

SETTING THE TABLE 3

THE MESSIAH WOULD SPEAK IN PARABLES

Parables held a major place in Israelite history. It was even prophesied that the promised Messiah would speak in parables and dark sayings. The word “parable” comes from the Greek παραβολή (*parabolē*), a conjunction of *para* (meaning alongside) and *bolē* (to throw). Hence the true meaning is found in understanding the symbolic or figurative words that were “thrown alongside” the intended meaning.

Speaking in parables is exactly what Jesus did at the Last Supper and on many other occasions, as was prophesied:

^{NAS} Psalm 78:2 I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings of old,

This scripture was a prophecy concerning the Messiah, who set forth truths and the plan of God “after the manner of a parable and riddle,” as the Keil and Delitzsch *Commentary* explains:

The poet, however, does not mean to say that he will literally discourse gnomic sentences and propound riddles, but that he will **set forth the history of the fathers after the manner of a parable and riddle**, so that it may become as a parable, i.e., a didactic history, and its events as marks of interrogation and nota-bene’s⁴⁴ to the present age.⁴⁵

Matthew, writing under God’s anointing, applies Psalm 78:2 directly to Christ:

^{NAS} Matthew 13:34 All these things Jesus spoke to the multitudes **in parables**, and **He did not speak to them without a parable**,

^{NIV} Matthew 13:35 **So was fulfilled** what was spoken through the prophet: “I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world.”

44 *Nota bene* is Latin, essentially meaning to “note well” the instruction at hand.

45 Keil and Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 5, p. 363.

The Messiah spoke in parables when he was led by God to do so, which was quite often. In reference to these scriptures, the commentator Lenski remarks how some will understand the parables and others will not:

This brings out the two features of parables: they are unsolved riddles to some (unbelievers) but are **highly illuminating illustrations for those having or receiving the solutions** (believers).⁴⁶

The Lord desires to reveal truth to the people, and when the time is right, He will do so as long as we are willing to hear:

^{NAS} Mark 4:11–12 And He was saying to them, “To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God; but those who are outside get everything in parables, And with **many such parables** He was speaking the word to them **as they were able to hear it**;

^{NAS} Mark 4:34 and He did not speak to them without a parable; but He was **explaining everything privately** to His own disciples.

Parables in the Jewish Tradition

Parables were a well-established part of the Jewish idiom. God used parables and figures of speech through the prophets (such as Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah). Samson and many others also spoke in riddles and parables. In fact, God explicitly told various prophets to bring riddles and parables to the house of Israel:

^{NAS} Ezekiel 17:2 “Son of man, **propound a riddle**, and **speak a parable** to the house of Israel,

^{NAS} Ezekiel 20:49 Then I said, “Ah Lord God! They are saying of me, ‘Is he not *just* speaking parables?’”

^{NAS} Hosea 12:10 I have also spoken to the prophets, And I gave numerous visions; And through the prophets I gave parables.

God also spoke to the sons of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in visions and dreams that often required interpretation. This dream of Joseph prefigured the coming Messiah:

46 Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel 15–28*, p. 534.

^{NAS} Genesis 37:9 Now he had still another dream, and related it to his brothers, and said, “Lo, I have had still another dream; and behold, the sun and the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me.”

God said that He would not speak in riddles or enigmatic speech to His friend Moses but rather face-to-face. Sometimes God has His people in a special place before Him where He speaks plainly and reveals deeper truths without riddles, such as with Moses:

^{NIV} Numbers 12:8 With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the LORD. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?”

But some truths are sealed until the time is right and the people are ready. Here Daniel and Isaiah show that God has some truths that even the learned man cannot understand, because they are sealed (and thus reserved) for a future understanding:

^{DBY} Daniel 12:8–9 And I heard, but I understood not. And I said, My lord, what shall be the end of these things? And he said, Go thy way, Daniel; for these words are closed and sealed till the time of the end.

