The Parables of Jesus in the Greek New Testament

Text, Translation, and Reception from the Pre-Nicene Fathers to the Present

A Critical and Reception-Historical Review

Greek text: Nestle-Aland 28th edition / UBS5
Old Testament comparanda: Masoretic Text (BHS/BHQ) and Septuagint (Rahlfs-Hanhart)
English versions collated: LSB, NIV, NRSVue, ESV, CSB, NET

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Abstract

This paper surveys the full corpus of parabolic material attributed to Jesus in the Greek New Testament, working from the Nestle-Aland 28th edition (NA28) and its UBS5 twin. It proceeds in four movements. First, it establishes what the Greek word παραβολή actually denotes in Hellenistic Greek and in the Septuagint, where it renders Hebrew *māšāl*, and argues that the narrow modern definition of "parable" is a nineteenth-century German rhetorical construct rather than a first-century Jewish one. Second, it catalogues the parables systematically across Matthew, Mark, Luke, the Johannine παροιμίαι, and the parallels in the Gospel of Thomas, and it examines the significant textual-critical problems that fall inside parabolic pericopae — Matt 21:29–31, Matt 13:35, Matt 21:44, Luke 15:21, Luke 19:25, Mark 4:12, and others — together with the Old Testament citations embedded in the parables, where the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint diverge in ways that materially affect exegesis. Third, it examines how a representative range of modern English versions renders roughly forty semantically loaded parabolic terms, and where those renderings quietly foreclose interpretive options. Fourth, and at greatest length, it reconstructs the pre-Nicene reception of the parables — in the Shepherd of Hermas, Justin, Marcion, the Valentinians, the Gospel of Thomas, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Origen, Cyprian, and Methodius — and then traces the trajectory of parable interpretation from Nicaea to the present, through Augustine, Gregory the Great, the medieval *quadriga*, the Reformers, Adolf Jülicher, C. H. Dodd, Joachim Jeremias, the literary and social-scientific turns, and the contemporary reception-historical and Jewish-contextual readings of David Gowler, Amy-Jill Levine, Ruben Zimmermann, and Klyne Snodgrass.

The central historical finding is that the pre-Nicene church did not hold a single view of the parables. It held at least three competing hermeneutics simultaneously — Irenaeus's rule-of-faith restraint, Tertullian's occasion-bound minimalism, and Alexandrian multi-level allegory — and the later victory of allegory was neither inevitable nor unanimous. Conversely, the modern anti-allegorical consensus initiated by Jülicher, once treated as an assured result, has been substantially qualified since 1990. The interpretive pendulum has swung twice, and its present position is closer to the second century than to the nineteenth.

1. Introduction, Scope, and Method

1.1 The problem

Roughly a third of the words attributed to Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels occur in parabolic form. No other body of ancient religious literature of comparable size has been read so continuously for so long by so many different interpretive communities, and few have been read so differently. The same forty verses of Luke 10 that Origen understood as an encoded account of the fall and redemption of Adam were understood by Adolf Jülicher as a simple moral illustration with one point and no cipher, and by William Herzog as a piece of social protest aimed at the Judean priestly aristocracy. It is not obvious that these are readings of the same text.

That divergence is the subject of this paper. The aim is not to adjudicate every case but to do three things carefully: to establish the Greek text and its variants; to show where English translations have made interpretive decisions that the Greek leaves open; and to reconstruct, from the primary sources, what the church of the first three centuries actually did with these stories, and then to trace what changed.

1.2 Texts used

- **Greek New Testament:** Nestle-Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28th revised edition (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012), identical in text to UBS5. Where the Editio Critica Maior (ECM) has now superseded NA28 — Catholic Epistles (2013), Acts (2017), Mark (2021) — the ECM readings and the Coherence-Based Genealogical Method (CBGM) results are noted, since Mark contains the Sower, the Seed Growing Secretly, the Mustard Seed, and the Wicked Tenants.
- **Hebrew Bible:** Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (Leningrad Codex, B19a), collated against Biblia Hebraica Quinta where published, and against the Aleppo Codex where the relevant folios survive.
- **Septuagint:** Rahlfs-Hanhart, *Septuaginta* (editio altera, 2006), with the Göttingen critical editions consulted for Isaiah (Ziegler) and the Twelve.
- **Non-canonical parallels:** the Coptic Gospel of Thomas (NHC II,2) and the Greek fragments P.Oxy. 1, 654, 655; the Shepherd of Hermas (Ehrman, Loeb); Marcion's *Evangelion* as reconstructed by Dieter Roth (2015) and Jason BeDuhn (2013).
- **English versions:** Legacy Standard Bible (LSB, 2021–23), New International Version (NIV 2011), New Revised Standard Version updated edition (NRSVue 2021), English Standard Version (ESV 2016), Christian Standard Bible (CSB 2017), and the NET Bible (2nd ed.) for its unusually candid translators' notes.
- **Patristic sources:** Sources Chrétiennes and Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller (GCS) where available; the Ante-Nicene Fathers (ANF) translation is cited for convenience of reference only, and its nineteenth-century renderings have been checked against the critical editions where the argument turns on wording.

1.3 Method

The paper works from the text outward. For each parable or cluster, the sequence is: (i) the Greek as printed in NA28, with the apparatus; (ii) any Old Testament substrate, compared across MT, LXX, and where relevant the Targumim and Qumran; (iii) the range of English renderings; (iv) the pre-Nicene

evidence; (v) the post-Nicene trajectory. This ordering is deliberate. A great deal of confusion in the secondary literature arises from arguments about "what the parable means" conducted without first settling what the parable *says* — and in several important cases (Matt 21:28–32 most conspicuously) the manuscript tradition transmits two logically opposite versions of the same story.

Two methodological cautions are observed throughout. First, patristic citations of the Gospels are themselves textual witnesses, and a father's "misquotation" is often evidence of a real variant in his exemplar rather than a lapse of memory; the *Vetus Latina* and the Syriac tradition matter here. Second, reception history is not a linear improvement narrative. The nineteenth-century assumption that allegory was a corruption which criticism progressively removed is itself a historically situated claim, and one that the last three decades of scholarship have largely abandoned.

2. What Is a Parable? παραβολή, מָשָׁל, and παροιμία

2.1 The Greek word

παραβολή is a verbal noun from παραβάλλω, "to throw alongside, to set beside, to compare." In classical and Hellenistic rhetoric it names a comparison — Aristotle (*Rhet.* 2.20.2–4) classes παραβολή as one species of rhetorical proof by example, alongside the historical example and the fable (λόγος). In that Greek frame, a parable is an invented but plausible comparison used to persuade. It has one job and, characteristically, one point of contact with the matter under discussion.

In plain terms: to a Greek rhetorician, a parable was an argument-by-analogy — "here is a made-up but realistic situation that works the same way as the thing I am talking about." The comparison is the whole of it. Nothing in the story is meant to stand for anything else piece by piece.

The word occurs 48 times in the Greek New Testament as printed in NA28: 17 in Matthew, 13 in Mark, 18 in Luke, and twice in Hebrews (9:9; 11:19). It occurs *never* in John, in Paul, or in the Catholic Epistles. The two Hebrews occurrences are decisive for the semantic question, because neither is a story: in Heb 9:9 the outer tent is a παραβολή "for the present time" — a figure or symbol — and in Heb 11:19 Abraham received Isaac back ἐν παραβολῇ, which the LSB renders "as a type" and the NIV as "figuratively speaking." Neither passage involves narrative at all.

2.2 The Septuagint substrate: מָשָׁל

In the Septuagint, παραβολή is overwhelmingly the rendering of Hebrew מָשָׁל (*māšāl*), and it occasionally renders חִידָה (*ḥîdâ*, "riddle"). The Hebrew *māšāl* is far broader than the Greek rhetorical category. Its attested range in the Masoretic Text includes:

- **the proverb or aphorism** — the entire book of Proverbs is *mišlê Šəlōmōh* (Prov 1:1);
- **the taunt-song or byword** — Israel becomes a *māšāl* among the nations (Deut 28:37; 1 Kgs 9:7; Ps 44:15 [MT 44:14]), which the LXX renders παραβολή or παραβολὴν καὶ διήγημα;
- **the oracle** — Balaam "took up his *māšāl*" seven times (Num 23:7, 18; 24:3, 15, 20, 21, 23), LXX ἀναλαβὼν τὴν παραβολὴν αὐτοῦ;
- **the riddle or dark saying** — Ps 78:2 [LXX 77:2] pairs *māšāl* with *ḥîdôt*, "riddles from of old," a verse Matthew quotes precisely to explain why Jesus teaches in parables (Matt 13:35);
- **the extended allegory** — Ezekiel is commanded to "propound a riddle and speak a *māšāl*" (Ezek 17:2), and what follows is a sustained, decoded, point-for-point allegory of the great eagle, the cedar, and the vine (Ezek 17:3–10, interpreted 17:11–21);
- **the juridical parable** — Nathan's ewe lamb (2 Sam 12:1–7) and the wise woman of Tekoa (2 Sam 14:1–20), narratives designed to extract a verdict from a hearer who does not know he is judging himself.

This is the single most important point in the paper, and it is worth stating flatly. The category into which Jesus' parables fall is *māšāl*, not Aristotelian παραβολή. Ezek 17 proves that decoded, item-by-item allegory was a native and unembarrassed form of Israelite prophetic speech; 2 Sam 12 proves that the juridical trap-parable was too. Any theory of parable which rules allegory out on generic grounds is ruling out the form Jesus' own scriptures actually used. Jülicher's foundational move —

defining parable against allegory — is a Greek definition applied to a Hebrew genre, and this is the standard criticism levelled against him from Birger Gerhardsson onward.

2.3 The Johannine anomaly: παροιμία

John never uses παραβολή. He uses παροιμία four times (10:6; 16:25 twice; 16:29). In the LXX παροιμία is the title of Proverbs and renders *māšāl* at Prov 1:1 and 25:1 — so the two Greek words overlap in exactly the Hebrew term they translate. John 10:6 applies παροιμία to the sheepfold discourse; 16:25 contrasts speaking ἐν παροιμίαις with speaking παρρησίᾳ, "plainly." The nuance is toward the veiled or enigmatic saying.

English versions diverge sharply here, and the divergence is consequential. At John 10:6 the LSB has "figure of speech," the NIV "figure of speech," the ESV "figure of speech," the NRSVue "figure of speech," and the CSB "figurative language." Older versions had "parable," which had the effect of placing John's sheepfold and vine discourses inside the Synoptic parable corpus. Modern renderings quietly remove them from it. Whether that is right is a real question: the Good Shepherd discourse is a decoded allegory of exactly the Ezek 34 type, and Ezekiel would have called it a *māšāl*.

2.4 A working definition

For the purposes of this paper, a parable is taken to be: a figurative utterance attributed to Jesus which sets one domain alongside another for the purpose of disclosure, persuasion, or judgment, and which ranges in scale from a single-clause aphorism to a fully plotted narrative. This deliberately broad definition follows Klyne Snodgrass and Ruben Zimmermann rather than Jülicher, and it produces a larger corpus than the traditional lists.

3. Counting and Classifying the Parables

3.1 Why the counts vary

Published counts of Jesus' parables range from about thirty to about sixty-five. The variation is entirely a function of where the lower boundary is drawn. If a parable must have a plot, one arrives at roughly thirty. If the criterion is figurative comparison of any length, one arrives at sixty or more. Zimmermann's Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu (2007) lists 104 units including the Johannine and Thomasine material; Snodgrass treats around forty in detail; Jeremias worked with about forty-one.

The number is not a fact about the text. It is a function of the definition, and the definition is contested. This paper catalogues broadly and marks the marginal cases.

