

be easier explained if we could suppose the MS. or MSS. on which LXX. is founded carried early to Egypt." ¹

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CRITICISM AND THE PARABLES.

II.

THE INTERPRETATION OF THE PARABLES.

THE first complete parable in the gospels is followed by the words, "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear." We could not be told more plainly that parable is an utterance in which more is meant than meets the ear, a picture which has to be contemplated not only by the outer but the inner eye. Yet in spite of this a great conflict has raged round the question whether the parables need any interpretation whatever. They are illustrations, it has been urged, and to suppose that they need themselves to be explained is as much as to say that they have failed of their purpose. They are meant to throw light upon other things, and to assume that they are dark sayings which need to be themselves illumined by interpretations is worse than absurd. This is so certain to some scholars that on the strength of it they deny the genuineness of the specimen interpretations given in the gospels themselves: it is not Jesus, they say, to whom we owe the interpretations of the Sower and the Tares, but the evangelist or the church; and these interpretations only show that the evangelist or the church had failed completely to under-

¹ *Hastings' Dictionary of the Bible*, ii. p. 575; cp. Briggs' *General Introduction to the Study of Holy Scripture*, p. 189: "The books of Samuel and Jeremiah differ in the Greek so very greatly from the Hebrew traditional text that we must conclude that they were translated from manuscripts which were at an early date independent of Palestinian manuscripts." It is not credible that any Jewish community had MSS. of Samuel or Jeremiah before it had MSS. of the Law.

stand the Master. They had perverted the parable into allegory, and then established from point to point a mechanical parallelism between the natural and the spiritual which was remote from Jesus' thought. It is only when we set such interpretations aside, and recognise the teaching of the parable in one self-evidencing illustration, that we do justice alike to the spiritual insight and the poetic genius of the great Teacher. It is inept to say, The seed is the word, the Sower is the Son of Man, the thorns are the cares of this life, and so on ; the one lesson of the Sower is that just as the future of the seed depends on the soil, so does that of the gospel on the heart into which the message of it falls.

It is easy to be too peremptory in such matters. There is, no doubt, a sense in which the parables need no explanation. The story they tell is intelligible enough. All that meets the ear is perfectly plain, and was no doubt perfectly understood from the beginning. But the question is about what does not meet the ear. A man may understand what the parable bears on its face, but not understand that it is a parable. This was the case of David, as Heinrici points out, with Nathan's parable, the only genuine parable the Old Testament contains. He understood every word Nathan said, but he did not understand in the least what he was talking about. It is so with many parabolic lessons. A child understands the fable of the fox and the lamb thoroughly, but it does not understand that it *is* a fable : it does not know that what inspired it and what it is designed to convey is the cynical unscrupulousness of human beings when they have others at their mercy. The parables are illustrations of this kind—genuine illustrations, yet requiring a key, or at least a hint as to the direction in which the application lies. Sometimes the evangelists or the speaker supply the hint in connexion with the parable.

Thus when Matthew rounds off the expulsion of the guest without the wedding garment in the words, "For many are called, but few chosen"; or when he closes the parable of the Ten Virgins with the warning, "Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour," he gives a sufficient key to the meaning. In Luke we often find something similar. Thus the parables of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin and the Lost Son are prefaced by a statement which bids us read them as Jesus' defence of His own conduct in receiving sinners and eating with them. The lesson of the importunate widow is plainly said to be that men ought always to pray and not to faint. Similarly the Pharisee and the Publican at prayer illustrate the truth which is stated in so many words, that every one who exalts himself shall be humbled, while he who humbles himself shall be exalted. These and other examples show that from the very beginning the parable was felt not to be self-explanatory: the hearer or reader was at least the better of having some hint of its bearing supplied to him. The Old Testament antecedents of the word and the thing are in agreement with this view. The first sentence in the book of Proverbs ($\lambda\psi\eta$ is = *παραβολή*) combines *παραβολή*, *σκοτεινὸς λόγος*, *ρήσεις σοφῶν* and *αἰνίγματα* as more or less parallel. Interpretation, therefore, is in some sense requisite, and the only question is on what principle it should be given or into what detail it should go.

