

# **LANGUAGE IN INDIA**

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**A Literary Study of the Parables in the Gospels of the Bible**

**Shanthi Nehemiah, M.A., M.Phil.**

# A Literary Study of the Parables in the Gospels of the Bible

Shanthi Nehemiah, M.A., M.Phil.

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## Parables Around the World

Hundreds of fables were composed in ancient India often as stories within frame stories. These included Panchatantra, the Hitopadesha, Vikram and The vapire, and Syntipas' Seven Wise Masters, which were collections of fables that were later influential throughout the Old World. The most famous fables from the Middle East were the One Thousand and One Nights, also known as the Arabian Nights.

## Indian Mythology

Indian Mythology is one of the richest elements of Indian Culture, which enriches it further and makes it a unique one in the world. Through generations, different stories in Indian mythology have been passed from generation to generation either by word of mouth or through carefully stored scriptures. These stories, which form the backbone of Indian mythology, are a great medium for people especially parents to inculcate interest in Indian Culture in the younger generation and to impart values of Indian culture to them. The interesting aspect of the stories in Indian Mythology is that they are usually meant to convey subtle facts, rules and maxims to guide our daily lives.

## Parables/fables in India

The Panchatantra is a legendary collection of short stories from India. The etymology of term 'Panchatantra' suggests that it is a combination of two words, 'Pancha' (five) and 'Tantra' (practice/ principle). So, the five principles or practices illustrated by Panchatantra are 'Mitra Bhedha' (Loss of Friends), 'Mitra Laabha' (Gaining Friends), 'Suhrubheda' (Causing discord between Friends), 'Vigraha' (Separation) and 'Sandhi' (Union). The Panchatantra is the oldest collection of Indian fables surviving today. Panchatantra, consists of five books of animal fables and magic tales. Each of these stories have a moral that continues to be relevant to this day. The purpose behind the Panchatantra was to implant moral values and governing skills in the young sons of the ancient kings. The ancient Sanskrit text boasts of various animal stories in verse and prose.

During all these centuries, many authors and publishers worked hard to make these fables accessible and readable to laymen. The grand assortment has extraordinary tales that are liked, by people of every age group. The Panchatantra is the best guide to enroot moral values in children since its each tale has a moral lesson in its end. The Panchatantra is a great book where plants and animals can speak and converse with human beings too.

Buddhist instructional materials also take the form of parables.

### **Some Differences between the Parables of Jesus and Non-Christian Sages**

However, there are several differences between the parables of Jesus Christ and the parables found in other texts. For one thing, parables of Jesus do not focus on magical elements to describe the characters presented in them or to carry out exemplary action through them. Within the Books of the Old and New Testaments, only Jesus resorts to the use of parables as his own specific and unique style. Even his disciples and other writers of the books in the New Testament do not use parables in any significant amount. Parable did not grow into a separate genre which is used by all writers of the books of the Bible. On the other hand, forms similar to parables are quite popular with many writers within other religions. Jesus' parables were presented in local idiom, Aramaic dialect, but the parables in other religious texts may be in classical mode as well.

Personification of animals and natural elements is not significant in Jesus' parables.

### **The Bible – A Conglomeration of Different Literary Styles**

Many types of writing make up the Bible. Parables, or parabolic passages, concentrated in the Gospels, are one of those genres. The Bible also contains legal codes, such as those one can read in the books of Moses. We can find poetry in the Psalms and elsewhere. There are also prophecies, histories, hymns, letters and speeches in the Bible. There are allegories, metaphors, similes, epics, riddles and wise sayings. We need to see these different literary genres for what they are, in their contexts.

Legal codes and delicate poetry are different. Letters may whisper personal details about their writers. Metaphors aren't meant literally. Failure to understand the literary style can lead to misunderstanding and misinterpretation. How, then, should we look at Jesus' parables?

To begin this exploration, it would be easy for our understanding if we have a clear picture of what parable is. What are the other literary styles related to it?

### **Parables**

The term is from the Greek *parabole*, meaning "Comparison" or "putting beside". A parable is a word-picture which uses an image or story to illustrate a truth or lesson. It creates a mini-drama in picture language that describes the reality being illustrated. It shows a likeness between the image of an illustration and the object being portrayed.

Parables have been respected as works of literary art. It is seen to have a force and function similar to poetry. Paraphrases, summaries or propositional organization of the content of a parable destroys the parable's inner strength and we get only a drab meaning. As literary art, a parable does not simply make its point, but it does its work on the reader – creating, altering, or even shattering a particular view of life and reality.

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## **Parabolic Teaching in Interneicine Indian Politics**

In recent years, this age-old genre has been given a new lease of life in the speeches and writings of Indian politicians, who exploit the form to drive home a point or two in their favor and against their political opponents. Among the Tamils, both AIADMK led by Jayalalitha and DMK led by Karunanidhi seem to exploit this genre for their political ends, creating parables and inserting them in their speeches. However, each party brings out the unsound analogies rampant in each other's "parables," thus doing their best to discredit each other. These "dime a dozen" parables, unfortunately, are as easily forgotten as they were originally created. Thus experience shows that only when a parable attains the level of a classic item, it may hope to be used and re-used, and remembered. The status of the parable creator certainly is an important factor here.