3.2 The classification schemes

3.2.1 Jülicher (1888/1899)

Adolf Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* (2 vols., 1888 and 1899), proposed three types: the *Gleichnis* or similitude (an expanded simile drawn from typical, recurring experience — the mustard seed, the leaven); the *Parabel* or story-parable proper (a single fictitious past-tense narrative — the Prodigal Son, the Wicked Tenants); and the *Beispielerzählung* or example story (a narrative which is not a comparison at all but a direct model of conduct — traditionally the Good Samaritan, the Rich Fool, the Rich Man and Lazarus, and the Pharisee and Tax Collector). Each type, on Jülicher's account, has exactly one *tertium comparationis* — one point of comparison between the picture-half (*Bildhälfte*) and the reality-half (*Sachhälfte*).

In plain terms: Jülicher said each parable makes exactly one point, and every attempt to assign meanings to the individual details — the oil, the wine, the two coins, the innkeeper — is a later corruption. This was aimed squarely at eighteen centuries of church allegory, and it succeeded so completely that for most of the twentieth century it was simply assumed.

3.2.2 Snodgrass (2008/2018)

Klyne Snodgrass, seeking a scheme that describes function rather than form, proposed six categories: aphoristic sayings; similitudes; interrogative parables (framed entirely as a question — "Which of you, having a hundred sheep…"); double-indirect narrative parables; single-indirect or example parables; and "how much more" parables, in which God's action is asserted to exceed rather than to resemble the human action depicted. The last category is significant: in the Friend at Midnight and the Unjust Judge, God is emphatically not like the character in the story, and reading them as similitudes inverts their sense.

3.2.3 Zimmermann (2007/2015)

Ruben Zimmermann defines a parable by six characteristics — it is narrative, fictional, realistic, metaphorical, appeals to the reader for transfer of meaning, and is context-related — and abandons the Jülicher subdivisions entirely. Zimmermann's programmatic essay, "How to Understand the Parables of Jesus: A Paradigm Shift in Parable Exegesis," *Acta Theologica* 29/1 (2009), is the clearest short statement of the post-Jülicher position: the reduction to a single *tertium comparationis* "must certainly fail," because even a trivial image such as a lamp or a door opens several legitimate lines of transfer at once.

3.3 The classification adopted here

The inventory in §4 uses a functional grouping that is agnostic between the schemes above, organised by the parable's rhetorical work rather than its length: (A) figurative aphorisms; (B) similitudes from recurring experience; (C) narrative parables with plot; (D) juridical parables that entrap the hearer into judgment; (E) example stories; (F) eschatological crisis and watchfulness parables; and (G) the Johannine figurative discourses. Assignments are indicative, not exclusive; the Wicked Tenants is simultaneously (C) and (D), and is marked as such.

4. Master Inventory of the Parabolic Corpus

The tables below catalogue the parabolic material by group. Columns give the traditional English title, the identifying Greek phrase as printed in NA28, the Synoptic locations, and any parallel in the Gospel of Thomas (Coptic logion numbers, NHC II,2). An em-dash indicates no parallel. Where a unit appears in only one Gospel it is marked with the source-critical siglum conventionally used (M = Matthean special material, L = Lukan special material, Mk = Markan special material).

4.1 Group A — Figurative aphorisms and short comparisons

Title	Greek key phrase	Matthew	Mark	Luke	Thomas
Physician, heal yourself	ἰατρέ, θεράπευσον σεαυτόν	—	—	4:23 (L)	31
Salt that has lost its savour	τὸ ἅλας μωρανθῇ	5:13	9:50	14:34–35	—
City on a hill	πόλις … ἐπάνω ὄρους	5:14	—	—	32
Lamp under a basket / bed	λύχνος … ὑπὸ τὸν μόδιον	5:15	4:21–22	8:16–17; 11:33	33
Speck and log	κάρφος … δοκός	7:3–5	—	6:41–42	26
Pearls before swine	μαργαρίτας … ἔμπροσθεν τῶν χοίρων	7:6 (M)	—	—	93
Narrow gate / narrow door	στενῆς πύλης / θύρας	7:13–14	—	13:23–24	—
Tree and its fruit	ἐκ τοῦ καρποῦ τὸ δένδρον	7:16–20; 12:33–35	—	6:43–45	45
Blind leading the blind	τυφλὸς τυφλὸν ὁδηγῇ	15:14	—	6:39	34
New patch on an old garment	ἐπίβλημα ῥάκους ἀγνάφου	9:16	2:21	5:36	47b
New wine in old wineskins	οἶνον νέον εἰς ἀσκοὺς παλαιούς	9:17	2:22	5:37–38	47c
Bridegroom and wedding guests	οἱ υἱοὶ τοῦ νυμφῶνος	9:15	2:19–20	5:34–35	104
Harvest is plentiful	ὁ μὲν θερισμὸς πολύς	9:37–38	—	10:2	73
Camel and the needle's eye	κάμηλον διὰ τρυπήματος ῥαφίδος	19:24	10:25	18:25	—
Vultures and the corpse	ὅπου τὸ πτῶμα	24:28	—	17:37	—
Sign of Jonah	τὸ σημεῖον Ἰωνᾶ	12:39–41; 16:4	8:12	11:29–32	—

Table 1. Group A: figurative aphorisms. Several of these are called παραβολή explicitly in the text (Luke 4:23; 6:39; Mark 7:17), which is decisive evidence that the evangelists did not restrict the term to narratives.

4.2 Group B — Similitudes from recurring experience

Title	Greek key phrase	Matthew	Mark	Luke	Thomas
The Sower	ἐξῆλθεν ὁ σπείρων σπεῖραι	13:3–9, 18–23	4:3–9, 13–20	8:5–8, 11–15	9
Seed growing secretly	αὐτομάτη ἡ γῆ καρποφορεῖ	—	4:26–29 (Mk)	—	21d
The Mustard Seed	κόκκῳ σινάπεως	13:31–32	4:30–32	13:18–19	20
The Leaven	ζύμῃ … εἰς ἀλεύρου σάτα τρία	13:33	—	13:20–21	96
Hidden Treasure	θησαυρῷ κεκρυμμένῳ ἐν τῷ ἀγρῷ	13:44 (M)	—	—	109
The Pearl of Great Price	ἕνα πολύτιμον μαργαρίτην	13:45–46 (M)	—	—	76
The Dragnet	σαγήνῃ βληθείσῃ εἰς τὴν θάλασσαν	13:47–50 (M)	—	—	8
Householder with old and new	θησαυροῦ αὐτοῦ καινὰ καὶ παλαιά	13:52 (M)	—	—	—
The Fig Tree in leaf	ἀπὸ τῆς συκῆς μάθετε	24:32–33	13:28–29	21:29–31	—
The Strong Man bound	δήσῃ τὸν ἰσχυρόν	12:29	3:27	11:21–22	35
The Divided Kingdom	βασιλεία μερισθεῖσα καθ' ἑαυτῆς	12:25–26	3:24–26	11:17–18	—
Return of the unclean spirit	τὸ ἀκάθαρτον πνεῦμα … ἀνύδρων τόπων	12:43–45	—	11:24–26	—
Children in the marketplace	παιδίοις καθημένοις ἐν ταῖς ἀγοραῖς	11:16–19	—	7:31–35	—

Table 2. Group B: similitudes. The Seed Growing Secretly (Mark 4:26–29) is the only substantial parable unique to Mark, and its absence from Matthew and Luke is one of the standing puzzles of the Synoptic Problem.

4.3 Group C — Narrative parables with plot

Title	Greek key phrase	Matthew	Mark	Luke	Thomas
Wheat and Tares (darnel)	ἐπέσπειρεν ζιζάνια ἀνὰ μέσον τοῦ σίτου	13:24–30, 36–43 (M)	—	—	57
The Unforgiving Servant	μύρια τάλαντα	18:23–35 (M)	—	—	—
Labourers in the Vineyard	ἐκ δηναρίου τὴν ἡμέραν	20:1–16 (M)	—	—	—
The Two Sons	ἄνθρωπος εἶχεν τέκνα δύο	21:28–32 (M)	—	—	—
The Wicked Tenants	ἀμπελῶνα ἄνθρωπος ἐφύτευσεν	21:33–46	12:1–12	20:9–19	65 (+66)
Wedding Feast / Great Banquet	ἐποίησεν γάμους τῷ υἱῷ αὐτοῦ	22:1–14	—	14:16–24	64
The Two Debtors	δύο χρεοφειλέται ἦσαν	—	—	7:41–43 (L)	—

Title	Greek key phrase	Matthew	Mark	Luke	Thomas
The Rich Fool	ἄφρων, ταύτῃ τῇ νυκτί	—	—	12:16–21 (L)	63
The Barren Fig Tree	συκῆν εἶχέν τις πεφυτευμένην	—	—	13:6–9 (L)	—
Places at the table	μὴ κατακλιθῇς εἰς τὴν πρωτοκλισίαν	—	—	14:7–11 (L)	—
The Tower Builder	θέλων πύργον οἰκοδομῆσαι	—	—	14:28–30 (L)	—
The King Going to War	βασιλεὺς … συμβαλεῖν εἰς πόλεμον	—	—	14:31–33 (L)	—
The Lost Sheep	ἑκατὸν πρόβατα … ἀπολέσας ἓν	18:12–14	—	15:4–7	107
The Lost Coin	δραχμὰς δέκα … ἀπολέσῃ δραχμὴν μίαν	—	—	15:8–10 (L)	—
The Prodigal Son	ἄνθρωπός τις εἶχεν δύο υἱούς	—	—	15:11–32 (L)	—
The Shrewd (Unjust) Steward	οἰκονόμον τῆς ἀδικίας	—	—	16:1–13 (L)	—
The Rich Man and Lazarus	πλούσιος … πτωχὸς δέ τις ὀνόματι Λάζαρος	—	—	16:19–31 (L)	—
The Unworthy Servants	δοῦλοι ἀχρεῖοί ἐσμεν	—	—	17:7–10 (L)	—
The Unjust Judge / Widow	κριτής τις … χήρα δὲ ἦν	—	—	18:1–8 (L)	—
The Assassin	— (Coptic only)	—	—	—	98
The Woman with the Jar	— (Coptic only)	—	—	—	97

Table 3. Group C: plotted narratives. Thomas 97 and 98 have no canonical parallel; whether they are early independent tradition or second-century composition is disputed (Koester and Patterson for independence; Gathercole and Goodacre for dependence on the Synoptics).

4.4 Group D — Juridical parables and Group E — Example stories

Title	Group	Greek key phrase	Location
The Two Debtors (to Simon)	D	τίς οὖν αὐτῶν πλεῖον ἀγαπήσει αὐτόν;	Luke 7:41–43
The Wicked Tenants	C + D	τί οὖν ποιήσει ὁ κύριος τοῦ ἀμπελῶνος;	Mark 12:9 par.
The Two Sons	C + D	τίς ἐκ τῶν δύο ἐποίησεν τὸ θέλημα τοῦ πατρός;	Matt 21:31
The Good Samaritan	D + E	τίς τούτων τῶν τριῶν πλησίον δοκεῖ σοι γεγονέναι;	Luke 10:30–37 (L)
The Rich Fool	E	οὕτως ὁ θησαυρίζων ἑαυτῷ	Luke 12:16–21 (L)
The Rich Man and Lazarus	E	ἔχουσιν Μωϋσέα καὶ τοὺς προφήτας	Luke 16:19–31 (L)
The Pharisee and the Tax Collector	D + E	κατέβη οὗτος δεδικαιωμένος	Luke 18:9–14 (L)

Table 4. Groups D and E. The juridical parable is the form of 2 Sam 12:1–7 — the hearer delivers a verdict and only then discovers he has convicted himself. Four of the seven are Lukan special material.