^{JPS} Isaiah 29:11 And the vision of all this is become unto you as the words of a writing that is sealed, which men deliver to one that is learned, saying: ‘Read this, I pray thee’; and he saith: ‘I cannot, for it is sealed’;

And some of the Messiah’s parables concerning the kingdom of God were for his disciples to understand, but not intended to be comprehended by those whose hearts were not for truth:

^{NAS} Matthew 13:10–11 And the disciples came and said to Him, “Why do You speak to them in parables?” And He answered and said to them, “To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted.

Obviously, those who love God—who have hearts receptive to truth, who are willing to do God’s will, and who are open to God’s leading—receive more truth than those whose hearts are not willing:

^{NAS} John 7:17 “If any man is willing to do His will, he shall know of the teaching, whether it is of God, or *whether* I speak from Myself.

Parables at the Time of the Last Supper

Throughout the time leading up to the Last Supper, Jesus related one parable after another:

^{KJV} Luke 18:1 And he spake a **parable** unto them *to this end*, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint;

^{KJV} Luke 18:9 And he spake this **parable** unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others:

^{KJV} Luke 19:11 And as they heard these things, he added and spake a **parable**, because he was nigh to Jerusalem, and because they thought that the kingdom of God should immediately appear.

^{KJV} Luke 20:9 Then began he to speak to the people this **parable**; A certain man planted a vineyard, and let it forth to husbandmen, and went into a far country for a long time.

^{KJV} Luke 20:19 And the chief priests and the scribes the same hour sought to lay hands on him; and they feared the people: for they perceived that he had spoken this **parable** against them.

^{KJV} Luke 21:29 And he spake to them a **parable**; Behold the fig tree, and all the trees;

Then Jesus continued speaking spiritual truth at the Last Supper:

^{NIV} John 13:7 Jesus replied, “You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand.”

Jesus gave many parables; yet the scriptures do not always qualify each one by adding, “This is a parable.” Here is just one example, spoken on the evening of the Last Supper:

^{KJV} John 15:5 I am the vine, ye *are* the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.

Of course Jesus did not mean, “I am really a grapevine, and I want you all to hold hands and pretend to be branches, and to turn this into a new ritual.” Nor did he spell out, “Well, actually I’m not *really* a grapevine; this is just a parable,” because he expected them to figure out the obvious.

In that same sense, while eating supper earlier that night, Jesus held bread, broke it, and handed the pieces to his apostles saying, “This is my body.” Jesus did not elaborate, “Well okay, this really isn’t my physical body that we are eating; it’s just bread—but you know that because this is a parable.” He knew they understood this to be a spiritual teaching:

^{KJV} Luke 22:19 And he took bread, and gave thanks, and brake *it*, and gave unto them, saying, This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me.

Thus, contrary to the belief of Roman and other theologians, at the Last Supper Jesus did not *mean* “This bread is really my body; I want you to eat it in a new ritual.”

After the apostles died and many of the earliest Jewish and Gentile believers either perished or were martyred, the Church became essentially Rome’s domain. As we’ve seen, the Jews, along with their understandings, customs, and idioms, became despised and were rejected. Roman Emperor Constantine wanted the Church to have *nothing in common* with the Jews, so the Church devolved into many lifeless rituals and doctrines that would never have been taught by the Jewish apostles.

Bizarre Statements Point to Parables

A bizarre-sounding scripture is like a big sign saying “parable.” Often in the Bible, a statement that seems strange, such as the following one by the Jewish prophet Isaiah, is intended to be understood figuratively:

^{KJV} Isaiah 60:16 Thou shalt also suck the milk of the Gentiles, **and shalt suck the breast of kings:** and thou shalt know that I the LORD *am* thy Saviour and thy Redeemer, the mighty One of Jacob.

No Jewish scribe or commentator ever believed that Isaiah meant this to be taken literally. They knew it referred symbolically and figuratively to the provision (whether natural or spiritual) of the nations flowing to Israel.

Another bizarre statement made by the patriarch Jacob comes from a portion of scripture referring to the promised Messiah:

^{NAS} Genesis 49:11 “He ties *his* foal to the vine, And his donkey’s colt to the choice vine; **He washes his garments in wine**, And **his robes in the blood** of grapes.

