead to the adoption of a marked tradition. Dan 4,7-9.11.18f.; Ezek 17,22-24 and Ezek 31,6 (see also 1QH 16,4-9) all speak of the image of a tree and the birds living in its boughs. In each case, the interpretation is a king and his reign. In Dan 4,1-34 it is the Babylonian king, in Ezek 17,1-24 the king of Israel and in Ezek 31,1-18 the Pharaoh.

Warren Carter used these political undertones in particular for his interpretation of Matt 13,31f.<sup>25</sup>. The trees mentioned in the Jewish traditions “symbolize the power and rule of nations and their kings, sometimes sanctioned by God and sometimes strongly opposed by God. Either way, it is significant that in these traditions, all the trees/empires are subjected to God’s

22. According to Jülicher the present tense is used for the timeless possibility of a similitude; the aorist for the extraordinary event of the past for the parables proper, see A. JÜLICHER, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, <sup>2</sup>1910 (reprint Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1963); my challenge of this issue can be found in ZIMMERMANN, *Leseanleitung* (n. 14), pp. 22-23.

23. See G. DALMAN, *Arbeit und Sitte in Palästina*. Bd. I/2. *Jahreslauf und Tageslauf*. 2. Hälfte: *Frühling und Sommer*, Hildesheim, Bertelsmann, 1928 (reprint Hildesheim, Georg Olms Verlag, 1987), p. 369; ID., Bd. II. *Der Ackerbau*, Gütersloh, Bertelsmann, 1932 (reprint Hildesheim, Georg Olms Verlag, 1987), p. 293.

24. G. Gaebel discusses white mustard (*sinapis alba*), yellow mustard (*sinapis arvensis*) and the so-called mustard tree (*salvadora persica*), the last one is probably not in Galilee. See the discussion in G. GAEBEL, *Mehr Hoffnung wagen*, in *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu* (n. 14), 330-332.

25. See W. CARTER, *Matthew’s Gospel, Rome’s Empire, and the Parable of the Mustard Seed*, in ZIMMERMANN (ed.), *Hermeneutik der Gleichnisse Jesu* (n. 14), 181-201; R. Funk also reads the parable against the OT kingdom symbolism, see R.W. FUNK, *The Looking-Glass Tree Is for the Birds*, in *Interpretation* 27 (1973) 3-9.

sovereignty”<sup>26</sup>. He concludes: “The central claim expressed through the image of the tree in these narratives is that God exercises control over human empires and reign”<sup>27</sup>.

The Matthean parable metaphorically talks about the “empire of the heavens” (v. 31) and compares it with a great tree. The power and presence of God’s empire are proclaimed to an addressee who is currently suffering under the power of the Roman Empire.

As Carter pointed out, the entire Gospel of Matthew reflects the conflict with Rome’s Empire. Even if we do not concur with all of his conclusions, we might agree that this context brings a specific meaning of the parable of the mustard seed to the fore: “the negotiation of Rome’s Empire by Jesus’ followers”. God brings empires down. But “God also uses Rome to punish Jerusalem, particularly its elite leadership, allies of Rome, for rejecting Jesus”<sup>28</sup>.

## 2. *Parables from the Triple Tradition: Mark/Matthew/Luke: Mark 7,14-23/ Matt 15,15-17: Clean and Unclean*

With regard to the triple tradition parables, Charles E. Carlston’s work *The Parables of the Triple Tradition* (1975) is pertinent. Carlston begins his work with part one, “The Matthean Redaction”, in which he identifies a total of 13 texts in Matthew as coming from Mark<sup>29</sup>.

In the following I will deal with the parable on “things that defile” (Matt 15,11.15-19), which is not part of the ‘triple tradition’ in a narrow sense. It only occurs in Mark and Matthew. Here, however, by focusing on several significant changes, it can be demonstrated more clearly how Matthew worked with Mark’s parables.

26. CARTER, *Mustard Seed* (n. 25), p. 198.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 200.

28. *Ibid.*

29. See 1) The Physician (Matt 9,12, cf. Mark 2,15ff.; Luke 5,31f.); 2) The Sons of the Bridechamber (Matt 9,14f.; cf. Mark 2,18ff.; Luke 5,33ff.); 3) The Patched Garment and the Old Wineskins (Matt 9,16f.; cf. Mark 2,21f.; Luke 5,36-39); 4) The Beelzebul Parables (Matt 12:22-30, 43ff.; cf. Mark 3:22-27; Luke 11:14-26); 5) The Sower (Matt 13,1-9.18-23; cf. Mark 4,1-9.13-20; Luke 8,4-8, 11-15); 6) The Mustard Seed (Matt 13,31f.; cf. Mark 4,30ff.; Luke 13,18f.); 7) The Things That Defile (Matt 15,1-20; cf. Mark 7,24-30); 8) Children and Dogs (Matt 15,21-28; cf. Mark 7,24-30); 9) The Wicked Husbandmen (Matt 21,33-46; cf. Mark 12,1-12; Luke 20,9-18); 10) The Fig Tree as the Herald of Summer (Matt 24,32f.; cf. Mark 13,28f.; Luke 21,29ff.); 11) The Savorless Salt (Matt 5,13; cf. Mark 9,50; Luke 14,34f.); 12) The Lamp and the Bushel (Matt 5,15; cf. Mark 4,21; Luke 8,16; 11,33); 13) The Manifestation of What Is Hidden (Matt 10,26; cf. Mark 4,22; Luke 8,17;12,2f.), see CARLSTON, *Parables* (n. 11), pp. 10-51.