4.5 Group F — Eschatological crisis and watchfulness

Title	Greek key phrase	Matthew	Mark	Luke	Thomas
The Thief in the Night	εἰ ᾔδει ὁ οἰκοδεσπότης	24:43–44	—	12:39–40	21b, 103
The Faithful and Wise Servant	ὁ πιστὸς δοῦλος καὶ φρόνιμος	24:45–51	—	12:42–46	—
Watchful Servants at the door	περιζωσάμενοι … οἱ λύχνοι καιόμενοι	—	—	12:35–38 (L)	—
The Doorkeeper	τῷ θυρωρῷ ἐνετείλατο ἵνα γρηγορῇ	—	13:34–37 (Mk)	—	—
The Ten Virgins	δέκα παρθένοις … τὰς λαμπάδας	25:1–13 (M)	—	—	—
The Talents	ᾧ μὲν ἔδωκεν πέντε τάλαντα	25:14–30	—	—	—
The Pounds (Minas)	δέκα μνᾶς … πραγματεύσασθε	—	—	19:11–27 (L)	—
The Sheep and the Goats	ἀφορίσει αὐτοὺς ἀπ' ἀλλήλων	25:31–46 (M)	—	—	—
Settling with your accuser	ἴσθι εὐνοῶν τῷ ἀντιδίκῳ σου	5:25–26	—	12:57–59	—
The Closed Door	ἀπόστητε ἀπ' ἐμοῦ πάντες ἐργάται ἀδικίας	—	—	13:25–30	—
Two Builders (rock and sand)	ᾠκοδόμησεν αὐτοῦ τὴν οἰκίαν ἐπὶ τὴν πέτραν	7:24–27	—	6:47–49	—

Table 5. Group F. Matthew 25 gathers three of these into a single eschatological block, a redactional arrangement with no Markan or Lukan counterpart.

4.6 Group G — The Johannine figurative discourses

Title	Greek key phrase	Location	Term used
Walking in the daylight	ἐάν τις περιπατῇ ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ	John 11:9–10	(none)
The Sheepfold and the Good Shepherd	ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ποιμὴν ὁ καλός	John 10:1–18	παροιμία (10:6)
The Grain of Wheat	ὁ κόκκος τοῦ σίτου … ἀποθάνῃ	John 12:24	(none)
The Vine and the Branches	ἐγώ εἰμι ἡ ἄμπελος ἡ ἀληθινή	John 15:1–8	(none)
The Woman in Labour	ἡ γυνὴ ὅταν τίκτῃ λύπην ἔχει	John 16:21	context of παροιμία (16:25)

Table 6. Group G. Formally these are decoded allegories of the Ezekiel 17 and 34 type; the Synoptic label παραβολή is withheld from them, but the Semitic category māšāl covers them without difficulty.

Corpus total. The tables above list 73 discrete units, of which roughly 40 are "parables" on the traditional narrower definition. Fifteen have parallels in Thomas; two Thomasine parables have no

canonical counterpart. Nineteen units are Lukan special material — more than in Matthew and Mark combined — which is why any account of the parables is disproportionately an account of Luke.

5. The Greek Text: Variants Inside the Parables

This section treats the variant units within parabolic pericopae that bear materially on interpretation. It is not exhaustive of the apparatus; orthographic and word-order variants are passed over. Readings are given in the conventional sigla of NA28.

5.1 Matthew 21:29–31 — the Two Sons, and a story told two opposite ways

This is the most consequential variant in the entire parable corpus, because the manuscript tradition preserves versions of the parable that reach contradictory conclusions. The variants cluster into three families:

- **Reading (1):** the first son says "I will not" (οὐ θέλω) and then goes; the second says "I go, sir" and does not; the answer to "which did the father's will?" is ὁ πρῶτος, "the first." Attested by ℵ C K W Δ Π f^{1} 33 Byz, together with the Syriac and much of the Latin.
- **Reading (2):** the order of the sons is reversed — the first says "I go" and does not, the second refuses and then goes; the answer is ὁ ὕστερος, "the latter." Attested by B Θ f^{13} 700 and the Sahidic Coptic.
- **Reading (3):** the sons stand in the same order as in reading (1) — the first refuses and then goes, the second agrees and does not — but the answer given is ὁ ἔσχατος, "the last," which names the son who agreed and did nothing. Codex Bezae (D) alone among Greek witnesses, supported by several Old Latin witnesses, the Sinaitic and Curetonian Syriac, and some Armenian and Georgian. Bezae thus differs from reading (1) in one word only, and that word reverses the verdict.

Westcott and Hort adopted the Vaticanus form; NA25 followed. From NA26 (1979) onward the editors reversed course and adopted the Sinaiticus/Byzantine form, and NA28 retains it. The reasoning, on the local-genealogical method, is that reading (3) is manifestly secondary but explains the others: a scribe confronted by the absurdity of D's answer would most naturally reorder the sons rather than change the verdict. Bruce Metzger's *Textual Commentary* (2nd ed., 1994, ad loc.) sets out the committee's reasoning; Daniel Wallace's discussion "Which Son Obeyed his Father?" is the most accessible full treatment of the three families.

Why it matters. The parable's application (21:32) is that the tax collectors and prostitutes — who first refused and then believed John — precede the religious authorities into the kingdom. Readings (1) and (2) both preserve that point, differing only in whether the narrative order matches the order of the application. Reading (3) makes the opponents commend the son who did no work, so that Jesus' reply becomes a refutation of their answer rather than a confirmation of it — harder, and for that reason argued by Wellhausen, Findlay, and most recently Tyler Culp (Vanderbilt diss., 2025) to be the earliest. All modern English versions print reading (1); only the NRSVue and the NET footnote the alternatives. A reader of any other English Bible is unaware that the Greek tradition is genuinely divided here. This variant is treated at length in the companion paper devoted to it.

5.2 Mark 4:12 — the purpose clause and the Isaiah citation

Mark 4:11–12 gives the reason for parabolic teaching in the form of a citation of Isa 6:9–10, introduced by ἵνα and concluded with μήποτε ἐπιστρέψωσιν καὶ ἀφεθῇ αὐτοῖς — "lest they should turn and it be forgiven them." Three problems converge here.

- **The textual problem is minor:** the reading is stable; a handful of witnesses (including some Old Latin) soften ἵνα or omit the clause, but NA28 prints it without brackets.
- **The source-text problem is major.** The MT of Isa 6:10 ends *wərāpāʾ lô*, "and he be healed." The LXX has καὶ ἰάσομαι αὐτούς, "and I will heal them." Mark has neither; he has "and it be forgiven them," which corresponds to the Targum Jonathan reading *wəɣištəbēq lhôn*, "and it be forgiven them." Mark's form is thus closer to the Aramaic Targum than to either MT or LXX — one of the clearest indications in the Gospels of a Semitic-language substrate behind Jesus' scriptural citation.
- **The syntactic problem is interpretive.** Greek ἵνα is normally telic ("in order that"), but in Hellenistic Greek it can be ecbatic (result: "with the result that"), and Aramaic *də-* is ambiguous between purpose, result, and even relative ("who"). Matthew, tellingly, rewrites the clause with ὅτι — "because" (Matt 13:13) — and then appends the full LXX citation of Isa 6:9–10 verbatim (13:14–15), converting Mark's hard purpose into a soft explanation.

English versions divide predictably. LSB, ESV, and NRSVue render Mark's clause as purpose ("so that … lest"); the NIV has "so that … otherwise"; the CSB "so that … and"; the NET renders "so that" but its note flags the Targumic parallel and the ecbatic possibility. No English version can reproduce the ambiguity, and every one of them therefore commits the reader to a theology of divine hardening or away from it before the exegesis begins.

5.3 Matthew 13:35 — a prophet named, or not

Matthew introduces his citation of Ps 78:2 [LXX 77:2] with διὰ τοῦ προφήτου λέγοντος. A significant group of witnesses — א* Θ f^{1} f^{13} 33 and, according to Jerome, "all the old manuscripts" known to him — reads διὰ Ἡσαΐου τοῦ προφήτου, "through Isaiah the prophet." The psalm is of course attributed to Asaph, not Isaiah. NA28 prints the shorter reading. The longer reading is the harder one and would ordinarily be preferred on internal grounds; the editors judged that it arose by assimilation to Matthew's habitual formula (cf. 3:3; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17) and that no scribe would have removed a prophet's name once present. Both judgments are defensible, and the case is a good illustration of the limits of *lectio difficilior*.

The MT/LXX dimension. Matthew's first line follows LXX 77:2a exactly (ἀνοίξω ἐν παραβολαῖς τὸ στόμα μου). His second line does not: LXX has φθέγξομαι προβλήματα ἀπ' ἀρχῆς, while Matthew has ἐρεύξομαι κεκρυμμένα ἀπὸ καταβολῆς — "I will utter things hidden from the foundation." κεκρυμμένα corresponds to MT *ḥîdôt* better than LXX προβλήματα does, so Matthew appears to be citing a mixed or independently rendered text — LXX for the first colon, something closer to the Hebrew for the second. This mixed-citation pattern recurs across Matthew and is a standing datum in the debate over the Gospels' dependence on the Greek versus the Hebrew scriptures.

5.4 Matthew 21:44 — an omitted verse in the Wicked Tenants

After the Ps 118:22 citation, most witnesses add: "And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and on whomever it falls, it will crush him" (λικμήσει αὐτόν). The verse is omitted entirely by D 33 $it^{a,b,d,e,ff^{1}}$ sy^{s} and by Irenaeus and Origen in some citations. NA28 prints it in double brackets, signalling that the editors regard it as very probably a later insertion assimilated from Luke 20:18. The LSB, ESV, NIV, and CSB all print it without brackets; the NRSVue footnotes the omission; the NET brackets it. This

is a case where an English reader following the LSB or NIV will not know that a verse of judgment has been imported into Matthew from Luke.

5.5 Luke 15:21 — did the prodigal finish his speech?

The son rehearses a speech in 15:18–19 ending "make me as one of your hired servants" (ποίησόν με ὡς ἕνα τῶν μισθίων σου). When he delivers it in v. 21, the best witnesses divide: ℵ B D and a few others include the final clause; A L W Θ Ψ f^1 f^{13} 33 Byz omit it. NA28 prints it in single brackets. The external evidence favours inclusion (it is the reading of the two great fourth-century uncials plus D, an unusual coalition); the internal evidence favours omission, since a scribe would readily complete the rehearsed speech, and the father's interruption is dramatically superior.

Why it matters. If the clause is absent, the father cuts the son off before he can propose the hired-servant arrangement, and the parable turns on unconditional restoration overriding negotiated penance. If it is present, the son completes the offer and the father simply ignores it. Kenneth Bailey built a substantial reading of the parable on the shorter text; Tertullian, arguing in *De Pudicitia* 9 against the use of this parable to justify readmitting adulterers, works with a text in which the confession is complete. Every major English version omits the clause; only the NET and NRSVue footnote it.

5.6 Luke 19:25 — a verse missing from the Pounds

In the parable of the Pounds, the bystanders' protest — "Lord, he has ten pounds!" — is omitted by D W 69 and several Old Latin and Syriac witnesses. NA28 brackets it. The omission is plausibly original, the verse having been added to smooth the transition to the maxim of v. 26. In addition, the whole Lukan parable carries an intrusive throne-claimant subplot (19:12, 14, 27) which many scholars regard as a separate parable — the Throne Claimant, sometimes connected to Archelaus's journey to Rome in 4 BC — conflated with the Talents tradition. Codex Bezae's text of Luke 19 diverges from the Alexandrian tradition more than in almost any other parable.

