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978-1-107-66501-9 - The Parables of the Gospels in the Light of Modern
Criticism: Hulsean Prize Essay, 1912
Laurence E. Browne
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CHAPTER I

SIMILITUDE AND ALLEGORY

The first question that a child asks on being told a tale is "Is it true?" In the same way the first enquiry to which we are tempted as we begin to deal with the parables of the Gospels is their genuineness. It is of the utmost importance to the child to know whether Hänsel and Gretel, Romulus and Remus, Adam and Eve, really lived; and yet the impatience for an answer must often be checked until the child is older. For us too the question of the authenticity of the parables, although it is so important, must wait awhile for an answer. It is not to be judged on external evidence alone, but on the internal evidence of the parables themselves. We must therefore first set ourselves to find out the nature and *raison d'être* of these stories which fill so large a part of the Gospels. In other words, What is a parable?

The uses of the Hebrew and Greek words for a parable do not, as we shall see later, give us any immediate help, for they include a variety of figures of

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speech. Broadly speaking they include any kind of speech that was thrown into figurative or pictorial form.

Now there are two kinds of figurative speech to be sharply distinguished, Allegory and Similitude¹. In their simplest form they are called respectively Metaphor and Simile. In Metaphor a word in the sentence to be expressed is replaced by a word denoting an object in some respect similar; frequently it is an abstract word which is replaced by a concrete. Eph. vi. 11 says "Put on the whole armour of God" meaning "Put on the whole protection (or defence) of God," the word 'armour' of concrete meaning replacing the abstract word 'protection.' In Simile on the other hand the abstract action is explained by comparison with a concrete action; e.g. it is simile to say (Ps. v. 12) "O Lord, thou wilt compass him with favour as with a shield."

In Allegory the exchange of one term for another which takes place in Metaphor is repeated, so that an allegory might be described as a string of metaphors. The metaphors are not chosen at random and strung loosely together, but are all taken from one sphere, so forming a connected whole. As an example let us take the well-known allegory of Jotham in Judges ix. 8-20:

¹ I use the word Similitude as equivalent to *Gleichnis*, keeping the word Parable, in a less restricted sense, for the parables of Jesus, and similar stories.

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“The trees went forth on a time to anoint a king over them ; and they said unto the olive tree, Reign thou over us. But the olive tree said unto them, Should I leave my fatness, wherewith by me they honour God and man, and go to be promoted over the trees? And the trees said to the fig tree, Come thou, and reign over us. But the fig tree said unto them, Should I forsake my sweetness, and my good fruit, and go to be promoted over the trees? Then said the trees unto the vine, Come thou, and reign over us. And the vine said unto them, Should I leave my wine, which cheereth God and man, and go to be promoted over the trees? Then said all the trees unto the bramble, Come thou, and reign over us. And the bramble said unto the trees, If in truth ye anoint me king over you, then come and put your trust in my shadow : and if not, let fire come out of the bramble, and devour the cedars of Lebanon. Now therefore, if ye have done truly and sincerely, in that ye have made Abimelech king, and if ye have dealt well with Jerubbaal and his house... then rejoice ye in Abimelech, and let him also rejoice in you. But if not, let fire come out from Abimelech, and devour the men of Shechem, and the house of Millo.”

Here we are given to understand that the word ‘bramble’ is put for ‘Abimelech,’ the word ‘trees’ for ‘men of Shechem,’ the ‘olive,’ ‘fig’ and ‘vine’ for other great men who might have been rulers over Shechem, the ‘fatness,’ etc. is the utility in some direction other than the mere holding sway, and the ‘fire’ from the bramble is the destruction by Abimelech of those who do not trust and obey him. This string of metaphors constitutes an allegory. All the metaphorical terms used belong to the sphere of plant life, thus giving coherence to the collection of metaphors. Although then the story as it stands is outside the range of

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possibility, yet it can be imagined and is therefore interesting. In order to get the meaning that Jotham wished to convey it is only necessary to exchange the words as explained above. No alteration has to be made in the relations between the different elements in the story: those relations are not similar to, but the same as, those intended to be understood. It is this fact indeed which makes the story as it stands impossible because they happen to be relations which do not obtain in the case of trees. By most authors figurative speech in which plants and animals play the chief parts is called fable, implying the impossibility of the story. But for our purpose this distinction is of no importance, and is best avoided. What is important to us is whether the speech is of the nature of similitude or allegory.

