

Research Article

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“To Those Who Have Ears to Hear:” Clement of Alexandria on the Parables of Jesus

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Abstract: This article addresses the topic of parables in the *Stromateis* of Clement of Alexandria. The broad thesis is that New Testament scholarship can help clarify early Christian interpretation of the New Testament. Clement of Alexandria has a very precise definition of the genre of parable. This definition is compared with various literary definitions found in the work of the grammarian Trypho of Alexandria and with one modern definition. Both of these comparisons bring out the precision, clarity, and usefulness of Clement’s definition for understanding the function of parables. The discussion then turns to the grounding of Clement’s definition in the saving mission of the Son. Since Clement closely links parables with prophecy and redemptive suffering, John Meier’s exposition of the Parable of the Wicked Tenants is introduced to show how parables can concretely express the redemptive suffering of the Son. Meier also demonstrates how the disciples were themselves involved in writing and completing this parable, so the article closes with an analysis of one of Clement’s interpretations of a parable, his own contribution to the tradition of parabolic speech.

Keywords: patristics, early Christian studies, biblical studies, prophecy, John Meier, gospels, teaching, esotericism, Alexandria

The last twenty-five years of scholarship on the Bible and early Christianity have seen many appeals to “reception.” New journals, handbooks, encyclopedias, and monographs have placed themselves beneath this banner.¹ However, it is not always clear what is meant by the term or why it is used. For some, it signals the declining dominance of the historical–critical method in biblical studies. For others, it is an avenue leading toward interdisciplinarity. For others still, the appeal to reception history or theory is untheorized entirely.² While this looseness of terminology may risk scholarly misunderstanding, it has also enabled many scholars to cross over into disparate disciplines in their research and writing.

¹ I list only some of the most important examples from the last thirty years or so by title, publisher, category, and the initial date of publication or founding: *Evangelischer katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament* (Commentary Series, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989); *Centre for Reception History of the Bible at Oxford University* (Academic Center, 2002); *Blackwell Bible Commentaries* (Wiley-Blackwell, Commentary Series, 2004); *Encyclopedia of the Bible and its Reception* (De Gruyter, Encyclopedia, 2009); *Studies of the Bible and its Reception* (De Gruyter, Monograph Series, 2013); *Scriptural Traces: Critical Perspectives on the Reception and Influence of the Bible* (Bloomsbury, Journal, 2015).

² Take for example, Paget, *The New Cambridge History of the Bible* (2013) in comparison with the Ackroyd and Evans, *Cambridge History of the Bible* (1970). The first volume of each has a Part V that covers early Christian interpretation of Bible. In the *CHOB* this section is titled “The Bible in the Early Church,” but in the *NCHOB* it is titled “The Reception of the Bible in the Post-New Testament Period.” Nonetheless, besides the heading, the methodology *vis-à-vis* reception studies is not fundamentally

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One subdiscipline of reception studies that is of special interest here is the history of interpretation.³ Discussions of reception theory in biblical studies have tended to focus on the ways in which scholars of a supposedly siloed discipline have broken through unnecessary parameters.⁴ In concert with this phenomenon, engagement with biblical scholarship by scholars of early Christianity also provides insights into the interpretations of early Christians.⁵ To demonstrate this point, I will treat Clement of Alexandria's theory and interpretation of the parables of Jesus.

Clement's own reflections on parables touch upon important questions regarding parables that took center stage in the twentieth century, especially the place of allegory in their interpretation and their relationship to prophetic speech. Clement's general theory of esotericism has been dominant in discussions of his treatment of parables.⁶ Bringing just some of the major concerns of New Testament scholarship to these discussions allows Clement's full literary and theological treatment of parables to come into view.

Broadly, I will add a small brick to the edifice called the "history of interpretation," in this case on the parables of the synoptic Gospels via the *Stromateis* (*Strom.*) of Clement of Alexandria. Specifically, I will engage Clement of Alexandria in a conversation with New Testament scholarship that demonstrates how he uses the shape of the Lord's saving mission to unite a nuanced literary and allegorical treatment of the parables of Jesus with a rich account of their challenging prophetic force.

To that end, I will compare Clement's definition of parables with some ancient and modern counterparts to draw out the complexity of his literary definition. I will then bring Clement's theological and Christological account of the genre of parables into conversation with John Meier's treatment of the parable of the Wicked Tenants of the Vineyard to tease out the close association between prophetic and parabolic teaching and suffering in Clement. Finally, I will examine one of the few explicit treatments of Jesus' synoptic parables in Clement to illustrate how Clement envisions and practices his own enigmatic form of teaching.

1 A definition of "parable"

To arrive at a definition of parable, Clement makes use of the Hellenic interpretive tradition. His definition appears in the midst of a long section on the reasons for Scripture's veiled meaning. He writes,

For just such a thing [as metaphorical writing] is a parable: a discourse (λόγος) that leads one who understands (συνιέντα) from what is not the principal subject (κυρίου) but is similar to the principal subject (κυρίῳ) to the true and principal subject (κύριον); or, as some say, it is an expression (λέξις) that presents (παριστάνουσα) with stylistic force (ἐνεργείας) what is principally (κυρίως) meant through other words.⁷

different in the *NCHOB*, nor is the subject matter, with chapters on Origen, Jerome, Augustine, and the Liturgy, *inter alia*. In each volume, the authors in this section belong to the same general field of "Patristics" or "Early Christian Studies."

³ The history of interpretation (*Auslegungsgeschichte*) might properly describe the topic of this article. For an outline of the relevant terminology concerning reception and the state of the question in biblical reception studies, see Boxall and Rowland, "Reception Criticism and Theory," 206–15. A discussion of the importance of Hans Georg Gadamer and Hans Robert Jauss for reception studies would be helpful here, if there were more room. On their place in this field, see Holub, *Reception Criticism*.

⁴ See, e.g., Watson, *Text*, 305–29. Bockmuehl even suggests that history of effect (using Gadamer's terminology) has a yet unrealized potential to bring scholars from many areas outside of biblical studies into the conversation and thus widen the scholarly discourse. *Seeing the Word*, 25–6. His first chapter is instructive for understanding the state of the field, its problems and possibilities, at the time of its writing in 2006. A number of criticisms have been applied to reception theory in biblical studies, but there is no space to discuss them here. See England and Lyons (eds.), *Reception History*, especially chapters 2–5 for a thorough treatment of those critiques.

