ATYPICAL FEATURES IN THE PARABLES OF JESUS

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I. Introduction

The hearer or reader of a parable expects a story that is believable. Dodd stated this emphatically in reference to Jesus’s parables:

... all is true to nature and to life. Each... story is a perfect picture of something that can be observed in the world of our experience... The... actions of persons in the stories are... either such as anyone would recognize as natural in the circumstances, or, if they are surprising, the point of the parable is that such actions are surprising.

Crossan puts it, “It is a cliché in parable analysis that such stories must be true to life, either to the recurrent actualities or the recognizable possibilities of experience and existence.” Hence Jeremias searched through his vast knowledge of the past to dig out comparable instances for all details of Jesus’ parables, and he used his ingenuity to explain unusual circumstances. He does, however, recognize occasional unexpected circumstances “to indicate where the meaning was to be found” as well as reflecting the oriental way of telling a story.

Nevertheless, some of the parables contain narratives that in certain particulars stretch the imagination. This has been recognized in some recent treatments. Crossan finds a group of servant parables which questions normalcy: bad servants get rewards, good servants get punished. These are thought of as “linguistic attempts to shatter the complacency of one’s world in the name of the kingdom’s advent.” Linnemann says that in the parables we are not shown what everyone does but what someone did once, whether or not other people would do it the same way. She adds, “Several parables contain features which conflict with daily experience. Such features... take their origin from the reality of which the narrator wishes to speak.” But such

4In Parables, 119.
parables hope to avoid opposition by telling their stories so attractively that the listener simply does not think of objections. According to Via, "... the parables themselves, by the use of the surprising and improbable, suggest the impingement of the divine upon human existence." Funk writes, "The language is tied to everyday experience... yet the figure challenges the natural reason of the hearer. Exaggeration and hyperbole heighten the impact, raise the issue set in mundane terms to ultimate seriousness." Ricoeur speaks of "extravagance" in the parables, the "extraordinary in the ordinary." This trait is said to transgress the narrative structure and intensify it in a way that relates it to paradox and hyperbole. These all have as a "qualifier" or common denominator the kingdom of God, which Ricoeur terms a "limit-expression."

The studies referred to above recognize the presence of some atypical elements, but they do not survey the extent and significance of the atypical in the whole corpus. This feature deserves fuller treatment, especially since the tendency has been to overlook it or to disregard it in interpreting the individual parables.

I will attempt to identify the atypical elements in the parables, beginning with the more evident examples; then I will survey the remainder and present my conclusions. Exaggeration and hyperbolic elements will be considered atypical; some of these strain the listener's credulity, yet the incongruities must be acceptable if the parables are to be effective, and this is achieved by their skillful construction. Very rare occurrences, though they may be credible enough, will also be considered atypical. Using extreme contrasts to represent two sides of a picture, while it is a popular didactic device, may involve caricature and become atypical. Sometimes only the conclusion of a parable is unconventional, but this must have shocked the original audience.

II. Primary Examples

The most obvious example is the parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (Matt 20:1-16). It begins with an ordinary scene of the owner of a vineyard hiring day laborers early in the morning. One denarius was the wage agreed on. The scene is repeated at the third hour when the owner sees idle men still in the agora. He hires them and promises a fair wage. (So far there is nothing unusual.) He repeats the action at the sixth and ninth hours. (The listener begins to see a humanitarian, someone unusual.) At the eleventh hour there are still idle men whom no one has offered to employ; he hires them, too, for one hour's work.

9Via says ("Parable and Example Story," Semeia 1 [1974] 124): "It is art that gives us the world and not the world which we use to judge the credibility of art."
It would seem reasonable at midday to hire workers for half a day, but the
ninth hour is included in the same sentence. However, the eleventh hour is
purely gratuitous and unbusinesslike. Still, we have been led along, and a
dialogue with the idle men bases their one hour of employment on their plight
rather than their usefulness. Bultmann has seen that the contrast between the
first and last groups had to be mitigated by intermediate stages: "Otherwise
the story would sound too improbable." \(^{10}\)

Of course the incredible part of the narrative is the equal pay for all. The
employer is not merely unusual: he is unique. The Christian reader, assuming
that the generous employer is a metaphor of God, easily accepts the parable as
revealing another reality, but it is hard to imagine the reaction of the first
listeners. Oesterley said that the parable sets before men "conditions which are
just not those of everyday life" to tell of the relationship between men and
God. \(^{11}\)

My thesis, as illustrated in this parable, is that Jesus deliberately and
cleverly led the listeners along by degrees until they understood that if God's
generosity was to be represented by a man, such a man would be different
from any man ever encountered. Those who insisted that God apply the merit
system are represented by the daylong workers who expected to receive more
than the one-hour workers; they were operating on the basis of worldly
reality.

