



The Bible as Literature

The Parables

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Luke 15: 11–end Luke 17: 11–19

In your 'Bible as Literature' series my task is to talk about parables, and I hope you noticed in the two readings from the Bible I chose only one of them belongs to the genre 'parable': Luke's parable of the prodigal son. The other, the account of the encounter of ten lepers with Jesus on the borders between Israel and Samaria is not a parable. It announces itself as an historical account and part of what Luke, in the prologue of his Gospel to Theophilus, describes as an 'ordering' of those things handed down by witnesses and ministers of the word. I've done this so that we might be able to see, through the non-parable the distinctiveness and yet deep similarity between the two genres of writing as they pertain, and that pertinence is significant, to the writing of what is an entirely new genre of Graeco-Roman discourse: the Gospel.

Certain differences are readily apparent: the parable of the prodigal son is a story told by Jesus and the account of the ten lepers a story told about Jesus. Jesus is the narrator in the first and a character about whom something is narrated in the second. The background world in the parable is pared down to a mytho-symbolic core – the son journeys 'into a far country' in which there arose 'a mighty famine'. The background world for the ten lepers is mapped geographically onto Jesus's final journeying towards Jerusalem, as he passes through Samaria and drops down into Galilee. There is a richness of incidental detail in the parable (though not in all parables) all of which is charged with a mytho-symbolic resonance: the folk-story opening of a father with two sons (in a fairy tale it would be three sons); an inheritance wasted in riotous living; employment in a pig sty contrasted to the butchering of the fatted calf at the feast of welcome; the music, dancing, re-robing and giving of a ring and shoes. There is a lack of such detail in the account of the ten lepers. The narrative is pared down so that the dramatic spotlight falls on the one who returns and falls at the feet of the Christ. And even then the spotlight quickly changes to focus on Jesus himself and the question he asks, "Were there not ten cleansed?" From the richness of detail in the parable to the scarcity of detail in the account it might be inferred that the parable is deeper in its interpretative ambivalence and therefore the hidden wisdom behind its composition and telling in the midst of the publicans, sinners,

Pharisees and scribes. Certainly, the storytelling by Jesus is more self-conscious – it is not attempting to narrate something that has actually occurred and it is composed for a targeted audience (or so we are led to believe by the compositor of the Gospel). The narrative about the ten lepers lacks a specific audience and presents the account without the self-consciousness of its being a story – though it is in fact a story; a story handed down to Luke and written up by Luke.

But it is exactly at this point that we have to recognize the similarities between the two types of narrative, both of which are acts of storytelling; and acts of storytelling that sketch something of the psychological dynamics of human relations. If in the parable the son comes to himself and returns to the father in penitence; if the father welcomes him without judgement, forgiving and merciful; if the elder son is jealous and resentful; then these psychological dynamics are not at all lacking in the account of the ten lepers. There's the gratitude and devotion of the one man who does return; the ambiguous silence of the nine who did not return; and the measured response of Jesus to the 'Samaritan' who falls at his feet and the equally measured response to the nine (by implication Jews not Samaritans) who do not return. The implication is significant here. That is, we are not directly told this. The hint is oblique. And it is that obliqueness that opens the ambivalent depths in the account that mirror the ambivalent depths in the parable.

For parables cannot be reduced to moral fables. Yes, the prodigal son 'teaches' about the forgiveness of the father, adding perhaps a cautionary tale about the shrivelings of the soul that resentment will bring. But its rich symbolic content and its appeals to mythic resonances (two sons, the aging father, man among the pigs) lend it qualities that are more than its moral teachings. The ring, the shoes, the fattened calf, the feasting all add levels of symbolic complexity: things are not just what they seem, they bear a gravity of meaning some of which can be recovered by relating these objects to their intertextual appearance in other stories from the Hebrew bible. But, when we turn to the ten lepers, we find the same symbolic complexities. The encounter with Jesus takes place in the borderlands and the lepers are the marginalized at the margins: the faceless and forgotten ones in no-man's-land, deeply ashamed of what they have become and driven socially to the edges of existence. There are the poor – and the poor you have with you always – but there is an untouchable class that has fallen even beneath the level of the poor. These are the abject. They rarely have names, and they don't have names in Luke's story, because names bestow dignity on persons. These are beneath the dignity of personhood. And why ten? Why were there ten lepers? The number ten is Biblically significant: there are ten commandments, the Passover lamb was selected on the tenth day of the first month, and the tenth day of the seventh month is the holiest day in the Jewish calendar – it's the Day of Atonement. So what else is going on in the tiny details of Luke's account? Upper Galilee was known as regionally as Decapolis – the ten towns where Jews mixed with Graeco-Roman citizens. Some of these were magnificent places and we can still visit the ruins of amphitheatres, roads, shops, libraries, temples. Is this then a story for the disciples – a story about going out to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ throughout

those ten Roman cities, one of whom had already become a place where believers could be found, assembling? Great, God-inspired events, had been known in the others, but they needed the gospel to be preached that they might know in whose name these events had occurred. If this interpretation of the ten is right there is a wonderful, topsy-turvy irony so much at the heart of the gospel message. For each of these magnificently constructed Graeco-Roman towns with their marble pillars and thriving trade were, in the eyes of Christ, not the domains of the mighty, wealthy and powerful elites – they were all leper colonies.

What I am suggesting here is that the parables are self-conscious acts of storytelling that offer reflections upon the world and its reality as understood in the light of the coming of Christ; in the light of the incarnation of God. They are like those reflex mirrors on the back walls of interiors so loved by seventeenth century Dutch painters. They are emblematic of how nothing now is simply what it appears to be – the historical is also trans-historical, the material also bears a mythic charge; all things are imbued with a providential grace and traversals of time. Parables draw attention to the transformative powers of a Christ who is re-narrating all things in an act of universal salvation, re-orchestrating all things in a new doxological key. Let me just add one more, highly speculative and therefore highly contentious observation: the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* carries an important theological implication – namely that all matter is intrinsically, quintessentially, divine. The incarnation of God is the perfect realization of this fact in time such that the redemption of Christ, the redemption wrought by Christ, is the performance of a divine alchemy with respect to creation and persons and history, and the complex imbrications of relations between creation, persons and history.

At base – and this returns us to what I said at the beginning – the parables and the non-parable seeming historical accounts both invite the hearers and readers into a world where the historical is fused with the trans-historical. This is the gospel that gave rise to the Gospels.