⁵ One excellent example is Johnson, "A Sign for this Generation." In Part I he uses the nineteenth-century biblical scholar David Strauss' theory of myth as it applies to the Gospels to illuminate Origen's own treatment of the Gospels.

⁶ E.g., Méhat, *Étude sur les 'Stromates'*, 88; Mondesert, *Clément d'Alexandrie*, 134–5.

⁷ *Stromateis*, 6.15.126.4. I have made all of my translations from the edition of Stählin, *Clemens Alexandrinus*, and I have profited from the edition found in Descourtieux, *Stromate VI*. In addition to the French translation of Descourtieux, I have also consulted the translations available in Ferguson, *Clement of Alexandria*, and the translation found in Donaldson and Roberts,

Otto Stählin, editor of the *Stromateis*, notices that Clement is adapting his definition from Trypho, the author of *On Tropes*.⁸ Trypho identifies a number of tropes as poetic, in that they most often appear in the poets and because grammarians use them in interpreting the poets.⁹ He defines a parable in this way: “A parable is a discourse (λόγος) that presents (παριστάνων) with stylistic force (ἐνεργείας) the underlying meaning through juxtaposition with a similar thing.”¹⁰ Trypho places parable as one of three subcategories of simile (ὁμοίωσις), which he defines as “a phrase in which we put one thing in comparison with another.”¹¹ The other two are likeness (εἰκών) and example (παραδείγμα).

However, Clement’s definition fits more neatly within Trypho’s categorization of metaphor rather than simile.¹² Metaphor, according to Trypho, “is an expression (λέξις) that is transferred (μεταφερομένη) from the principal subject (κυρίου) to another that is not the principal subject due to some emphasis or likeness.”¹³ Along similar lines, “an allegory is a discourse (λόγος) that principally displays one subject, but presents (παριστάνων) the meaning of another according to a general likeness.”¹⁴ This definition might be closest to the first part of Clement’s definition. Moreover, Trypho gives a definition for stylistic force, which is a component of both Clement’s and his own definition of parable: “Stylistic force is a phrase that leads the object of intellection into the field of vision.” The example that Trypho gives for stylistic force from *Odyssey* 10.120 makes it clearer: “In great numbers [they came], not like men, but like giants.”¹⁵ That is, a trope that includes stylistic force uses vivid imagery to make its subject both concrete and arresting to the reader. Trypho then adds that the parables (i.e., some of the similes) of Homer themselves contain stylistic force.¹⁶ As in Clement’s definition, stylistic force may be an elemental part of a more drawn-out trope that indicates to the reader the presence of figurative speech. It seems then that Clement combines Trypho’s definitions of parable, metaphor, and allegory. He takes the transference from one subject to another from Trypho’s definition of metaphor, unites it with the idea of likeness from each of the three, and distinguishes what is said from what is truly presented. Finally, he adds the idea of stylistic force, the use of dramatic expression to catch the attention of the reader or listener.

Ante-Nicene Fathers in making my own translations...”. A note on κύριος; a common title in the New Testament for Jesus and in the Septuagint for God, within Hellenistic literary theory it can take on the sense expressed here, of the principal, authentic, or main subject matter, i.e., the subject matter that *rules* the other elements of the narrative. Hermaniuk, “La parabole,” 8–9, gives a helpful treatment of κύριος here. In the entirety of his article, he provides an excellent and thorough analysis of Clement’s definition with reference to many philosophical themes and sources, including Trypho.

8 Note, 495, *Clemens Alexandrinus* V. II. Trypho was an Alexandrian grammarian of the first century BCE who wrote works on orthography, aspiration, rhetorical figures, and grammar, Baumbach “Tryphon,” 987. This work, like other similar works, has been described as a “dictionary,” insofar as it is a list of definitions, West “Tryphon,” 230. West refers to this text as Tryphon i to distinguish it from a very similar work ascribed to the same author, which he refers to as Tryphon ii (231). Trypho uses a very wide array of classical Greek poetic texts, from Homer and Hesiod onward, to illustrate his definitions.

9 Trypho, *On Tropes*, 728–9; in Spengel, *Rhetores Graeci*. Though the name of the collection of modern editions where *On Tropes* appears suggests that the topic is *rhetorical* tropes. In fact, Trypho gives only poetic texts as examples. Clement saw Greek poetry as a home of enigmatic and figured speech. See Ward, “Most Useful,” 537 and 550.

10 Trypho, *On Tropes*, 750.

11 *Ibid.*, 748.

12 I am assuming Trypho’s definition of metaphor and simile as I make this distinction. The general difference is that a metaphor *assumes* the relationship between what is said and what is meant. Trypho writes that there are four kinds of metaphors: ones that transfer meaning from one animate thing to another, from an animate thing to an inanimate thing, and so on (729–30). To the contrary, a simile *expresses* this relationship with a word like “as” – e.g., ὡς or ἥντε – or an adjective for “similar” – e.g., ἵκελος (747–51). Clement’s use of the adjective “similar” (ἐμφερής) suggests at the very least that a parable is a kind of metaphor that depends on a natural relationship between two levels of meaning. Hermaniuk “La parabole,” 22–3, suggests that Clement’s (or another Alexandrian’s before him) transfer of the parable from simile to metaphor was meant to align it with the parables of the synoptic Gospels.

13 *Ibid.*, 729.

14 *Ibid.*, 732.

15 *Ibid.*, 747.