Before taking up this question, however, it will be proper to advert to the passage in the gospels which has been most appealed to by those who question the whole idea of interpreting the parables as the evangelists interpreted them—I mean the passage in Mark iv. 10-12. "And when He was alone, those who were about Him with the twelve asked Him about the parables. And He said to them, To you has been given the mystery of

the Kingdom of God, but to them, the outsiders, everything remains parabolic, that seeing they may see and not perceive, and hearing may hear and not understand, lest perchance they should turn and be forgiven." Surely, it is said, this is an obviously impossible theory. Jesus did not speak the parables to hide the truth, but to illumine it—not to veil the laws of the Kingdom, but to reveal them. He did not speak them to prevent conversion and forgiveness, but to lead men to repentance and all the blessings of the Kingdom. The very evangelist who puts this monstrous saying into Jesus' lips represents him more truly in the same chapter as carefully studying the interests of the people in this peculiar kind of teaching: "with many such parables He spake the word unto them as they were able to hear it." The real explanation of the terrible words here ascribed to Jesus about the aim of His teaching in parables is that the evangelist, who was a companion of Paul, has carried back to the Lord Himself a doctrine with which the apostle explained one of the dark things in his own experience. That dark thing was Israel's unbelief. Israel did not believe in the gospel. Why? Because a judgment of God darkened their eyes and hardened their hearts to the truth. That which was in its own nature a vehicle of blessing became for their sins a curse to them. It became so in God's sovereign providence—not without His will, nor against it, but in accordance with it. This sovereign will or providence of God is here represented as finding its instrument in the parables of Jesus: Jesus speaks His parables, in which, as we have seen, more is meant than meets the ear, not to bring this something more to the consciousness of his hearers, and so lead them to the truth, but to keep it behind a veil, and so to baffle their understandings and shut them up to their unhappy fate. This strange conception of the purpose

with which Jesus taught in parables is all of a piece with the idea that the parables are dark sayings which need interpretation, and the one is just as false as the other.

This mode of treating Mark iv. 10-12 has now become almost a tradition of criticism, a theory about which no questions are to be asked, but I venture still to think it artificial, prosaic, and gratuitous. If the words of Jesus are read in the legal and literal fashion which this interpretation requires, it is no doubt inconceivable that He should have spoken them. But it would have been just as inconceivable to the evangelist as it is to us : if we would not put into the lips of Jesus what is [morally monstrous and incredible, neither, we may be confident, would he. The natural inference is that this legal and literal interpretation is wrong ; and we are all the more confident that it is wrong when we consider that an interpretation in consonance with the passage of Isaiah here quoted is at once in keeping with the spirit of Jesus, and with the tone of the first great parable, the Sower, to which the words are appended. The story of Isaiah's call, as its place in his book shows, was not written till he had spent some years in his prophetic ministry, and it is in the light of his experience of these years that he looks back on his call and its import. It is as if he said, "What did God mean when He sent me to this people ? What was I to do ?" The answer is not to be taken as a piece of predestinarian theology, but as an utterance of pathetic irony, learned in sad and disappointing experience. "It must have been to blind their eyes and harden their hearts, for that is all that has come of it." This is the key to the words of Jesus here. He also has disappointing experiences behind Him. They are reflected in what He tells of the seed which fell by the wayside, and on the rocky ground, and among the thorns. And when, on occasion of this new style of teaching,

the disciples ask Him what He means by it, and He cannot help being surprised by their want of intelligence, it is in the same tone of pathetic irony, with the same foreboding, that all His efforts to enlighten and win the multitudes will be vain, that He answers, "to blind their eyes and dull their ears lest they should turn and be forgiven." I can see nothing incredible in this ; on the contrary, there is something profoundly true and moving in the idea that the soul-travail of the greatest of the prophets was sympathetically known to the Lord. They could speak their experience in the same words—not the words of a bewildered dogmatist, who has lost contact with reality, but the words of baffled yet persistent and unabated love.¹