The first question is: is this even a parable? Many scholars exclude this text from parable exegesis<sup>30</sup>. As in Mark 7,17, the explicit term παραβολή is used within the speech on “clean and unclean” adopted from Mark (Matt 15,15: Peter said: “Explain this *parable* to us!”). The subsequent explanation reveals that the reference text must be Matt 15,11, which in Mark is also located directly before the question. Thus, Matthew still considers this text to be a parable<sup>31</sup>. Let us have a closer look at Matt 15,11

οὐ τὸ εἰσερχόμενον	εἰς τὸ στόμα	κοινοῖ τὸν ἄνθρωπον,
ἀλλὰ τὸ ἐκπορευόμενον	ἐκ τοῦ στόματος τοῦτο	κοινοῖ τὸν ἄνθρωπον.
it is not what goes	into the mouth	that defiles a person,
but it is what comes out	of the mouth	that defiles.

The text shows a two-part narrative sequence in which the first sentence can be directly related to the commandments concerning food and can be understood literally in the context of the purity discourse. Only the second part of the verse, which is formulated in direct contrast (οὐ – ἀλλά; εἰς – ἐκ), metaphorically transfers the process of eating into a broader but at first unclear field. How can that which comes out of the mouth defile?

The confusion of the audience’s expectations is then resolved in the subsequent instructions to the disciples, in which nourishment is treated neutrally whereas that which comes out of the mouth should be understood figuratively. Thus, the interpretation objectifies a traditionally overdetermined field (food – purity), while a traditionally freer field (speech) is ‘charged’ to the heart and the entire person. Impurity arises because “evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander“ (v. 19) come from the heart.

This parabolic character of the sentence (including the interpretation) exists in essence in Mark; however, there are striking deviations. Matthew adapts the, at times, very across-the-board and even inappropriate statements of the Markan purity discourse to his Jewish milieu. Thus, the situational details in Mark 7,2 and the naming of “all Jews” (v. 3f.) are omitted. Additionally, we have no corroborating evidence for a Jewish practice of purifying oneself with water after walking through the market. The parable (v. 11) is also rearranged. The introductory οὐδὲν ἔστιν ἕξιωθεν is

30. See, for instance, the comprehensive study of K.R. SNODGRASS, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 2008.

31. See also CARLSTON, *Parables* (n. 11), pp. 28-35; JONES, *Parables* (n. 20), pp. 368-371; In Matthew, however, two further parables are added (Matt 15,13 the uprooting of the plants; Matt 15,14 the blind leading the blind).

missing, as is the corresponding contrast between “outside” and “inside”. However, in Matthew “the mouth” is added, which directs attention more clearly to the nutritional regulations<sup>32</sup>. While Mark 7,19 fundamentally declares all food to be clean (“Thus he declared all foods clean”) and thus reduces all nutritional regulations to absurdity, Matthew seems to be more interested in making the discussion more precise and ethical<sup>33</sup>.

*Conclusion:* Without being able to go into further detail, I would like to note that the Markan parable of what defiles a man is introduced by Matthew in the same context of the purity discourse. The nutritional regulations are not fundamentally devalued; however, they are relativized (see the Jewish background). They are adapted more closely to the Jewish background, once again revealing the Jewish scope of Matthew and his community.

### 3. *Parables from the Double Tradition: Q/Matthew: The Lost Sheep* (Q 15,4-7 – Matt 18,12-14)

I would like to look at the parable of the lost sheep as an example of the double tradition, which is Matthew’s adoption of Q material<sup>34</sup>. Luke begins his “chapter of the lost” (Luke 15) with this text and adds the parable of the lost coin and that of the lost/prodigal son, in Matthew, however, the parable appears in the framework of the fourth discourse (Matthew 18), the so-called “discourse on the church”. The framework in v. 10a and 14 is clearly redactional<sup>35</sup> because Matthew takes up the motif of the “little ones”, which was previously the subject of Matt 18,6.

Let us look at several details. Although the parable shows clear differences in the wording between Matt and Luke<sup>36</sup>, the fundamental narrative structure scarcely leaves room to dispute a common basis. Instead of getting

32. There is also a syntagmatic semantic connection to the “lips” mentioned in Matt 15,8, which uses Isa 29,13 and its distinction of mouth and heart, see J. NEUSNER, (“First Cleanse the Inside”: The Halakic Background of a Controversy Saying, in *NTS* 22 (1976) 486-495.

33. See JONES, *Parables* (n. 20), p. 369; see on speech ethics the comprehensive study of S. LUTHER, *Sprachethik im Neuen Testament: Eine Analyse des frühchristlichen Diskurses im Matthäusevangelium, im Jakobusbrief und im 1. Petrusbrief* (WUNT), Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2015 (forthcoming).

34. The majority of scholars reckons with a Q parable here. In contrast, U. Luz is undecided or even negative, see U. LUZ, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus 3: Mt 18–25* (EKKNT, 1/3), Zürich, Benziger; Neukirchen-Vluyn, Neukirchener Verlag, 1997, 2012, pp. 25-26: “Stand sie in Q? (...) Offen ist, ob das Gleichnis in Q stand. (...) Fazit: Ich rechne eher damit, daß Matt und Luke diesen Gleichnisstoff unabhängig voneinander der mündlichen Überlieferung verdanken”.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 25: “Das Schlußwort V 14 ist eindeutig redaktionell”.

