AMOS N. WILDER

*Jesus’ Parables and the War of Myths*

Essays on Imagination in the Scripture

Edited, with a Preface, by
James Breech

PHILADELPHIA

FORTRESS PRESS
3

Telling From Depth to Depth:
The Parable of the Sower

1. DEEP REGISTERS OF RESPONSE

It is now widely evident that an important new phase of New Testament study is emerging. The initiatives are various, but they all have to do with a deeper inquiry into the nature of language and “how language works.” The focus is well suggested by the title of a recent book by Paul Ricoeur dealing mainly with biblical texts: *The Theological Bearings of Contemporary Investigations with Respect to Language.*

The basic concern remains that of meaning and of language as communication. Therefore the various thrusts all come under the wider caption of hermeneutics. But it is increasingly felt that the dynamics and import of discourse, the full meaning of a biblical passage, go beyond what our usual methods of exegesis and interpretation convey. Words and phrases, narrations and liturgical poems or other speech modes, require other resources for their understanding than those provided by our usual philological, historical, and theological expertise. There are certain resonances and imponderables in language, whether in folktales or in the highest literary art, which are often felt by the layman, but their operations should be brought to light and understood if we are to have any full interpretation of a writing.

A work of art has a life of its own apart from its reporters. It remains itself and goes on testifying or celebrating, independently of its interpreters and their various versions and deformations of their communication.² So it

The Parables of Jesus and the Full Mystery of the Self is with a parable or other literary form in Scripture. Its telling is ever and again to be heard naïvely and afresh. The deep registers of response in the hearer should not be disturbed at this level of encounter by other preoccupations.

But then comes the phase of wider understanding, of relating this communication to others and to our whole context of meaning and reality. Since the mystery and operations of language are involved, we find ourselves committed to clarification at this point, so that we can give a better account of our “hearing” and the terms of its interpretation. With respect to a parable, this means an understanding of its language structure, its poetic. But it also means an understanding of how this language dynamically evokes response, its semantic.

II. EPIPHANIC DISCLOSURES

If I may be allowed a personal reminiscence, I adduce the following experience. In a rural Sunday school class taught by a village housewife in ways surely contrary to all the precepts of the religious educator, the parable of the sower was the theme, no doubt assigned in some long-since-repudiated graded lesson book. I was fourteen at the time, and my reaction may have been colored by the fact that I was working on a farm that summer. In any case, I have always recalled with wonder the impact, the imaginative reverberations, and the psychic dynamics of the six verses of the parable. (I am sure that the allegorizing interpretation of the parable that follows it in the Gospel did not disturb this prior visionary transaction.) This revelatory power of the parable was no doubt related to the fresh sensibility of childhood, but the experience has always remained with me as one of my earliest memories of the power of Scripture and of language generally. Over and above all rules and resources of interpretation later acquired, I had learned in this instance to respect the naked text itself, to let the word and the words have their own untrammeled course, to be open to their deeper signals, to let the naïf speak to the naïf and depth to depth.

But one need not leave it there, or at this level. We rightly seek to understand the operations of the imagination and the heart. This is, first of all, a native and proper impulse of our human nature to organize our experience and to relate reason to the prerational. Even the deepest layers of sensibility have their laws and structures. To trace them out and to become aware of them is to enter more fully into possession of our being. It is also to illuminate the processes of new creativity and vision, and to further them. One could illustrate by the art of music and the interplay here of the composer's command of its “laws” and structures with his ultimate impulse. But our concern is with the arts of language.

If one were to exemplify this double approach, the naive and the structural, in the case of the parable of the sower we might illuminate the wider issue. What lighted up my imagination as a boy exposed to an emblematic story was the nevertheless prevailing power of the sown seed, indeed its extravagant yield, but also the deep wedding of the venture of the sower with this prevailing. It was not first of all a question of the sower nor of the vicissitudes of his operation, nor was it a question of the various soils. But all these in combination provided the analogue for the inexorable and indefeasible continuity and plenitude of creation of which man is a part.

