Parable Metonymy and Luke’s Kerygmatic Framing

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Abstract

Luke’s parable frames clarify theologically the unruly metonymic world of Luke’s unique parables with their economic sketches of life’s ambiguities and contradictions. The L parables retain the diffuse particulars of their worlds, but these particulars are re-framed theologically within the kerygmatic narrative. The parable denouements are interpreted theologically. The ethical, rhetorical and theological directions attributed to the L parables belong to their gospel narrative framing and resolution, not the parable plots, which sustain metonymic density in their fluctuating points of reference. The L parables are frequently used to illustrate extravagant claims for parables as metaphors that dramatically shatter one’s world to disclose the kingdom of God. However, without their frames, these stories can be interpreted in any direction.

Introduction

It is sometimes claimed that Luke’s unique parables have been framed and domesticated by gospel tradition.¹ This article claims that the L parables only make kerygmatic sense with their gospel framing, a context that provides an otherwise absent kerygma.² My thesis is that the L parables,


2. Without kerygmatic framing, the L parables do not refer to the kingdom of God. In the L parables there is an absence of such direct correlation, without the framing of

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without framing, are not intrinsically kerygmatic, but remain as ambiguous as the sketches of life they depict. It is the gospel narrative and therefore the theological framing of L parables that provides their kerygmatic impetus. The nature of the L parables is such that they can be interpreted in many possible ways due to their metonymic character, in which language is never entirely literal or figurative, but oscillates between both. Metonymy is an oscillation between specific reference and figurative reference. In Derrida’s terms, the signified (what is referred to) is always in a position of becoming a signifier (referring to something else). In language, signifier (word) and signified (reference) oscillate between reference (stable ‘proper meanings’) and many possible references (slippage in meaning). That is, specific reference can be sustained alongside potentially endless reference.

For example, an implicit comparison of the prodigal son’s father and the compassion of God (15.11-32) is a specific referent contingent upon gospel narrative, however the diverse configurations of filial love, sibling rivalry, and family dynamics can disseminate the points of reference, in the absence of this framing context. Metonymy is turning part of the signified (father) into a signifier (referring to God), but the signified might

gospel narrative and therefore kerygma. The one exception might be The backward looking ploughman (9.62), but this is more aphoristic than narrative. None of the “L” parables begins, “The kingdom of God is like [. . .]”. They all begin with τις interrogative or τίς indefinite’. Michael D. Goulder, ‘Characteristics of the Parables in the Several Gospels’, JTS 19/1 (1968), pp. 51-69 (65).


4. Metonymy is turning part of the signified into a signifier as ‘a metaphor of the signified’. Jacques Derrida, ‘White Mythology’, in Margins of Philosophy (trans. Alan Bass; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 227 n. 32. For example, in the aphorism ‘the pen is mightier than the sword’, the pen signifies writing (cited as an example of metonymy in W.R. Tate, Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991], p. 69), even if rhetorical, apologetic writing (the signified). The pen is a constituent part of writing, even if it also functions as a synecdoche (naming a part for the whole) for writing that may include word processing. Therefore, the metonym the pen (or sword for that matter) is ‘a metaphor of the signified’.

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also be a signifier referring otherwise than to God (i.e. merely a father in a
difficult predicament). Hence, metonymy is here used to suggest that
ordinary language has a tendency to splinter into figuration, at once
familiar and strange, without limit. This and other observations become
the basis for an argument that the ordinary language of the L parables
(unframed) is metonymic, dissipating assumed kerygmatic reference,
disclosing otherness in the very familiar details of life, for, without their
frames, these parables gesture towards the elusive ambiguities of life. This
ambivalence is resistant to theological interpretation, with the kerygmatic
impetus coming from gospel framing, not from these parables. Unframed,
the L parables do not create ‘metaphorical worlds’ of theological meaning.
Instead, they are dense with the diverse vicissitudes of human life, which
can disseminate meaning in many directions, with the possibility of
creating dissonance between any particular parable and its frame.5

Many scholars do not distinguish parables as parables of specific
Gospels. They are referred to as ‘the parables of Jesus’ without distinction
between parables belonging to specific Gospels and their various ways of
framing parables.6 Parables are therefore credited with disclosing a new

5. For a specific example, see my study on Lk. 18.1-8, which documents the
diverse hypotheses proffered by scholars on the relationship between parable and
107-21.

