Exegetical Paper

Narrative and Parabolic Analysis,
Matthew 13:1-9

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The intended topic of this paper is to perform a narrative analysis on the Parable of the Sower, Matthew 13:1-9, and to show how the understanding of the parable as a literary form supports and enhances the general techniques of narrative criticism in this effort. The analysis will begin by looking at the story and discourse in terms of settings, events, characters, plot, and associated narrative patterns. Next, I will address the significance of this parable’s placement within the gospel. The fact that the story is a “parable” has everything to do with its location. Therefore, it is also reasonable to address the unique literary form of a parable and how this form contributes to narrative interpretation. Using this information, we will look again at Matthew 13:1-9 to expand our analysis and attempt to establish what the author is intending to convey to the reader. Finally, this paper will conclude with a brief discussion about how the understanding of these characteristics of parables will benefit our church today.

Matthew 13:1-2 opens with Jesus going down by the sea. Eventually a large crowd gathers so he gets into a boat and sits down. While this may be considered a minor event in the passage, it does provide the setting for the parable and in fact can be considered an introduction for all the parables in Matthew 13. We see this in verse 3a where Matthew tells us: “And he spoke to them at length in parables . . . .”¹ Matthew emphasizes that Jesus spoke for a long amount of time and offered multiple parables.

The Parable of the Sower actually begins in verse 3b by introducing a new event, “A sower went out to sow . . . .” This is an action which has consequences. Sowing involves throwing seed over an area of ground and letting it fall where it may, often dispersed widely by the wind. In this story, Matthew describes four types of ground that the seed

falls into: the path; rocky ground; thorns; and good soil. The body of the parable is about what happens to the seeds that fall into each of these different soil conditions. In verse 4, the path is ground that been compressed and compacted by travelers. The seed that falls here is unable to establish itself in the soil and is left completely exposed to the eyes of the birds that come and eat it. Verses 5-6 are about the seed that falls on the rocky ground. Here the seed has little soil because the ground is shallow and the seed’s roots have little strength or protection. When the sun rises the roots are scorched and the seed dies. Verse 7 is about the seeds that fall among the thorns which grow up and choke it. Verse 8 is the good soil in which the seed grows and produces a bountiful harvest. Each of these situations is an event that takes place within the parable. The major events are the sower sowing the seed and the seed falling in various soil conditions. The resulting events are effects of the soil conditions on the growth and health of the seed, the birds eating the seed, the sun scorching the seed, the thorns choking the seed, and the good seed producing fruit.

The characters of Matthew 13:1-9 will be presented in two parts because they serve two different purposes. In verses 1-3a, the characters introduced are Jesus and the large crowd. Crowd is plural in Matthew but once Jesus is in the boat separated from the crowds he is speaking to all collectively. Since the disciples are not specifically mentioned they are most likely considered part of the listening crowd. Here the author uses a rhetorical device by changing the narrator from the implied author to Jesus. The direct words of Jesus emphasize to the reader that the following verses have more importance. Jesus begins his story and introduces the characters of the sower, the seed, the birds, the sun, and the thorns. In the story the seed is the main character; all the other
characters are performing an action with the seed. These characters are described by
stock characters as, “those with a single trait who perform a perfunctory role in the
story.” This is definitely the sower, birds, sun, and thorns. The seed, the crowd, and
Jesus I would place in Powell’s category of round characters because they are not
consistent or predictable; they all do possess conflicting traits. The seed I place in this
category because it has the potential to produce a rich harvest; the key descriptive word is
“potential.” This particular crowd is a round character because it is a mixture of the
disciples and people of Israel. While Jesus makes a distinction between the disciples and
the crowd in Matthew 13:10-17, in verses 1-9 they are still part of one group. As for
Jesus, he is definitely a round character because he is dynamic throughout the Gospel. In
Matthew 13:1-9 he surprises his disciples, the crowds, and the readers by beginning to
teach in parables.

In reflecting on the various narrative patterns that may be present in verses 3a
through 9, there are three most apparent: 1) causation and substantiation; 2) the statement
of purpose; and 3) preparation. While there are different situations presented which
effect the seed, the story is not so much repetition or contrast as much as verses 3a-8 tell
of the different soil conditions that the seed lands in and the resulting effects those
conditions have on the seed’s life — a cause and effect relationship. The story is clear in
that three of the four soil conditions result in death for the seed while only the last soil
condition insures life. The last verse, verse 9, is a concluding remark and gives the reader
a clue to the purpose of the story. Jesus’ ending words are: “Whoever has ears ought to

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hear.” Jesus is telling the crowds that there is more meaning to the parable that just a nice story; that there is a deeper purpose in the relationships of the soil conditions and the seed’s life which may in-turn be important to the hearer’s own lives. Jesus is clearly making a point to the crowd that they should look more closely at the story. For the reader, there is also an implied “you” in verse 9. In his book, *Matthew as Story*, Jack Dean Kingsbury discusses the use of the pronoun “you” as a linguistic device to turn Jesus’ speech “into a direct word of address to the implied reader.”⁴ Here verse 9 is used to draw the reader into the story by emphasizing that Jesus is making an important point and also serving to gain the reader’s attention as the story transitions into Jesus’ explanation of the parable in the following verses. Verse 9 is preparing the reader for the explanation to come.