We do not admit, therefore, that the parables were meant literally to blind the people's eyes or to harden their hearts, or that the evangelist thought so : they were meant to enlighten and to charm, and the evangelist understood that as well as any modern scholar. But he understood also, probably in part from his experience as a catechist, that they needed interpretation : there were people on whom they were thrown away, unless a key was supplied along with them. No doubt Jesus had had the same experience before Him, and it is natural to suppose that it is to this we owe both such summary applications of parables as have been already quoted, and such full explanations as are given of the Sower and of the Tares in the field. The two latter have been the object of specially determined assaults. The interpretations of them which the evangelists supply do not (it is alleged) treat the parables of Jesus as parables, but as allegories, and in doing so they degrade them. The interpretations miss the main point, and they lead to infinite confusion and irrelevance.

¹ That there is a more dogmatic look at the same facts in Paul need not be questioned, but even Paul's dogmas are touched with emotion.

The parable of the sower, for example, needs no interpretation. Its one main lesson, according to J. Weiss—that success, though limited and achieved only through many disappointments, is sure—does not need to be pointed out ; and as for the other things discovered in it, they are anything but convincing. Why, for instance, says this scholar, should not the birds of the air which snatch away the seed be compared to the cares and sorrows of the world instead of to Satan, or the thorns to sloth and self-righteousness instead of to the cares of this world ? I think any experienced preacher or pastor could state an excellent case for the gospel interpretation against these suggested alternatives, but this is not the main point at issue. The main point is whether there should be any interpretation of such features at all ; or, in other words, whether it is ever admissible to recognize allegory or allegorical elements in what we usually call the parables.

This is a question on which much rigour and vigour have been expended, and on which it is more than probable that common sense will have the last word in spite of both. No doubt parable and allegory can be distinguished in a treatise on rhetoric. What a parable tells has an existence and a meaning of its own, quite apart from its parabolic application. There is such a being as the sower, for example, and he has the experiences of the one whose story is told by Jesus, quite apart from the significance of this story as illustrating something about the Kingdom of God. Although there were no such thing as a Kingdom of God, the Sower would go out to sow, and this is what would happen. When you come to interpret, all you can assert is, that as things go in the one case, so they will in the other ; as the natural crop varies with the natural soil, so will the spiritual crop with the spiritual soil. To find parallelism or equivalence not merely in the relations of

things, or in the law of the case, but in the things themselves on the two sides—e.g. to say the birds mean Satan, or that the thorns mean cares, or that the rocky soil means a shallow nature—is to lapse into pure arbitrariness; anything at this rate can mean anything; there is no principle of interpretation at all. So much for parable. With allegory it is quite different. Take a genuine and unmistakable allegory like the *Pilgrim's Progress*. It has not the twofoldness of a parabolic story like the Sower. It has not a surface meaning *and* a spiritual meaning: its spiritual meaning is the only one. This man and his journey do not exist independently of Bunyan's creation of them, as the sower on the Galilean hillside existed and had all the experiences of the parable independently of Jesus' use of him: on the contrary, he has no existence at all except through Bunyan's imagination. He is not found, or observed, but invented; and the allegorist who freely produces him produces him at every point to suit his purpose. Every detail here has a meaning, because it was the meaning in the author's mind which brought the detail into being. An interpreter is essential, and is indeed a character in the allegory itself. This is the broad distinction between parable and allegory. Any one can see it, and probably it is true to say that artistically judged parable is the finer and more poetic form, the expression of the purer and more penetrating genius, and that we should be careful not to degrade it to the inferior type. But this does not settle the question whether what we are accustomed to call parables in the gospels are parables in this strict sense, or allegories in the same strictness, or whether some are one and some the other, while some blend features of both.