Accepting some such reading or hearing of the parable as an unsophisticated depth-response, what can one say about it as a language vehicle? What is the correlation of form and communication? What observations about its rhetoric or linguistic structure would help to explain its power and to disentangle its real focus? Inadequate interpretations of the parable are certainly connected with inattention to its literary features. If it is not read as a distinctive form or artistic whole, alien motifs from a wider context in the gospel or the chapter are introduced. So one is carried into illegitimate allegorization (from the sequel, Mark 4:13ff.), or into the search for some esoteric teaching (Mark 4:11-12), or for direct light on the teacher and his work. If the parable is not grasped as (extended) metaphor, the reader will then look for a teaching or a theme, rather than a revelatory shock of insight.

That shock of insight is related both to the aesthetic form of the utterance and to the receptivity of the hearer. Therefore we speak both of the “poetic” and the “semantic” of the New Testament texts. The two are related. A parable or a saying or a prayer have a given form because they have long been shaped in that way among those concerned, who are therefore ready to hear something in such and such a pattern. The medium already locates the communication. If the pattern and style are associated with visionary insight, rather than with instruction or mandate, then the hearer attends to it in this mode and expectation. The tone of voice of the speaker would further this reception. (It is only when our parable was in written form that it would invite the kind of piecemeal scrutiny that led to allegory and be read as paroemia.)

III. BETWEEN ANGUISH AND TRUST

The simplest way to explore the dynamics of our parable is to ask what there is about it as “words” that would make it interesting to the hearer
Telling from Depth to Depth: The Parable of the Sower

note the “rule of three,” thrice instanced: three types of loss; three verbs of bringing forth (“growing up,” “increasing,” “yielding”); three degrees of increment (thirtyfold, sixtyfold, one hundredfold). We also observe the feature of reversal and surprise, the fourth case against the first three. But this denouement or resolution is also marked by (at least rhetorical) hyperbole.

There is, indeed, a question as to whether the yield—thirtyfold, sixtyfold, one hundredfold—represents an extraordinary outcome. (It refers not to the whole sowing, but to the seed sown on the good soil.) Here Linnemann rejects Jeremias’s view to that effect as a misunderstanding of Dalman’s data. But apart from this uncertainty, two considerations argue for taking the yield as hyperbolic and a departure from realism: 1) The ascending serial enumeration, in the context of the art form, intensifies the feature of surprise and disproportion. The imagination is pointed even beyond the hundredfold. Thus at least rhetorical hyperbole. 2) The motif of disproportion is paralleled in other parables like that of the leaven, and in another parable of growth, that of the mustard seed.3

These various features of the parable, shared with universal patterns of fabulation, identify it with an imaginative genre or art convention which, as I have said, dynamizes its “raw material.” The medium alerts the hearer to a wider horizon of import. That a genre medium is in question is also indicated by the initial ἀκούειν (Listen!), as it would have been in any case in the oral telling by a subtle change in the tone of voice and delivery.

If one presses this matter of our responses to particular rhetorical features or signals in a story or a text, one comes to something still more fundamental. There is indeed something in us that answers to the kinds of patterns of speech and motifs suggested. But among these are some that go very deep into our emotion and imagination and motivation. We can think of the self as containing, as it were, explosive material, which can only be kindled by the appropriate art or language. Psychology can speak of archetypes. The study of dreams, mythology, and folklore can uncover recurrent structures of consciousness, scenarios of wish, anxiety, and fulfillment. When we speak of the appeal of a poem to the imagination, this

3. The seeming exception of another “parable of growth,” the parable of the “seed growing of itself” that yields finally only “the full grain in the ear,” has a different movement and a different horizon, that of the time when the sower returns to “put in the sicker.” In any case, in this parable, the aspect of miraculous operation is associated with the ἀφέωντα τοῦ φροῦντος. The Greek term does not mean “of itself,” but “without any recognizable cause,” or “by the operation of God.” See R. Stuhlmann, “Beobachtungen und Überlegungen zu Markus 4:26–29,” New Testament Studies 19 (1972–73): 153–62. Stuhlmann, like Jeremias, includes v. 29 in the original parable.
The Parables of Jesus and the Full Mystery of the Self

is part of what we mean, especially in connection with the power of symbols. But even apart from powerful inherited social imagery, there are kinds of language which engage these deep structures.