In Matthew’s gospel, the Parable of the Sower is the first time Jesus uses parables to teach the people. The fact that he did not give specific instructions about what the story meant to their lives causes some confusion and prompts the disciples to question him about it in verses 10-17. What prompts Jesus to begin using parables such that his teachings become like riddles to be solved? Based on the disciple’s reactions it was new even for them. If we look closely at chapters 11 and 12, we see Jesus increasingly being rejected by the people of Israel along with his relationship deteriorating with the religious leadership. In Matthew 11:16-20, Jesus criticizes the current generation for rejecting his teachings and those of John the Baptist. In Matthew 11:20-24, Jesus reproaches whole towns for their unrepentance. In chapter 12, we are told of how the Pharisees and scribes continually challenged Jesus, and in verse 14 we even told that they took counsel against him to put him to death. Finally in Matthew 12:38-42, Jesus refers to the people of Israel

as, “an evil and unfaithful generation.” It is in chapters 11 and 12 that Jesus begins to realize that his message will be rejected by Israel just as John’s was. In his book, The Parables of Jesus in Matthew 13, Kingsbury tells us that Matthew 12:46-50 is noteworthy because Jesus changes his emphasis from “the Jewish crowds and his family towards his disciples.”

Kingsbury suggests at this point in the gospel story that Jesus realizes the extent of his rejection and now begins to turn his attention to the teaching of his disciples who represent his church.

In Matthew’s gospel, the use of parables by Jesus is a pivot point. What is unique about the literary form of parables such that Jesus changed his approach and what was their impact on the people? First, what is a parable? According to John Donahue, S.J., in his book, The Gospel in Parable, parables are communications that take place through the use of images rather than literal or precise speech. Many authors over the years have offered that parables are some combination of metaphors, similes, or allegories. A metaphor is an implied comparison that says one thing but means another. It is intended to be interesting and puzzling leading the mind to inquire about it further. A simile is more literal speech. The author uses “like” or “as” to be illustrative since it is intended more to teach and to leave little grounds for questions. An allegory, on the other hand, is a string of metaphors arranged to form a coherent narrative; a story where people, things, and events have a symbolic meaning, often instructive. If we look at the Parable of the Sower, we can see that it uses metaphors with the overall story being an allegory. Kingsbury calls this “a mixed-form, or more specifically, an allegorical parable.”

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7 Kingsbury, The Parables of Jesus in Matthew 13, 2.
8 Kingsbury, The Parables of Jesus in Matthew 13, 6-7.
because it contains metaphors with each requiring a translation thereby confronting the reader with multiple points of engagement. At the same time the parable generally has one main theme which is built upon the combined metaphors in the story.

In addition to a parable’s metaphorical quality, narrative analysis also contributes to the interpretation of parables. According to Donahue, Rudolf Bultmann established “narrative laws” for parables that relate to narrative style, characterization, and the plot.

First is in regard to style:

- The narration is concise. Only the necessary characters appear: sower, seed, birds, sun, and thorns.

- Groups of people tend to be treated as single characters. In verses 1-3a, the crowds are combined into a single character.

- Only two characters interact at the same time: Jesus and the crowd, seed and sower, seed and birds, seed and sun, seed and thorns.

- One perspective for the hearer at a time; the action unfolds in a series of single incidents: In this parable the perspective is either death or life.

Second is in regard to characterization:

- Characters are defined by what they do, not by in terms of attributes, feelings or emotions. The sower sows. The birds eat, the sun scorches, the thorns choke.

- No motivations for actions are given. In this parable the characters act according to their nature.

- Secondary characters are not described in details. We have only what they are and what they do.

Third is in regard to plot:

- Repetition is the way action is maintained. The repetition in this case is the cause and effect relationship that any soil that is not rich leads to death.

- The final verses often contain the outcome of the plot. The rich soil produces abundantly and those with ears ought to hear.

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There is a lack of conclusion; if the conclusion is self evident, it fails: In the case of the Parable of the Sower, four points of reference are given; three result in no yield from the seeds and one abundant yield. The reader must draw their own conclusions.\(^{10}\)

These narrative laws for parables are consistent with the four elements of narrative developed by Scholes and Kellogg and are important because they allow the reader to quickly evaluate how the story is told and recognize it as a parable in form.\(^{11}\) Then, with the form identified, the reader can more readily determine what the implied author intends to communicate, and what response the real author is intending to get from the reader.