It is certainly opposed to that rigorous distinction that the one Old Testament word to which parable corresponds,

viz. מִשְׁלַּל, is used to describe figurative speeches of various kinds. The Old Testament contains fables, like Jotham's story of the trees choosing a king—which is called a parable in the chapter headings of the Authorised Version—parables, like Nathan's of the poor man and his one ewe lamb—allegories like those in Psalm lxxx. and in Ezekiel, at which the prophet's contemporaries mocked; and we have no right to say beforehand that a form of illustration used by psalmists and prophets could not have been used by Jesus. Fiebig tells us, as the result of his examination of Jewish parables, that they are as a rule parables with an admixture of allegory. Such parables, he points out, are easier to make and to apply than *pure* parables, and therefore more effective with hearers. In the Jewish books, too, they are usually accompanied with a full interpretation. We need not be astonished if something similar to this should prove true of the parables of Jesus. The gospels represent Him to us as looking round for illustrations. "How shall we compare the Kingdom of God? or in what parable shall we represent it?" As He looked abroad on the world and the analogy which He sought flashed upon His mind, can we not imagine Him becoming conscious of subordinate analogies within some larger one, and letting these work themselves out in some detail in his mind—a process which would almost inevitably lead to such a degree of allegorising or to the admission of such more or less allegorical traits as have been attacked in the parable of the Sower? Jesus did not conceive or speak the parables to provide illustrations for a text-book of rhetoric, nor even to indulge His delight in literary art; He had nothing in view but the practical purpose of making His message more intelligible to men; and if a certain alloy of allegory made His illustration more palpable and manageable to the common mind, we have no reason to

think that aesthetic scruples would make Him hesitate to use it. This being so, instead of rewriting the parables before we interpret them, as some scholars would do, in order to eliminate the allegorical elements, I feel it quite safe to take them as they stand. All we must take care of is that we do not, in interpreting any particular detail allegorically, destroy the unity of the parable, or introduce incongruous or inconsistent ideas which mar the general effect. The interpretation of the Sower which is given in the gospels conforms to this condition. The broad lesson is not lost in the details, but reinforced; and the fact that so many details can be allegorically interpreted in consistency with the broad parabolic import of the whole is not a defect: it adds to the impressiveness and felicity of the parable. No more precise rule than this can be given for interpretation: the reader must have a trained or an instinctive sense for the kind of matter with which he is dealing. The mean which constitutes virtue must be defined, Aristotle tells us, as the wise man would define it; and we get to this *impasse* in looking for the true interpretation of the parables. They must be read, not as the professor of rhetoric and its definitions, nor as the pedant or the prig, nor as the man who is bound to be original, would read them, but *ὡς ἂν ὁ φρόνιμος* would read.

It is a little embarrassing, after such a preamble, to submit some observations on particular parables and their interpretation, but it is the only way in which the rule just laid down can be illustrated and proved. I start with one of the simplest of the parables—the mustard seed. “How shall we liken the Kingdom of God? or in what parable shall we set it forth? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which when it is sown upon the earth, though it be less than all the seeds that are upon the earth, yet when

it is sown groweth up, and becometh greater than all the herbs, and putteth out great branches : so that the birds of the heaven can lodge under the shadow thereof." This parable, it may fairly be said, is so simple that it needs no interpretation : it illustrates with unmistakable clearness a single truth—the growth of the Kingdom of God from a small beginning to an unimagined greatness. But what are we to say of the last clause—"so that the birds of the heaven can lodge under the shadow thereof" ? Is it permissible to interpret this allegorically, and to say that it prophesies the coming of men or of nations under the protection of the Kingdom of God, so as to share in its blessings ? or is it just a spontaneous but otherwise purposeless expansion of the picture of the tree, to which no separate significance is to be attached ? I cannot doubt that the first alternative is the right one. No doubt it introduces an allegorical trait into what would otherwise be a pure parable. But there is no law in the nature of things against this, and in the case in hand there are two considerations which support it. One is that the clause in question is expressed in Biblical words (Dan. iv. 12, 21), in which the allegorical use is unmistakable. The other is, that so far from conflicting with the broad lesson of the parable—the surprising growth of the Kingdom of God—the introduction of this allegorical trait, and its interpretation as such, confirm that lesson. It is not inconsistent with the future expansion of the Kingdom, but an illustration of it, that the nations find a home under its shadow ; and accordingly the allegorising clause vindicates itself.