16 *Ibid.*

Still, Clement's definition of parable is distinct from Trypho's general definition of metaphor in a way that is suggestive of the parables of Jesus in the New Testament.¹⁷ Clement does define parable in terms of metaphor,¹⁸ but he treats parable as a sub-genre of metaphor. Since he does not equate the two, it is reasonable to suppose that there is some difference. The main difference between Clement's definition of parable and Trypho's definition of metaphor is that a parable "leads the one who understands." That is, a parable has an active role in guiding the listener from one surface meaning to a deeper or higher meaning. To borrow a word from C. H. Dodd's famous phrase, something about the parable "teases" out the relationship between the two levels of meaning in the mind of the listener.¹⁹ Trypho's definition of a metaphor, by contrast, is somewhat more static and does not speak to the relationship between the metaphor itself and the mind of its audience. A hallmark of recent New Testament scholarship on parables has been to recognize this functional quality of parables, which appears as a challenge to the reader. John Meier writes, "Parables create a story world that listeners are invited to enter, experience, and even struggle with as they are confronted with challenges about how they should see and react to God and the world."²⁰

Finally, the one element native to Clement's definition but foreign to all of Trypho's various definitions is an allusion to an important set of biblical verses regarding parables that Clement discusses elsewhere in the *Stromateis* in an important passage on the subject of parables.²¹ Clement uses the same verb συνίημι (to understand) as Matthew 13:13: "That is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see and hearing they do not hear and do not understand (συνιούσιν)." In Matthew and even more so in its parallel in Mark 4:12, this word appears as a part of an explanation for parabolic speech wherein the emphasis falls on those who *do not* understand. In Matthew's Gospel, which Clement quotes, Jesus speaks in parables precisely "because" they do not understand, but in Mark he speaks in parables "in order that" they may not understand. In the *Stromateis*, however, Clement puts the emphasis on those who *do* understand. The parables hide and elude, but for Clement they also reveal and guide. This connection between Clement's definition of a parable and the gospel-writers' own reflection on the subject through the voice of Jesus attests that Clement is, indeed, focused on locating certain elements of his definition from within the text of the Gospels.

A brief examination of modern scholarship on the subject of parables confirms the applicability of Clement's literary definition of parable to the parables of the New Testament. The parables have been a topic of relatively intense disagreement.²² Much recent scholarship has been concerned with bridging the gap between allegory and simple ethical speech, a gap that was put in place by Adolf Jülicher around the turn of the century.²³ Even those scholars who do reject allegorical or metaphorical interpretations of

¹⁷ Osborn, *Clement*, 58, to the contrary, says that metaphor and parable are identical in Clement.

¹⁸ The identification of parables as either drawn out similes or metaphors goes back to Jülicher in the scholarship. He argued that the parables were drawn out similes (a direct form of teaching) and not drawn-out metaphors (an indirect form of teaching), *Gleichnisreden*, 52–8. He used Aristotle's categorization of parables as similes to push away allegorical interpretations of the parables.

¹⁹ Dodd, *Parables of the Kingdom*, 16. Full quotation: "At its simplest the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought."

²⁰ Meier, *Marginal Jew Volume 5*, 31.

²¹ Clement, *Strom.*, 1.1.2.3. Mark 4:12 and Matthew 13:13, which are each differently worded citations of Isaiah 6:9. See below, Section 3, for an exposition of the contrast between Mark and Matthew on this point.

²² Meier, *Marginal Jew V. 5*, 35, perhaps wryly expresses embarrassment over the widespread disagreement concerning the character of parables and shows to what extent major New Testament scholars have diverged in their numeration of them, from 32 (C. H. Dodd) to 65 (T. W. Manson), and he notes that parables are the most widely disputed subject in form-critical studies. One might add to Meier's assessment that the very recent collaborative commentary, *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu*, which casts the net as widely as possible to comment on everything that could be called a parable and arrives at 104 parables.

²³ Even Meier, whose project is primarily concerned with the historical Jesus, spends a short "excursus" in volume five of *The Marginal Jew* on allegory's relationship to the parables (82–8). Internal evidence of allegorical interpretation has also been noted in relevant prophetic material from the Hebrew Bible, see Snodgrass, *Stories*, 164–6. This should not give one the impression that all contemporary scholars accept the category of allegory as useful for interpreting parables. Crossan, *In*

parables, often go on to give such interpretations themselves.²⁴ So, instead of seeing allegorical interpretation of parables as an outside intrusion upon the text, many scholars, like Clement, have argued that an allegorical meaning or meanings can be part of the internal dynamic of the parables.

One such scholar is Ruben Zimmerman, who takes great pains to come to a nuanced definition of parables:

A *parable* is a short narrativ (1) fictional (2) text that is related in the narrated world to known reality (3) but, by way of implicit or explicit transfer signals, makes it understood that the meaning of the narration must be differentiated from the literal words of the text (4). In its appeal dimension (5) it challenges the reader to carry out a metaphoric transfer of meaning that is steered by contextual information.²⁵

While Clement's definition has a more metaphysical scope than Zimmerman's,²⁶ the structure of the definitions is much the same. For both, the text of the parable has an active effect on the audience in carrying out the "metaphoric transfer" from the literal to a non-literal meaning,²⁷ which is to say that the text itself prompts a reading that goes beyond the text. The manner in which the parable accomplishes this effect is also similar. Zimmerman describes it as the parable's "appeal dimension,"²⁸ and Clement as "stylistic force." While Clement's definition lacks reference to narrativity or fictionality, the latter may be implicit. What Clement writes immediately after his definition of parable suggests this: "Indeed, the whole incarnation (οἰκονομία), prophesied about the Lord, truly appears like a parable to those who have not knowledge of the truth."²⁹ Judith Kovacs takes this as an anti-gnostic defense of the incarnation.³⁰ The Gnostics, Clement is suggesting, take the whole story of the gospels as a non-historical tale. If Kovacs' interpretation is correct, then Clement is assuming that a parable is fictional, otherwise it would not make sense as a critique.³¹ In any case, Clement's definition, on its face, has explanatory value for understanding the New Testament parables as forceful, metaphorical sayings that prompt allegorical reading.

Parables, 8–10, follows Jülicher, Jeremias, and Dodd in making a very hard distinction between parables and allegories. For a description of how scholarship in the last forty years has turned against Jülicher and his followers, see Carlston, "Parable and Allegory." Boucher made an early breakthrough for allegory as well as metaphor in scholarship on the parables, *Mysterious Parable*, 17–25.

²⁴ See Snodgrass, *Stories*, 623–4. He gives a list of a number of scholars, with references, who exhibit this contradiction in their interpretation of the Parable of the Prodigal Son: Adolf Jülicher, Rudolf Bultmann, Robert H. Stein, Kenneth Bailey, and Dan Via.