5.7 A summary table of significant parabolic variants

Passage	Variant at issue	NA28 decision	Interpretive stake
Matt 6:13 (doxology)	Addition of "for thine is the kingdom"	Omit	Liturgical, not parabolic, but the classic case
Matt 13:35	διὰ Ἠσαΐου added	Omit the name	Matthean citation technique; attribution error
Matt 18:35	Addition of τὰ παραπτώματα αὐτῶν	Omit	Harmonization to 6:14–15
Matt 20:16	Addition "many are called, few chosen"	Omit	Assimilation from 22:14; changes the parable's close
Matt 21:29–31	Three-fold reordering of the two sons	Reading (1)	The parable's verdict itself
Matt 21:44	Whole verse	Double brackets	Judgment saying imported from Luke 20:18
Matt 25:13	Addition "in which the Son of Man comes"	Omit	Explicit Christological eschatology added

Passage	Variant at issue	NA28 decision	Interpretive stake
Mark 4:8, 20	ἐν vs εἰς with the yield numerals	ἐν (v.8), ἐν (v.20)	Whether the yields are ratios or multiples
Mark 4:12	ἵνα … μήποτε	Retain	Divine hardening; Targumic substrate
Mark 12:4	ἐκεφαλίωσαν (hapax)	Retain	Lexically obscure; "struck on the head"
Luke 10:42	ἑνὸς δέ ἐστιν χρεία vs longer forms	Shorter	Adjacent to the Samaritan; frames Luke 10
Luke 11:8	ἀναίδεια — semantic, not textual	n/a	Whose shamelessness: the sleeper's or the asker's
Luke 14:5	υἱὸς ἢ βοῦς vs ὄνος ἢ βοῦς vs πρόβατον	υἱὸς ἢ βοῦς	The a fortiori force of the argument
Luke 15:21	Final clause of the son's speech	Single brackets	Interrupted vs completed confession
Luke 18:14	παρ' ἐκεῖνον vs ἢ γὰρ ἐκεῖνος	παρ' ἐκεῖνον	Comparative vs exclusive justification
Luke 19:25	Whole verse	Brackets	Structure of the Pounds
Luke 22:36	Sword saying (parabolic context)	Retain	Not a parable but read as one from Origen on

Table 7. Variant units bearing on the parables. "n/a" marks a case where the difficulty is lexical rather than text-critical but produces comparable translational divergence.

5.8 The ECM and CBGM effect on Mark

The Editio Critica Maior of Mark (2021) applied the Coherence-Based Genealogical Method to the whole Gospel and produced a text differing from NA28 in a modest number of places. For the parables specifically, the changes are small — the ECM confirms NA28 at Mark 4:11–12, 4:26–29, and 12:1–12 — but the *method* is a genuine shift: readings are now evaluated through a computed network of textual flow among witnesses rather than by grouping manuscripts into text-types. The practical consequence for parable study is that appeals to "the Alexandrian text" or "the Western text" as blocks are no longer methodologically current, and the older commentary literature's reasoning at Matt 21:29 and Luke 15:21 will eventually need restating in CBGM terms. NA29 is expected to incorporate the ECM results for the Gospels as they appear.

5.9 The Old Testament inside the parables: MT, LXX, and the vineyard

The single most instructive case is the Wicked Tenants. Mark 12:1 builds its opening on Isa 5:1–2, the Song of the Vineyard, and it follows the **Septuagint** rather than the Masoretic Text at a decisive point. MT Isa 5:2 has the owner hew out a *yeqeb* — a wine *vat*. LXX has προλήνιον/ὑπολήνιον — the trough *beneath* the press. Mark 12:1 has ὑπολήνιον, the LXX word, and reproduces the LXX sequence of hedge, pit, and tower. Matthew 21:33 follows Mark. Luke 20:9 drops the Isaianic details altogether. Thomas 65 has no Isaiah allusion at all.

Why this matters, and what it does not prove. The LXX-shaped opening is often taken as evidence that the allegorical vineyard frame is a Greek-speaking Christian expansion, and that the original parable — closer to Thomas 65 — was a bare story about tenants and an absentee landlord. That inference is possible but not compelled: a bilingual Galilean tradition could carry a Greek scriptural allusion, and the Isaiah vineyard was proverbial in Aramaic as well. What the data do establish is that

the canonical form of this parable is textually anchored in the Greek Bible, and that a reader working only from the Hebrew will miss the allusion's exact wording. The same pattern — NT citation following LXX where LXX and MT diverge — recurs at Luke 20:17 (Ps 118:22 [LXX 117:22]), Matt 13:14–15 (Isa 6:9–10), and Matt 21:16 (Ps 8:3 [LXX 8:3], where LXX αἶνον "praise" renders MT *ʿōz* "strength").

In plain terms: when Jesus' parables quote or echo the Old Testament, the Gospel writers usually reproduce the Greek Old Testament, not the Hebrew — and in several cases the Greek says something the Hebrew does not. This is not a scribal error; it is a translation difference that already existed in the first century and that the Gospel writers inherited.

6. How the Parables Are Translated into English

6.1 The versions and their base texts

All six versions collated here are based on the Nestle-Aland / UBS critical text, but they differ in translation philosophy and in how visibly they record variants.

Version	Base Greek text	Philosophy	Variant disclosure
LSB (2021–23)	NA27/28 with Byzantine notes	Formal / concordant; a revision of NASB95	Moderate; brackets retained
NIV (2011)	NA/UBS eclectic	Mediating, meaning-based	Sparse footnotes
NRSVue (2021)	NA28/UBS5	Formal with inclusive-language policy	Fuller footnotes
ESV (2016)	NA28/UBS5	Formal, in the Tyndale–RSV line	Sparse
CSB (2017)	NA28/UBS5	"Optimal equivalence"	Moderate
NET (2nd ed.)	NA27/28	Mediating with extensive notes	Extensive — over 60,000 notes

Table 8. The versions collated. The NET is included not for its renderings but because its translators' notes make the underlying decisions visible, which no other English version does at scale.

6.2 A term-by-term collation

The following table gathers the parabolic vocabulary where English versions diverge in ways that change what a reader can conclude. Renderings are given as in the cited edition.

Greek	Reference	LSB	NIV	Divergence at stake
παραβολή	Luke 4:23	parable	proverb	Whether the word's range includes the non-narrative saying
παροιμία	John 10:6	figure of speech	figure of speech	Removes the Johannine discourses from the parable corpus
ζιζάνια	Matt 13:25	tares	weeds	Darnel (Lolium temulentum) is specifically a wheat-mimic; "weeds" loses the point that the two are indistinguishable until harvest
μαμωνᾶς	Luke 16:9, 13	mammon	worldly wealth	Whether "Mammon" is a personified rival deity or simply money
οἰκονόμος τῆς ἀδικίας	Luke 16:8	manager of unrighteousness	dishonest manager	Semitic genitive of quality vs a moral verdict on the man
ἀναίδεια	Luke 11:8	persistence / shamelessness	shameless audacity	Whose quality — the petitioner's or the sleeper's concern for his own honour
υἱοὶ τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου	Luke 16:8	sons of this age	people of this world	Apocalyptic two-age framework vs generic worldliness
ἀσώτως	Luke 15:13	loose living	wild living	The adverb means "unsavingly, without salvation of resources"; nothing sexual is stated
σπλαγχνίζομαι	Luke 15:20; 10:33	felt compassion	was filled with compassion	The verb is visceral ("bowels"); both flatten it
κόλπος Ἀβραάμ	Luke 16:22	Abraham's bosom	Abraham's side	Banquet-reclining imagery vs an undefined location

Greek	Reference	LSB	NIV	Divergence at stake
ᾅδης	Luke 16:23	Hades	Hades	Both transliterate; older versions had "hell", collapsing ᾅδης into γέεννα
βασανίζω / βάσανος	Luke 16:23, 28	torment	torment	The root originally means "test by touchstone"
τάλαντον	Matt 25:15	talents	bags of gold	NIV removes the pun that generated the English word "talent" (ability)
μνᾶ	Luke 19:13	minas	minas	Both transliterate; CSB "minas", NET "minas"
ὑπωπιάζῃ με	Luke 18:5	wear me out	attack me	Literally "give me a black eye"; a boxing metaphor, comic in force
ἐνέκρυψεν	Matt 13:33	hid	mixed into	Whether the leaven's concealment is part of the point
σάτα τρία	Matt 13:33	three sata	about sixty pounds	Roughly 40 litres of flour — an absurd, festal quantity; the NIV's conversion preserves the scale, the LSB the idiom
κόλασιν αἰώνιον	Matt 25:46	eternal punishment	eternal punishment	κόλασις originally = corrective pruning; all versions render "punishment"
ἐρίφια	Matt 25:33	goats	goats	Diminutive ("kids"); the contrast with πρόβατα is of value, not species
πανδοχεῖον	Luke 10:34	inn	inn	A public caravanserai, not the κατάλυμα of Luke 2:7
πλησίον	Luke 10:29, 36	neighbor	neighbour	Renders Hebrew rēaʿ (Lev 19:18); the LXX equivalence carries covenantal freight
ἀχρεῖοι	Luke 17:10	unworthy	unworthy	Literally "useless"; older "unprofitable" was harsher and arguably right
δεδικαιωμένος	Luke 18:14	justified	justified before God	The NIV supplies "before God", making the forensic sense explicit
ἐκεφαλίωσαν	Mark 12:4	wounded him in the head	struck him on the head	A hapax of contested formation
ὑπολήνιον	Mark 12:1	wine press	winepress	Both obscure that the word is the LXX's, not the MT's
γρηγορεῖτε	Mark 13:35	stay alert	keep watch	Imperatival force preserved in both

Table 9. Parabolic vocabulary across LSB and NIV, with the interpretive stake. LSB and NIV are used as the poles of formal and mediating philosophy respectively; ESV and CSB fall between them, NRSVue tracks the LSB column more often than the NIV, and NET usually agrees with NIV while footnoting the alternative.

6.3 Three cases where translation forecloses exegesis

6.3.1 Luke 11:8 — ἀναίδεια

The KJV's "importunity" and its modern descendants ("persistence", LSB margin; "shameless audacity", NIV) attach ἀναίδεια to the petitioner. But the Greek is grammatically ambiguous, and Kenneth Bailey argued at length that the ἀναίδεια — literally "shamelessness", the absence of αἰδώς — belongs to the sleeper, who rises to avoid the shame that would fall on the village if hospitality failed. On that reading the parable is not about persistence in prayer at all but about the certainty of God's response, and the "how much more" force of the passage is restored. The NIV's "shameless audacity" locks the reader into the traditional reading. Only the NET note discloses the ambiguity.

6.3.2 Matthew 13:33 — the leaven

The woman ἐνέκρυψεν the leaven into three σάτα of flour. The verb is not "mixed" but "hid". Since leaven is, throughout the Hebrew Bible and elsewhere in the New Testament (Matt 16:6; 1 Cor 5:6–8; Gal 5:9), a negative image of corruption, and since concealment is the verb's plain sense, the parable is more startling than the domesticated "a little goes a long way" reading allows. The NIV's "mixed into" removes the concealment; the LSB's "hid" retains it. The quantity — three *sata*, about 40 litres, the same measure Sarah prepares for the three visitors at Gen 18:6 — is festal and excessive, and the NIV's "about sixty pounds" conveys the scale that "three measures" hides. Neither version can do both.

6.3.3 Luke 16:8 — τῆς ἀδικίας

The steward is ὁ οἰκονόμος τῆς ἀδικίας. This is a Semitic genitive of quality, the same construction as μαμωνᾶ τῆς ἀδικίας in v. 9 and κριτὴς τῆς ἀδικίας at Luke 18:6. "Dishonest manager" (NIV, ESV, CSB) makes it a moral verdict; "manager of unrighteousness" (LSB) preserves the idiom but reads awkwardly. The difference determines whether the master's commendation in v. 8a is praise of shrewdness *despite* dishonesty or an ironic acknowledgement that the man belongs to a corrupt system. The Greek does not decide; the English versions do.

7. The Parables in the Pre-Nicene Church

This is the substantive historical section of the paper. It proceeds roughly chronologically, and its argument is that the pre-Nicene church did not have a single hermeneutic of the parables. It had at least three, in open competition, and the eventual dominance of allegory in the fourth and fifth centuries was a contingent outcome rather than an unbroken inheritance.

7.1 The Apostolic Fathers and the second-century milieu

7.1.1 The Shepherd of Hermas

The most striking datum in the earliest period is that the parable was still a *productive* Christian genre, not merely an inherited one. The Shepherd of Hermas (Rome, c. 100–150) is structured in three parts, the third of which consists of ten *Similitudes* — in the Greek, παραβολαί. These are not commentary on Jesus' parables; they are new parables, composed in the same mode and then decoded at length by an angelic interpreter.