36. See the many words in double square brackets in J.M. ROBINSON – P. HOFFMANN – J.S. KLOPPENBORG (eds.), *The Critical Edition of Q: Synopsis including the Gospels of Matthew*

into a detailed discussion about whether *πλανηθῆ* (Matt 18,12 from *πλανάω* go astray; be misled) or *ἀπολέσας* (Luke 15,4 from *ἀπόλλυμι* be lost; perish) was more original or whether the order was *ἐξ αὐτῶν ἔν* (Luke 15,4) or *ἐν ἐξ αὐτῶν* (Matt 18,12), the methodological decision of our research group in Mainz to view the plot or the narrative framework as the foundation of the analysis proves valid her<sup>37</sup>.

We can note the following about the parable of the lost sheep: It is about a person who has sheep. We can also clearly recognize the numerical specifications because first the entire count of 100 sheep is mentioned and then a contrast, which appears again at the end, is drawn between one sheep and 99 sheep. Even without precisely determining a verb, one can conclude that a sheep has gone astray because the going in search and finding would otherwise make no sense. Finally the motif of the “delight over” is named and the double *ἐπί* (over) suggests a comparison. And one can, like Fleddermann, assume that a reaction in heaven is common to both<sup>38</sup>.

This basic plot is embedded in the context in Matthew and Luke in different ways. While in Luke, joy over a returned sinner, over an outsider to society and the community (see in particular v. 1 and 7) takes the central role, the emphasis in Matthew is on instruction for the community.

In Matthew, the sentence structure stands out<sup>39</sup>. The parable is presented in two *ἐάν*-sentences which refer to the argumentative context of the discourse on the church (if ... then). The rhetorical question that follows the first if-sentence demands the agreement of the audience, who is also spoken to using the direct form of address in v. 10a: *Ὁρᾶτε* (Look!) as well as by “I tell you”. This “appeal structure” of the parable is also strengthened by the redactional expression *τί ὑμῖν δοκεῖ* (What do you

*and Luke, Mark and Thomas with English, German, and French Translations of Q and Thomas*, Philadelphia, PA, Fortress; Leuven, Peeters, 2000, pp. 478-481.

37. With H.T. FLEDDERMANN, *Q: A Reconstruction and Commentary* (BiTS, 1), Leuven – Paris – Dudley, MA, Peeters, 2005, p. 767: “Although Matthew and Luke differ greatly, the parable has the same basic two-part structure in both evangelists”.

38. See R. ZIMMERMANN, *Metaphorology and Narratology in Q Exegesis: Literary Methodology as an Aid to Understanding the Q Text*, in D.T. ROTH – R. ZIMMERMANN – M. LABAHN (eds.), *Metaphor, Narrative, and Parables in Q* (WUNT, 315), Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2014, 3-30; D.T. ROTH, *Die Parabeln in der Logienquelle: ‘Alte’ Probleme und ‘Neue’ Ansätze*, in C. HEIL – G. HARB – M. HOELSCHER (eds.), *Built on Rock or Sand? Q Studies: Retrospects, Introspects and Prospects* (BETL), Leuven, Peeters (forthcoming), see also FLEDDERMANN, *Q: A Reconstruction and Commentary* (n. 37), p. 770: “The parable certainly included a reaction in heaven since both Matthew and Luke record one”.

39. For details see A. OVEJA, *Neunundneunzig sind nicht genug! (Vom verlorenen Schaf) Q 15,4-5a.7 (Matt 18,12-14 / Luke 15,1-7 / EvThom 107)*, in *Kompendium der Geichnisse Jesu* (n. 14), 205-219, pp. 213-214.



think?, v. 12), which often appears in Matthew (see Matt 17,25; 21,28; 22,17.42; 26,66).

According to Luz, the verb *πλανάομαι* is also Matthean<sup>40</sup> and in a nutshell summarizes the Matthean interpretation. The parable of the lost sheep is about community members gone astray. Following the example of the shepherd, the community members are called to go and search for the lost little ones and not to despise them (Matt 18,10). The finding is also formulated in the conditional in an if-sentence and is in no way definite. Should it, however, be successful, it will lead to delight that reaches up to the heavens. While Luke explicitly speaks of the “joy in heaven” (Luke 15,7), Matthew emphasizes the “will of the heavenly Father”, which in the Jewish context brings in a more paraenetic note. In Matthew, the term *θέλημα* often refers to God’s will<sup>41</sup>. At the same time, the “Father in heaven” creates the connection to the introduction, which in v. 10b speaks not only of angels in heaven but also of “Father in heaven”.

### *Conclusion*

The Matthean interpretation inserts the parable of the lost sheep into the *community rules* and makes a direct connection to the situation in the community through the framework as well as through the inner structure. The little ones are not necessarily a sociologically definable group; instead the parable addresses every Christian in his or her own faith and teaches that despite possible aberrations (if...), he or she will not be excluded from the community and miss out on salvation. The shepherd demonstrates clear overtones for a transferral to the divine shepherd (Ezekiel 34), as is suggested in the framework (Father in heaven). However this unmistakably unique emphasis is not in opposition to the parable in Q. As seen by Fleddermann, the intention of the Q parable is to direct more attention to the shepherd and less to the sheep. It is presumably not about a reversal (as in Luke). “The Q-parable does not concentrate on the sheep but rather on the shepherd’s effort to recover the sheep”<sup>42</sup>. Once again, Matthew is close to the intention of his source, nevertheless he puts the parable in a certain contexts and interprets it in his specific meaning.