²⁵ Zimmerman, *Puzzling*, 137.

²⁶ Hermaniuk, "La parabole," 8–10, remarks that the Platonic notion of a double world, one intelligible and one sense-perceptible, is evident in Clement's definition.

²⁷ Zimmerman, *Puzzling*, 145, says that this is a transfer from "the real world to the religious world and the reality of God and vice versa."

²⁸ Zimmerman, *Teasing*, 147–8. The idea of an "appeal dimension" derives from the reader-response theories of Wolfgang Iser, a founding member of the "School of Constance" with Hans Robert Jauss. See Holub, "School of Constance."

²⁹ Clement, *Strom.*, 6.15.127.1. The participle ἐγνώκουν, "who [do not] have knowledge," may be a kind of sly jab at the Gnostics, as Kovacs "Gnostic Exegesis," 425, suggests. I am following her in supposing that οἰκονομία refers to the incarnation here. In reference to *Strom.* 7.2.5.3–6.1, she writes that Clement sometimes uses οἰκονομία to refer specifically to the incarnation (in footnote 12 she cites 6.15.127.1 as proof). But it can also, as here, refer more broadly to the "all-embracing pedagogy by which the Logos seeks to lift all people up to God," "Divine Pedagogy," 7. Throughout this same article she elaborates on how the Gnostic Christian teacher plays a role in this οἰκονομία (see especially 23). So, the word "incarnation" is not fully adequate to what Clement means, since it can also refer to God's saving plan, of which the incarnation is a part. This preference for the incarnation as a translation is reinforced by Gerhard Richter's magisterial work, *Oikonomia*, which offers a complete evaluation of the ways in which Clement uses the word. Referencing this passage, Richter writes, "Bevorzugt dafür die Wendung ἡ περὶ τὸν σωτήρα οἰκονομία, die nicht nur die Menschwerdung meint, sondern sein ganzes von Gott bestimmtes Leben, das von den Propheten angekündigt war. Wer sie nicht erkannt hat, dem erscheint sie nur als eine Pabel, aber gerade durch das prophetische Wort erweist sich ihre Wahrheit" (189).

³⁰ Kovacs, "Gnostic Exegesis," 425. She points to *Excerpta ex Theodoto* 85.1, where there is a Valentinian statement that the events in the Gospels are types for the believers.

³¹ I will try to show next that while Kovacs is noticing a true critique of the Gnostics in this sentence, Clement is doing something more with the idea of the incarnation as a parable here.

Though Clement does seem to have the New Testament parables of Jesus in view in his definition, they do not exhaust his understanding of the genre, which extends, in a sense, to all of Scripture. The word itself, *παραβολή*, occurs in the Septuagint. And Clement quotes two important verses in multiple places in the *Stromateis*, where he expresses the enigmatic character of Scripture and the coherence of the prophetic speech and Jesus' teaching.³² Indeed, earlier in Book Six Clement writes that *all* of Scripture is written as a parable. He reasons that since Matthew says that "[the Savior] spoke all things in parables, and nothing apart from a parable did he speak to them" (Matt 13:34), and John says that "all things came about through him and apart from him not one thing came about" (Jn. 1:3), therefore, both the prophecy and the law, as his products, were spoken as parables.³³ The Savior's own mode of teaching becomes the model for understanding all of the rest of Scripture.

Clement's presentation of the genre of parables, then, is of a piece with his wider exposition of Scripture's symbolic and enigmatic quality.³⁴ Clement roots his theory of Scripture in the mysterious nature of God *vis-à-vis* the incapacity of human speech;³⁵ he argues that there is a need to prevent the immature from accessing teachings that might harm them or which they might deride;³⁶ and, he shows how Scripture's riddling quality encourages mature readers to be zealous in their pursuit of learning.³⁷ A long passage on the "many reasons" why "the Scriptures hide their sense" provides the context for Clement's definition of parables.³⁸

2 Parables, the incarnation, and prophecy

In his grappling with the genre of parable, Clement ultimately goes beyond thoughtful engagement with Hellenistic literary theory and beyond establishing a workable definition. Ultimately, he aligns his definition with the shape of the Lord's saving mission. Clement precedes his definition of Jesus' metaphoric or parabolic teaching with a description of his metaphoric or parabolic mission. He writes,

For the style of the Scriptures is parabolic, because even the Lord (κύριος), though not of the world (κοσμικός), came to human beings like one who was of the world, for he also was clothed in every virtue and wished to lead (ἀνάγειν) the human being, a foster-brother of the world, through knowledge up to the intelligible and principal (κύρια) things, from one world (κόσμου) to another world.³⁹

One can easily see the multiple levels of wordplay involved with this passage and Clement's definition of parables.⁴⁰ The principal subject (κύριος) of this story is the Lord (κύριος). He leaves the principal subject (since he is not of this world) in order to "lead" the human being "up" to the principal subject. Notice the

³² He quotes Ps 71:12 in *Strom.* 5.13.80.7; and Prov 1:6 in *Strom.* 1.15.130.2 and 5.10.63.6. See Schneider, *Theologie*, 173, on the use of these verses as well as others, which Clement uses as grounds for the allegorical reading of Scripture.

³³ Ibid., 6.15.125.1.

³⁴ See Méhat, *Étude sur les 'Stromates'*, 88; and Mondesert, *Clément d'Alexandrie*, 134–5.

³⁵ For an analysis that includes reference to Middle-Platonic philosophical categories, see Mortley, *Connaissance Religieuse et Hermétique*, 86–94.

³⁶ See Méhat, *Étude sur les 'Stromates'*, 494–5.

³⁷ Clement, *Strom.*, 6.15.126.1.

³⁸ Ibid. Harl, "obscurité," 349–50 outlines the four reasons that Clement gives in this passage. In brief, they are (1) to inspire the search for truth; (2) to prevent those who are unready from falling into error; (3a) to put them out of reach of the Greeks and barbarians; (3b) to avoid seeming blasphemous to pagans; and (4) to avoid suffering death. The fourth reason that she discerns is questioned in fn. 66. The heart of Clement's scriptural hermeneutics is found in Book Five of the *Strom.*, for which Ward, "Most Useful," provides a sound and thorough analysis. Specifically, he sees *παραβολή* and *μυστήριον* as Clement's scriptural parallels to *αἰνιγμα* and *σύμβολον* (553–4).