Much more difficult is the case of the short parable which is found in Mark alone, and fills in his gospel the place which is taken in Matthew by the Tares and the Wheat. "So is the Kingdom of God, as if a man should cast seed

upon the earth ; and should sleep and rise night and day, and the seed should spring up and grow, he knoweth not how. The earth beareth fruit of herself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear. But when the fruit is ripe, straightway he putteth forth the sickle, because the harvest is come." If we read this as a parable in which one analogy is presented between the natural and the spiritual, what is the analogy in question ? Is it this—As the seed passes, without human interference, through the natural and necessary stages of its growth till it stands ripe in the ear, so the Kingdom of God passes, without human interference, under the care of God alone, from its appearance in germ on to maturity ? This is how it is read by many, and read in this sense it can be applied to the coming of the Kingdom on greater or smaller scenes—in humanity as a whole, in particular nations, in individual souls. Dr. Bruce had a peculiar enthusiasm for this parable, and found in it the doctrine of progressive sanctification which he believed to be wanting in Paul. But if this one broad lesson were all—that as in the natural, so in the spiritual world, there is a law of development with which we cannot interfere, so that once the seed is sown our whole duty is to wait on God—if this one broad lesson were all, why did not the parable end with the words, " then the full corn in the ear " ? Why was the closing sentence added, " But when the fruit is ripe, straightway he putteth forth the sickle, because the harvest is come " ? This question has been differently answered by different scholars. Some would say, it has been added by mistake. It is an allegorizing trait, due to the evangelist ; it drags in the idea of the last judgment as the harvest, as in the parable of the tares, and in so doing it distorts and degrades the beautiful parable of Jesus ; the simple and obvious course is to strike it out. Others, however, take a precisely

opposite view. Holding a purely eschatological view of the Kingdom of God, they find here a confirmation of it. The question which this parable answers, according to such interpreters, is not *How* does the Kingdom of God come, but *when* does it come? and the answer is not, "It comes through a process of development, analogous to that which we see in nature," but "It comes the very instant God's time has come." It is not we who bring it; it is not Jesus who brings it; God brings it Himself, just as the earth brings forth fruit of itself; all we have to do is to wait on Him, and we may be sure that when the proper time comes there will not be a moment's delay; *straightway* He putteth forth the sickle. On this view the last sentence is the only one which has real importance. One may surely believe with a good conscience that both of these interpretations are wrong. The last verse, which the purely parabolic interpretation would strike out, is in effect precisely like the clause in the parable of the mustard seed about the birds of heaven taking shelter under the shadow. The solemn tone and scriptural language—for here the speaker borrows from Joel as in the other parable from Daniel—are purposely employed to suggest that more than an ordinary growth and an ordinary harvest are meant. The interpretation, so to speak, is breaking through the parabolic veil: or, which is the same thing, the parable at this point is passing insensibly into allegory. But there is no reason, it must be said again, in the nature of things, why this should not be; and there is no inconsistency in Jesus' teaching at one and the same time that there is a process in the coming of the Kingdom which we cannot reverse nor accelerate, and that when the process has reached a certain stage there is an instant crisis. The purely eschatological interpretation fails to do justice to the language used. On the face of it the parable teaches,

not only that there will be no delay when God's time comes, and that the coming of that time is in God's hand ; it teaches also, that God's time is determined by and disclosed in the culmination of a process of development, on which all the emphasis in the parable falls. To ignore this, as the eschatologists do, is to ignore the most conspicuous feature in the picture. It is equally illegitimate to play off the process against the crisis—as they do, who would omit *v.* 29 ; or to play off the crisis against the process with the eschatologists, who make the vivid features of *v.* 28 meaningless ; there is nothing inconsistent in doing justice to both in one and the same utterance.