- **Similitude 2** (the elm and the vine) makes the fruitless elm support the fruit-bearing vine, an image of the rich and the poor as mutually necessary.
- **Similitude 5** (the vineyard and the faithful slave) reworks the Wicked Tenants and the Faithful Servant into a treatise on fasting and on the relation of Son, Spirit, and flesh — with a Christology that later readers found so awkward that Origen and Tertullian both had to address it.
- **Similitude 9** (the tower built of stones) is a fully decoded ecclesiological allegory in which every category of stone corresponds to a category of believer.

The methodological point is decisive: the earliest post-apostolic Christian writer to work extensively with parables treats point-for-point decoding as the normal and expected mode of parabolic discourse. Whatever one thinks of Jülicher, the second century did not agree with him — and it did not have to be taught allegory by Alexandria, because it was already producing allegories in Rome.

7.1.2 The Didache, 1 Clement, and Barnabas

These texts allude to parabolic material without expounding it. The Didache draws on the Two Ways and on eschatological watchfulness (Did. 16, echoing Matt 24–25). The Epistle of Barnabas is important not for parable exegesis but for method: its treatment of the dietary laws and of the 318 servants of Abraham (Barn. 9–10) exhibits a thoroughgoing allegorical technique on Old Testament material, showing that the interpretive habits later applied to the parables were already standard in Christian handling of Scripture generally.

7.1.3 Justin Martyr

Justin (c. 100–165) cites parabolic material from what he calls the "memoirs of the apostles" (ἀπομνημονεύματα τῶν ἀποστόλων). His citations are often harmonised across Matthew and Luke, which makes him a significant early witness to the text — and to the existence of harmonising traditions before Tatian. In *Dialogue with Trypho* 125 he expounds the Sower at length, taking the seed as the word of God and the soils as the varieties of human reception, and connecting the parable to Isa 6 and to the meaning of "Israel". In *1 Apology* 16 he cites the Two Builders. Justin's handling is moderate: he decodes the elements the Gospel itself decodes, and does not go much beyond.

7.1.4 Marcion and his Gospel

Marcion (fl. c. 140) is the reason a great deal of second-century parable exegesis exists at all, since much of it was produced against him. His *Evangelion* — a form of Luke, whether abbreviated by him from canonical Luke or representing an earlier recension, a question reopened by Dieter Roth and Jason BeDuhn and pressed hardest by Matthias Klinghardt — retained a substantial body of Lukan parables, including the Prodigal Son and the Rich Man and Lazarus. Marcion read these within his own frame: the God of the Old Testament is not the Father of Jesus, and the parables that contrast old and new (the patch, the wineskins) are read as programmatic statements of discontinuity.

This is the pivotal second-century controversy for parable interpretation, because it forced the orthodox to develop an explicit theory. If the parables can be made to prove two Gods, then something must govern how parables may be used. Both of the great restraint-doctrines of the pre-Nicene period — Irenaeus's rule of faith and Tertullian's occasion-rule — were forged in this argument.

7.1.5 The Valentinians and Heracleon

Irenaeus reports (*Adv. Haer.* 1.1–1.8) that the Valentinians derived elements of their aeonology directly from parables: the Lost Sheep is Sophia, the hundredth aeon fallen from the Pleroma; the Lost Drachma is the twelfth aeon; the hours in the Labourers in the Vineyard yield the numbers of aeons; the leaven, the mustard seed, and the treasure all become cosmological ciphers. Heracleon, a Valentinian, wrote the first known commentary on a New Testament book (on John), surviving in fragments quoted by Origen — a fact worth pausing on, since it means the first Christian biblical commentator known to us was a "heretic", and the orthodox tradition of commentary developed in response.

Irenaeus's famous image is aimed exactly here (*Adv. Haer.* 1.8.1): the Valentinians take the jewels of a mosaic portraying a king and rearrange them into the image of a dog or a fox, then claim it is the original picture. The complaint is not that they interpret figuratively — Irenaeus does that himself — but that they have no controlling *hypothesis* (ὑπόθεσις) to constrain the rearrangement.

7.1.6 The Gospel of Thomas

Thomas preserves some fourteen parables, of which twelve have Synoptic parallels and two (logia 97, the woman with the broken jar, and 98, the assassin) do not. Thomas's versions are consistently shorter and lack the Synoptic interpretive appendages: Thomas 9 (the Sower) has no allegorical explanation; Thomas 65 (the Tenants) has no Isaiah vineyard frame and no citation of Ps 118; Thomas 64 (the Banquet) ends with a curse on merchants rather than an eschatological application. Whether this brevity is primitive or reductive is the central question of Thomas scholarship. Helmut Koester and Stephen Patterson argued for independent early tradition; Simon Gathercole and Mark Goodacre have argued in detail for dependence on the Synoptics, partly on the basis of distinctively Matthean and Lukan redactional traces in the Coptic. William Schoedel's 1972 study of the Thomas parables remains a useful entry point.

For the present argument, Thomas matters chiefly as evidence that in the second century the parables were already being detached from their Gospel frames and refitted to a different theology — the same operation, formally, that Marcion and the Valentinians performed, and the operation that Irenaeus and Tertullian set out to prohibit.

7.2 Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 130–202): the rule of faith

Irenaeus is the first Christian writer to state an explicit hermeneutical rule for parables, and he states it twice. At *Adv. Haer.* 2.10.1 and again at 2.27.1–3 he lays down that what is clear and unambiguous in Scripture must govern what is figurative, and never the reverse:

> Parables ought not to be adapted to ambiguous expressions. For, if this be not done, both he who explains them will do so without danger, and the parables will receive a like interpretation from all… *(Adv. Haer. 2.27.1, ANF)*

Three features of Irenaeus's practice follow from this.

- **Parables are subordinated to the rule of truth.** The *regula veritatis* — the summary of apostolic teaching received at baptism — supplies the *hypothesis* within which figurative texts are read. This is not a rejection of figurative reading but a constraint on it.
- **Not every detail signifies.** Irenaeus insists (2.27.3) that some things in Scripture we must be content to leave with God. Applied to parables, this cuts directly against the Valentinian practice of assigning a referent to every numeral and every character.
- **The parables prove the unity of the covenants.** Book 4, chapter 36 is the first sustained Christian exposition of a set of parables, and its purpose is anti-Marcionite: the Wicked Tenants, the Two Sons, the Wedding Feast, and the Labourers in the Vineyard are read serially to show that the God who planted the vineyard, sent the servants, and finally sent the Son is one and the same God. The householder of Matt 13:52 who brings out treasure old and new becomes the emblem of the whole argument.

Irenaeus does allegorise. Riemer Roukema observes ("The Good Samaritan in Ancient Christianity," *Vigiliae Christianae* 58 [2004] 56–74) that Irenaeus refers to the Good Samaritan only in passing and without arguing for the Christological identification — which implies he considered it already self-evident by c. 180. So the Samaritan-as-Christ reading is older than our earliest explicit witness to it.

In plain terms: Irenaeus's position is not "no allegory." It is "allegory, but under authority." He accepts that the Samaritan is Christ. What he refuses is the move from a parable's details to a doctrine not otherwise attested — which is precisely how the Valentinians generated their thirty aeons.

7.3 Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–215): the parable as veil

Clement supplies the theoretical justification that Alexandria would build on. In *Stromateis* 5 and 6 he argues that Scripture speaks in enigmas by design: truth is veiled so that it may be sought, and so that it may not be trampled by the unworthy. The parable is thus not a teaching aid but a filter — a doctrine Clement supports from Mark 4:11–12 read at face value, and from a broadly Philonic account of symbolic speech among Egyptians, Pythagoreans, and Hebrews alike.

His treatment of the rich in *Quis dives salvetur* is the best-known application. There Clement reads the demand of Mark 10:21 not as a literal command to divest but as a call to detachment — the first sustained Christian argument that a hard saying of Jesus must be read figuratively for the sake of a workable social ethic. He identifies the Good Samaritan as Christ (§29), continuing the tradition Irenaeus already assumed, and reads the Prodigal's father as God receiving the penitent.

The cost and benefit of Clement's position. The benefit is a serious theory of why figurative speech exists at all. The cost is that the veil-doctrine supplies a general licence: if the surface is a covering, then the interpreter's task is always to go beneath it, and the constraint Irenaeus imposed is weakened.

7.4 Tertullian (c. 155–225): the occasion-rule

Tertullian is the pre-Nicene father whose parable hermeneutic most resembles modern critical practice, and the resemblance is not accidental — both arise from polemical need. In *De Pudicitia* (On Modesty), written in his Montanist period against a Roman bishop's decision to readmit penitent adulterers, Tertullian confronts the use of Luke 15 as a proof-text for restoration. His response is to demand that a parable be read strictly according to the occasion that prompted it:

- The Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin, he argues (*De Pud.* 7–8), were spoken in answer to the Pharisees' complaint that Jesus received sinners. They therefore concern the recovery of the **unbeliever** — the sheep that was never in the fold and the coin that was never in the purse of the church — not the restoration of a baptised Christian who has sinned gravely after baptism.
- The Prodigal Son (*De Pud.* 8–9) belongs to the same setting: the elder brother is the Jew, the younger the Gentile. It is a parable of Gentile inclusion, and cannot be pressed into service as a charter for restoring the lapsed.
- The general rule follows: a parable is answerable to its occasion. Details that merely carry the story — the ring, the robe, the fatted calf — must not be made to bear doctrine.

Tertullian states the governing principle explicitly: we must not stretch a parable beyond the matter it was spoken to address, nor build doctrine on details that serve only the narrative. He is, seventeen centuries early, arguing for the *Sitz im Leben* and against uncontrolled allegory. That he does so in the service of a rigorist penitential discipline most modern readers would reject is one of the standing ironies of the history of exegesis.

The other Tertullianic contribution is *Adversus Marcionem* 4, which walks through Marcion's Gospel of Luke parable by parable — the Two Debtors, the Sower, the Good Samaritan, the Rich Fool, the Great Banquet, the Lost Sheep and Coin, the Prodigal, the Shrewd Steward, the Rich Man and Lazarus, the Unjust Judge, the Pharisee and Tax Collector, the Pounds — demonstrating in each case that the parable presupposes the Creator God of the Old Testament. Book 4 is, incidentally, the single most important witness to the contents of Marcion's text.

On the Rich Man and Lazarus, Tertullian goes further than most: in *De Anima* 7 and 58 he treats the parable as evidence for the corporeality of the soul and for an intermediate state with distinct compartments. This is the beginning of a very long history in which a parable becomes a load-bearing text in eschatology — a use that would be contested from the Reformation onward and is contested still.

7.5 Origen (c. 185–253): the threefold sense

Origen's hermeneutic is set out programmatically in *De Principiis* 4.2–3: Scripture has a body, a soul, and a spirit — a literal, a moral, and a spiritual sense — corresponding to the tripartite anthropology of 1 Thess 5:23. Simple believers are edified by the flesh of Scripture, the more advanced by its soul, the perfect by its spirit. Applied to parables, this generates the most elaborate exegesis of the ante-Nicene period.

The classic instance is *Homilies on Luke* 34, on the Good Samaritan. Origen reports the interpretation of "one of the elders" — significant, because it means he is transmitting a received tradition, not inventing:

> The man going down is Adam; Jerusalem is paradise and Jericho the world; the robbers are the hostile powers; the priest is the Law and the Levite the prophets; the Samaritan is

> Christ; the wounds are disobedience; the beast is the Lord's body; the inn, which receives all who wish to enter, is the Church; the two denarii are the Father and the Son; the innkeeper is the head of the Church; and the Samaritan's promised return is the second coming.