40. *Ibid.*, the biblical linguistic usage corresponds, see in LXX 6 times together with *πρόβατα*.

41. See Matt 6,10; 7,21; 12,50; 21,31; 26,42; see LUZ, *Mt 18–25* (n. 34), p. 42; FLEDDERMANN, *Q: A Reconstruction and Commentary* (n. 37), p. 771.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 772.

4. *Parables from the Single Tradition (so-called "Sondergut"):*  
*Matt 21,28-32: The Parable of the Two Sons*

Finally, a parable from the Sondergut of Matthew is taken into account. I would like to take up the opening parable from the "trilogy"<sup>43</sup> in the final part of the Gospel (Matt 21,28–22,14): the parable of the two sons (Matt 21,28–32) and focus the ethical interpretation of this parable<sup>44</sup>. Measured by the standards of ancient ethos, the parable is scandalous. Aristotle (*Eth. Nic.* IX 2, 1165a 24), Menander (341–290 BC frg. 600) and Epictetus, to name only a few, were all in agreement that it is the duty of the son "in every instance to obey him [the father]; not to revile him to any one; not to say or do anything injurious to him; to give way and yield in everything, co-operating with him to the utmost of his power" (Epictetus, *diss* II 10,7). Based on the fourth commandment (Exod 20,12), Jewish ethics also views obedience to the parents as an obligatory norm. According to Philo or Josephus, a son should be punished with the death penalty if he does not honor his parents and speaks to them without respect (Philo *spec.* II 248, see Flav. Jos. *Apion.* II 206)<sup>45</sup>.

The audience must be appalled at the reaction of the first son. However, ethical foundations are not being shaken only at the level of moral rules and ethos. Analyzing the text on a more theoretical level, it demonstrates moral inconsistency that, in the terminology of analytical moral philosophy, could be characterized as "contradictory". Anyone who agrees to an imperative or, more openly formulated, to a moral law must also carry through on it – and vice versa. The double asymmetry (denial-obedience; affirmation-disobedience) thus calls the entire ethical system of deontological moral law into question. That is, however, clearly the point of the parable. Harmony between consent and action is not expected. In order to act according to "the will of the Father", it is sufficient simply to act, even if verbal consent

43. See OLMSTEAD, *Trilogy* (n. 19), on Matt 21,28–32 see *ibid.*, pp. 99–108.

44. On the ethical focus see also R. ZIMMERMANN, *Die Ethico-Ästhetik der Gleichnisse Jesu: Ethik durch literarische Ästhetik am Beispiel der Parabeln im Matthäus-Evangelium*, in F.W. HORN – R. ZIMMERMANN (eds.), *Jenseits von Indikativ und Imperativ: Contexts and Norms of New Testament Ethics Vol. 1* (WUNT, 238), Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2009, 235–265, pp. 258–259; on the rabbinic background see W.E. LANGLEY, *The Parable of the Two Sons (Matthew 21,28–32) against Its Semitic and Rabbinic Backdrop*, in *CBQ* 58 (1996) 228–243; on the variety of interpretations G. GÄBEL, *Was heißt Gottes Willen tun? (Von den ungleichen Söhnen) – Matt 21,28–32*, in *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu* (n. 14), 473–478; furthermore SNODGRASS, *Stories with Intent* (n. 30), pp. 266–275.

45. For more details on this background see GÄBEL, *Gottes Willen* (n. 44), p. 475; on the contradiction between saying and doing see also Dio Chrysostom, *Oratio* 70,5; bBM 78a; ExRab 27,9, according to SNODGRASS, *Stories with Intent* (n. 30), p. 267.

is lacking. More clearly stated, the parable is about “paradoxical action” instead of the fulfillment of obligations.

At this point, one could point out the ὑστερον μεταμέλομαι (change his mind) in v. 29 (see also 32). Is the action perhaps preceded by insight after all? Is the action indeed in harmony with the actor’s own conviction? The text leaves it up in the air as to whether the sons regret either the refusing to act or the disobeying the father. However, both aspects are brought together in the final sentence. He who acts fulfils the will of the father regardless of which insight, justification or manifestation of will precedes the action.

### *Conclusion*

The parable speaks of the fulfillment of the will of the heavenly Father, which takes place by means of correct action, orthopraxy, and not by means of correct teaching, orthodoxy. He who acts is on the ὁδὸς δικαιοσύνης (way of righteousness), as is expressed clearly in the framing verses about John the Baptist (Matt 21,32). Within that context, the parable may be addressed to Jewish Leaders, who in Matt 23,3 are directly accused of saying and not doing<sup>46</sup>. There is, however, no need to narrow down the meaning of the parable to one single aspect. Within the ethical concept of Matthew (which is mostly addressed to the Matthean Community), the parable opens up to a more general ethical debate and highlights the contradiction of saying and not doing.