Another characteristic of parables directly relating to their discourse is that they were spoken and therefore, their impact had to be immediate. In his book, *The Gospel of Matthew*, William Barclay describes this effect as: “It made truth flash upon a man as the lightening suddenly illuminates a pitch-dark night.”\(^{12}\) Interestingly, this relates to a definition of parable by Robert Funk, and phrased by Donahue as follows: “. . . a vision of reality that cannot be conveyed by discursive speech . . . ultimately beyond the power of language to express; metaphorical language cannot be translated into discursive language but must be experienced . . .”\(^{13}\) With this said, Donahue continues to make his point that metaphors are, “especially suited to express two necessary qualities of religious experience: immediacy and transcendence.” The form of the parable is such that it has the same impact; whether it is spoken or written, it accomplishes the same impact on the hearer as on the reader. The images engage the mind by using the experiences of

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\(^{10}\) Kingsbury, *The Parables of Jesus in Matthew 13*, 8.


the individual to establish a relationship with the story. Its truth must stand out the moment it is read.

This leads us back to the Parable of Sower, what is the truth the author is intending to convey to the reader and how does he accomplish this? From the beginning of the gospel the author has continued to establish the credibility of Jesus as the messianic prophet and even more, as the Son of God. Jesus represents all that is good with wisdom greater than Solomon’s (Matt 10:42), compassion for the poor and sick, demonstrated righteousness, and mission. In contrast, the author has developed the Jewish religious authorities as evil, untruthful, and living contrary to the will of God. By the time Jesus begins using parables, located in chapter 13 of Matthew, the reader already knows that truth and life are synonymous with the words of Jesus. Since the parable guides the reader along such that there is only one good soil that results in life, the intended response of the reader by the implied author is to motivate the reader to discover for themselves how the rich soil and the abundant life of the seed relate to them. According to Kingsbury, while there has been much discussion among scholars about whether Jesus should be identified as the sower, he believes this identification is Matthew’s intention:

> It would then seem that Matthew understood the parable of the Sower as follows: The sower is Jesus. At one time he delivered his message personally; after Easter, as the exalted Kyrios, he speaks through his Church. The act of sowing is the act of preaching. That which has been sown, or preached, is the Word. Just as the Sower has scattered the seed with abandon, so God has not been short in his grace . . .

In this quote by Kingsbury, the focus on purpose now shifts from the implied author to the real author who is writing some fifty years after Jesus. The Christian community has been preaching the resurrected Christ for many years with little acceptance from the

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14 Kingsbury, *The Parables of Jesus in Matthew 13*, 35.
Jews. As a result the new church has been growing predominantly through the conversion of the Gentiles. The real author has two purposes here: 1) for the implied reader to recognize and distinguish between those who hear the words of Jesus and respond in contrast to those who hear and do nothing; and 2) for the real readers to see the transition in the story away from Jesus teaching the nation of Israel to his beginning to focus primarily on his disciples. In verses 10-17, the implied reader is led to the conclusion that the seeds that perish are Jesus’ unaccepted words to the Jews and that the seeds which bear fruit are Jesus’ fully accepted words to his disciples.

As a final discussion about the author’s intended purpose of the Parable of Sower in verses 1-9, I believe it is also helpful to discuss its relationship with the explanation of the Parable of the Sower in verses 18-23. Prior to this paper, I always considered them to be part one and part two of the same parable, separated by Jesus’ explanation about the purpose of parables. Through the application of narrative criticism and looking at how each story varies, one can say that while they are complementary, they are also independent. ¹⁵ In verses 1-13, the seed is the primary character with the intended purpose of the implied author being to have the implied reader understand that the seed is the Word of God. In verses 18-23, the primary character becomes the person who hears the Word. In addition, the supporting characters in the story also change: the birds become the evil one who steals away what was sown in the heart; while the sun and thorns are replaced by the world, which produces tribulation, anxiety, and lures of riches. As a result, the plot takes on the ecclesiological orientation introduced by the author in verses 10-17. So the intended purpose for this episode is more for the real reader by the real author with verses 1-9 being a transition story to introduce the parable form, to show

¹⁵ Kingsbury, The Parables of Jesus in Matthew 13, 62.
Jesus transitioning away from the Jews collectively to focus on his disciples, and to lay the foundation for Matthew’s exhortation to the members of his own church.

How does understanding these characteristics of parables benefit our church today? Parables are a language of faith. They appeal to our human spirit through the images conveyed. We are drawn into their story because we relate by our own experiences. Parables offer us choices; they are a form of discourse that appeals to our human freedom.  

16 We have the choice to either respond to the story with a desire to understand or to reject its message as having little impact or meaning in our lives. Whether two thousand years ago or today, their intended purpose is the same: to bring the life of the recipient into conformity with Jesus.  

17 It is this continuous conversion of heart that sustains our church, especially in the post-Vatican II church; how best to facilitate this conversion is the primary challenge facing confirmation teams and teams for the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults.

As a member of a confirmation team, what I have learned personally from writing this paper is that a parable’s impact is significantly influenced by its literary form. It is this concise short story with uncomplicated imagery that captures the imagination of our teenagers. Attempting to convey the same information in lecture form has far less impact. Conversion occurs through a person’s response and this is best accomplished by allowing the open-ended conclusions and puzzling nature of the parables to operate. By understanding the design and intended purpose for the parables, the catechist is better prepared to allow the parable to help facilitate the conversion process by letting the spoken and written Word change hearts.

17 Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story*, 111.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