Two things are usually missed about this passage. First, Origen *attributes* it rather than claiming it, and then qualifies it — he says the reading is reasonable and beautiful but should not be applied to every man, and he goes on to give a moral reading in which the hearer is called to be a neighbour by imitation. Second, on the oil and the wine Origen offers the *least* allegorical reading of any ancient commentator, treating them as genuine medicaments and dwelling on their healing properties. The caricature of Origen as an interpreter who dissolves the literal sense entirely does not survive contact with the homilies.

Elsewhere: in the *Commentary on Matthew* 10 he expounds the Treasure, the Pearl, and the Dragnet, taking the field as the Scriptures and the treasure as the meanings hidden in them; the Labourers in the Vineyard become the successive ages of salvation history, with the eleventh hour the present age — an interpretation that passes intact through Gregory the Great into the medieval tradition and is still assumed by Trench in 1841.

7.6 Hippolytus, Cyprian, Novatian, Methodius

Cyprian of Carthage (d. 258) makes the parables load-bearing in ecclesiology and penitential discipline. In the Novatianist controversy over the readmission of the lapsed, the Wheat and the Tares (Matt 13:24–30) becomes the decisive text: the church is a mixed body until the harvest, and premature separation usurps the angels' office. Cyprian applies the Dragnet in the same way. In *De Opere et Eleemosynis* he reads the Sheep and the Goats as making almsgiving constitutive of judgment — the beginning of a reception history that runs through the medieval works of mercy to the modern social gospel.

Methodius of Olympus (d. c. 311), in the *Symposium*, allegorises the Ten Virgins as an encomium on consecrated virginity, the lamps as chastity and the oil as continence. This is the origin of an ascetic reading of Matt 25:1–13 that dominated for a millennium and that has almost entirely disappeared from modern commentary.

Novatian and the **Pseudo-Clementine** literature supply further scattered evidence, but the pattern is by now established.

7.7 What the pre-Nicene period actually held

Synthesising the evidence, five patterns are visible, and they do not form a single position.

Pattern	Principal exponents	Characteristic move	Fate after Nicaea
Christological allegory	Irenaeus, Clement, Origen, (already assumed by c. 180)	The Samaritan is Christ; the vineyard owner is the Father	Becomes the mainstream through Ambrose and Augustine
Rule-of-faith restraint	Irenaeus	Parables may not generate doctrine not otherwise attested	Survives as a principle, weakens as a practice
Occasion-bound minimalism	Tertullian	Read the parable to the situation that prompted it; nothing further	Largely dormant until the Reformation, then Jülicher

Pattern	Principal exponents	Characteristic move	Fate after Nicaea
Multi-level allegory	Clement, Origen	Literal / moral / spiritual senses in ascending order	Expands into the medieval fourfold sense
Ecclesial and disciplinary application	Tertullian, Cyprian, Methodius	Tares and Dragnet for church purity; Prodigal for penance; Ten Virgins for virginity	Becomes the dominant pastoral use for a millennium

Table 10. Five pre-Nicene hermeneutical patterns. The conventional claim that "the fathers allegorised" is true of most of them most of the time, but it obscures the existence of an articulate minimalist tradition in Tertullian and an articulate restraint doctrine in Irenaeus.

The historically important point is that the second and third centuries were arguing about parable method, not merely practising one. The arguments were driven by heresiology — by the need to answer Marcion, Valentinus, and Thomas — and the positions taken were shaped by that polemical context. When the polemical context changed, so did the method.

8. The Long Trajectory: Nicaea to the Present

8.1 The fourth and fifth centuries: consolidation and one fateful reading

8.1.1 The Antiochene counterweight

John Chrysostom's *Homilies on Matthew* represent the Antiochene alternative to Alexandria. Chrysostom does allegorise — he takes the Samaritan as Christ — but his characteristic move is moral and rhetorical rather than cosmological: he asks what the parable requires of the hearer's conduct, and he repeatedly warns against pressing details. His famous rule, that in parables one must not press every element but seek the purpose for which it was composed, is Tertullian's occasion-rule restated in a homiletic key. Theodore of Mopsuestia pressed the Antiochene position further, to the point of a hostility to allegory that later contributed to his condemnation.

8.1.2 Augustine and the full allegory

Augustine's reading of the Good Samaritan in *Quaestiones Evangeliorum* 2.19 is the version that entered Western imagination and stained glass: the man is Adam; Jerusalem the heavenly city; Jericho mortality; the robbers the devil and his angels; the stripping the loss of immortality; the priest and Levite the Old Testament's inability to heal; the Samaritan Christ; the binding of wounds the restraint of sin; the oil the comfort of hope; the wine the exhortation to fervent work; the beast the flesh of the incarnation; the inn the church; the two denarii the two commandments of love or the promises of this life and the next; the innkeeper the Apostle Paul. The scheme is essentially the elders' reading Origen transmitted, elaborated and given Augustine's authority.

The consequential case, however, is Luke 14:23. In the Great Banquet the master tells the servant ἀνάγκασον εἰσελθεῖν, rendered in the Vulgate *compelle intrare*. Augustine, in the Donatist controversy (*Epistles* 93 and 185), used this clause to justify imperial coercion of schismatics — arguing, against his own earlier position, that compulsion which brings a person to truth is an act of love. That single parabolic phrase became the standard scriptural warrant for religious coercion in the Latin West for over a millennium, cited in the Albigensian campaigns, in inquisitorial practice, and in the *Revocation of the Edict of Nantes*. Bayle's *Philosophical Commentary on These Words of Jesus Christ, "Compel Them to Come In"* (1686) is one of the founding texts of modern toleration theory, and it is a book-length refutation of an exegesis of one parable.

This is the clearest single answer to the question of what changed over the millennia. The Greek ἀναγκάζω in a first-century banquet context means to press or urge insistently — the servant must overcome the guests' polite refusal, since an invitation from a patron is not lightly declined. All six modern English versions collated in §6 render it in that softer register: LSB "compel", NIV "compel", ESV "compel", CSB "make", NRSVue "compel", NET "urge". The translational history and the interpretive history came apart, and enormous consequences followed from the gap.

8.1.3 Gregory the Great

Gregory's *Homiliae in Evangelia* (c. 591) standardised parable allegory for the medieval West. His forty homilies work steadily through the Gospel pericopae, and his readings of the Labourers in the Vineyard (the hours as the ages of the world and the ages of a human life), the Great Banquet, the Wedding Garment (charity), and the Ten Virgins became the received exposition. Gregory's work is the

mechanism by which Origen's Alexandrian readings, filtered through Ambrose and Augustine, reached every medieval preacher.

8.2 The medieval period: the quadriga

The fourfold sense — literal, allegorical, tropological (moral), and anagogical (eschatological) — codified in the couplet attributed to Augustine of Dacia (*littera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria…*), gave the parables four simultaneous registers. The *Glossa Ordinaria* supplied the standard marginal apparatus; Aquinas's *Catena Aurea* assembled the patristic readings into a continuous commentary; Bonaventure and the Franciscan tradition developed the moral register in preaching. Henri de Lubac's *Exégèse médiévale* remains the indispensable account.

Two observations. First, the medieval reading is not arbitrary — the quadriga is a disciplined system with rules, and Aquinas insisted (*Summa Theologiae* I q.1 a.10) that all doctrine necessary for faith must be established from the literal sense, which is Irenaeus's restraint doctrine in scholastic dress. Second, the medieval church nevertheless read the parables as an encyclopaedia of doctrine, and the visual culture of the period — the Good Samaritan windows at Chartres, Bourges, and Sens — encodes the Augustinian allegory in glass for populations who could not read.

8.3 The Reformation

Luther rejected allegory in principle with considerable violence — he called his early allegorising "dirt" — while continuing to allegorise in practice when it served the gospel/law distinction. His treatment of the Good Samaritan retains the Christological identification. Calvin was more consistent. In the *Harmony of the Evangelists* he lays down that it is not lawful to seek in parables more than the Lord intended, and that the interpreter should attend to the scope of the passage rather than to its ornaments. Calvin's rule is Tertullian's and Chrysostom's, and it is Jülicher's in embryo, three centuries early.

The Reformation also produced a doctrinal shift with parabolic consequences: the recovery of justification by faith made Luke 18:9–14 (the Pharisee and Tax Collector) and Luke 15 central texts in a way they had not been, and made the Sheep and the Goats (Matt 25:31–46) an interpretive problem, since it appears to condition final judgment on works of mercy. Both traditions of reading — Cyprian's almsgiving reading and the Reformation's faith reading — remain in tension in commentary to this day.

8.4 The nineteenth century and the great turn

Richard Chenevix Trench's *Notes on the Parables of Our Lord* (1841) is the last major English work in the patristic-allegorical mode, and it went through countless editions. It is worth reading precisely because it is the position Jülicher demolished.

Adolf Jülicher's *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* (vol. 1, 1888; vol. 2, 1899) argued that Jesus' parables are not allegories, that each has a single *tertium comparationis*, and that the allegorical explanations in the Gospels themselves — the interpretation of the Sower (Mark 4:13–20) and of the Tares (Matt 13:36–43) — are secondary church productions rather than dominical. The effect was total. Within a generation, every serious commentator worked within Jülicher's frame.

The standing criticisms of Jülicher are three, and all are now widely accepted. (i) He defined parable by a Greek rhetorical model rather than by the Hebrew *māšāl*, which as shown in §2 freely includes decoded allegory. (ii) His single points turned out, on inspection, to be nineteenth-century liberal Protestant moral maxims — Matt 20:1–16 teaches "one salvation for all", Luke 10:25–37 teaches that "acts of love are the highest duty" — so that the method delivered the interpreter's own theology under the appearance of neutrality. (iii) His categorical exclusion of allegory required him to excise as inauthentic a large body of material that has as good a claim to be dominical as anything else in the tradition.

8.5 The twentieth century

Scholar and work	Date	Central claim	What it changed
C. H. Dodd, The Parables of the Kingdom	1935	The parables belong to a concrete historical crisis in Jesus' ministry; the kingdom has already arrived ("realised eschatology")	Relocated the parables from timeless ethics to eschatology
Joachim Jeremias, Die Gleichnisse Jesu	1947 / ET 1963	Form-critical "laws of transformation" allow the recovery of the parables' original setting in Jesus' life from their setting in the early church	Made the double Sitz im Leben standard; supplied the Palestinian-background method
Ernst Fuchs and the New Hermeneutic	1950s–60s	Parables are "language events" that do not describe reality but bring about a new one	Shifted parable study from content to effect
Eta Linnemann, Gleichnisse Jesu	1961	The parable compels the hearer to a decision by co-opting their own judgment	Emphasised the parable as an act rather than a text
Dan Otto Via, The Parables	1967	Parables are autonomous aesthetic objects with tragic and comic structures	Opened literary criticism of the parables
Robert Funk / Amos Wilder	1964–71	The parable is an extended metaphor and therefore irreducible to a paraphrase	Undermined Jülicher's "one point" from the side of literary theory
John Dominic Crossan, In Parables	1973	Parables are paradoxical and subversive; they shatter the hearer's world rather than illustrating a truth	Made "subversion" the dominant descriptor for a generation
Paul Ricoeur	1975	Parable as metaphor achieving a "redescription of reality"	Provided the philosophical account of metaphor the field had lacked
Bernard Brandon Scott, Hear Then the Parable	1989	Full reconstruction of each parable's originating structure against its cultural repertoire	The most thorough application of the literary-critical programme

Table 11. Principal twentieth-century positions.

8.6 The last three decades: three simultaneous corrections

8.6.1 The partial rehabilitation of allegory

Craig Blomberg's *Interpreting the Parables* (1990; 2nd ed. 2012) argued that most parables have as many points as they have main characters — typically two or three — and that limited, controlled allegory is not a corruption but a feature. Klyne Snodgrass's *Stories with Intent* (2008; 2nd ed. 2018) is now the standard reference work; it rejects both the Jülicher exclusion and unlimited allegory, and argues that the parables are "stories with intent" whose Gospel framing is part of the evidence rather than an

obstacle to it. Ruben Zimmermann's *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu* (2007) and *Puzzling the Parables of Jesus* (2015) formalised the abandonment of the single *tertium comparationis*.