## IV. POLYVALENT INTERPRETATION OF PARABLES IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

### 1. *Matthew’s Interpretation of Parables*

There is no doubt that the parables are presented and edited in Matthew with a particular aim in mind. The parables in the Gospel of Matthew bear the handwriting of the Evangelist. They are not simply reproductions of existing tradition. With regard to their internal narrative structure as well as to the introductions and conclusions<sup>47</sup> and in their arrangement within the work as a whole, Matthew steers the parables in a particular direction and implements them with a specific intent. However, a direct interpretation is given in only one place. The parable of the “wheat and the weeds” is directly explained within the framework instructions to the disciples (Matt 13,36-43). This narrowing of the interpretation can also be found in the tradition

46. See *ibid.*, p. 274: “The parable then is an accusation that the leaders of Israel claim to serve God but do not”.

47. See on this aspect especially MÜNCH, *Gleichnisse* (n. 11).

from Mark (here the parable of the sower and the parable concerning cleanliness are explicitly interpreted) and in general remains an exception. Appellative or summarizing concluding sentences cannot be put into the same category. My point here is to highlight that even if Matthew had his own interests in the parable tradition, he did not define the interpretation of the parables and limit their meanings to one single interpretation. He transmits or (if we grant him greater qualities of authorship) creates parables as a type of text that is open to interpretation. Thus, he affirms a basic characteristic of this genre. With their specific interaction of narrativity, metaphor and realism, they are open to interpretation and want to remain so.

## 2. *A Whiff of Postmodernity in Early Christianity: Polyvalent Interpretation*

Anyone who wants to fix the meaning of the parables to a single theological or ethical point (e.g. Jülicher with his *tertium comparationis* – one point approach) misjudges the hermeneutical potential of the parable texts. Ulrich Luz's remarks about the lost sheep are principally valid: "Das Sinnpotential eines biblischen Textes (hat sich) im Lauf der Auslegungsgeschichte zu reicher Fülle entfaltet. Ist irgendeine dieser Auslegungen falsch? (...) Bereits das Neue Testament zeigt verschiedene Akzentuierungsmöglichkeiten der ursprünglichen Parabel"<sup>48</sup>.

Parables are open to interpretation. This, however, does not simultaneously mean that they are arbitrary. Parables allow more than one interpretation and, in doing so, trigger interpretative processes, whether in an individual reader/listener or within a reading community. Parables are "discussion starters" (Crossan) that deny any dogmatic claims to absolutism. This renunciation of absolute interpretation has been re-discovered in particular by postmodern philosophy. However, the entire history of biblical interpretation from the allegorical interpretation of Origen and the fourfold exegesis to the divinatory and literary interpretation of Schleiermacher is characterized by this openness. It was only the short 'golden age' of historical-critical exegesis in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that narrowed the interpretive range in an historic positivistic sense<sup>49</sup>.

In the Gospel of Matthew, we also find the conviction that parables want to be accessible – accessible to the entire world. Matthew 13, the parable discourse, suggests the difference between the disciples and the common people.

48. LUZ, *Mt 18–25* (n. 34), p. 35.

49. This is clearly to be seen in the new source book S. LUTHER – R. ZIMMERMANN, *Studienbuch Hermeneutik: Bibelauslegung durch die Jahrhunderte als Lernfeld der Textinterpretation. Portraits – Modelle – Quellentexte*, Gütersloh, Gütersloher Verlag, 2014.

While the people are addressed in parables, the disciples are granted the understanding of the secrets of the Kingdom of Heaven (Matt 13,11). The eyes and ears of the disciples are opened. This statement, however, has both a positive and a negative dimension. The medium of parable not only enshrouds, it also exposes. The use of parable in the Gospel as a whole clearly strengthens the second aspect: This medium is exactly the way in which the entire world, all of humanity can and should hear Jesus' message. According to Matt 13,35 the Psalm (Ps 78,2) fulfils itself in Jesus' parable speech to the people. It speaks of the opening of the mouth, of the utterance of secrets. The parable wants to disclose, it should be understood and instigate 'hearing and seeing'.

## V. THE ROLE AND FUNCTION OF PARABLES IN MATTHEW

The specific linguistic form of the parable also has special functions that Matthew implements in his use of the parables.

### 1. *The Rhetorical Function of Parables: Parables and Eschatology*

Matthew is familiar with a pronounced eschatological expectation, as can be seen in the expansive discourse on the end of the age. The parable trilogy in Matthew 21–22 in particular but also other parables in Matthew 24–25 reveal that the parables also play a definitive role in the eschatological proclamation. Let us look, for example, at two parables from these sections: the parable of the banquet in the parable trilogy in Matt 21,28–22,14 and the parable of the ten virgins in Matt 25,1–13 in the discourse on the end of times.

The parables demonstrate certain structural analogies in the tension between invitation or admission to a wedding banquet on the one hand and the ostracizing or excluding of the guests on the other hand. The guest without wedding robes is thrown out (Matt 22,11–14); the door is not opened to the foolish virgins (Matt 25,10–13). Does Matthew know a strict dualism that contrasts salvation on one hand and the court of law on the other? Or to bring this to a head: Must salvation first be earned through good works? Or can it even be endangered after the fact if those summoned do not prove themselves to be worthy of mercy? If the community does not prove itself in the faith<sup>50</sup>?