Take as another example of allegory an ancient hymn:

“Christian, dost thou see them
On the holy ground,
How the troops of Midian
Prowl and prowl around?”

This is an extremely simple allegory. In order to get the required meaning it is only necessary to read ‘spirits tempting to evil’ for ‘troops of Midian,’ and perhaps ‘seat of the soul’ for ‘holy ground.’ All the relationships are written word for word as intended to be understood.

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In general words, it is allegorising when a man wishes to tell something about certain elements *A*, *B*, *C*, *D*, etc., and writes down instead of them *a*, *b*, *c*, *d*, etc., only fitting them into the same relations that exist between *A*, *B*, *C*, etc. There is a similarity of some kind between each pair, so that one may say that the values $\frac{A}{a}$, $\frac{B}{b}$, $\frac{C}{c}$, etc. are known quantities. This is well seen in the examples given above.

In Simile and Similitude on the other hand the comparison is not between one element and another but between one relationship and another. A simple example is Ps. xlii. 1 :

“Like as the hart desireth the water-brooks,
So longeth my soul after Thee, O God!”

where the one relationship compared is the desire of a hart for water with the longing of the soul for God. This may be expanded with greater detail without there being any further relation to be compared :

“As pants the hart for cooling streams,
When heated in the chase,
So longs my soul, O God, for Thee,
And Thy refreshing grace.”

The one relation compared is the same as before ; nor would it need great ingenuity to construct quite a long story about a hart which after many adventures succeeded in reaching a stream for refreshment, without bringing in more than this one relation of the longing

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of the soul for God. But now Jülicher asserts that however much a similitude be embellished there is *never* more than one relation to be compared¹. According to him the speaker wishes to convey a judgment or decision (*Urteil*) on some matter, and in order to do so tells the similitude in which the same judgment is obvious. So far that is often true, for, especially in similitudes of an argumentative kind—as opposed to such as are merely explanatory—the main object is to bring out a judgment. But this one judgment may result from a comparison of a number of relationships. To illustrate this idea of several relationships compared, with the object of bringing out one judgment, let us consider Rabbi Akiba's Similitude of the Fox and the Fishes²:

“Once the evil kingship ordered the Israelites not to busy themselves with the Law. Pappus ben Jehudah came and met Rabbi Akiba holding an assembly in the street, and busying himself with the Law. He said to him, ‘Akiba, fearest thou not the evil kingship?’ He replied, ‘I will tell thee a parable. What is the matter like? It is like a fox who went along the bank of a river and saw fishes which gathered together from one place to another. He said to them, “Why do ye flee away?” They said to him, “Because of the nets which men bring over

¹ Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 1 Teil, p. 317: “die Parabel ist immer nur da, jenen einen Punkt, ein Gesetz, eine Idee, eine Erfahrung, die im geistlichen wie im irdischen Leben gilt, zu beleuchten.”

² I translate from Fiebig's German, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, p. 79.

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us." He said to them, "Were it your will to mount up on to dry land we might dwell, ye and I, as my fathers dwelt with your fathers." They said to him, "Art thou he of whom it is said that he is the cleverest of beasts? Thou art not clever but rather foolish. If we are already afraid in the place of our life (i.e. in the water), how much more in the place of our death (i.e. on dry land)?" So we too: if we fear now where we sit and busy ourselves with the Law, in which it stands written, "For that is thy life and the length of thy days" (Deut. xxx. 20), how much more if we go off and are neglectful of it?"