8.6.2 The social-scientific and political reading

William Herzog II's *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (1994) read the parables as codifications of the exploitative agrarian economy of Roman Palestine — the Wicked Tenants as a study in absentee landlordism, the Talents as a critique of a rapacious retainer economy in which the third servant is the hero rather than the villain. Ernest van Eck has developed the social-scientific approach systematically in the South African journals *HTS Teologiese Studies* and *Verbum et Ecclesia*. Kenneth Bailey's *Poet and Peasant*, *Through Peasant Eyes*, and *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* argued from Middle Eastern village culture and the Syriac and Arabic versions.

8.6.3 The Jewish-contextual correction

Amy-Jill Levine's *Short Stories by Jesus* (2014) mounted the most direct challenge to the interpretive tradition, on two grounds. First, that Christian parable interpretation has systematically constructed a caricatured Judaism as the parables' foil — the "legalistic" Pharisee, the "ritually scrupulous" priest and Levite who pass by (who are, in the text, given no motive at all), the "harsh" God of the Old Testament against whom the father of the Prodigal is contrasted. Second, that the parables are Jewish stories told to Jewish hearers, and that their first-century Jewish resonances — with rabbinic parallels in the *meshalim* of the Tannaitic literature, and with the Hebrew Bible itself — have been substituted with Christian doctrinal frames. Levine's work has been widely and, for the most part, positively absorbed; the charge that the priest and Levite were avoiding corpse impurity, for instance, is now generally recognised as an inference the text does not support (a priest travelling *down* from Jerusalem has already completed his service).

8.6.4 The reception-historical turn

David Gowler's *The Parables after Jesus: Their Imaginative Receptions across Two Millennia* (2017) treats the interpretive history itself as the object of study, following the parables through Ephrem, Romanos, medieval art, Rembrandt, Frederick Douglass, Flannery O'Connor, and liberation theology. Ulrich Luz's Matthew commentary in the Hermeneia series established *Wirkungsgeschichte* as a normal component of critical commentary. This paper is written within that turn.

8.6.5 The authenticity question

John P. Meier's *Probing the Authenticity of the Parables* (2016), the fifth volume of *A Marginal Jew*, applied the traditional criteria of authenticity strictly and concluded that only four parables can be shown on those criteria to go back to the historical Jesus — the Mustard Seed, the Evil Tenants, the Great Supper, and the Talents. The conclusion has been widely resisted, largely because the criteria themselves are now regarded as unsound. Meier's volume is best read as a *reductio* demonstrating the limits of criteriology rather than as a result.

9. Eight Case Studies

Each case study follows the same sequence: the Greek and its problems; the translation question; the pre-Nicene reading; and what changed.

9.1 The Sower (Mark 4:3–20 par.; Thomas 9)

Text. Mark 4:8 and 4:20 present a preposition variant (ἐν vs εἰς vs ἕν) with the numerals thirty, sixty, and a hundred, affecting whether the yields are stated as ratios or as multiples. The more significant question is the relation of the parable (4:3–9) to its interpretation (4:13–20), which Jülicher and Jeremias both regarded as a secondary allegorising expansion — the vocabulary of 4:14–20 (σπείρεται with abstract subjects, θλῖψις, διωγμός, ἀπάτη τοῦ πλούτου) is closer to early Christian missionary language than to anything else in the Jesus tradition. Thomas 9 preserves the parable without any interpretation, which is often taken to support the secondary hypothesis, though it may equally reflect Thomas's general practice of stripping frames.

Pre-Nicene. Justin expounds it in *Dial.* 125 with the Gospel's own decoding and little more. Irenaeus uses it against the Valentinians, who had taken the four soils as their four classes of humanity. Origen (*Comm. Matt.*) extends the soils to the moral progress of the soul.

What changed. The Sower is unusual in that the Gospel supplies its own allegory, so the interpretive question has never been *whether* to allegorise but whether the supplied allegory is dominical. Dodd and Jeremias read the parable as an assurance of eschatological harvest despite present failure; modern agrarian studies (Payne, Dalman) established that broadcast sowing before ploughing is normal Palestinian practice, removing the older objection that the sower is careless.

9.2 The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37)

Text and translation. The text is stable. The translational cruxes are πλησίον (which renders Hebrew *rēaʿ* at Lev 19:18 LXX and carries covenantal restriction that "neighbour" does not), ἐσπλαγχνίσθη in v. 33, and πανδοχεῖον in v. 34 — a commercial roadside inn, not the guest room (κατάλυμα) of Luke 2:7. Note that Jesus' closing question inverts the lawyer's: the lawyer asks who *is* my neighbour (i.e. who qualifies as an object of my obligation); Jesus asks who *became* (γεγονέναι) a neighbour to the man. The question shifts from classification to action, and no English version can signal that inversion typographically.

Pre-Nicene. The Christological allegory is attested as already traditional by c. 180 (Irenaeus alludes without arguing), stated by Clement (*Quis dives* 29), and transmitted by Origen as the view of "one of the elders" (*Hom. Luc.* 34). Riemer Roukema's study in *Vigiliae Christianae* 58 (2004) is the standard treatment.

What changed. Augustine fixed the allegory in its fullest form; Chartres, Bourges, and Sens put it in glass; Trench still assumes it in 1841. Jülicher classified the parable as a *Beispielerzählung* — an example story with no comparison at all, teaching simply that one should help. That classification held for most of the twentieth century and has since eroded from two directions: literary critics observe that a bare example story would not need a Samaritan, and Jewish-contextual readers (Levine) observe that the shock of the story lies in the identity of the rescuer, which is a metaphorical and not merely exemplary function. Herzog reads it as an indictment of the Jerusalem–Jericho road economy. The Christological

reading, dismissed for a century as a patristic fantasy, has been partially readmitted — not as exegesis of Jesus' intent but as a legitimate figural reading in the church's tradition.

9.3 The Wicked Tenants (Mark 12:1–12 par.; Thomas 65)

Text. Discussed at §5.4 and §5.9. Key points: the Isaianic frame follows the LXX; Matt 21:44 is doubtful; Mark 12:4 contains the hapax ἐκεφαλίωσαν; Thomas 65 lacks the Isaiah frame and the Ps 118 citation entirely, and in some Coptic readings the owner is "a good man", making the tenants' violence purely criminal rather than theologically loaded.

Pre-Nicene. Irenaeus (*Adv. Haer.* 4.36.2) makes this the lead parable in his anti-Marcionite argument: the same lord planted the vineyard, sent the servants, and sent the son, and therefore the God of the prophets is the Father of Christ. This is arguably the single most important pre-Nicene use of any parable, because it is doing structural theological work in the definition of the canon's unity.

What changed. From the fourth century the parable was read as a straightforward supersessionist allegory: the vineyard is taken from Israel and given to the church. That reading was near-universal until the mid-twentieth century. Post-Holocaust scholarship has scrutinised it closely; the Greek of Matt 21:43 says the kingdom will be given to a nation (ἔθνει) producing its fruits, which need not mean a different ethnic body, and Mark 12:9 says only that the *tenants* — the leadership, in the narrative's own framing (Mark 12:12: "they knew he had spoken the parable against them") — will be replaced. Whether the vineyard itself changes hands is precisely what the text leaves open, and the tradition closed.

9.4 The Mustard Seed and the Leaven (Matt 13:31–33 par.; Thomas 20, 96)

Text and translation. Matthew and Luke agree against Mark in ways that suggest a Q version alongside the Markan one. The mustard becomes a δένδρον in Matthew and Luke but a λάχανον (garden herb) with great branches in Mark; the birds nesting in its branches evoke Dan 4:12/21 and Ezek 17:23 and 31:6, imperial-tree imagery. The leaven's ἐνέκρυψεν and σάτα τρία are discussed at §6.3.2.

Pre-Nicene and after. The Valentinians read both as cosmological. Irenaeus and Tertullian resist. From the fourth century onward the standard reading is ecclesiological triumph: the church begins small and fills the world — a reading whose plausibility rose steeply after Constantine and which is, on any account, a post-hoc application. Dodd read the parables as realised eschatology; Crossan and Scott emphasise the shock of comparing the kingdom to a weed and to a corrupting agent, and note that Lev 2:11 excludes leaven from offerings. Nothing in the pre-Nicene sources anticipates that reading.

9.5 The Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32)

Text. The Luke 15:21 bracketed clause (§5.5) is the crux. Note also διεῖλεν αὐτοῖς τὸν βίον in v. 12 — "he divided to them the *living*", not merely the property; and δραμὼν ἐπέπεσεν ἐπὶ τὸν τράχηλον αὐτοῦ in v. 20, where the father's running is the socially undignified act Bailey emphasised.

Pre-Nicene. This parable was at the centre of the most consequential disciplinary controversy of the third century. Callistus of Rome used it to justify readmitting penitent adulterers; Tertullian's *De Pudicitia* 8–9 is a sustained rebuttal, arguing on occasion-grounds that the parable concerns Gentile

inclusion, not post-baptismal restoration. Clement of Alexandria reads the father as God receiving the penitent without such restriction. Both readings are recognisably ancestors of positions still held.

What changed. The Reformation made it the parable of justification by grace. The nineteenth century made it the parable of the fatherhood of God. Jeremias read it, correctly in the view of most, in its Lukan setting as a defence of Jesus' table fellowship with sinners — the elder brother being the parable's actual target, since the story ends without resolving whether he comes in. Levine has criticised the standard Christian reading for constructing the father as a foil to a supposedly harsh Jewish deity, when the father's behaviour has close analogues in rabbinic *meshalim*.

9.6 The Wheat and the Tares (Matt 13:24–30, 36–43; Thomas 57)

Text and translation. ζιζάνια is darnel (*Lolium temulentum*), a grass that mimics wheat until the ear forms and whose grain is toxic when infected with ergot. "Weeds" (NIV, ESV, NRSVue, CSB) loses the whole mechanism: the point is not that weeds are present but that they cannot be told apart in time. "Tares" (LSB) preserves the traditional English but is now opaque. No modern version prints "darnel" in the text; the NET footnotes it.

Pre-Nicene and after. This parable became the charter text of the mixed-body ecclesiology in the Novatianist and later Donatist controversies. Cyprian argued from it against premature separation; Augustine made it the centre of his anti-Donatist ecclesiology (*corpus permixtum*). Its later career is extraordinary: it was the standard argument for toleration in early modern Europe — Roger Williams built *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution* (1644) on it — set against Augustine's *compelle intrare* from Luke 14:23. The two parables were, quite literally, deployed against each other in the seventeenth-century toleration debates.

9.7 The Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31)

Text and translation. The lexical decisions carry unusual doctrinal weight: ᾅδης (v. 23) is Hades, the LXX equivalent of *šəʾôl*, and is not γέεννα; older English versions rendered both "hell", collapsing a distinction the Greek maintains. κόλπος Ἀβραάμ (v. 22) is banquet-reclining imagery, not a place-name. χάσμα μέγα (v. 26) is a great chasm. βασανιζόμενος (v. 23) uses a root whose primary sense is testing by touchstone.

Pre-Nicene. Tertullian (*De Anima* 7, 58) takes the parable as literal topography of the intermediate state and as evidence for the soul's corporeality. Irenaeus (*Adv. Haer.* 2.34.1) uses it to argue that souls retain their form and remember. This is the earliest and clearest case of a parable being used as a source of information about the afterlife rather than as a comparison.

What changed. The literalist use dominated for a millennium and a half and remains popular. Critical exegesis since Jülicher has emphasised (i) that the story draws on a widely attested Egyptian and Jewish folk-tale of reversal in the afterlife, (ii) that the parable's own punchline is in v. 31 — they have Moses and the prophets — making the subject the sufficiency of Scripture rather than the topography of Hades, and (iii) that Luke's frame (16:14, the Pharisees "who were lovers of money") ties it to the Shrewd Steward as part of a single discourse on wealth. Klyne Snodgrass's treatment is the fullest modern discussion.