50. H.-J. ECKSTEIN, *Bessere Gerechtigkeit: Zur Ethik Jesu nach dem Matthäusevangelium*, in *Theologische Beiträge* 32 (2001) 299–316, p. 315: "Und dennoch: Obwohl Matthäus so eindrücklich das Handeln Gottes zugunsten der Menschen indikativisch zu beschreiben weiß, dennoch vermittelt er in einem bestimmten Zusammenhang in der Tat den Eindruck, dass

In my opinion, one ends up in such theological contradictions only when one culpably disregards the linguistic form of the parable. It is indeed a characteristic of Matthew's parables that they work with rhetorical contrasts. They do not only activate traditional stores of knowledge, such as the conscious image fields here of family and legal life in "wedding" and "court of law". They consciously focus on the possibility and necessity of empathy and aesthetic experience. The idea is not so much to convince using arguments and logic but more to be felt and experienced. The parable speech of the wedding and the law court is figurative speech that uses the appeal character of the parable in order to leave the audience without a choice. The wedding parables in particular intends not primarily to warn but to attract. Thus, anyone who tries to derive moral dogmatic theology of the final judgment from the parables misjudges their rhetorical dimension.

## 2. *The Ethical Function of Parables: Ethico-Aesthetics in Parables*

It can scarcely be denied that Matthew also gives the parables an ethical character within his ethical development of the Gospel. We already have seen in the interpretation of Matt 21,28-32, and it can be observed particularly in the introductions and moralistic conclusions<sup>51</sup>.

The introductions often make explicit use of the imperative<sup>52</sup>. The readers are challenged to hear, understand or learn. According to Christian Münch, the conclusions are also primarily admonitions or instructions and often make grammatical use of the imperative or of future formulations. The connective particle οὕτως is characteristic, for example in Matt 5,16:

οὕτως λαμψάτω τὸ φῶς ὑμῶν ἔμπροσθεν τῶν ἀνθρώπων, ὅπως ἴδωσιν ὑμῶν τὰ καλὰ ἔργα καὶ δοξάσωσιν τὸν πατέρα ὑμῶν τὸν ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς.

In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven<sup>53</sup>.

der ethische Anspruch den Heilszuspruch nachträglich gefährden könnte und der Indikativ der Gnadenzusage durch die Gewichtung des Imperativs nachträglich konditioniert wird".

51. See also MÜNCH, *Gleichnisse* (n. 11), pp. 129-160 (on the introductions); pp. 249-290 (on the conclusions).

52. See also *ibid.*, pp. 155-158. Münch points out that most of these introductory imperatives have been taken over from tradition.

53. See also: 12,45: οὕτως ἔσται καὶ τῇ γενεᾷ ταύτῃ τῇ πονηρᾷ (So will it be also with this evil generation).

13,49: οὕτως ἔσται ἐν τῇ συντελείᾳ τοῦ αἰῶνος (So it will be at the end of the age).

18,35 οὕτως καὶ ὁ πατήρ μου ὁ οὐράνιος ποιήσει ὑμῖν, ἐὰν μὴ ἀφῆτε ἕκαστος τῷ ἀδελφῷ αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ τῶν καρδιῶν ὑμῶν (So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart). 24,42 (two in the

The embedding of the parables in the macro context of the entire Gospel correlates to the sensitive structuring of the micro contexts. The parables often bring confirmatory speeches that intend to create an impulse to action to a close. For example in Matt 7,24-26 (wise and foolish builders) in the Sermon on the Mount; in 11,16-19 (playing children); in 13,52 in the parabolic discourse or in Matt 18,23-35 (unforgiving servant) in the discourse on the church. The parabolic discourse in Matthew 13 is placed in the center of the five discourses. Rhetorically, the *parabolai* do not simply aim at *argumentatio* or *ratio*, simply because, as *paradeigma*, they fulfill a particular function in the leading to a logical conclusion, as in the ancient rhetoric<sup>54</sup>.

The imperative introductions generally use a verb of sense perception, in particular “Look!” or “Listen!” (ἀκούετε, Matt 15,10, see also 21,33; 24,43). Questions that have already been asked within the narrated world and often not answered there are also repeated and directed at listeners. There is often a question at the end of a parable:

Matt 18,33: Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?”

Matt 20,15: Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?

Matt 21,31: Which of the two did the will of his father?

Matt 21,40: Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?

Using this strategy, the readers are addressed holistically and drawn into the events of the parable narrative step by step. They should recognize, they should hear, they should experience with their senses and be absorbed into aesthetic experience. Thus, I am convinced that Matthew undertakes not only “to make the parables ethical” but rather, in contrast, “to make ethics aesthetic” by using parables. This can be seen clearly in the Sermon on the Mount. This text is usually understood as a type of ethical manifest<sup>55</sup>. But in which linguistic form are these ethics presented? In addition to the Antitheses and the Golden Rule, there are many parables, which is normally

field and at the mill): Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day\* your Lord is coming. Γρηγορεῖτε οὖν, ὅτι οὐκ οἴδατε ποῖα ἡμέρα ὁ κύριος ὑμῶν ἔρχεται.

24,33 (at the fig tree): So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. οὕτως καὶ ὑμεῖς, ὅταν ἴδητε πάντα ταῦτα, **γινώσκετε** ὅτι ἐγγύς ἐστιν ἐπὶ θύραις.