6. For example, Norman Perrin, Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom: Symbol
The works of Funk, Via, Ricoeur and Crossan also frequently refer to ‘the parables of
Jesus’ without distinguishing the diverse characteristics of parables in each Gospel.
Tolbert distinguished between the methodologies associated with ‘parables of Jesus’,
and ‘parables of the gospels’, which cannot be delineated along the difference between
form criticism (Jeremias, Dodd, Bultmann) and redaction criticism (Kingsbury,
Carlston, Bailey). Tolbert also distinguished quests for the linguistic originality of the
parables (Wilders, Funk, Crossan, Perrin), or their poetic, aesthetic form (Wilders, Jones,
Via). Mary Ann Tolbert, Perspectives on the Parables: An Approach to Multiple
still fail to distinguish between the parables of Jesus and the parables of gospels—
Marcus J. Borg, Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the
Heart of Contemporary Faith (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994), pp. 70-88; R.
David Kaylor, Jesus the Prophet: His Vision of the Kingdom on Earth (Louisville, KY:
with the Parables’, in V. George Shillington (ed.), Jesus and his Parables: Interpreting
the Parables of Jesus Today (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), pp. 1-20; B. Witherington
III, Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), pp. 155-
reality of the kingdom of God as an independent kerygma.\textsuperscript{7} Much parable scholarship, too, has focused on the kerygmatic integrity and character of the parables, raising questions about their subsequent reconfiguration within frames. This study does not posit such pre-Lukan kerygma in the L parables. Rather, it argues that, without their kerygmatic frames, these stories can be interpreted in any direction. The central issue for parable scholarship that this article raises is the inseparability of L parables from their parable framing, locating the kerygma with gospel narrative rather than the parables \textit{per se}. The article does not set out to demonstrate the historical context or milieu of these parables, nor does it attempt to sketch their pre-Lukan tradition, either literary or oral. Rather, this study focuses on the signifying relationship between L parables and their frames in terms of kerygmatic impetus or otherwise. This study will examine the ambivalent character of L parables, the interpretative impetus of Luke’s frames, and finally, the metonymic dissipation of reference in the L parables without their frames.

\textit{The Character of L Parables}\textsuperscript{8}

The L parables have metonymic qualities with their earthy and often ambivalent sketches of human life, with resolutions that do not entirely stabilize this ambivalence. Immersed in the vicissitudes of life that they sketch so economically, their paucity of detail can unravel or disseminate into diverse points of reference. Hence, the familiar but sparse details of the L parables depict a range of ambiguous and contradictory values found in ordinary life. These parables are not exceptional in their features, for these things do happen. Indeed, the diversity of their strange twists and turns is replicated in life. They recall the tangled skein of behaviour, motivation, conflict, frustration, despair and hope within any community of people. The denouements providing ethical and theological resolution


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belong to Luke’s parable frames, not the parable narratives. The Gospel writer, creating a sense of ending, often completes the parables in Luke. Consider the following L parables, which would otherwise be ambiguous without such endings: The good Samaritan (10.30-35); The persistent neighbour (11.5-7); The rich fool (12.16-20); On beating slaves (12.47-48a); The fig tree’s reprieve (13.6-9); Places of honour (14.7-10); The tower builder (14.28-30); A king going to war (14.31-32); The lost coin (15.8-9); The cunning steward (16.1-8a); The slave’s duties (17.7-9); The audacious widow (18.2-5); The publican and Pharisee (18.10-13). Hence there is the enduring difficulty of identifying the endings.9 The framing denouements offer some form of moral and theological resolution to the complexity of these parable worlds. By contrast, unframed, these parables leave paradoxical elements to exist in a tension between clarity and ambivalence. The much celebrated overturning denouement or reversed situation of these parables belongs to the theological and ethical rhetoric of the Gospel writer.10 The details of the parables, however, can oscillate metonymically, disseminating their focus of meaning and sense of adequate ending. The distinction between parable and frame, then, is not made in a quest for an original parable and its subsequent interpretative corruption by gospel tradition. The distinction is made, however, with a recognition that L parables are necessarily framed by gospel contexts.11 These frames


11. Donahue structures a study of the parables around the motif of parables ‘as
function kerygmatically, proposing particular theological perspectives and contingent actions. Without such frames, most of Luke’s unique parables would be theologically stranded in the paradoxical incongruities of human life, serendipitous and tragic.