9.8 The Sheep and the Goats (Matt 25:31–46)

Text and translation. The units at issue are πάντα τὰ ἔθνη (v. 32 — "all the nations" or "all the Gentiles"?), τῶν ἀδελφῶν μου τῶν ἐλαχίστων (v. 40 — "the least of these my brothers", where the referent may be the needy generally, or Christian missionaries, or disciples), and κόλασιν αἰώνιον against ζωὴν αἰώνιον (v. 46). All six English versions render κόλασις as "punishment", though the word's classical sense is corrective pruning; the parallel structure of v. 46 makes the duration of the two states grammatically identical, which is the standard argument against annihilationism from this verse and is a genuine feature of the Greek.

Pre-Nicene and after. Cyprian's *De Opere et Eleemosynis* takes the parable as making almsgiving constitutive of salvation; this reading generated the medieval corporal works of mercy and, through them, an enormous institutional apparatus of hospitals and hospices. The Reformation had to reconcile it with *sola fide* and generally did so by reading the works as evidence rather than ground. The twentieth century saw the "universalist" reading (the least are all the poor) contend with the "exclusivist" reading (the least are Christian missionaries, so the criterion is reception of the gospel messengers) — the latter championed by Jeremias and Lamar Cope, the former by nearly all liberation theology. The Greek does not settle it: ἀδελφός in Matthew usually means a disciple (12:48–50; 18:15; 23:8), which favours the narrower reading, but ἐλάχιστος is not elsewhere a term for missionaries.

10. Synthesis: What Changed, and What Did Not

10.1 The two swings of the pendulum

The history reconstructed above is not a straight line from allegory to sobriety. It is a pendulum that has swung twice.

Era	Dominant method	Controlling concern	Characteristic failure
c. 50–150	Decoded allegory as a live compositional genre (Hermas, the Gospel interpretations themselves)	Instruction and community formation	None yet visible; the genre is doing what māšāl always did
c. 150–250	Contested: Christological allegory (Clement, Origen) vs rule-of-faith restraint (Irenaeus) vs occasion-minimalism (Tertullian)	Heresiology — answering Marcion, Valentinus, Thomas	Parables become weapons; both sides read tendentiously
c. 350–1500	Full allegory, then the quadriga	Doctrinal and pastoral systematisation	Compelle intrare; the parable as a source of independent doctrine
1520–1880	Reformation restraint in principle, allegory in practice	Scriptural sufficiency and the gospel/law distinction	Inconsistency; parables enlisted for confessional positions
1888–1970	Jülicher's one point, then eschatological (Dodd) and form-critical (Jeremias) refinement	Recovery of the historical Jesus behind the Gospels	The single point turns out to be the interpreter's own moral programme
1970–2000	Literary and metaphorical (Via, Funk, Crossan, Scott); then social-scientific (Herzog, Bailey, Van Eck)	The parable as event, and as social critique	Detachment from the Gospel frames; anachronistic politics
2000–present	Contextual pluralism: limited allegory readmitted (Blomberg, Snodgrass, Zimmermann); Jewish context recovered (Levine); reception history as method (Gowler, Luz)	Historical accuracy about first-century Judaism; honesty about the interpreter's location	Too recent to assess

Table 12. Seven interpretive eras. The critical observation is that the current period resembles the second century more than it resembles the nineteenth: both accept that parables can be figurative at multiple points, and both insist on a controlling context — the difference is that the second century's control was the rule of faith and the twenty-first century's is historical reconstruction.

10.2 What stayed constant

- **The parables were never read as ornament.** From Hermas to Levine, every interpretive community has treated them as load-bearing — for doctrine, for discipline, for ethics, or for politics. No period has read them as merely illustrative.
- **Every era has needed a restraint doctrine.** Irenaeus's rule of truth, Tertullian's occasion-rule, Aquinas's literal-sense priority, Calvin's scope-rule, Jülicher's *tertium comparationis*, and Snodgrass's intent-criterion are functionally the same move: a rule about what a parable may not be made to prove. The need for such a rule is a constant of the genre.
- **The Gospel frames have always been the battleground.** Whether the interpretations attached to the Sower and the Tares are dominical, whether Luke's introductions to his parables are original, whether Thomas's frameless versions are earlier — these are the same question in different vocabularies, and it has been live since Marcion.

10.3 What changed most

- **The status of allegory.** Universal (to 1880), forbidden (1888–1990), conditionally readmitted (1990–). This is the largest single reversal in the field.
- **The reference of the Jewish characters.** Pharisees, priests, Levites, and elder brothers functioned for eighteen centuries as ciphers for a caricatured Judaism. That reading has been systematically dismantled since about 1990, and the dismantling has produced substantially different exegesis of Luke 10, 15, and 18.
- **The eschatological frame.** Absent from the moralising nineteenth century, restored decisively by Weiss, Schweitzer, and Dodd, and now assumed by nearly everyone.
- **The class and economy of the parable world.** Landlords, stewards, day-labourers, and debtors were read as neutral narrative furniture until Herzog and Bailey made them the subject. Whether that reading is historically disciplined or politically retrojected remains contested.
- **The use of parables in eschatological doctrine.** Tertullian's literal reading of Luke 16 and the medieval use of Matt 25 built a detailed afterlife topography on parabolic foundations. Critical exegesis has largely withdrawn that foundation; popular preaching has not.

11. Conclusion

The parables of Jesus have been read continuously for nearly two thousand years, and the readings have differed radically. This paper has argued four things.

First, the generic question is prior to the interpretive one. παραβολή in the New Testament is not the Aristotelian comparison but the Septuagintal παραβολή that renders *māšāl*, a category that already includes the proverb, the taunt, the oracle, the riddle, the juridical trap, and the fully decoded allegory of Ezekiel 17. Jülicher's exclusion of allegory was a category error at the level of Hebrew lexicography, and the field has taken a century to say so.

Second, the Greek text of the parables is less settled than English readers are permitted to see. Matt 21:29–31 transmits the Two Sons in logically opposed forms; Matt 21:44 is probably imported from Luke; Luke 15:21 and 19:25 are bracketed; Matt 20:16 and 25:13 carry secondary expansions in the Byzantine tradition. The Old Testament substrate of the parables — Isa 5 in the Tenants, Isa 6 in the Sower's frame, Ps 78 in Matthew's parable-theology — follows the Septuagint against the Masoretic Text at several decisive points, and at Mark 4:12 follows neither, agreeing instead with the Aramaic Targum.

Third, English translation is exegesis. "Weeds" for ζιζάνια removes the mechanism of Matt 13:24–30; "mixed into" for ἐνέκρυψεν removes the concealment; "shameless audacity" for ἀναίδεια forecloses a reading that reverses the parable's subject; "dishonest manager" for οἰκονόμος τῆς ἀδικίας converts a Semitic idiom into a moral verdict. None of these is a mistranslation. Each is a choice, and none of the major versions makes the choice visible to the ordinary reader.

Fourth, and most importantly for the historical question posed, the pre-Nicene church did not hold one view of the parables. It held several, and they were in open conflict. Irenaeus subordinated parables to the rule of truth in order to stop the Valentinians deriving aeons from the Lost Coin. Tertullian confined each parable to its occasion in order to stop Callistus deriving a penitential discipline from the Prodigal Son. Clement and Origen developed a multi-level allegory in order to make the whole of Scripture spiritually productive. All three positions are second- and third-century, all three are pre-Nicene, and only the third became the medieval mainstream. When Jülicher attacked "the allegorical method of the fathers" in 1888, he was attacking one pre-Nicene option that had won, not the pre-Nicene position as such — and the option he championed in its place had itself been articulated, with greater rigour, by Tertullian in about 215.

That is the shape of the change over the millennia: not a fall from clarity into allegory and a modern recovery, but a long argument, conducted with different weapons in each period, over how much a story is permitted to mean.

Appendix A: Greek Terms Glossary

Greek	Transliteration	Gloss	Note
παραβολή	parabolē	comparison, parable, figure, byword	48× in NA28; LXX rendering of māšāl
παροιμία	paroimia	figure of speech, proverb, enigma	4× in John only; LXX title of Proverbs
מָשָׁל	māšāl	proverb, oracle, taunt, riddle, allegory	The controlling Semitic category
חִידָה	ḥîdâ	riddle, dark saying	Paired with māšāl at Ps 78:2; Ezek 17:2
ζιζάνια	zizania	darnel, Lolium temulentum	A wheat-mimic; "tares", "weeds"
μαμωνᾶς	mamōnas	wealth, Mammon	Aramaic loanword; possibly personified
ἀναίδεια	anaideia	shamelessness, want of αἰδώς	Luke 11:8; referent disputed
σπλαγχνίζομαι	splanchnizomai	to be moved in the viscera, to feel compassion	Luke 10:33; 15:20
οἰκονόμος	oikonomos	household manager, steward	Luke 16:1–8
τάλαντον	talanton	a talent (c. 6,000 denarii)	Matt 25; roughly 20 years' wages
μνᾶ	mna	a mina (100 denarii)	Luke 19
ὑπολήνιον	hypolēnion	trough beneath a winepress	Mark 12:1, from LXX Isa 5:2
ᾅδης	hadēs	Hades, the realm of the dead	LXX equivalent of šəʾôl; ≠ γέεννα
κόλασις	kolasis	punishment; originally corrective pruning	Matt 25:46
ἀναγκάζω	anankazō	to compel, to press, to urge insistently	Luke 14:23; Vulgate compelle
ἐλάχιστος	elachistos	least, smallest	Matt 25:40, 45; referent disputed
tertium comparationis	(Latin)	the point of comparison	Jülicher's term for the single point of contact

Appendix B: Parables Attested in Pre-Nicene Sources

Parable	Justin	Irenaeus	Clement Alex.	Tertullian	Origen	Cyprian
The Sower	✓ (Dial. 125)	✓	✓	✓	✓	—
The Wheat and Tares	—	✓	—	✓	✓	✓ (central)
The Mustard Seed	—	✓	✓	✓	✓	—
The Leaven	—	✓	✓	✓	✓	—
The Dragnet	—	✓	✓	—	✓	✓
Treasure / Pearl	—	✓	✓	✓	✓ (Comm. Matt. 10)	—
The Wicked Tenants	—	✓ (AH 4.36.2)	—	✓ (Adv. Marc. 4)	✓	—
The Two Sons	—	✓ (AH 4.36.8)	—	✓	✓	—
Labourers in the Vineyard	—	✓ (AH 4.36.7)	—	✓	✓ (ages of the world)	—
The Wedding Feast / Banquet	—	✓ (AH 4.36.5–6)	✓	✓	✓	✓
The Good Samaritan	—	✓ (in passing)	✓ (Quis dives 29)	✓	✓ (Hom. Luc. 34)	—
The Lost Sheep / Coin	—	✓ (vs Valentinians)	✓ (Paed. 1.9)	✓ (De Pud. 7–8)	✓	—
The Prodigal Son	—	—	✓	✓ (De Pud. 8–9)	✓	—
The Rich Man and Lazarus	—	✓ (AH 2.34.1)	✓	✓ (De Anima 7, 58)	✓	✓
The Unforgiving Servant	—	—	—	✓	✓	✓
The Ten Virgins	—	—	✓	✓	✓	✓
The Talents / Pounds	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
The Sheep and the Goats	—	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓ (De Op. et Eleem.)
The Pharisee and Tax Collector	—	—	✓	✓	✓	✓

Table 13. Indicative attestation. A checkmark indicates substantive use or exposition, not merely a passing allusion; absence of a mark does not prove ignorance of the parable, since much of this literature survives only in fragments and in Latin or Armenian translation. Methodius (Symposium) should be added for the Ten Virgins, and the Shepherd of Hermas for the Tower and the Vineyard/Faithful Slave similitudes.

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