54. See my article R. ZIMMERMANN, *Jesus' Parables and Ancient Rhetoric: The Contributions of Aristotle and Quintilian to the Form Criticism of the Parables*, in ID. (ed.), *Hermeneutik der Gleichnisse Jesu* (n. 14), 238-258.

55. See R. ZIMMERMANN, *Sermon on the Mount*, in *The (Oxford) Encyclopedia of Bible and Ethics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015 (forthcoming).

overseen in scholarship. They are located programmatically at the beginning (Matt 5,13-16: salt, city, light) and at the end (Matt 7,24-26: wise and foolish builders) and are brought into play repeatedly throughout the speech (see Matt 6,22f: lamp of the body; 6,24: serving two masters; 6,26-30: ravens and lilies; 7,2: the measure; 7,3-5: speck and log; 7,6: pearls before swine, 7,7-11: asking child; 7,15-20: tree and fruit).

Logic and reason are often interrupted, as in the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matt 18,35) or of the treasure in the field (Matt 13,44-46)<sup>56</sup>. The ethics of the parables is not a system of logic or a moral sermon in the imperative. The parables use images and daily-life situations to promote just behavior, that is orthopraxy, as we have seen with the parable of the two sons (Matt 21,28-32). Furthermore, the ethics of the parables is narrative-metaphorical, holistic and passionate. It adheres to the laws of poetry and aesthetics more than those of logic and reason. It is an “ethico-aesthetic”<sup>57</sup>, as I have put forward previously. Anyone who tries to derive moral dogmatic theology from the parables misjudges their aesthetic dimension.

### 3. *The Theological Function of Parables: Parables of the Kingdom of Heaven*

The parables of the Gospel of Matthew fulfill a theological function in particular. It was the first Evangelist who brought together the form and content of Jesus’ proclamation in an exceptionally effective synthesis, as I would like to demonstrate with the “Kingdom of God”-parables.

Since Charles Harold Dodd<sup>58</sup> it has been agreed that Jesus proclaimed the “Kingdom of God”<sup>59</sup> in parables<sup>60</sup>. Correspondingly Crossan said: “There is

56. See here ZIMMERMANN, *Ethico-Ästhetik* (n. 44), pp. 256-258.

57. See *ibid.*, pp. 235-244 on the overlapping of “ethics” and “aesthetics”. The term is taken from G. GAMM, *Einleitung*, in ID. – G. KIMMERLE (eds.), *Ethik und Ästhetik: Nachmetaphysische Perspektiven, Tübinger Beiträge zu Philosophie und Gesellschaftskritik 2*, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 1990, 1-10. Further M. SEEL, *Ethisch-Ästhetische Studien*, Frankfurt/M, Suhrkamp, 1996; B. GREINER – M. MOOG-GRÜNEWALD (eds.), *Etho-Poietik: Ethik und Ästhetik im Dialog. Erwartungen, Forderungen, Abgrenzungen* (ZAAK Beiheft, 7), Bonn, Reichert, 1998; M. FOUCAULT, *Ästhetik der Existenz: Schriften zur Lebenskunst*, ed. D. DEFERT, Frankfurt/M, Suhrkamp, 2007.

58. See also the programmatic introductory sentence in C.H. DODD, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, London, Nisbet, 1935 (cited is the paperback reproduction of the revised edition, Glasgow, 1978), p. 13: “The parables are perhaps the most characteristic element in the teaching of Jesus Christ as recorded in the Gospels. (...) Certainly there is no part of the Gospel record which has for the reader a clearer ring of authenticity”.

59. Concerning the Kingdom of God, see, among others, T. SÖDING, *Lehre in Vollmacht: Jesu Wunder und Gleichnisse im Evangelium der Gottesherrschaft*, in *Communio* 36/1 (2007) 3-17; also G. VANONI – B. HEININGER, *Das Reich Gottes* (NEB, 4), Würzburg, Echter, 2002.

60. As, for example, J.D. CROSSAN, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus*, New York, Harper & Row, 1973 (repr. Sonoma, CA, 1992), pp. 23-36; J. BREECH, *The Silence of Jesus: The Authentic Voice of the Historical Man*, Philadelphia, PA, Fortress, 1983, pp. 66-74;



very wide agreement that Jesus is the one who proclaimed the Kingdom of God". Looking back historically to the oldest sources reveals, however, that these sources, Q and Mark, introduce the Kingdom of God as a reference field only twice within an abundance of parables. From a total of 28 Q parables<sup>61</sup>, the βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ is mentioned only in the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven (Q 13,18f.20f.), which is even more remarkable because Q indeed speaks quite often of the "Kingdom of God"<sup>62</sup>. Within the total of 17 Markan parables, the Kingdom of God is referred to only in the parable of the growing seed (Mark 4,26) and that of the mustard seed (Mark 4,30).

It was Matthew who first brought together these two otherwise parallel currents of tradition: on the one hand, the memory of Jesus' parable discourse, and on the other hand the memory of the constitutive meaning of the "Kingdom of God" in Jesus' proclamation. One can agree with Dunn's judgment only within the scope of Matthean remembrance: "Jesus was evidently remembered as using parables to illustrate or illumine what he had in mind when he spoke of the kingdom"<sup>63</sup>.