Jesus could use such dynamic images as Kingdom or Satan or Gehenna. But he also used plot patterns (such as lost and found) or role situations (master and servant) which similarly engage our deepest apperceptions. The master-servant relation evokes the archetype of authority deeply buried in the human psyche, an archetype which is ambivalent and charged with both anxiety and the craving for security. In the case of the parable of the sower, I see two deep sounding boards that lend power to the communication and enter into its proper interpretation. These are like inflammable tinder awaiting its fuse: charged language.

For one thing, man’s relation to the earth and its processes is primordial and full of mystery. Folklore, mythology, and the “savage mind” see tilling and planting as transactions with powers, chthonic and divine, and harvest as having the character of miracle. Our parable, as an art form, identifies itself with this naive depth. In contrast, perhaps, with the parable of the mustard seed, this one (and that of the seed growing εδρουμάντη) involves the husbandman. It has to do with culture, and not with wild nature alone. The enigmatic vicissitudes of loss and gain involve man’s place in creation and its exuberance, the primordial wonder that existence emerges out of, and prevails over, nothingness. If one speaks of “structure” here, it would refer to an internalized pattern in the psyche which dictates such universal motifs as those of the garden, Paradise, and other archetypes, in dreams and human fabulation.

A second sounding board evoked in the parable goes even deeper. It relates to man’s ultimate conatus, or striving, or going out from himself in search of fulfillment. Our very being and security in existence are strangely poised between trust and lack of trust. Man is a conative, intentional project, and there is profound existential drama at the core of his nature between the sense of being sustained in his venture and anguish at betrayal. The parable speaks out of, and to, this dynamic turmoil by assurance not only of the trustworthiness of existence, but of its plenitude and excess.

Our parable speaks to this particular sounding board or register in the hearer in terms of sover, seed, soils, and harvest. What is here presented in the language-analogue of the husbandman or the archetype of the garden could equally well be dramatized or storied in some other metaphor of human activity. The basic paradigm of man’s initiative vis-à-vis his world and its sequel could employ other types of venture: not only sowing, but digging, and also hunting, digging, mining; risking, investing, gambling. The Gospels include some of these motifs or fields of action in various rhetorical forms to reveal one or other face of the vision conveyed in the parable of the sower. We think, for example, of the parable of the friend at midnight. However, the basic paradigm of effort and reward can take a brief, imperative form: “Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.” The paradigm of effort and reward would then be seen as the structural formula (open to various versions of “generative poetic”), the formula itself, however, resting for its power on an ontological depth.

It is, then, not only in the parable genre that this particular sounding board finds dramatization in the Gospel. In the “legend” (as it is called by Bultmann and Dibelius) of the miraculous draught of fishes in Luke 5:4-10 (also reported in John 21), we find the same scenario and elements as in the parable of the sower, but here in the context of fishing, rather than planting. By “scenario,” I mean the sequence of 1) initiative vis-à-vis nature, 2) frustration, and 3) extravagant outcome. The dynamics of the narrative again arise out of a deep human constant: man poised between trust and anguish in his relation to existence: “Master, we toiled all night and took nothing!” The dynamics of the narrative also arise, at a second level, from the employment here of a folklore motif, or more generally from the sea-wonder category of the narrative. Corresponding to the “thirtyfold, sixtyfold, one hundredfold” of the parable of the sower, we have in the legend, “And when they had done this, they enclosed a great shoal of fish. . . . Their nets were breaking . . . They filled both the boats, so that they began to sink.” The correspondence of the scenarios in the two genres points to a common underlying vision of reality. But we have been interested in the patterns of language by which this vision is mediated.

Returning to the parable of the sower, we may well ask why its culminating reassurance has cogency. The analogy of the yield of the good soil is not persuasive in itself. Romantic consolations drawn from aspects of nature are notoriously subjective. The very language of such “effusions”


5. It is of more than incidental interest that Luke introduces the legend in a setting (Jesus teaching from the boat) and with phrases which in Mark lead to the parable of the sower.
The Parables of Jesus and the Full Mystery of the Self betrays their inconsequence. Their rhetoric lays hold of no subsoil deeper than sentiment or euphoria; simile and allegory take the place of metaphor; apostrophe and exclamation points are poor surrogates for vision.