³⁹ Clement, *Strom.*, 6.15.126.3.

⁴⁰ This parallelism is noticed by Hermaniuk, "La parabole," 8; Harl, "obscurité," 347–8; and Ramelli, "Mysteries of Scripture," 88–90, who calls the description of the Incarnation "translational."

very strong parallels of vocabulary and syntax between this passage and the parable definition. The one “who is not of this world” like “what is not the principal subject” “leads” (here ἀνάγειν instead of ἄγειν) “the human being” in place of “the one who understands” up to “the intelligible and principal things” in place of “the true and principal subject.” What would be the constructed “story world” (κόσμος) in a discussion of parables is rather the physical world, the world from which the Lord leads human beings to another world.⁴¹

The Lord, then, acts a parable. Or rather the parables act as the Lord. The literary definition describes the incarnation, and the incarnation grounds the literary definition. Furthermore, all of Scripture is parabolic in nature, since it participates in this same pattern and has the Lord as its source.⁴² The parables are the ultimate example of this kind of expression, and the pattern for the rest of Scripture, because they are the incarnate Lord’s privileged mode of teaching.

Within this context, the previously quoted statement about the incarnation becomes clearer: “Indeed, the whole incarnation (οἰκονομία), prophesied about the Lord, truly appears like a parable to those who have not knowledge of the truth.”⁴³ While one aspect of this statement may be anti-gnostic, this is not the only way to take it.⁴⁴ It could be taken as an enigmatic statement about the incarnation *as prophesied*. The prophecies about the Lord are parabolic in order to expose the ignorance of those who do not have knowledge.⁴⁵ Moreover, the genres of prophecy and parable overlap for Clement; in fact, the parable, alongside the proverb, and the enigma are a form (εἶδος) of prophecy.⁴⁶ Or, this phrase could be taken as an enigmatic statement about the prophesied *incarnation*. Clement follows this provocative statement with a kind of miniature creed that highlights the suffering of the Son:

Indeed, the whole incarnation, prophesied about the Lord, truly appears like a parable to those who have not knowledge of the truth, when one speaks and others listen, [saying] that the Son of God (God, who made the universe), took flesh, and was conceived in the womb of a virgin, as his sensible flesh came into being, consequently, insofar as this happened, he suffered and was raised, “a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks” (1 Cor 1:23), as the Apostle says. But when the scriptures have been opened up and have shown to those who have *ears to hear* they announce as the power and wisdom of God that very truth that the flesh that the Lord took up suffered.⁴⁷

⁴¹ This passage also reflects one just prior, 6.15.124.3, where Clement defines “real liars” as those “who err in the most principle subjects (κυριώτατα) both by editing out the principle subject/the Lord (κύριον) as far as is possible for them and by draining the true teaching of the principle subject/the Lord (κυρίου); they are those who both speak and hand on the Scriptures in a manner unworthy of God and the Lord (κυρίου).”

⁴² A point that Clement speaks to at length earlier, *Strom.*, 6.15.125.1–2. Zimmerman makes a similar point: the parables force the reader to encounter his own incomprehension and thus to develop a hermeneutic that will redound to a broader understanding of scriptural interpretation, *Puzzling*, 7–8.

⁴³ Clement, *Strom.*, 6.15.127.1.

⁴⁴ Others have taken it differently: Völker, *Gnostiker*, 362–3 does not even quote the second part of the quotation that would be perceived as anti-gnostic, and treats it according to one element in the passage that follows it, that the Old-Testament prophecy was a stumbling block to Jews and Greeks; Hägg, *Clement*, 147, touches upon this passage in only the briefest way but relates it to Clement’s project of concealment.

⁴⁵ Clement, *Strom.*, 6.15.127.3.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.15.130.1. More discussion of this will follow, but it is interesting to compare Clement’s alignment of παροιμία, παραβολή, and αἰνίγμα under the category of prophecy, since the first two can be translations of the Hebrew word, *māšāl*, which is a narrative form of prophetic speech that many scholars see as the natural Hebrew precursor to New Testament parables. For references, see entries in T. Muroaka, *Index to the Septuagint*, 90 and 92. For a more general treatment, see Meier, *Marginal Jew*, Volume 5, 36–41.

⁴⁷ Clement, *Strom.*, 6.15.127.2 The phrase “who have ears” could be an allusion to several places in the New Testament. The phrase “Let him who has ears (to hear), hear” is used as a conclusion in all three versions of the Parable of the Sower: Matt 13:9; Mark 4:9; Luke 8:8. It is also used as a conclusion to the explanation of the Parable of the Weeds (Matt 13:43) and in a similar fashion after the Lucan version of the short saying about salt that loses its saltiness (Luke 14:35). A different version of this phrase with the singular form of “ear” instead of the plural, as it occurs in the Gospels and in Clement, appears repeatedly in Revelation after the messages to the seven Churches (2:7, 2:11, 2:17, 2:29, 3:6, 3:13, 3:22) and once after the description of the two beasts 13:9. The editor of the text, Stählin, notes a different allusion to Matt 11:15, which concludes Jesus’ reflection on the prophetic character of John the Baptist.

The central subject in this passage is the suffering of the Son. Under the anti-gnostic lens this suffering would cause the gnostic reader to take the whole narrative of the Gospels as a fictional parable. Still, could it not also have a double effect as a parable? The Gospel teaching of the Lord's suffering is so difficult to understand that it repels those who are not equipped to understand it. The metaphorical language of the Gospels, broadly conceived, does not open up the space for just anyone to enter in. But, for those who are coming to knowledge, who "have ears," it is possible to make the metaphorical leap. For Clement this is the leap that Paul makes at the beginning of I Corinthians: the suffering of the Lord's incarnate flesh is the "power and wisdom of God." The metaphor unfolds and brings the reader from what is not the principal subject (the suffering flesh of the Lord), but which is similar to the principal subject, to the true and principal subject (the power and wisdom of God), not that the suffering flesh is a fictional narrative, but that it acts parabolically in its confrontation of the reader as a prophetic riddle.⁴⁸ It is now possible to see how the form of the literary definition, grounded in the Lord's saving mission, comes to have prophetic force.