Since this parable is a clear illustration of the thesis, and since Derrett has
published a thorough study of it defending the story as normal, I will use it as a
test case. He says, "It is usually thought that this parable teaches God's
behaviour by a picture utterly unlike human behaviour; if this were true it
would run contrary to almost every other parable. . . . On the contrary the
story is as lifelike as it is amusing." \(^{12}\)

How does he argue his case? First he explains the social and economic
background. In a pre-contractual "status" economy (which may still have
persisted to some degree) the employer has some responsibilities for the
employees. Especially in Israel all were "neighbors" or "brothers." Derrett
refers to evidence in the Talmud of paying a minimum wage (\(kep\)fel \(batel\))
and suggests that, anyway, paying some of the laborers a minor fraction of a
denarius would have been impractical and seemingly stingy. For the economic
practices of the time Derrett relies on the Talmud. We do not know whether
the particular practice of paying a minimum wage was in force in Jesus' day,
or (if it was) that it equalled a full day's pay. But we know from other
information, including the parable of the Unjust Steward, that business
contracts were common then.

to him, one should not insist that the details of the schedule are those of the original narrative; it
would be natural to expect a series of three. The narrative could have been elaborated later,
exaggerating the effect.

\(^{11}\)W. O. E. Oesterley, *The Gospel Parables in the Light of Their Jewish Background* (New

Secondly, Derrett assumes unusual circumstances. The grapes must have needed harvesting immediately, and it was probably on a Friday; they could not wait until after the Sabbath without serious damage. Here Derrett, using the parable narrative as an outline, developed it into a short story, but the resulting story is more Derrett's than Jesus'. Situations are assumed which the parable does not imply. The employer's actions are not to be explained by transforming the parable into an event. This method is not defensible; the parable loses its effect.

If a parable must be true to life, Derrett has made an admirable attempt, and certainly one learns much from him. But since the story seems to depart from the norm, let us consider the possible significance of that. The employer did not pay according to the usual merit system. What a surprise! It will be similar with God and his kingdom: all who accept the invitation will fare alike; expectations based on merit will not serve to suggest how things will be done then, but it can be shown by a parable in which things are not done as usual.

Once the mind is open to the possible presence of atypical features, one sees some of the other parables in a new light.

The method used in the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) is similar to that of the previous example. The goodness of the father stands out—especially considering the disgraceful conduct of the son—but the Christian reader is ready to accept it as really portraying God. However, as recent writers have commented, "to Jesus' listeners the conduct of the father will hardly have seemed a matter of course!"13 His love "exceeds all ordinary human boundaries."14 His treatment of the prodigal was "better . . . than most peasant fathers would have treated him."15 A conditional acceptance and a period of probation would have been more reasonable.

To divide the estate while the father was living presents legal problems for us, but it shows us at the beginning an unusually generous father. The prodigal's fall is sketched in extreme terms, and at his return we find a series of extravagant actions:16 the father running to meet him and providing robe and shoes, the ring of status and authority and a calf for a banquet. From the conventional point of view the older brother was justified when he objected. (This parallels the objection of the workers in the vineyard.) The listener, however, identifies with the younger brother and approves the father's conduct, but not because it is typical. It is the skillfully developed parable itself that may make it possible to believe in God's joyful forgiveness and overflowing grace. This parable is more effective than the parable of the workers because the father-son relationship provides better understood motivation than the employer-employee relationship, although the actions of

13Linnemann, Jesus, 77.
16Perrin, Rediscovering, 96: "... no doubt the extravagance is deliberate."
the central characters are comparable. Both emphasize that the predominant feature of the kingdom is its king, and both reveal his benevolent character.