The success story told in our parable is not bland propaganda for optimism. There is too much economy, tension, and aesthetic distance in the language. As with a poem, the parable form as a distinctive kind of voice, and by its architecture, reveals rather than persuades. So far as it persuades, it is not by an induction, but by a visionary recognition. This recognition has to do, not with optimistic eudaemonism, but with the creaturely sense of the trustworthiness of existence. If this sense is threatened by panic or anguish, the parable lights up the inner theater of travail and speaks reassurance—recalling us to a prior vision of reality—as Jesus did to Peter when Peter’s faith failed and he began to sink in the sea.

IV. PARABLE AND PARABLER

In exploring the language of the parable, I have called attention to certain rhetorical features and to two sounding boards or structures to which it appeals. These considerations help us to understand its impact at any time or place. But then we have the question as to the speaker, and therewith, that of his situation and audience. Here it would seem that we step outside the rhetorical form itself. Yet since we have to do with language and communication, even so self-ordered a trope as a parable witnesses to its author in its own way, and to the situation of its utterance.

His authority in the original occasion can be dissociated from that assumed for him in the Gospel context in which we now find the parable. We can also set aside interpretations of the parable of the sower according to which Jesus would have transparently referred to himself in the role of the sower. But then we encounter the persuasive view that the faith of Jesus himself in and through the travail of his calling is mediated by his disciples through this compelling and revelatory metaphor. Thus the parable interprets Jesus’ action in the situation, while at the same time being sanctioned by him as the speaker.

6. The confining and formal aspects of a poem or other genre, these exacting features of its “poetic,” serve as barriers to false lyricism. This has been brought out recently in connection with W. H. Auden, who, to avoid “easy Eloquence,” finds a need of “complex resistances (metrical)” and of “inhibitors: syntactical, grammatical, lexical.” In his Epistle to a Godson and Other Poems (New York: Random House, 1972, p. 47) Auden puts it this way:

   Blessed be all metrical rules that
   forbid automatic response,
   force us to have second thoughts,
   free from the fetters of Self.

Telling from Depth to Depth: The Parable of the Sower

In the original oral situation, Jesus does not impose consent by extrinsic authority. It is indirectly, in the fictional world of the saying, that his role as Master and Teacher operates. In his address and solicitation to the hearers (made explicit in the later written form by the introduction “Listen!” and by the concluding words “He that has ears to hear, let him hear”), he does indeed relate the action of the parable to the public occasion, and therefore to his own work and mission. But consent to his cause and person goes pari passu with consent to the affirmation of the parable itself. Here is where we find the “through-meaning” (Via) of the dense and self-sufficient fiction. And in any later context down to our own, there is some such interplay between the parable and the “authority” under which it is presented (Jesus as the Christ, the Church, the Scripture, a given preacher or teacher, or some combination of these). But in all such changing contexts, the parable continues to have a life of its own, and one that continually challenges and corrects current deformations of its deeper import.

With respect to the “audience” or hearers, there are many variables. Jesus’ immediate hearers were at home with the parable genre, if in a somewhat different rabbinic form. Absence of familiarity with this particular shape of narrative handicaps its right reception, as is already evident in the New Testament. Even the basic psychological structures to which the parable speaks can vary. While men of all cultures would share to some extent in the two “sounding boards” I have cited, there would be differences. Man’s sense of his relation to nature varies in different cultural settings, given all the uniformities of sowing and reaping. More significantly, the basic correspondence posited and confirmed in the parable between human striving and fulfillment could be assumed in the Hebraic context. But there have been, and are, great cultural areas and epochs in which the conatus is anemic, and in which willing, intention, action are not deeply related to the reality-sense. It would be interesting to see how motifs of sowing, fishing, and hunting are manipulated in non-Western fabulation. In gnostic versions of the biblical stories, one can recognize a transformation.

V. MISCARRIAGE AND FRUITION

I have said that the parable proffers a vision of the selective vivacity or exuberance of life over against its wide miscarriage. At the core of the vision and at the heart of the parable is the motif of miscarriage or waste. This note three times invoked is not only a foil to the extravagant outcome, as it might be in a romantic analogue; it is part of the mystery of the total transaction, a transaction which has its dead ends and blind alleys. God
The Parables of Jesus and the Full Mystery of the Self finds his way through miscarriage and impasse to incommensurable fruition. But of course in the generality of the metaphor, there is no identification of the losses.