I will now take an illustration from Luke, and one in which the difficulty of interpretation has been universally felt—the unjust steward (Luke xvi. 1–9). Every one will admit that this is a parable, not an allegory. We are not to say, “the Master is so and so ; the steward is so and so ; the goods, the debtors, the arrangements between the debtors and the steward, are so and so.” On the contrary, the parable itself tells us that the steward is presented to us as an example in one point only ; the Lord commended the unjust steward *because he did prudently*. He looked ahead, and made provision for the future. How he did it is not so much to the point ; the main matter is that he did not stumble blindly on and land himself in a situation where he would not have a roof over his head. In that he is an example to the children of light. Prudence may not be a characteristically Christian virtue, but if there is a future to look forward to, every man who looks forward sets so far a good example. If this had been all, there would be no real difficulty, and the parable might have ended at *v.* 8. The difficulty begins at *v.* 9, where the moral of the story seems to be appended to it by our Lord Himself. “ And I say unto you,

make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness, that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal tents." Here it is not only prudence that is commended, but a particular exercise of prudence analogous in some way to that which had been manifested by the unjust steward. He provided for his future by making free with his master's money ; he bought the goodwill of his master's debtors at his master's expense, and so secured a home for himself against the day of his dismissal. We must not take it too literally if Jesus says to His disciples, "Go you and do the same." It would have been absurd to add, "of course *mutatis mutandis*." What we have here is not the language of a person commending dishonesty, but of a person who is indifferent and even scornful about money, yet believes it can be piously and profitably used. It is quite clear from the verses which follow (*vv.* 10-12) that the proper use of money is the subject in the evangelist's mind, and that the lesson of the unjust steward, as he understood it, is a lesson on this subject. He speaks of money, indeed, or represents Jesus as speaking of it, in *v.* 12, under the Stoic designation of τὸ ἀλλότριον, that which is alien, which does not belong to a man's true nature, the lack of which does not affect what he is ; and this tone of superiority, mingled with the feeling that wealth in general belongs to a region which is never free from sin ("the mammon of unrighteousness") pervades the passage. But worthless or worse as money may be in itself, there is one profitable investment of it for a Christian—its investment in charity. This is the way to provide for the future, as the unjust steward provided ; this is the way to make friends for ourselves, who, when our wealth fails, or when we ourselves die, will welcome us into the eternal world. The man who dies without having spent anything in charity dies without having made any provision for the future ;

he passes into a world in which he will not have a single friend. It is quite possible, of course, to read this so prosaically or so legally that it ceases to be true, and even becomes morally monstrous; but there is no necessity to read it so. If it is read in the mood in which it was spoken—read as the glowing utterance of a spirit which was indifferent or contemptuous about money, but enthusiastic about man—it has in the highest degree the practical and appealing truth with which alone such a spirit is concerned. When the Pharisees who were lovers of money heard this strange doctrine, they mocked the Speaker (*v.* 14), and the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus is His answer to their derision. It is given as a case in point. The Rich Man, self-sufficient as he seemed, was really more in need of a friend than Lazarus. He was on his way to a world in which he would have given anything to have Lazarus as his friend, but when he got there, it was too late. He had his chance to make a friend of him while he lay at his gate; a very small investment in charity might have made an infinite difference to his own future. But the rich man paid no attention to Lazarus; the mammon of unrighteousness was more to him than any appeal of humanity; and he found himself in the eternal world a man without a friend. It is possible, I repeat, for a grammarian or a legalist to find that all this is immoral or unreal; but for the intelligent man who reads with his conscience it is profoundly and solemnly true. Perhaps for the exegete one of the main lessons of the unjust steward and the rich man and Lazarus is that in the interpretation of live words we need to take account not only of formal principles of hermeneutics, but of the moral temperature at which the words were spoken.