Parables are often credited with disclosing the new reality of the kingdom of God as an independent kerygma. However, this view cannot be sustained for the L parables. Instead, Luke’s gospel narrative provides the theological impetus that transforms a parable from a human story to a kerygmatic simile. Gerhardsson notes that the ‘narrative meshalim’ (Gerhardsson’s phrase for synoptic Gospel parables) are not kerygmatic as ‘elementary proclamation’ of the good news of the kingdom of God. They do not interpret Scripture or ‘challenge the listeners to a decision... They are calculated instead to call forth an existential insight.’ It is the gospel narrative that gives the L parables their kerygmatic potential, and not the opposite. Gerhardsson notes that the parable functions as a simile or ‘comparative text’ for didactic purposes. Narrative meshalim are used to clarify a kerygmatic message. In Luke, parables function apologetically for the ‘way of discipleship’. Hence for Donahue, the L parables are ‘Christian paideia, instruction through example’. Praxis responses are called for in the paradigmatic examples of L parables. Donahue notes the recurrent ‘What shall I/we do’ in Luke (3.10; 10.25; 12.17) to which the parables

context rather than in context, with parables interwoven with gospel in such a way that both parable and gospel constitute a continuum, within which the effect of both genres must be taken into consideration for interpretation. Donahue, The Gospel in Parable, pp. 3-4, 25-27.


13. For example, the two parables of 14.28-32 are ‘vague’ without kerygmatic framing. ‘Presuming the background of the Kingdom of God, they serve as warnings about the price membership in the Kingdom will entail’. J.D. Crossan, The Essential Jesus: Original Sayings and Earliest Images (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994), p. 165 (my italics).


15. Gerhardsson, ‘If we do not Cut’, pp. 326-329. Beavis isolates the ‘applications’ to parables as ‘secondary’, with much the same character as ‘the morals added to Greco-Roman fables’. Indeed, the demands of contemporary Hellenistic paideia would have ensured such applications were not absent from parables. Beavis notes that the synoptic Gospel parables were meant to be interpreted, with at least the applications appended, even if other applications were possible. Mary Ann Beavis, ‘Parable and Fable’, CBQ 52/3 (1990), pp. 473-98 (477, 482, 494).
provide a paradigm of response (e.g. *The good Samaritan*)—"[t]he parables offer an imaginative world where reflection is translated into action for better (15.17-18) or for worse (12.15-21)." 16

While the L parables might be framed to create some form of theological resolution, they are nevertheless metonymic, oscillating between interpretative clarity and density. Luke’s brief narratives encompass incidental sketches of the social and moral vicissitudes of life. 17 People are caught up in the uncertainties and crises of life, and face difficult issues and decisions to which they must respond. 18 Some of Luke’s characters wrestle with these decisions through soliloquies. 19 The personality traits disclosed in these soliloquies appear to embody negative, undesirable, not positive characteristics—for example, *The rich fool* (12.16-20), *The unfaithful steward* (12.42-46), *The prodigal son* (15.11-32), *The cunning steward* (16.1-8a), *The judge and the widow* (18.2-5), and *The vineyard owner* (20.9-16). 20 Drury frequently notes the ambivalence of L parables and correlates Luke’s autonomous realism with this ambivalence. 21 The framing of these brief sketches functions rhetorically, creating theological direction amid the ambivalent and diffuse threads of moral and social life common to their listeners. On the one hand, a parable is framed to create specific theological perceptions in its auditors, hence gospel narrative, not parable, functions as the site of theological disclosure. 22 On the other hand, a


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parable has the potential to unravel with meanings beyond the control of the Gospel writer.

The unframed parables are located in the flux of ordinary life. Because this world is dense with incongruities, these parables can also equivocate in their reference to other than what they appear to refer. Unframed parables appear to be simple stories. However, they are not transparent. The so-called ordinary details of L parables invite interpretation, yet these parables are also resistant to clear theological resolution. They have a surplus of detail, as simple as that might be, which remains resistant to transparent appropriation in a particular analogy or interpretation.23

If the L parables contain a surprise denouement that is intended to shock, then they are no more shocking or surprising than the life situations they sketch. The world of parable is a diffuse, sometimes ambivalent world, sketched with the complex particulars of our familiar world. In the L parables, familiar motifs and images from the world of persons, places, customs and artefacts are juxtaposed incongruously to evoke a response. These parables can sustain this ambivalence not for a line, but for a story. This metonymic ambivalence is resolved theologically and socially by the Gospel writer—at least toward the disclosure of the kingdom of God. Luke’s narrative framing can function as the resolution to a story, which appears to have no resolution, or ends in paradox. For example, while the ‘dead has come to life’ and ‘the lost has been found’ might be true of the younger son in The prodigal son (15.11-32), the parable remains impenetrable in its resolution of life’s moral vicissitudes and paradoxes. Is the elder son now lost or dead? Is the elder brother reconciled with his younger brother and, indeed, with his father? (15.31-32). Is the father now presented with another experience of grief? Are not these the incorrigible tensions and dilemmas of numerous siblings, parents and families? While resisting the idea that ‘the parables of Jesus’ are ‘universal stories appealing to the common experience’ of people, Perrin nevertheless conceded that ‘there are clearly universal elements in the parables of Jesus. The Prodigal Son speaks to any group of humans who have lived in families; The Good Samaritan addresses itself to any community with unsafe streets.’24

23. Even claims for the iconoclastic, indeterminate character of parables generates stock theological dichotomies in Funk’s interpretations of The good Samaritan and The prodigal son. Funk, Honest to Jesus, pp. 176-80, 184-89. Of his own interpretation of The good Samaritan, Funk states, ‘The meaning of the parable cannot be made more explicit than that’ (p. 180).