The suffering is the key, because it challenges the readers just as it challenged Jesus' disciples when he foretold it. In this sense, the incarnation may appear as a parable both to those who do not understand and to those who do. This parabolic challenge of suffering levels difficult demands as Clement's allusion to "those who have ears" makes clear. Multiple referents of this phrase are possible.⁴⁹ The editor Stählin notes an allusion to Matthew 11:15, where Jesus is telling the crowd about John the Baptist's character and suffering through a series of figures and allusions drawn from the Old Testament. Elsewhere, Jesus uses this same phrase as a conclusion to the Parable of the Sower. And both contexts, prophetic and parabolic, are relevant here. The audience needs to "have ears" to understand the suffering of John the Baptist, the last prophet, especially since John's death prophesies Jesus' death. The audience needs to have these same "ears" to understand both the parables of Jesus and the parable that is Jesus who took up suffering flesh. The parable of the Lord's suffering is, then, not an idle, fictional, or merely symbolic story, but an invitation to achieve "power and wisdom" through suffering.

For Clement, the connection between parables, prophecy, and suffering does not end with Jesus. He passes down all three to his disciples. To explain how this works according to Clement, I would now like to introduce John Meier to the conversation. The author of the multi-volume work, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, Meier may seem a strange interlocutor. His overarching methodology, a criteria-based criticism, is much further afield from Clement than, say, reader-response theory or even the broad swaths of literary criticism on offer. And yet, Meier's very methodological distance from Clement promises to make the conversation a fruitful one.

Meier's exposition of the Evil Tenants of the Vineyard furnishes the reader with a way to understand the close relationship between prophecy, parable, and suffering.⁵⁰ He uses form-critical methods to show how the *nimšalim* (explanatory interpretations) at the end of the parable (Mark 12:10–11) are later additions to Jesus' own teaching.⁵¹ The basic elements of the parable proper (1–9) are that a man leases a vineyard to tenant farmers, to whom he sends slaves to collect their fruits, and when they are killed, he sends his son, with the expectation that the tenants will listen to him; but, instead, they kill him with the hope that they

⁴⁸ This would be a fine example of the way that Clement alters Valentinian Gnostic forms of reading and philosophizing rather than outright rejecting them. Kovacs, "Gnostic Exegesis," 428, discusses how, for instance, Clement changes the Valentinian two ways of salvation into two stages of salvation. About a passage in Book Five she writes, "This passage presents the incarnation in both a positive and negative light. It is part of the divine plan of revelation, but, insofar as it takes place within the realm of sense-perception, it cannot convey the ultimate truth about God" (423).

⁴⁹ See fn. 47 above.

⁵⁰ Meier, *Marginal Jew V. 5*, 241–53. He analyzes Mark exclusively since he thinks it is obvious that it is closest to the authentic parable of Jesus. This is one of only four parables that Meier believes are more likely than not authentic, according to his method. It is striking that it is one of the most overtly Christological, the most obviously concerned with Jesus's suffering and death.

⁵¹ A *nimšal* is an either internal or external interpretation that is added to a *māšāl*, a prophetic story, to explain the story allegorically or offer some exhortation to the audience.

will inherit the vineyard. The later additions are two questions that Jesus asks and answers. The first is what the owner will do, and Jesus answers that he will destroy the tenant farmers (10); next he asks “Have you not read the Scripture[...]” and then quotes Psalm 117:22–23 LXX about the rejected stone that becomes the cornerstone (11).

Meier notes that these *nimšalim* are utterly unique in the synoptic gospels, because in no other case does the *nimšal* contribute to the plot of the parable rather than provide an allegorical interpretation or an exhortation to the crowd.⁵² What, then, is the contribution to the plot? Meier argues that the parable proper ends at verse nine with a “cliffhanger.” The son is dead, and the wicked tenants seem to have their way. Meier reads this as “a veiled allegorical parable of prophetic judgment” on the Temple authorities through a standard articulation of prophetic history in Israel, that prophets preach and are subsequently rejected and killed.⁵³ What Jesus adds to this articulation is that he is the climax of this history, he is the son, the end of the line.⁵⁴ The first *nimšal* (10) provides a notion of revenge that offers some resolution. The son, nevertheless, is still dead. Meier argues that the second *nimšal* brings him back to life from a post-resurrection perspective.⁵⁵ The rejection of the stone is closely related to it being chosen as the cornerstone.⁵⁶ This parable with the *nimšal* sums up the whole incarnation/οἰκονομία as Clement outlines it.⁵⁷ The incarnation appears, that is becomes visible, as a parable in this text, and the suffering flesh of the Lord lies at the heart of his parabolic mission.

Read in this way, the followers of Jesus complete the parable through the written word that Jesus had only made a beginning of orally.⁵⁸ Clement writes that the apostles themselves followed the Lord’s mode of teaching.⁵⁹ He backs this up with a few quotations from the lost *Preaching of Peter*, wherein Peter says that the prophets name Jesus Christ and his life, passion, resurrection, and ascension both enigmatically and clearly, and that the prophecies about the Lord are the ground of the disciples’ faith; since this is so, they (the disciples) do not speak “apart from the scriptures,”⁶⁰ indicating that they do not speak apart from the prophetic or parabolic mode in which they received him.

Of course, Clement did not have had in mind that the followers of Jesus were completing his parables with a post-resurrection perspective, as Meier argues. Still, he is not far off. Clement sees a close connection between parabolic speech and entrance into suffering. He writes “At any rate, all the prophets, who foretold the coming of the Lord and the mysteries that accompanied it, were persecuted, were slain, just as also the Lord himself was, who brought their writings into clarity, and his disciples, who announced the word like he did, after him risked their lives (παρεβάλλοντο).”⁶¹ The last verb in this quotation is tantalizing. In the *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (ANF) series, it is translated as “used parables,”⁶² whereas it is translated as

⁵² Ibid., 249.