The appeal of the above story causes one to overlook an anomaly which is more striking in the preceding parable of the Lost Sheep (Matt 18:12-14; Luke 15:4-7; Gos. Thom. 107). This is the extravagance of joy over finding the one that was lost as compared with an apparent lack of concern over the ninety-nine. The shepherd took a risk in leaving his flock in the wilderness to search for the one missing sheep, and his celebration (with his neighbors: Luke) over one per cent of his flock seems like over-reacting. Surely this introduces a new kind of shepherd, as Montefiore pointed out.

Next we may consider three parables about the growth or expansion of the kingdom. In choosing between the Q version of the Mustard Seed (Luke 13:18-19—Matt 13:31-32 is a conflation) and the (pre-)Marcan version (4:30-32; cf. Gos. Thom. 20), the contrast in size has been a factor. To call the mustard plant a tree, with birds nesting in its branches, as Q does, is quite an exaggeration. In Mark it becomes a large plant, and birds rest in the shade under the branches. Perrin displays the traditional presumption about parables by preferring Mark’s version because its description of the mustard plant is more accurate. Crossan asks, “Why begin with a mustard seed if one intends to end with a tree . . . ?” His answer is, the “large branches” of Mark are more original than the “tree” of Q. But the aim of the hyperbole was to stretch the imagination of the listener so that one can think of the kingdom in adequate dimensions, regardless of its unimpressive present status. Kingsbury notes perceptively, “Matthew, by forging a heightened contrast, indicates how he desires his text to be understood: In terms of the miraculous . . . .” This is also the best interpretation of the intention of Jesus. He selected one of the greatest naturally occurring contrasts and carried it farther, creating an unforgettable hyperbole. The Q version is a true parable (not simile), narrated

17E. F. F. Bishop (“The Parable of the Lost or Wandering Sheep,” ATR 44 [1962] 45) maintained that the shepherd could have missed the one only after counting the flock as it filed into the sheepfold; therefore, the ninety-nine were safe, and probably were left with other shepherds. F. Bussby (“Did a Shepherd Leave Sheep upon the Mountain or in the Desert?” ATR 45 [1963] 93-94) added the conjecture that ‘hills’ (Matt) is a misunderstanding of Aramaic tura/dura, sometimes a Galilean term for a circular walled fold. Here is a typical attempt to dramatize and normalize the parable and claim what it does not provide for: in this case it weakens the parable.


19The claim that the mustard is the smallest seed is lacking in Luke. Dodd, finding it grammatically awkward in Mark, thought that it was probably interpolated by that evangelist (Parables, 153 n. 1). Trees are metaphors for foreign kingdoms in Dan 4:10-12, 20-22; Ezek 31:1-6; and for Israel restored in Ezek 17:22-23. Among other features, they shelter birds (also in Ps 104:12), but the parable does not seem to have these passages in mind. It is best not to think of the mustard “tree” allegorically.


22“The Seed Parables of Jesus,” JBL 92 (1973) 255, 259.

in the past tense,24 about a particular mustard seed which—mirabile dictu—became a tree!

The parable of the Leaven is linked with the Mustard Seed in Q (Matt 13:3; Luke 13:20-21; Gos. Thom. 96). In it, too, size is emphasized: "(no housewife would bake so vast a quantity of meal)."25 The yeast has the ability to leaven an extraordinarily large batch of dough. So the power of the kingdom will permeate extensively.

In the parable of the Sower (Mark 4:3-8; Matt 13:3-8; Luke 8:5-8; Gos. Thom. 9) the fortunes of the seed/sower move downward through a typical three-fold action, then turn upward. The harvest is also described in three ascending amounts, indicating degrees of fertility in the good soil. Possibly the original parable specified three types of good soil, too. This would give it a more symmetrical form. The reduction could have taken place when the parable was allegorized. Allegorizing the soils has made the parable lose its intended effect by calling attention to these four components in the narrative (three negative, one positive) and shifting the emphasis away from the harvest to them. But, as in the other seed parables, the harvest is the climax. Allegorizing the sower and the seed has also diverted the major attention from the harvest.