### **Allegory**

In any literary work, allegory is used as a symbolic device to represent abstract ideas or principle beyond the surface meaning. Allegorical subjects, items or characters have a literal meaning as well as a figurative one. The story itself is constructed in such a way as to convey the central theme or lesson. Allegory is an extended metaphor in which a person, abstract idea, or event stands for itself and for something else. It usually involves moral or spiritual concepts which are more significant than the actual narrative. Allegory is often used as an embodiment for moral qualities and messages as we see in Aesop's Fables.

### **Fable**

Fable is a short, simple story, usually with animals as characters, designed to teach a moral truth. A fable is a succinct story, in prose or verse that features animals, plants, inanimate objects, or forces of nature which are personified explicitly in a pithy maxim. Within Indian traditions, both within Sanskrit and Tamil classical poetry, the roles of animals and plants, etc., personified as humans are dealt with. In its original sense, "fable" may be a deliberately invented or false account of an event or circumstance. A fable often concludes with an epigram containing the moral.

A parable differs from a fable for it excludes animals, plants, inanimate objects, and forces of nature as actors that assume speech and other powers of humankind.

### **Jesus' Parables**

Jesus often used spiritually significant fictional narratives to illustrate his teachings. Jesus, as we find in the Gospels, used simple word-pictures to help people understand who God is and what his kingdom or reign is like. Jesus used the characters taken from everyday life to create a miniature play or drama to illustrate his message. This was Jesus' most common way of teaching. His stories appealed to the young and old, poor and rich, and to the learned and

unlearned as well. Jesus loved to use word-illustrations to reach the heart of his listeners through their imagination.

### **The Pictorial Effect of Parables**

These word-pictures challenged the mind to discover anew what God is like and moved the heart to make a response to God's love and truth. Jesus, the skillful artist, painted evocative pictures with short and simple words. A good picture can speak more loudly and clearly than many words.

Jesus used the ordinary everyday activities to point to another order or reality – hidden, yet visible to those who had “eyes to see” and ‘ears to hear”. Jesus commuted with pictures and stories, vivid illustrations which captured the imaginations of his audience more powerfully than an abstract presentation could. His parables are something like buried treasure waiting to be discovered as we see in (Matt.13:44). The parables of Jesus will enlighten us if we approach them with an open mind and heart, ready to let them challenge us. If we approach them with the conviction that we already know the answer, then we, may look but not see, listen but not hear or understand.

This is yet another important feature of a parable that lasts long and continues to give wisdom and insight.

### **Jesus - the Master Storyteller: Multifaceted Meanings of Parables**

Jesus was a master storyteller. His parables contain striking images, dramatic action and bold character development, all built around universal themes that have touched people for two millennia.

Jesus' parables have a double meaning. First, there is the literal meaning apparent to anyone who has experience with the subject matter. But beyond the literal meaning lies a deeper meaning about God's truth and his kingdom. For example, the parable of the leaven which we see in Matthew 13:33 describes the simple transformation of dough into bread by the inclusion of yeast. In like manner, we are transformed by God's kingdom when we allow his word and Spirit to take root in our hearts. And in turn we are called to be leaven that transforms the society in which we live and work.

### **Element of Surprise**

Jesus' parables often involve an element of surprise or an unexpected twist. We are taken off guard by the progression of the story. The parable moves from the very familiar and untreatable aspects of experience to a sudden turn of events or a remarkable comparison which challenges the hearer and invites further reflection. For example, why should a shepherd go through a lot of bother and even risk his life to find one lost sheep when ninety-nine are in his safe keeping? The

shepherd's concern for one lost sheep and his willingness to risk his own life for it tells us a lot about God's concern for his children.

While Jesus parables are rooted in a specific time and place, they nonetheless speak of timeless realities to people of every time and place. They underline the fact that God works in every age and he meets us in the ordinary everyday situations of life. While this is the case certainly with the faithful, the teaching part and the strategy adopted by Jesus still elicit admiration from among those who are not theologically the followers of Jesus.

In the above sense, one should say that Jesus has mastered and exploited the art of creating and using parables in a way that is still admirable. Parabolic teaching, teaching through the use of parables, reaches its simplest and yet masterful level in the parables of Jesus Christ.

### **Parable - Heavenly Stories with Earthly Meanings**

Parables do not define things precisely, but rather use comparisons to describe some aspects of how God acts or interacts with human beings. Who doesn't enjoy a well written story? Naturally story-telling is the best medium for conveying even powerful messages.

Jesus' parables have been called "heavenly stories with earthly meanings," or "earthly stories with heavenly meanings." But there is more to them than that. All the parables of Jesus can be classified as follows: "nature parables" (for example, the mustard seed) showed how God's kingdom would start small but become all-encompassing. The kingdom's present aspects would seem unspectacular, its ultimate realization amazing. His "discovery parables" (the hidden treasure, Matthew 13:44 ; or the pearl of great price, verses 45 – 46) show that God's kingdom is so valuable we can happily abandon all else for it. His "contrast parables" (the rich man and Lazarus, Luke 16:19-31 or the Pharisee and the tax collector, Luke 18:9-14) illuminate how much God loves even the lost and dispossessed and welcomes them into fellowship with him. The "a interrogative parables" – those that ask "How much more.. " (the friend at midnight, Luke 11:5-8; or the persistent widow, Luke 18:1-8) – show how much God can be trusted to act righteously. If even humans won't act in certain evil ways, Jesus asked, "How more will your Father in heaven give...? (Luke 11: 13).