⁵³ Ibid., 250.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ For comparison, see Poplutz, “Paroimia und Parabolē.” Poplutz sets the Johannine concept of *paroimia* (proverb) in contrast with the Markan *parabolē*. He argues that they each are meant to highlight a lack of understanding that is resolved through a post-resurrection perspective (John) and through an access to Jesus’ inner-circle of teaching (Mark), but he admits that even in Mark the parables are tied to the theme of the cross (117).

⁵⁶ Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 248–9.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 33–34, Meier does set the parables in the context of all of Jesus’ symbolic actions and street theater, which like the parables serve Jesus’ goal of presenting himself as an eschatological prophet. The word “incarnation” might pull us out of a world of Markan images and concepts into a Johannine one, but perhaps not so overtly if we keep in mind the wide breadth of the term outlined earlier.

⁵⁸ Not everybody is satisfied with Meier’s form-critical reasoning about this parable. Snodgrass, *Stories*, 576, says that Meier’s reasoning about this parable is “circuitous.”

⁵⁹ Clement, *Strom.*, 1.15.127.5.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 6.15.128.1–3.

⁶¹ Ibid. 6.15.127.5. Αὐτίκα οἱ προφηταὶ πάντες οἱ προθεσπίσαντες τὴν παρουσίαν τοῦ κυρίου καὶ σὺν αὐτῇ τὰ ἅγια μυστήρια ἐδιώκουν, ἐφονεύθησαν, καθάπερ καὶ αὐτὸς ὁ κύριος διασαφίσας αὐτῶν τὰς γραφὰς καὶ οἱ τοῦτου γνώριμοι οἱ κηρύξαντες τὸν λόγον ὡς αὐτὸς μετ’αὐτὸν τὸ ζῆν παρεβάλλοντο. I am here following Descourtieux who rejects Stählin’s correction of the manuscript where he changes out ὡς αὐτὸς for ὡσαύτως. See fn. 5, 315.

⁶² Donaldson and Roberts, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 510.

“risquèrent leur vie” in the *Sources Chrétiennes* (SC) version.⁶³ The structure of the sentence suggests the latter translation,⁶⁴ but a pun is also likely. In any case, the use of parabolic or prophetic speech is inextricably linked with persecution and death here. This vision of parables is not merely of symbolic devices that both conceal and lead to further meaning,⁶⁵ but of a variety of sayings that are so challenging that the speaker is put in danger. Speaking parabolically does not protect the speaker.⁶⁶ It rather exposes the speaker, all the while protecting the rich, hidden meaning of his speech, which is a taunt and retribution for “those who have not the truth.” Clement teaches that Jesus’ disciples imitated his challenging mode of teaching and continued it after his death.⁶⁷ It is to the question of the handing down of Jesus’ teaching – and Clement’s self-conceived place in it – that I will now turn.

3 Clement’s interpretation of the parable of the talents

To conclude, I will investigate Clement’s own interpretation of the parables of Jesus. Clement’s interpretation of the Parable of the Talents and the surrounding passages in *Stromateis* 1 offer an opportunity to consider how Clement conceives of his own writing and teaching in relation to the parables of Jesus, texts that are both literary and prophetic.

Clement’s use of the Matthean rather than Markan version of Jesus’ explanation for parabolic speech reveals the way in which he sees his own enigmatic writing as prophetic. The opening of the *Stromateis* is a reflection on the written and spoken forms of teaching, and the father–son relationship that arises between a teacher and student, a privileged form of teaching that needs to be guarded in written works. Clement quickly turns to the example of Jesus in Matthew 13 as a warrant for his enigmatic form of writing:

“For this reason,” says the Lord, “I speak to them in parables: because seeing they do not see and hearing they do not hear and do not understand (Matt 13:13).” The Lord does not contribute to their ignorance – it is groundless to think so! – but he does prophetically interrogate their already present ignorance and discloses that they will continually misunderstand what is said.⁶⁸

Clement’s choice of the Matthean version is meaningful. In Mark 4:12, the quotation from Isaiah 6:9 (“seeing they do not see and hearing they do not hear and do not understand”) is introduced by ἵνα (“in order that”)

⁶³ Amongst the various lexica consulted, Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Dictionary*, has under III.2 “Compare one with another,” including an option in the middle (1304); Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, has under A.5 “Represent by a parable,” for παραβάλλω in the active, citing John Chrysostom (1007). Lampe cites this passage of Clement under A.2 for “*expose*, esp. to danger.”

⁶⁴ The participles, which I have converted into relative clauses, all refer to some form of teaching, but the finite verbs, like παραβάλλοντο, all refer to suffering and persecution.

⁶⁵ Clement discusses this aspect of the parabolic genre in 6.15.127.3–4 and in 6.1.4.2.

⁶⁶ It is here that I disagree with the reading of Harl who cites this passage as evidence that security from danger is one of the reasons given by Clement that prophecy was expressed enigmatically. The opposite seems to be the case. See fn. 38.

⁶⁷ In this, Meier, *Marginal Jew* V. 5, 70, disagrees with a number of scholars, Wright in particular, who argues that there would have been no reason to write parables after “the secret was out,” *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 180. Again, Snodgrass, *Stories*, 576, disagrees vehemently with Meier: “The problem (with Meier’s argument) is that *there is no evidence that anyone in the early church taught in parables*. Early Christians, as far as we know, did not tell parables; they dropped the indirect communication of parables for direct speech” (italics are his). The *Shepherd of Hermas* (as early as the late first to as late as the late second century CE) may not fit Snodgrass’s definition of “early church,” but it is certainly a form of “indirect writing,” and it includes parables and explanations thereof in chapters 50–110. Likewise, the array of so-called Gnostic Gospels (of various dates) also furnishes many instances of parable-writing. Indirect teaching is also present in the so-called *Second Letter of Clement* (late first century). Finally, it is difficult to imagine how one might read the book of Revelation in any way except as an “indirect communication.”