This harvest is more marvelous than is realized. We should grant the farmer enough common sense to scatter most of his seed in the good soil. He would know where the soil was shallow and where people habitually trampled a path through his field; only an accidental scattering of grain would land in such spots, while the good soil would be sown with most of the seed. The "people of the land" would have understood this. Furthermore, this harvest (30, 60 and 100 fold; Gos. Thom. has 60 and 120) clearly exceeds actual rates of reproduction. Although estimates vary, Jeremias says that 7 1/2 to 10 times is a good harvest.26 The "plot," according to Ricoeur, is "the amazing yield of the seed in the good earth as opposed to the triple failure of the seed on the path, the rocks and among the thorns." The excess in losing is overcome by the excess in winning.27 Thirty-fold is near enough to reality and projects its acceptability on the more excessive numbers which follow. God’s harvest at the realization of the kingdom will be a more productive one than a farmer ever reaped. This is revealed by having this sower reap unrealistic amounts.

It makes a great difference in the effect of the parables of the Mustard Seed and the Sower whether the listener understands them as describing ordinary, natural processes or supernatural results. If the latter, they are not similes.


25Jeremias, Parables, 147. He attributes the enlargement in both parables to the evangelists, but how could they have independently agreed verbally?

26Parables, 150. Linnemann (Jesus, 117, 181 n. 13) tries to be realistic and proposes that the count is not of the total but of the grains on single heads. She could be right; still, this is a most optimistic if possible count.

27"Biblical Hermeneutics," 61.
In the Treasure in the Field and the Pearl of Great Price (Matt 13:44, 46; Gos. Thom. 109, 76) the situations are themselves atypical and characterized by extravagance or hyperbole. Each man, pursuing his occupation, by chance makes a discovery that might happen to only one person in a thousand, once in a lifetime. Finding a treasure (like winning a sweepstake) is only a daydream for most, and one pearl more valuable than the sum of the others gives the story a legendary quality. Each man, by cashing in all of his assets, has just enough to obtain the treasure (the poor workman pays only the price of the field). Chance and circumstance combine in stories that are just possible and which dramatize the supreme value of the kingdom, which can be acquired only by complete investment of the self.28

Eschatological expectations contain threats as well as promises, and there are parables about the judgment and punishment of those who reject God, his messengers and the offered kingdom. In these God is represented by individuals as stern and unyielding as he is benevolent to those whom he rewards in other parables.

The Unmerciful Servant (Matt 18:23-35) is related to Jesus’ theme that forgiving those who trespass against one is prerequisite to receiving divine forgiveness (Matt 6:12, 14-15). The story is both legendary and hyperbolic in type. Folktales delight in kings. The minister’s debt is the maximum amount expressible in ordinary terms (“a myriad of talents”) and conceivable (if at all) in the government business of tax farming. Set off against the small debt owed to the minister (100 denarii), it creates a striking hyperbole and is hardly a life-like situation. The king’s generosity in cancelling the debt is a surprise. (It is on a scale with the forgiving of the prodigal son, but the relationship does not provide the motive.) The minister’s actions of seizing his debtor by the throat and putting him in prison over a relatively insignificant debt (which could not have helped to solve his financial problem) is the opposite swing of the pendulum. These extremes transpose the intent of the parable from the realm of human relationships to those of the human and divine. The parable succeeds dramatically even though it is larger than life.

The Marriage Feast/Great Banquet (Matt 22:1-10, omitting vv 6-7, 12-14; Luke 14:16-24; Gos. Thom. 64) has unexpected developments. The first surprise is the refusal apparently by all of the invited guests. The banquet was prepared for a large number (Matt: “my oxen and my fat calves are killed”), and in the subsequent invitations the servants were ordered to invite everyone on the streets in order to fill the banquet hall. Accordingly, the three (or four: Gos. Thom.) who sent their excuses must represent a large number of others. It would be very strange for everyone to refuse such an invitation; exaggeration has been employed.29 The parable assumes that the fault is the

28Legal justification for acquiring the field is given by Derrett, Law, 3-16. See Linnemann, Jesus, 97-98. Perrin (Rediscovering, 89), defending typicality, remarks that in that much fought-over land “the chance of discovery of valuables . . . was by no means unusual . . . .”

29For a precedent in the Talmudic parable of Bar Ma’yan, see Jeremias (Parables, 178) and a contrary opinion by Linnemann (Jesus, 160-62). Perrin gives a translation of the text (Rediscovering, 111-12).
guests', not the host's.