The one judgment to which the hearer is forced is that as it was the wisest course for the fishes to remain in their natural sphere, the water, so it is the wisest course for the Jew to remain in *his* natural sphere, the study of the Law. But it would be quite wrong to suppose that only one relationship is compared. To begin with fishes living in the water, their natural home, are compared with Jews living in the study of the Law. Then fishes stranded on dry land are compared with Jews trying to live without the Law. Further the men trying to catch the fish are compared with the evil kingship trying to prevent the Jews from living in the Law; and the fox giving stupid advice is probably compared with Pappus ben Jehudah whose advice is equally foolish. We have three or four relationships compared. The story is therefore parallel to the matter to be expressed, not as Jülicher would assert in one point only, but in three or four. Such a close parallelising as this Jülicher would call allegorising, but yet these examples of similitude lack

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the one essential of allegory, which is that elements (not relationships) in the picture-story shall be related in some way to the corresponding elements in the matter expressed¹. For instance there is no relationship between a hart and the soul, between water-brooks and God, between fish and Jews, a river and the Law, and so on. Writing it as we did in the case of allegory: we wish to express the relationships between elements A, B, C, D , etc., and we tell the relationships between other elements a, b, c, d , etc. But $\frac{A}{a}, \frac{B}{b}, \frac{C}{c}$ are not known quantities, since there is no point in A by which it can be compared with a . In a similitude we are told that $A : B : C : D = a : b : c : d$. A common illustration will make this clearer. We wish to express in the concrete the abstract passing of time. The elements we wish to express are the intervals when 1 min., 2 min., 3 min., etc. have passed. We express it in the concrete by the movement of a minute hand through angles of $6^\circ, 12^\circ, 18^\circ$, etc. The angular movement of the minute hand is a similitude of the passing of time.

¹ They do not in fact go beyond the dictum of Maldonatus (ad Matth. xi. 16): "Nunc satis est ut moneamus ualde esse usitatum ut in parabolis non personae personis, non partes partibus, sed totum negotium toti negotio comparetur....Itaque frustra laborat, qui anxie quaerit quomodo personae personis partes partibus respondeant, totum sententiae corpus intuendum est, et integrum ex integra parabola tradendum: ne in partes diuisum pereat atque dissoluatur."

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1 min. : 2 min. : 3 min. = 6° : 12° : 18°. Yet we know no relationship between 1 minute of time and an angle of 6° for they are quite incomparable.

The essence of Similitude is thus the comparing of relationships. Often for simplicity's sake only one relationship is compared, and especially often is this the case in the occidental similitudes which Jülicher takes as his norm. Fiebig, taking Jewish similitudes as his norm, regards several relationships as the usual case. He says¹ "In the method of laying stress on individual points, which belongs to the Jewish way of expressing oneself, it is specially easy to make a similitude, so to speak, with several peaks, i.e. not to give it quite strictly merely one idea, one point of comparison, as the abstract logician and refining Professor is anxious to do in his colourless theory." Jülicher had in fact defined Similitude as² "that figure of speech in which the working of a sentence (a thought) is made clear by laying alongside a similar sentence, whose working is known, belonging to another sphere." By restricting this definition to one sentence or one thought Jülicher ignores the possibility of several thoughts being compared. But Fiebig is quite incorrect in laying this omission to the account of a love of logic. Greater attention to logical and scientific accuracy in the definition might have avoided it. Nor is Fiebig right when he hints that the Jewish method of

¹ *op. cit.* p. 27.² *op. cit.*, 1 Teil, p. 80.

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comparing several relationships is due to an oriental absence of logic: the number of relationships compared depends on the whim of the writer or speaker, and is not of the essence of similitude. And one more point: the purpose of a similitude may often be to force a judgment on some question, but that again is not essential.

It will be seen that both in the matter of the essential judgment brought out by a similitude, and also in the number of relationships compared in a similitude, we have departed from Jülicher's opinion, although he rightly sees the characteristic of allegory in individual traits, the two halves of the allegory being comparable element with element. We are obliged to disagree with him even more than this, for he asserts that figurative speech must be either pure allegory or pure similitude. He gets this result, as will be explained later, by his treatment of the purpose of these different forms of speech. Before dealing with the purpose, we can easily see that pure allegory and pure similitude are not the only nor even the commonest kinds of pictorial speech. The ordinary mind, and especially the mind of an Oriental, does not restrict itself within these logical bounds. The 'corruption' of pure allegory or similitude can proceed from either side. An allegory may have some of the features of similitude, or vice versa. The example that follows of an allegory which has a trace of similitude in it is