The unjust steward is a parable in the strict sense, in which a daring approach to allegory is made at a single

point in the interpretation—an approach which can be vindicated, however, in some such way as has just been suggested. There are other parables in Luke from which allegorising must be kept even more strictly apart. This applies particularly to those which give lessons on prayer. Thus in the story of the man who came at midnight to ask three loaves from his friend, we must not say that the friend who has gone to bed with his children represents God: the argument is not, “As this man behaves in the story, so will God behave”; but, “If even a man, with so many reasons for being disobliging, can be won by importunity, much more will God lend a ready ear to the cry of His children.” The moral indeed is put in very much this form by our Lord Himself in the parable of the importunate widow and the unjust judge. Yet here it is difficult to avoid feeling that the wronged widow represents the persecuted church, and that her vindication is to take place at the ardently prayed for and long deferred but sure coming of the Messiah. This is undoubtedly how the evangelist read it, and he recognised in so doing a strongly allegorical element; but unmistakable as this element is, it is confined. The widow may represent the church, but the judge does not represent God, though it is God who is to do the church justice. In spite of the one allegorical feature, the argument of the whole is, “If even the unconscionable judge could be moved by importunity, much more will God see justice done to His chosen who cry to Him day and night.” Cases like these show the importance, on one hand, of not denying an allegorical feature if it is manifestly present; and on the other, of not allowing the presence of such a feature to disturb the balance or proportion of the whole. A sense of the practical interest of the speaker, of the application which is to be made of the words according to the context in which they

are presented, and of the flexibility of all these illustrative modes of teaching, will usually keep one straight. It is quite gratuitous, in the interest of an arbitrary theory, to eliminate everything allegorical, and to reconstruct our texts as pure parables; but it is just as gratuitous, and not less misleading, to carry allegorising interpretation to a point which destroys the one lesson every parable is designed to teach, or which raises questions to which nothing in the text supplies any answer.

I shall conclude with two observations which illustrate further the value of unity and consistency in interpretation, both as setting a limit to allegorising and as preserving the true impression which a parable is designed to make. The first concerns the parable of the Ten Virgins. This, as it stands in Matthew, is one of a pair of parables connected with the Parousia or coming of the Messiah. The moral is the same in both, but the motive is different. Watch, says the first (the parable of the faithful and unfaithful servants in Matthew xxiv. 44-51), for the advent may be *sooner* than you expect, and surprise you in disorder; watch, says the second (the parable of the Virgins in Matthew xxv. 1-13), for the advent may be *later* than you expect, and surprise you asleep. That this is the main impression to be left—this, at least, and the solemn truth that there is such a thing possible in the mind of Jesus as the idea of an irreparable loss, a final exclusion—cannot be disputed; and it ought not to be blurred or deadened by an interpreter looking for subordinate lessons in this or that feature of the picture. The parable of the Virgins tempts to allegorising almost more than any other, yet there is not one in which it proves so impracticable. How easy it is to say, as no doubt the evangelist would have said, that the Bridegroom is Christ. But when Christ is the bridegroom, the church is the bride; and here the