The second surprise is the issuing of a general invitation throughout the city. The people assembled are such as a great man would not normally have invited. The evangelists may be responsible for characterizing them good and bad (Matthew), or poor, maimed, blind and lame (Luke: cf. his quotations from Isa 61 in chap. 4, and his beatitudes and woes in chap. 6). A typical story about a banquet might have a few of the invited ones send their regrets, and the host might or might not invite others of a similar social status to take their places. But here hyperbole has created a unique occurrence to show that the kingdom will bring about "total reversal: the invited are absent, and the uninvited are present."30

The characters in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) illustrate human relationships instead of the divine-human relation; the action is atypical in a not unlikely situation. When a Samaritan was introduced into the story, the situation was jolted out of normalcy: immediately unfavorable comparisons with the religious elite were unavoidable, and Jewish listeners identifying with the victim would feel repelled by a Samaritan ministering to a fellow Jew.31 Perhaps we may assume that he was unconscious or too desperate ("half dead") to object to being defiled.

The Samaritan persisted: He rendered first aid, transported him on his own beast, got him to bed at an inn and paid the innkeeper for his expenses. Here the Samaritan might have left it to others, or to the injured man himself (now that he had arrived at his destination) to take over the responsibility; he had to depart. But he said to the innkeeper, "Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back" (RSV). He went "the second mile."32

This far the story. What of the concluding dialogue (vv 36-37)? One possibility is that the parable is complete in itself and the concluding dialogue is a Lucan construction dependent on the introduction which he provided (vv 25-29) of the lawyer's questions and the two commandments. Funk and Via take this view.33 The story was told to involve the listeners in it. The Samaritan was a catalytic agent to precipitate a change in their experience. But the way in which he became the agent was to go beyond all expectations in showing

31"... according to rabbinical teaching, no Jew could accept an act of almsgiving or of love from a Samaritan because to do so would delay the redemption of Israel;" Norman Perrin, Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom: Symbol and Metaphor in New Testament Interpretation (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 119.
mercy. Other scholars accept as genuine part or all of vv 36-37, and a few accept the introduction as well. These are all concerned with the meaning of “neighbor;” some see it as a non-metaphorical example story, climaxèd with the command, “Go and do the same!” Whatever solution is accepted, the effectiveness of the parable grows out of the double surprise of a Samaritan hero and his unlimited mercy.

In solutions including the identification and love of neighbor, it is the same extravagant conduct of the hero that makes the concept of neighbor more inclusive and qualifies him as the answer to the question(s). Neighbor is a mutual, not solitary, status. If A is B’s neighbor, B is A’s neighbor, they are neighbors. This Samaritan responded to the victim as to a neighbor: “This man is my neighbor; I must help him.” Thereby he automatically became the victim’s neighbor. With this understanding the answer of v 37a seems appropriate to the introductory question of v 29.

The parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector praying (Luke 18:10-14a) contrasts extreme examples, one of self-righteousness and one of humility. The conclusion was no doubt shocking to the audience and emphasizes the radical reversal to be brought about by God’s judgment and kingdom.

The Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) stands apart from the other parable narratives, since some of the action is in another world where we have no knowledge of what is typical. But in the worldly scene the fortunes of the two main characters are opposite extremes. It is usually pointed out that the reversal of fortunes in the other world—which illustrates the Lucan beatitudes and woes in chap. 6—was without justification and that a Jewish audience would assume that the rich man’s earthly fortune was his reward for a virtuous life. The reversal in the next world was truly a shock, unless the hearer assumed that the rich man was woefully negligent of his neighbor, Lazarus. No virtue on the part of Lazarus is mentioned in explanation of his reward. In the second part of the parable the dialogue implies that the rich man as well as his brothers had not listened to Moses and the prophets. Note how even now he expects to use Lazarus as his servant and messenger boy. Perhaps their treatment after death was not without justification. Uncertainties about the integrity or the authenticity of the parable have frequently been raised, and it has frequently not been included in studies of the parables.

The primary examples make up less than half of the parables numerically, although they include most of the well developed (or better preserved) ones. A review of the remainder will help in assessing the relative importance of the atypical. The interpretation of some of these is complicated by critical problems. Others do not have clearly atypical features.