24. Perrin, Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom, p. 143. Commenting on Lk.

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Perrin here takes away with one hand (the parables are not universally applicable), he concedes with the other (anyone who lives in a family or a troubled community)—indicating how Luke’s two best-known parables are permeated with familiar experiences of human life. Luke, however, composes a frame for each parable as a theological or social comment appropriate to Luke’s community thereby resolving potential ambiguity in interpretation.

The Interpretative Impetus of Luke’s Parable Frames

Crossan’s early ‘Parable and Example in the Teaching of Jesus’, noted the effect of framing on the unique narrative parables in which Luke has essentially de-parabolized earlier, world-challenging parables of reversal. According to Crossan, the L parables have been framed as literal stories with ‘a moral injunction’, their metaphoricity being ignored. Funk sustains this approach, suggesting more recently that The good Samaritan, a radical parable of disclosure, has been made an example story by Luke’s framing or ‘moralizing interpretation’. He argues for an original performative context that retains the highest level of tension in the story (which has been eroded by a new context in gospel narrative), and therefore an example of the ‘world-shattering’ language of the historical Jesus. Yet without the kerygmatic context of gospel narrative, the unframed story of 15.11-32, Kaylor notes that the problems Luke’s parables depict were common at this time. Kaylor, Jesus the Prophet, p. 166. Rohrbaugh describes The prodigal son as a ‘story about the chaotic life of a village family and the attempts of the father to reconcile things gone wrong’. Richard L. Rohrbaugh, ‘A Dysfunctional Family and its Neighbours (Lk 15.11b-32)’, in Shillington (ed.), Jesus and his Parables, pp. 141-64 (163).

25. Original Jesus stories that are world-shattering have been turned into example stories. Of Luke’s parables, ‘The good Samaritan, The Rich Fool, The Rich Man and Lazarus, The Pharisee and the Publican, The Wedding Guest and the Proper Guests’, Crossan states, ‘in all cases there is a certain tension between the story and its present interpretative frames. This tension is explained if these stories were originally parables of Jesus before they were changed into examples by the tradition and/or the evangelists. As parables, all except The Rich Fool, are attacks on the hearer’s world where-in and whereby he may experience the kingdom of God as eschatological or world-shattering presence.’ Crossan, ‘Parable and Example in the Teaching of Jesus’, Semeia 1 (1974), pp. 63-104 (63).


27. Funk, Honest to Jesus, pp. 170, 179 (170-80); Funk, ‘From Parable to Gospel’, pp. 3-5, 11-15.
The good Samaritan need not imply such claims. It can imply the uncanny, surprising phenomenon in which human attitudes and behaviour are reversed to ameliorate intolerance, enmity and self-preservation. This unframed parable is indicative of a phenomenon that occurs and, though paradigmatic, is not unique to a particular religious confession or moral stance. The good Samaritan is a human story about social valuations and perspectives that belongs to all people. Is The good Samaritan the only story of its kind known to humankind? What of the story in 2 Chron. 28.5-15 that is sometimes cited as a precursor to The good Samaritan? Luke, it is claimed, has turned this and other parables of unique disclosure into moralizing example stories. On the contrary, Luke has framed a parable that could have been framed in any number of ways. What of other interpretations of the story without its frame? Could it just as easily be a piece of rhetorical polemic? The Lukian frames have parables posture towards the eschatological advent of the kingdom of God in Jesus’ ministry. They also function apologetically. Luke, it appears, challenges the theological stance of some more ethnically concerned constituents of his community in apologetically framed parables. Allegorical, apologetic interpretations of Luke’s parables betray conflict within the community—The good Samaritan, The prodigal son, Table places combined with The


32. Within their theological frames, several parables function as anti-Jewish leadership polemic, in the context of later conflicts between Jesus movements and Judaism, not dramatic reversals that reveal the non-hierarchical kingdom of God. Mack, A Myth of Innocence, pp. 135-71. The frames of some parables are pitched against Jewish religious sensibilities (13.10-17; 14.12-15; 15.1-2; 18.9, 14).