

What Is A Parable?

by Bill Crews

While this is a study of subject matter found in the New Testament, it is worthy of note that the word **“parable”** can be found in English translations of the Old Testament. In both the King James Version and the American Standard Version it appears some eighteen times, all from the same word (**MASHAL**), which word is also rendered *“by-word”*(1), *“like”*(1) and *“proverb”*(19 times). In the New King James Version and the New American Standard Version the word **“parable”** appears far fewer times (just 4 or 5). The translators preferred *“oracle”* or *“discourse”* instead. **MASHAL** is defined in *Strong’s Concordance* as “a pithy *maxim*, usually of a metaphorical nature; hence a *simile* (as an adage, poem, discourse).” In *Wilson’s Old Testament Word Studies* it is defined as “a comparison, similitude, parable; a sentiment, maxim; a proverb, by-word, satire.”

We also find some Old Testament passages that have to do with the parables of Christ in the New Testament. Psalm 78:2 (attributed to Asaph) says, *“I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings of old.”* In Matthew 13:34-35 this passage is referred to as a prophecy which Jesus fulfilled by speaking in parables. It reads: *“All these things Jesus spoke to the multitude in parables; and without a parable He did not speak to them, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet saying: ‘I will open My mouth in parables; I will utter things which have been kept secret from the foundation of the world.’”* Isaiah 6:9-10 apparently has a dual application — to the Israelites in Isaiah’s day and to the Jews who heard the parables of Jesus. See Matthew 13:14-15 where this Isaiah passage is quoted and which appears between the parable of the sower (vv. 1-9) and the explanation of that parable (vv. 18-23).

The word **“parable”** in the New Testament, except for John 10:6 (**PAROIMIA** in the original, meaning an *“adage”* or *“dark saying,”* rendered **“parable”** only in the KJV and the ASV), is always from the Greek word **PARABOLE**, a word which the translators chose, not to translate, but to *transliterate* (transpose the Greek letters into English letters) and *anglicize* (give it an English-sounding ending). You already knew that this is how they came up with *“baptize”* and *“baptism”* rather than translating the Greek words for *“immerse”* and *“immersion.”* The word **“parable”** appears sixteen times in Matthew, twelve times in Mark, seventeen times in Luke, and once in John in some translations (as noted previously). We will be examining some of the parables spoken by Jesus in the first three books of the New Testament. In some instances they are specifically referred to as parables; in others they are not, even though it is obvious that they are.

What Is A “Parable”?

Vine’s Expository Dictionary of N.T. Words (Vol. III, p. 158) says, **“PARABOLE** — literally denotes a placing beside (akin to **paraballo**, to throw or lay beside, to compare). It signifies a placing of one thing beside another with a view to comparison. It is generally of a somewhat lengthy utterance or narrative drawn from nature or human circumstances, the object of which is to set forth a spiritual lesson ... sometimes it is used of a short saying or proverb.” *Vine’s* also warns of two dangers: “that of ignoring the important features, and that of trying to make all the details mean something.” Generally, a parable was designed to teach one central truth, and was called for by the circumstances present and the attitude of the listeners for whom it was intended. J. H. Thayer’s *A Greek-English Lexicon of the N. T.*, p. 479, says of **PARABOLE**: “1. a of one thing by the side of another, juxtaposition, as of ships in battle ... 2. metaphorically, a comparing, comparison of one thing with another, likeness, similitude ... specifically, a narrative, fictitious but agreeable to the laws and usages of human life, by which either

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