III. Problematical Examples

In the Wise and Foolish Maidens (Matt 25:1-12, [13]) two aspects may or may not be considered atypical as a story: the midnight arrival of the bridegroom and the exclusion of the unprepared maidens. Jeremias proposed
that Jesus was telling an actual occurrence known to the audience, and he added that modern customs confirm the credibility of the late arrival. 34 Dodd accepted it without a christological interpretation as "a quite realistic story." 35 On the other hand, Linnemann remarked, "In the frequently discussed problem of whether all of the features . . . 'can be included in the picture of an ordinary wedding', it is constantly overlooked that a parable does not have to give a regular instance, but usually describes an abnormal individual case." 36 Nevertheless, she attributes this one to the early church's need to deal with the delayed parousia, 37 as did Montefiore earlier. 38 The exclusion of the foolish maidens would seem harsh in everyday life but typical of Jesus' teachings about the eschatological crisis. The genuineness of these words (vv 11-12) is questioned here by Sherman E. Johnson 39 on the basis that they are a Q saying (Matt 7:22-23; Luke 13:25-27) and give the story a somewhat allegorical effect; yet, Linnemann takes v 12 to be the key verse of the (non-genuine) parable. 40 In conclusion, uncertainty remains as to whether we have here a parable of Jesus and, if so, whether we can consider any of it truly atypical.

The parable of the Talents/Pounds seems more intact in Matthew (25:14-30) than in Luke (19:12-27), which is complicated by hints of Archelaus's trip to Rome. 41 In Matthew there is nothing atypical. The point is qualifying to enter the kingdom ("the joy of your master;" Luke: "cities"). Luke's parable tells of the first servant making one thousand per cent profit, unlike but defended by Derrett as not exceptional. 42 Lane C. McGaughey has introduced a perspective on the parable which would see it as teaching an unconventional message. 43 Judaism, which understood its mission to be preserving the Torah, is represented by the servant who preserves his master's money, safely buried (not carelessly wrapped in a napkin: Luke); accordingly, a Jewish audience would have approved this servant, and the criticism of him as "unprofitable" would have seemed unjustified. Did the parable aim to teach the audience evangelism in place of preservation? McGaughey's interpretation depends on the assumption that the audience would catch the allegorical meaning.

The Friend at Midnight (Luke 11:5-8) tells of an unusual situation—a traveler arriving at midnight, no food in the house. The awakened neighbor's response is somewhat humorous in that he acts contrarily to his feelings. Yet, the story cannot be labeled atypical: a friend can be counted on, even in

34 Parables, 52-53.
35 Parables, 138.
36 Jesus, 190 n. 2.
37 Jesus, 126.
38 Synoptic Gospels, 2. 317.
39 IB 7 (1951) 558.
40 Jesus, 126.
41 Jeremias, Parables, 59.
42 Law, 24.
inconvenient circumstances. The following verses (9-13//Matt 7:7-11) encourage prayer by reference to the typical conduct of a father to his son and state what is implied in the parable above: human considerateness gives confidence in God’s greater considerateness. The expression “(by) how much more,” reasoning from the lesser to the greater, was a favorite rabbinic device which Jesus employed more than once (Luke 12:24, 30; Matt 10:25, the reverse).

Luke 12:35-38 (cf. Mark 13:33-37) relates to the eschatological crisis and contains the atypical feature of the returning Master serving his Watchful Servants. In Luke 17:7-10, however, Jesus rejects this possibility, and the story ends with the “unworthy servants” thankfully waiting on the master at the end of the long day’s work. The unusual scene of a master waiting on his servants has not been accepted as original by most scholars, who consider it an allegorical detail having its origin in Mark 10:45//Matt 20:28//Luke 22:27. The Marcan version of the Doorkeeper is generally preferred. The material is too complex for a firm decision, but we have seen that Jesus is apt to put atypical elements in a parable.

The parable of the Weeds (Matt 13:24-30) may seem an unlikely story and would certainly reflect a rare occasion, but a similar modern incident is cited by Jeremias, and Oesterley refers to Roman laws dealing with the practice. It would be typical to pull up the wild wheat as soon as it becomes distinguishable, unless—as in this case—there was too much of it. Johnson, however, considers it Matthew’s rewriting of Mark’s obscure parable of the Seed Growing Secretly (4:26-29) which it replaces, providing a twin to the simile of the Seine Net (13:47-48), and creating allegorical interpretations for both (vv 36-43 and 49-50).