### **List of Jesus' Parables**

#### **Open and closed doors**

The Closed Door (Luke 13:24-30)

The Doorkeeper (Mark 13:33-37; cf. Matt 24:42)

The Thief in the night and the Faithful Servants (Mathew 24:42-51.; Luke 12:32-48.)

The Strong Man Bound (Matt. 12:29; Mark 3:27; Luke 11:21 f.)

The divided Realm (Mark 3:24-26; Luke 11:17-20)

The Unoccupied House or The Demon's Invasion (Mathew 12:43-45; Luke 11:24-26)

The Importunate Neighbor (Luke 11:5-8)

The Son's Request (Mathew 7:9-11; Luke 11:11-13)

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The Unjust Judge or The Importunate Widow (Luke 18:1-8)  
The Pharisee and the Publican (Luke 18:9-14)

### **Work and wages**

Master and Servant (Luke 17:7-10)  
The Waiting Servants (Luke 12:14-30; Luke 19:12-27)  
The Laborers in Trust or The Talents (Mathew 25:14-30; Luke 19:12-27)  
The Money in Trust or The Talents ( Mathew 25:14-30; Luke 19:12-27)  
The Lamp (Matt 5:14-16; Mark 4:21; Luke 8:16,11:31) and The City Set on a Hill(Matt.5:14b)  
The Body's Lamp(Mathew 6:22 f. ; Luke 11:34-36)  
The Discarded Salt (Matt 5:13; Mark 9:50; Luke 14:34 f.)  
The Patch and the Wineskins (Matt. 9:16 f.: Mathew 5:25.f.)  
The Householder's Treasure(Mathew 13:52)  
The Dishonest Steward (Luke 16:1-12)  
The Defendant (Luke 12:58.f; Mathew 5:25.f.)  
The unforgiving official or The unmerciful Servant (Mathew 18:23-35)

The Rich Fool (Luke 12:16-21)  
The Wicked Vinedressers (Mathew 21:33-43; Mark 12:1-9; Luke 20:9-16)  
The Two Debtors (Luke 7:41-43)  
The Hidden Treasure (Mathew 13:45.f.)  
The Pearl of Great Price (Mathew 13:45.f.)

### **Weddings and feasts**

The sulking children or the children in the Marketplace (Mathew 11:16-19; Luke 7:31-35)  
The Arrogant Guest (Luke 14:7-11)  
The Bridegroom's Friend ( John 3:28)  
The Bridegroom's Attendants (Mathew 9:15a; Mark 2 :18.f.; Luke 5:34)  
The Bride's Girlfriends or Ten Virgins (Mathew 25:1-13)  
The Tower Builder and The Warring King (Luke 14:28-32)  
The Wedding Feast or The Unwilling Guests (Mathew 22:1-10; Luke 14:16-24)  
The Wedding Garment (Mathew 22:11-14)  
The Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31)

### **Lost and found, father and son**

The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)  
The Prodigal Son or the Loving Father (Luke 15:11-32)  
The Two Sons, the Apprentice Son, and The Slave and Son (Mathew 21:28-32; John 5:19-20a; John 3:35)  
The Lost Coin (Luke 15:8-10)  
The Lost Sheep (Mathew 9:12; Mark 2:17; Luke 5:31)  
The Doctor and Sick (Mathew 9:12; Mark 2:17; Luke 5:31)

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The Great Assize or the Sheep and the Goats (Mathew 25:31-46)

### **Parables in the Old Testament**

Parables are present, but not common, in the Old Testament. Perhaps the parable that most closely resembles Jesus' parable is Nathan's story of the pet lamb, which moved King David to repent (2 Samuel 12:1-13). Judges 9:8-15 and 2 Kings 14:9 symbolize kings and nations as talking plants and a wild beast; these passages are more like fables. Prophet Nathan meets King David to make him realize his great folly through a parable as we see in

Nearly 2,000 years after Jesus presented his teaching, his parables still sparkle with simple yet sublime insights about life—and startling yet comforting revelations about God's kingdom, as preached by Jesus. Jesus' use of parable was so masterful, and the kingdom-centered message of his parables so revolutionary that no other New Testament personality tried to copy this aspect of his teaching.

The uniqueness of Jesus' parables continues to amaze every one. Many creative writers, for example, Leo Tolstoy, have used this strategy. But this will be dealt with in another article!

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*Shanthi Nehemiah, M.A., M.Phil.*  
*Department of English*  
*Karunya University*  
*Karunyanagar, Coimbatore - 641 114*  
*Tamilnadu, India*  
[shanthi\\_nehemiah@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:shanthi_nehemiah@yahoo.co.uk)