Everyone knows you cannot wash robes in wine or the “blood” of grapes and expect them to come out clean. Then below, in the context of the Promised Land, Moses follows with a similarly peculiar analogy of the Israelites drinking blood, although it was only the “blood” of grapes:

^{NAS} Deuteronomy 32:14 Curds of cows, and milk of the flock, With fat of lambs, And rams, the breed of Bashan, and goats, With the finest of the wheat—And **of the blood** of grapes you drank wine.

With all the admonitions God gave to Moses for the Jews to avoid any manner of blood,⁴⁷ this verse in the Song of Moses might have seemed bizarre to many Israelites. Why didn’t Moses simply write of the “fresh flowing juices of the grapes”? Wouldn’t that have been more appealing? Imagine how the Israelites would have reacted if Moses had said to them, “Here, have a cup of blood to drink; this is blood of the grapes.” This scripture shows that Moses (and Jacob) spoke a “dark saying” of old.⁴⁸

In the New Testament, Peter (the Jewish follower of the Messiah) made the following statement that would be *very bizarre* if taken in the natural sense. Rome, Martin Luther, and the Protestants all understood this scripture spiritually, and none of them applied it naturally by actually sprinkling each other during their Communion ritual:

^{NAS} 1 Peter 1:2 according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, that you may **obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood**: May grace and peace be yours in fullest measure.

In Acts, chapter 10, through a vision from the Lord, a hungry Peter was told to “kill and eat” various unclean animals (including lizards, in the Greek). Peter responded, “Not so, Lord, for I have never eaten anything common or unclean.” However, Peter soon understood what God was showing him—that the believing Gentiles were no longer to be considered as unclean. This bizarre statement was only a parable that gave Peter new truth when he came to understand it (Acts 10:14, 28).

⁴⁷ Leviticus 7:26, 27; 17:10–14, etc.

⁴⁸ In Course 11 we will explore how these two scriptures tie into the “dark sayings” that the Messiah spoke at the Last Supper.

Why the Messiah Spoke in Parables at the Last Supper

After the many parables the Messiah spoke at the Last Supper, he then said the following:

^{NAS} John 16:25 “These things I have spoken to you in **figurative language**; an hour is coming when I will speak no more to you in figurative language, but will tell you plainly of the Father.

The disciples remark on this specifically, showing their understanding that what Jesus had said earlier during supper had been figurative:

^{NAS} John 16:29 His disciples said, “Lo, **now** You are speaking plainly, and are not using a figure of speech.

At the Last Supper, Jesus knew his disciples were not yet in a place of discernment to receive deeper spiritual truths, so instead he used parables and figurative language that they would remember. Once they were filled with God’s spirit on the soon-coming Day of Pentecost, they were better able to understand:

^{NAS} John 14:26 “But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, **and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you.**

^{NAS} John 16:12 “I have **many more things to say** to you, **but you cannot bear *them* now.**

How sad it is that these followers of the Messiah had him right there with them, but their previous traditions and understandings were so ingrained that they could not bear to hear the new truths that the Messiah wanted them to understand. Today, too, we must not let previous traditions, no matter how entrenched they may be, hold us back from anything God intends for us.

What Jesus Said or What He Meant

When interpreting the scriptures, it’s not always what Jesus *said* that matters, but what he *meant*. Jesus often spoke from a higher plane or a spiritual point of view. For example, when Jesus spoke of the leaven of the Pharisees, he was referring to their false teachings. At first the disciples did not understand what Jesus *meant*; they thought he was speaking *literally* about the leaven of bread:

^{NAS} Matthew 16:6 And Jesus said to them, “Watch out and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”

^{NAS} Matthew 16:7 And they began to discuss among themselves, saying, “*It is* because we took no bread.”

^{NAS} Matthew 16:11 “**How is it that you do not understand** that I did not speak to you concerning bread? But beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”

^{NAS} Matthew 16:12 **Then they understood** that He did not say to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the **teaching** of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

If the disciples took the Messiah’s words literally, they would miss his true meaning:

^{NAS} John 11:11 This He said, and after that He said to them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I go, that I may awaken him out of sleep.”