The parable of the Wicked Husbandmen occurs in the three synoptics and the Gospel of Thomas (Mark 12:1-9; Matt 21:33-41; Luke 20:9-16; Gos. Thom. 65). It has been taken as a parable, an allegory, or a combination of the two. The apparently allegorical elements, which are lacking from Thomas and partly from Luke, may be eliminated. These are:

(1) details of preparing the new vineyard, influenced by Isa 5:2 (LXX): Mark, Matt
(2) the murder of the third slave: Mark only
(3) slaves in the plural, representing OT prophets: Mark, Matt
(4) possibly, the reasoning of the tenants, that they would become heirs: Mark, Matt, Luke
(5) possibly, calling the son ‘beloved’ (Mark, Luke; since he would be heir, it is implied that he is an only son and not unnaturally referred to thus); throwing him out of the vineyard before killing him (Matt), possibly an allegorical reference to Jesus’ death
(6) possibly, killing the tenants: Mark, Matt, Luke
(7) giving the vineyard to others: Mark, Matt, Luke.


Parables, 224.

Gospel Parables, 60.

IB 7, 414; also discussed and rejected by Kingsbury, Matthew 13, 64-65. Dodd does not question it; neither does Crossan (“Seed Parables,” 255, 259).

Jeremias, Parables, 70-77; others similarly.
In the remainder we have this parable (with dubious items in parentheses): A man planted a vineyard, leased it to tenants and went abroad. At three successive harvest times he sent a slave to collect the rents, but the tenants abused each and sent him off empty-handed. He finally sent his son, thinking that they would respect him, but they killed him (scheming in this way to gain possession of the vineyard). What will the owner do? (He will come and kill those tenants.)

Is there a hyperbolic character to this story? The wickedness of the tenants knows no limits. There is disagreement as to whether such a situation could have occurred, especially whether the tenants could have expected to inherit the vineyard after murdering the son, although this part of the story has been questioned and may be secondary. On the other hand, Derrett defends the plausibility of the entire action (with hypothetical expansions), given the Galilean situation. At any rate, the enormity of their evil is shocking. The owner's actions also are extreme. His initial patience is comparable to the indulgence of the prodigal son's father (but his punishment is the ultimate); in real life would a landowner take the law into his own hands?

It seems that this parable, too, uses a pattern of atypical, hyperbolic actions in an otherwise credible narrative. Again, a protagonist who represents God is larger than life. The listeners are told that judgment has been delayed to give them opportunities to reform. (Now their increased wickedness will bring destruction on them.)

Textual variants render uncertain the original form of the parable of the Two Sons (Matt 21:28-32). Derrett uses social conventions in support of the B-text. According to it, the older son ostensibly obeys his father, while the younger at first refuses, each outwardly responding as expected in that social climate. Whether or not the sons' reactions are typical depends on the text adopted.

IV. Negative Examples

The remaining parables seem devoid of atypical features, and it will suffice merely to list them by subject matter with occasional comments.

The coming of the kingdom is depicted in typical imagery in the similes of the Seed Growing Secretly—though it is marvelous—(Mark 4:26-29) and the Budding Fig Tree (Mark 13:28-29; Matt 24:32-33; Luke 21:29-31).

49 Yes, according to Jeremias (Parables, 74-76), Dodd (Parables, 97), Johnson (IB 7, 511). No, according to Gilmour (IB 8, 346). F. C. Grant (IB 7, 836).


51 Law, 289-310. Carlston (Triple Tradition, 183-84) gives a comprehensive discussion of the improbabilities of the reasoning and actions of both parties, including a criticism of Derrett (n. 35, 36). He thinks it unlikely that the parable goes back to Jesus.

52 Gilmour, IB 8, 346.

The coming judgment and its attendant crisis for the individual are portrayed in typical situations in these:

the Seine Net (Matt 13:47-48)
the Burglar (Matt 24:43; Luke 12:39; Gos. Thom. 21b, 103)
the Rich Fool (Luke 12:16-21; Gos. Thom. 63; it makes a strong dramatic impact by the sudden—and hardly typical—death of the man by divine intervention just as he looks forward to a long and comfortable life)
the Faithful Servant (Matt 24:45-51; Luke 12:42-46)
the Barren Fig Tree (Luke 13:6-9; the intercession of the gardener and the consequent extension of time might be considered atypical)
the Narrow Door (Luke 13:24-29; the action is strange, the fault of the “evil doers” is not explained)
the Guest without a Wedding Garment (Matt 22:11-14, which should be excised from the Marriage Feast; it is absent from the parallels in Luke and Gos. Thom.—this fragment without a proper context is difficult to interpret)
Counting the Cost (Luke 14:28-32)
the Dishonest Steward (Luke 16:1-9; Derrett34 provides a background which makes sense of the business transactions involved and shows them to be unexceptional; probably no one has satisfactorily solved the problems involved in vv 8 and 9).