⁶⁸ Clement, *Strom.*, 1.1.2.3.

rather than Matthew's softened ὅτι ("because").⁶⁹ Klyne Snodgrass has argued that even the Markan version does not communicate that Jesus was trying to prevent his listeners from understanding his message. Snodgrass notes that Mark could have chosen to include, as does Matthew, the even more overt Isaiah 6:10 to prove that point. Rather, as in Matthew so in Mark, Jesus is attempting to show with prophetic force the hard-heartedness of his listeners and still to invite them to follow him.⁷⁰ As Snodgrass writes, "Jesus taught in parables, like any good prophet, to appeal and to enable hearing. Where parables find a willing response, further explanation is given. Where there is no response the message is lost."⁷¹ Clement does not exactly match the description that Snodgrass lays out here. He does, admittedly, use a parabolic or enigmatic mode of speech to do more than "to appeal and enable hearing." He has a true concern to avoid causing harm to his readership, lest he be found "offering a dagger to a child."⁷² Nonetheless, he notes that Jesus' fixation on continued ignorance here is a prophetic one, and like Jesus, Clement does not intend to be responsible for the ignorance of his readers. His choice of Matthew over Mark along with his explicit comments are good evidence for this view.

Clement immediately follows these remarks on Jesus' use of parables by ingeniously reworking the Parable of the Talents (Matt 25:14–30; Luke 19:22:12–28)⁷³ to conceptualize and enigmatically demonstrate his role as a teacher in a line of succession going back to Jesus. Clement begins, "And now the Savior appears in person out of his superabundance. He distributes his goods among his servants, proportionally to the capacity of the recipient (and this ought to be increased by disciplined practice)."⁷⁴ Then Clement contrasts the servants who increase their money and find welcome and more responsibility with the servant who returns the money without increase and who finds rejection from Jesus.⁷⁵

Curiously, Clement does not follow this summary with an explicit interpretation.⁷⁶ Instead, he presents two citations from Paul:

Paul also says, "So be strong in the grace which is Christ Jesus. Hand on to people of faith, who will be competent to teach others, all that you have heard from me before plenty of witnesses" (2 Tim 2:1–2). And again: "Do your best to present yourself to God in a state fit for approval, a worker who has no cause to be ashamed, treating the word of truth properly" (2 Tim 2:15).⁷⁷

Clement's presentation of this parable accomplishes several things. He shows that he understands the parable, since he is able to interpret it. He does not see without seeing nor hear without hearing or understanding. Moreover, his citations of Paul from 2 Timothy make his interpretation of the parable a reference to a succession of teaching – with Jesus' audience, and especially the apostles, playing the part of

⁶⁹ Schneider, *Theologie*, 175–7, drawing on modern New Testament exegesis, argues that while Clement quotes explicitly from Matthew's version, he also absorbs Mark's more enigmatic version and preserves the Markan parable-theory as part of his framework for salvation history, but whereas the evangelist made it contingent upon the coming death and resurrection of Jesus, Clement extends it into a permanent feature of Scriptural exegesis, that is "einen Dauerzustand, eine immerwährende Auslegungsregel für alle Bibelworte schlechthin" (177).

⁷⁰ Snodgrass, *Stories*, 156–64. Others have seen an esoteric element in Mark that is softened in Matthew: e.g., Carlston, *Triple Tradition*, 7, 105–9.

⁷¹ Snodgrass, *Stories*, 163.

⁷² Clement, *Strom.*, 1.1.14.3.

⁷³ Stählin references Luke 19:11–27, but Clement is apparently referencing Matthew's account exclusively, since he notes phrases included in Matthew alone (entrance into the master's joy and the casting of the useless servant into the outer darkness) and does not note any of the features exclusive to Luke.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.1.3.1. On the idea of a form of pedagogy accommodated to a variety of students, see Kovacs, "Divine Pedagogy," 7–11; she also treats of the esoteric dimension of this process (17–25).

⁷⁵ Clement, *Strom.*, 1.1.3.2.

⁷⁶ This is a good example of Dawson's treatment of Clement's allegorical exegesis, which he contrasts to Philo's. Clement's interest is not in providing one-to-one allegorical interpretations or definitions of scriptural terms or figures. Rather, he plays with the text allegorically from within his own project, *Allegorical Readers*, 218.

⁷⁷ Clement, *Strom.*, 1.1.3.3–4.

the servants who are entrusted with the money.⁷⁸ Clement's interpolated note that one can increase the money with which one is entrusted renders the parable capable of accommodating audiences at any stage of progress. That is, one can return to it repeatedly and find oneself in a different position than before. Between the departure of Jesus and his return, one cannot only be faithful to his teaching by passing it down, but through "disciplined practice" (συνασκήσεως) increase the store of education or instruction that one receives from Jesus. Finally, the silence of Clement advances his point about Jesus' mode of teaching. Instead of providing an open and clear interpretation, Clement offers an obscure one, allowing Paul to do the work for him.⁷⁹ By doing so he is assured that he is treating the teachings "properly" by only making them available to "people of faith, competent to teach others."

4 Conclusion

When read in conjunction with the approaches of modern parable scholarship, Clement's definition, articulation, and appropriation of parables come clearly into view. Clement, like modern New Testament scholars, sensed the close connection between parables as a prophetic form of speaking and the suffering of the prophets, of Jesus, and of his disciples. Under his hand, the parables are revealed to be an emblematic expression and a pattern of the Lord's saving mission. More could be done here. In Clement, this relationship might be brought to bear upon his discussion of martyrdom in Book Four of the *Stromateis*, where he writes that the true martyr comes eventually "no more to have understanding and to possess knowledge, but to be understanding and knowledge."⁸⁰ One might also profitably bring such an approach to Clement's predecessors, especially *The Shepherd of Hermas*. Likewise, Clement's enigmatic successors, Origen of Alexandria and Evagrius of Pontus, each take up an approach to the parables that has important ramifications for their scriptural hermeneutics.⁸¹

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⁷⁸ This is the interpretation of Beasley-Murray, *Jesus*, 217. Luz, *Matthew*, 255, by contrast, does not think this kind of interpretation is viable, since it is not enough to connect the concept of discipleship exegetically to this parable.

⁷⁹ This form of interpretation is a good example of what Clement writes later in Book One: "There are some things that my text (γράφῃ) will say enigmatically, some it will present, others it will only say, still other things it will attempt to say furtively and remaining in hiding to speak forthrightly and keeping silent to demonstrate" (1.1.15.1).

⁸⁰ Clement, *Strom.*, 4.6.40.1.

⁸¹ For Origen's definition of "parable," see Gohl, *Origen*, 12.

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