^{NAS} John 11:13 Now Jesus had spoken of his death, **but they thought** that He was speaking **of literal** sleep.

^{NAS} John 11:14 Then Jesus therefore said to them plainly, “Lazarus is dead,

Often even those closest to Jesus wrongly took his words *literally* when he intended a *spiritual* meaning. This was true when, at the age of 12, Jesus was in the Temple during the Passover and his parents could not find him:

^{NAS} Luke 2:46 And it came about that after three days they found Him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them, and asking them questions.

^{NAS} Luke 2:47 And all who heard Him were amazed at His understanding and His answers.

^{KJV} Luke 2:49 And he said unto them, How is it that ye sought me? wist ye not that I must be about my Father’s business?

^{KJV} Luke 2:50 And **they understood not the saying** which he spake unto them.

^{NAS} Luke 2:51 And He went down with them, and came to Nazareth; and He continued in subjection to them; and His mother treasured all *these* things in her heart.

Many times Jesus puzzled his disciples with his use of parables and figurative language. The disciples sometimes asked Jesus to clarify his meaning:

^{KJV} Matthew 15:15 Then answered Peter and said unto him, Declare unto us this parable.

^{KJV} Matthew 15:16 And Jesus said, **Are ye also yet without understanding?**

^{KJV} Matthew 15:17 **Do not ye yet understand**, that whatsoever entereth in at the mouth goeth into the belly, and is cast out into the draught?

^{KJV} Matthew 15:18 But those things which proceed out of the mouth come forth from the heart; and they defile the man.

In the Temple at Jerusalem during the Festival of Sukkot (also called Feast of Tabernacles/Booths/Ingathering), the Messiah called out to the thirsty to come to him and drink. But he did not *mean* this literally, as the second verse below makes clear:

^{NAS} John 7:37 Now on the last day, the great *day* of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, "If any man is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink.

^{NAS} John 7:39 **But this He spoke of the Spirit**, whom those who believed in Him were to receive; for the Spirit was not yet *given*, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

Often the scripture leaves it up to the reader to discern if the words are meant literally or not, such as the "yoke" the Messiah mentions below:

^{NAS} Matthew 11:28 "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.

^{NAS} Matthew 11:29 “Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls.

Again, the Messiah said many things that he did not *mean* to be taken literally, and many times he did not qualify that his statements were parables, since he expected his disciples to understand. For instance, Jesus *said* he was the following:

- the door of the sheep—but he did not *mean* door or sheep literally
- the good shepherd—but he did not *mean* of sheep
- the true vine—but he did not *mean* vine literally
- the light of the world—but he did not *mean* literal light
- the bread of life—but he did not *mean* literal bread.

God’s spirit will bear witness with our own spirit when something is to be taken literally or spiritually. God also sends us teachers for the equipping of the believers (Ephesians 4:11–13).

To take every scripture *literally* would require belief in the following:

- that the disciples became branches of the grapevine (John 15:5)
- that Jesus was actually a lamb (John 1:36)
- that King Herod was actually a fox (Luke 13:32)
- that Jesus was actually bread, and he literally came down from heaven (John 6:41)
- that Jesus gave bread, that was really his body (Luke 22:19)
- that Jesus held a cup, which was really his blood (Matthew 26:27, 28)
- that the cup at the Last Supper was actually the New Covenant (1 Corinthians 11:25)
- that we should get busy washing each other’s feet (John 13:14, 15)
- that Jesus told the Jews to destroy the Temple (John 2:19, 20)
- that Jesus had two flock of sheep somewhere (John 10:16)
- that Jesus was actually eaten up by zeal (John 2:17, KJV)
- that the Lord wanted Peter to eat reptiles, crawling things, and other unclean animals (Acts 10:12, 13, reptiles in Greek)

Numerous other examples exist of Jesus speaking figuratively, metaphorically, or in a parable. It’s easy to see how it is not always what the Messiah *said* that is important, but what he *meant*.