A miscellany is left:

Children at Play (Matt 11:16-19; Luke 7:31-35)
the Return of the Unclean Spirit (Matt 12:43-45; Luke 11:24-26)
Two Debtors (Luke 7:41-43)
the Lost Coin (Luke 15:8-10)
the Unjust Judge (Luke 18:2-8; although this contains nothing atypical, the portrayal of the judge as extremely insensitive heightens the impact of the use of the lesser good to establish the greater).

Other brief figurative statements (e.g., Mark 2:22) are sometimes treated as parables but do not lend themselves to the discussion of this theme. The picturing of the Judgment (Matt 25:31-46) is not a parable in the accepted meaning of the word.

V. Summary and Conclusions

Many of Jesus’ parables contain characters, situations and actions which depart from the norm to a degree not usually recognized. Being aware of this will produce very different interpretations from beginning with the supposition that in the parables everything will be normal.

I have interpreted the atypical features as being Jesus’ usual way of revealing the unworldly character of the coming kingdom of God. This interpretation connects these parables with many assertions elsewhere that the kingdom and its standards are the reverse of the world and its ways. I refer to such teachings as the Beatitudes, the warnings against ambitions to be great or wealthy, and the paradoxes. How could parables limited to everyday

34Law, 50-75.
situations in this world throw adequate light on such a kingdom?

Only in the parable of the Good Samaritan is God or the kingdom not metaphorically represented, but the situation was shocking, and the Samaritan's conduct was uncommonly altruistic; thus it suggested a radically new style of conduct and human relations. Sanders points out that one cannot survive long in this world while practicing such *agapē* and maintains that the parable is valid only if the kingdom of God will come shortly and reward such conduct. But would the audience have thought that a Samaritan's self-denying conduct was motivated by Jewish eschatological expectations, which are not so much as alluded to in the parable (only in the introductory question, v 25)? Altruism is more likely the motivation to be understood.55

The negative examples and some of the problematical group show that Jesus also presented the eschatological crisis and the kingdom in parables with wholly typical elements, although not so frequently. The several other subjects, too, were treated either way or mixed. Nevertheless, the parables with atypical elements are by far the most effective, the most memorable and (I would say) the most characteristic. Jesus' view of the kingdom is presented predominantly in the parables with atypical features, and a failure to recognize this is a handicap to understanding his central message.

I have characterized many atypical features as hyperbolic, and they seem related in style to Jesus' hyperboles outside the parables. The same imagination that opposed the mote to the beam, for example, contrasted the myriad-talent debt to the one hundred denarii debt. Yet, unimaginative readers have tried to put the "camel through the needle's eye" literally, either by turning the former into a rope (Mark 10:25 and parallels in a few ancient MSS) or the latter into a pedestrian gate in the walls of Jerusalem (modern lore); and they present evidence that at times trumpets were sounded when gifts were made at the Temple (Matt 6:2). Such efforts are misguided and the answers irrelevant. A similar approach to the parables considers such features a weakness or evidence of faulty transmission, as when Crossan asks, "Why begin with a mustard seed if one intends to end with a tree?"

The words of Jesus abound in pictures and figures of speech, products of a creative imagination. We should not expect that his parables would be devoid of these features.

Finally, we must always remember that Jesus narrated the parables orally. Awareness of the atypical features strongly suggests a style of delivery appropriate to their contents. Today, intoned from the Holy Bible on a church lectern or approached analytically in the classroom, their strangeness is not felt. For what it may be worth, I suggest that when Jesus spoke of hiring workmen at the eleventh hour, of a mustard seed that grew into a tree, of a farmer reaping a hundred-fold, of a Samaritan offering to repay "whatever more you spend" on a Jewish stranger, he made use of the actors' skills to convince his audiences. Otherwise, the atypical features might not have been accepted at the first hearing, to be remembered and repeated later.

55 *Ethics*, 8-9.