It is this aspect of selectivity to which attention is drawn in the allegorizing interpretation of the parable given in Mark 4:14-20, with a paraenetic intention and with an individualizing application. The same is true of the section Mark 4:10-13, with its distinction between “those outside” and those who receive the secret of the Kingdom of God. In this focus on the mystery of rejection, these later supplements relate to the depth of the parable.

The double motif of selection and fruition cannot but remind us of Israel’s understanding of calling and rejection—“Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated”—and the theme of the remnant. The world-story has its dead ends and discards, both within and without the line of election, but it goes on, and the lavish future lies with the elect, more in number than the sands of the sea. The parable is too autonomous a creation to be allegorized in this sense. But the deep paradigm resonates in it and conditions the “answering imagination” of the hearers. 7

Even deeper than this appeal to Israel’s own apperception, the language and “plot” of the parable relate to, as we have seen, to elementary human striving, frustration, and fulfillment. Through the theme of miscarriage, we can hear such laments as that of Jeremiah 51:58:

The peoples labor for nought, and the nations weary themselves only for fire.

The parable brings both these levels into relation to Jesus’ ministry and proclamation in such a way as to employ consent.

In this light, it is not necessary to declare an impasse, as Linnemann does, with respect to the occasion and meaning of the parable—even to the point of envisaging its nonauthenticity. It is true that there is no particular

7. This same profound paradigm is, of course, prominent, and as a problem, in 2 Esdras. Note 8:41, a passage in which the husbandman’s sowing illustrates the larger theme of the remnant and “the multitude of those who perish.” “For just as the farmer sows many seeds upon the ground and plants a multitude of seedlings, and yet not all that have been sown will come up in due season, and not all that were planted will take root, so also those who have been sown in the world will not all be saved.” The version of the parable of the sower in the Gospel of Thomas does not similarly particularize and stress the seed that fails. But the motive of election versus rejection, with reference to the individual souls and apart from an historical or covenant community, is implicit in the Gnostic context. Cf. Log. 23, “Jesus said: I shall choose you, one out of a thousand,” and 62, “Jesus said, I tell my mysteries to those who are worthy of my mysteries.”

Telling from Depth to Depth: The Parable of the Sower polemic occasion or topos of debate in Jesus’ ministry into which one can fit the saying. But he was speaking beyond any such ad hoc juncture to the dilemma of his people and the hope of Israel.

VI. IT WILL FOREVER KEEP ITS FRESHNESS

I have been concerned first of all to insist on a naive reading of the parable. It must be allowed to speak for itself, and to go on telling from depth to depth. As Frost said of the genre of the poem, “Read it a hundred times: it will forever keep its freshness as a petal keeps its fragrance. It can never lose its sense of a meaning that once unfolded by surprise as it went.” So the parable should be allowed to evoke its own horizon and its meaning in that horizon, independently of its interpreters. It should be allowed to awaken its own corresponding registers in our hearing, and even to create these. In this unadorned exposure to it, we are captured by the primordial wonder that existence emerges out of, and prevails over, nothingness.

But I have also been concerned to inquire as to the structures of language and the structures of consciousness which make possible such communication. Such clarification of language and its operation refines and corrects our usual tools and methods of interpretation.

It is only to be added that this kind of study opens up access to the historical Jesus and to the Gospel in ways that carry a new kind of cogency. It is a question of a new or refined optic. The parable witnesses to Jesus in its own way, and to the concrete language-world which conditioned his proclamation and fate.

The bearing of this study of a parable upon other New Testament forms may be suggested by brief attention to the miracle story, or paradigm. Here, too, we have, as it were, the Gospel in miniature; here, too, its eschatological horizon and reality come to speech. In this “form,” saving operation evoking astonishment over against impediment and limitation matches the scenario of the parable. As compared with a novella or “legend,” the economy and density of the language correspond to the “autonomy” of the parable form. In both cases, the gestalt effects “distance,” excludes any immediate or conventional reference (or “through-meaning”), and therefore lights up a wider reality. The paradigm has power because, as in the case of the parable, its realism has gone through a sea-change. The medium dynamizes the content. A diurnal episode becomes a hierophany.

This is not to say that a novella or “legend” (or, in the case of a parable,
The Parables of Jesus and the Full Mystery of the Self

...