church is not the bride, but the bride's maids, and the allegory collapses at once. How tempting, too, but how futile, to find by allegorising a meaning for the oil which the wise provided and the foolish lacked. What was it? It is vain to ask. The only answer which is not irrelevant and distracting is the quite vague and indefinite one, that as the purpose of the virgins and the lamps was to add to the splendour of the procession or the feast, those who (for whatever reason) could not add to that splendour were unfit to be there, and were in point of fact excluded. The preacher who enters into a prolonged and inconclusive examination of what is meant by the oil is apt unconsciously to dissipate the impression Jesus meant to leave—that people may be surprised at last in a state in which they are unfit to enter into the joy of the Lord, and are therefore refused entrance. They are not ready, and when they come again after the best preparation they can make, it is too late. It is no use quarrelling with this either on dogmatic or allegorising grounds. We must not annul the unequivocal impression of the parable by the plea that it is never too late to mend, or that God could never refuse to welcome the penitent except by ceasing to be God; and just as little are we at liberty to annul it by finding that the oil is some trifling matter the want of which could never justify a punishment so severe. The whole intention is to leave a solemn and awful impression on the mind, and every interpretation which abates this must be discarded as inconsistent with the parable as a whole.

The other observation concerns what is in some respects the simplest as well as the most wonderful of the Parables—the Prodigal Son. The evangelist, as I have already pointed out, gives us the key to its interpretation in its historical setting. It is part of Jesus' defence of His own conduct in receiving sinners and eating with them. It is one of

a sequence of three, all teaching the same lesson. Jesus points to every department of human life as furnishing analogies to and therefore justifications of His action. In welcoming the lost when they turn penitently to God He is only doing what the shepherd does who rejoices to find his lost sheep, or the woman who rejoices over her lost coin, or, supremely, the father who rejoices over his lost son. All that is spontaneously human upon earth is on His side, and so therefore (He asserts) is God also. "There is joy in the presence of the angels over one sinner that repenteth." But though the parable as a whole is not to be allegorised, there are many subordinate traits in it which lend themselves readily to a spiritual rendering not only in harmony with the whole, but in the happiest and most striking way reinforcing it. The whole picture of the prodigal's career comes under this head—the far country, the riotous life, the poverty, the swine's husks, the remembrance of home: the literal and the spiritual so interpenetrate here that interpretation is hardly necessary; every touch is significant and vital, and the more each is felt in its own place, the more impressive the whole parable becomes. The one misleading byway is the elder brother, and many there be whom he has misled. How many interpreters discuss and compare the characters of the two sons, and into what embarrassments such discussion leads. The mistake made is to enter into such comparisons at all. This is not the parable of the two sons: Matthew has such a parable elsewhere (xxi. 28 ff.). The popular instinct which knows it as the parable of the prodigal son is sound; he is the only son in question; the other man appears not as a foil to the prodigal, but as a foil to the father. Jesus compares, not the character of the brothers, but the ways in which the prodigal is treated by his father and his elder brother respectively. He Him-

self treated the sinners as the prodigal was treated by his father; the Pharisees treated them as the prodigal was treated by his brother; and what Jesus wishes us to feel is that everything human and divine is on His side. To digress into a comparison of the brothers is to put the whole parable out of focus, it is to do something in which we get no help from Jesus, and to make the one fatal mistake an interpreter can make. If there is anything to say about the brothers at all, which is in keeping with the parable, it is what I once heard felicitously put by John McNeill in a sermon—The father went out for them both.

JAMES DENNEY.

*PRIVATE SACRIFICES BEFORE THE
JEWISH DAY OF ATONEMENT*

IN the *EXPOSITOR* for June, 1911, on p. 495 ff., Professor Eerdmans referred to private sacrifices offered by the Jews on the Day of Atonement in addition to the official sacrifices prescribed in Leviticus xvi. He pointed out "that the Old Testament did not mention these private sacrifices, but that the Rabbinical literature informed us about a custom of 'beating Kapporeth,' that is sacrificing a white cock."

While not going into the interesting conclusions of the learned professor from the statement quoted, I may be permitted to draw his attention to the rather late date of the Jewish custom referred to. Not only none of the earlier Rabbinic writings of the first and the second centuries knows anything of the sacrifice; but not even the Palestinian and the Babylonian Talmuds and the numerous works of Midrash, covering at least three centuries down to 500, betray any trace of it. It is only in the Responsa of the Gaons, the heads of the rabbinic high schools in Sura and