In the introductions, the "Kingdom of Heaven" is chosen 10 times by Matthew as a frame of reference for the parables<sup>64</sup>, for example "The Kingdom of heaven is like ... ὁμοιώθη ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν",

O. KNOCH, *Wer Ohren hat, der höre: Die Botschaft der Gleichnisse Jesu. Ein Werkbuch zur Bibel*, Stuttgart, Metzler, 31987, p. 62: "Die Botschaft vom Reich Gottes als Hauptthema der Gleichnisse"; A.J. HULTGREN, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary*, Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 2000, p. 384: "The kingdom was certainly a main theme, even *the* main theme, of Jesus' message". SNODGRASS, *Stories with Intent* (n. 30), p. 179: "Any number of parables could be labelled parables of the present kingdom, and to some degree all the parables presuppose that the kingdom of God is present in the activity of Jesus, even where the kingdom is not explicitly in view". Also from the perspective of Jesus scholarship: P. POKORNÝ, *Lexikalische und rhetorische Eigentümlichkeiten der ältesten Jesustradition*, in J. SCHRÖTER – R. BRUCKER (eds.), *Der historische Jesus: Tendenzen und Perspektiven der gegenwärtigen Forschung* (BZfNW, 114), Berlin – New York, de Gruyter, 2002, 393-408, here p. 395: it is "kaum möglich, die Bedeutung der Reich-Gottes-Verkündigung in der Jesustradition zu überschätzen". Also SÖDING, *Lehre* (n. 59), pp. 10-14. On this critically C.W. HEDRICK, *Parables as Poetic Fictions: The Creative Voice of Jesus*, Peabody, MA, Hendrickson, 1994, pp. 16-17, who demonstrates that only 13 parables can truly be categorized as the Kingdom of God.

61. In the *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu* 28 texts for Q and 17 texts for Mark are listed as parables, see the tables in *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu* (n. 14), pp. 59-60; 262-263.

62. See Q 4,5; 6,20; 7,28; 10,9; 11,2.17.18.20; 11,52; 12,31; 13,18.20.28; 16,16; 17,20f.; 22,30.

63. See J.D.G. DUNN, *Jesus Remembered*, Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, p. 385; similarly M. HENGEL – A.M. SCHWEMER, *Jesus und das Judentum*, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2007, p. 398: "Auf jeden Fall blieb er (= Jesus) in Erinnerung als der, der von der Königsherrschaft Gottes in Gleichnissen sprach".

64. MÜNCH, *Gleichnisse* (n. 11), pp. 144-150.

Matt 13,24-30; 13,44; 13,45-46; 13,47-50; 13,52; 18,23-35; 20,1-16; 21,28-32; 22,1-14; 25,1-13)<sup>65</sup>.

In this way creative memory is shown to be established in the object itself. The form of the parable is considered to be constitutive for Jesus' speech about the Kingdom of God. Besides the Jewish-theological tradition, it is the concrete life world of humankind that advances to the display space for Jesus' theological message. This proximity to life and people is the deepest expression of "Emmanuel" (God is with us, see Matt 1,23), whose proximity to man is promised to the end of the age (Matt 28,20). Anyone who tries to derive a dogmatic theology of historicism from the parables misjudges their theological dimension.

#### EPILOGUE

Finally, let us return to Crossan. He put forth the criticism that Matthew re-interpreted Jesus' parables into polemical attack parables. The careful reader already may have noticed that there was an implicit criticism of Crossan in my last point. According to the existing sources, one cannot really claim that Jesus proclaimed Kingdom-of-God parables and that Matthew then turned them into polemical attack parables. Quite the contrary: It was Matthew who first gave the idea of the Kingdom-of-God parable a definite form. The material of these parables – speaking of treasure, the pearl, the net, the wedding – can in no way be summarized under the heading of "rhetorical violence". Matthew is clearly familiar with the appeal structure of the texts, of which he makes use rhetorically. However, at the same time he plays with the image fields. The Matthean parables are at times direct and drastic but they remain aesthetic and polyvalent, without turning into one-sided moral texts.

Let me close with a Crossan quotation against Crossan: "The parables of Jesus (...) challenge us to act and to live from the gift which is experienced therein. But we do not want parables. We want them (the parables) to tell us exactly what to do and they refuse to answer"<sup>66</sup>.

Crossan wrote these lines in his book "In Parables" in 1973. Is it possible that today he has fallen into his own hermeneutic trap? Because "we do not want" and cannot bear the challenging openness of the parables, we assume

65. Cf. Matt 13,24-30; 13,44-46; 13,47-50; 13,52; 18,23-35; 20,1-16; 21,28-32; 22,1-14; 25,1-13; also John 3,3-5; EvThom 22; 64; 97; 98.

66. CROSSAN, *In Parables* (n. 60), p. 82.

that Matthew also could not bear it. Thus, Crossan projects the position of the modern reader back into the Gospel of Matthew.

After forty years the old parable researcher has tried something new instead of preserving the old. However, it is the use of parables by Matthew himself which contradicts Crossan's idea of a violent Parable of Matthew. Furthermore, listening to the parables: Crossan himself will remain included in Matthew's large-heartedness, as it says in the parable:

The (parable) scribe (who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven) is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old (Matt 13,52)<sup>67</sup>.

Johannes Gutenberg-University  
of Mainz  
Saarstraße 21  
D-55099 Mainz  
Germany  
ruben.zimmermann@uni-mainz.de

Ruben ZIMMERMAN

67. The motif of this parable was used as the "subtitle" of the Leuven-conference 2012, where this paper was read.

