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Names of the Parables

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The history of interpretation of Jesus' parables reveals a fascinating tradition of insightful applications and unique interpretations. Scholars and clergy alike have interpreted the parables in almost every way imaginable. Some of those interpretations are markedly different than modern interpretations, whereas others are quite similar. In looking at the history of interpretation of the parables, we can find consistent evidence for a close relationship between the given name of the parable and its interpretation or application. This article will consider the issue of the names of the parables and the origins of our modern names for the parables. The process of how the parables came to bear their current names will also be discussed. It will become readily apparent that the names of the parables are largely functional designations and have the capacity to lead us on certain preconceived interpretive paths. The names of the parables unwittingly predispose us into looking at the parables in a certain way.¹

A brief example of this may be seen in the so-called parable of the "marriage of the king's son" (Matthew 22:1–14). The parable tells the story of a king who has invited certain guests to the wedding of his son, but those guests ultimately turn down the invitation and refuse to attend the wedding. The name of the parable directs our attention to the actual wedding of the son, an event that is mentioned in only one verse (22:2). This parable, however, focuses almost entirely on actions that can cause someone to be excluded from a wedding party. Perhaps the parable could be more appropriately named the "parable of the

invited guests” or, equally as likely, “the guests who refuse to attend.” Yet another possibility is quite interesting. The parable ends with the account of one of the guests being thrown out because he does not have on the proper wedding garment (22:11–13). If this portion of the parable were the main point of focus, perhaps a name such as the “wedding garment” would be more appropriate. The point here is not to question endlessly the names of the parables but to recognize that there may be another point of emphasis we have failed to see because our understanding has been directed by the modern name.

A Brief History of the Names of the Parables

Beginning with the earliest attested names for the parables and moving toward more recent titles, we can trace a fairly consistent pattern for naming the parables. Typically, we have relied on the modern chapter headings and Bible Dictionary to give us the names or titles of the parables. Have we ever asked ourselves concerning the actual origin of the titles of the parables? Are they inspired names? Do the names go back to the Savior Himself?² Are they human inventions? These questions have led one Latter-day Saint scholar to comment, “The titles or names assigned to the parables are purely subjective and generally emphasize some important feature. Often the title only emphasizes part of the message and is therefore inadequate or misleading.”³ Fortunately, we can answer many of these questions with relative accuracy.

Our modern chapter headings give us the most regularly accepted modern names of the parables. Unfortunately, any original names of the parables, if there were any, have largely been lost to us. Only two of the parables are given names in the New Testament, one by the Savior Himself, the “parable of the Sower” (Matthew 13:18), and one by the disciples, the “parable of the tares in the field” (13:36).⁴

Regarding the early Christian tradition of naming the parables after the New Testament period, we have little evidence to suggest that there were fixed or universally accepted names for the parables. Our earliest evidences are the early Greek biblical manuscripts and the quotations of the New Testament by early church bishops, scholars, and clergy. The evidence from the early biblical manuscripts is sparse and relatively uncertain until the fifth century. Before that time, biblical manuscripts were generally written in continuous script with no verse or chapter divisions. Therefore, any titles to New Testament stories or parables would have had to be included in the margins. Around the turn of the fifth century, the trend began in New Testament manuscripts

to divide the books into rudimentary chapters, represented by columns and indentations in the text itself. As these divisions were introduced into the biblical text, the possibility of including titles and summaries also arose. This tradition yields some evidence for ancient Christian names for the parables.⁵

The modern chapter divisions of the King James Version bear little if any relationship to the ancient chapter divisions. The modern chapter divisions of the New Testament were introduced in the early thirteenth century by Stephen Langton while he was a lecturer at the University of Paris. He created divisions in the Latin text of the New Testament, and these same divisions have been passed down to us as chapters in the King James Version. The descriptive names used for these divisions are likewise relatively recent. There was no canon of names, nor were they a fixed part of the text. Therefore, the King James translators had relative freedom in choosing the names. The breakdown of the chapters into verses took place in 1551 by Robert Stephanus, also known as Robert Estienne, who introduced them into an interlinear Greek and Latin New Testament. These same verse divisions were subsequently adopted by the Geneva Bible and have been fixed since that date.⁶ Our modern Latter-day Saint edition, which reflects the work of the 1979 scripture committee, contains neither the ancient chapter headings or descriptions of the early Greek biblical manuscripts nor those of the 1611 King James Version.⁷

Since the invention of printing, there has been a great degree of liberty for each edition of the Bible to use its own chapter headings and summaries. These summary descriptions tend to extend well beyond denominational boundaries. Various translations have sought a degree of uniformity regarding the chapter headings, but there is no canon of accepted names. The modern names are interpretive and have been used predominantly for comparative purposes. The modern chapter headings, chapter divisions, and verses, like their ancient counterparts, help facilitate biblical research and scholarship. When we look at the history of the names of the parables, three parables stand out as examples of considerable diversity in name. The three parables are the parable of the wheat and tares, the parable of the prodigal son, and the parable of the laborers in the vineyard.⁸

The Wheat and the Tares

The so-called parable of the “wheat and tares” is one of the few parables that are given a name in the New Testament. The parable is introduced in Matthew 13:24 with the common introductory phrase

“the kingdom of heaven is likened unto.” Later, after the departure of the multitude, the disciples approached Jesus and asked Him, “Declare unto us the parable of the *tares in the field*” (13:36; emphasis added). The disciples, who appear to have named the parable themselves, wanted to know about the tares that would infect the early Christian church, something that was of immediate concern to them.

The parable of the wheat and tares is unique to the Gospel of Matthew, and therefore it is to that Gospel that we can look for contextual clues in interpreting it. Chapters 10 through 12, the chapters preceding the parable, create a dramatic crescendo of opposition to Jesus in His teachings and miracles. The collection begins with Jesus sending the disciples on a mission that would ultimately condemn the wicked (10:5–15); He then censured the cities of Bethsaida, Chorazin, and Capernaum (11:20–24); He was rejected for threshing wheat on the Sabbath (12:1–9); and then a select group of Pharisees counseled how they might kill Him because He had healed a man on the Sabbath (12:10–14). The atmosphere of chapters 10 through 12 is charged with tension, the hostility against Jesus mounting until there is a pronounced plot against His life. In his conclusion to these events, Matthew records that Jesus then taught them that speaking against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but speaking against the Holy Ghost will not (12:31–32, 37–38; Joseph Smith Translation, 12:37–38). And He called them an adulterous generation (12:39). The overall impression is that both sides are heading toward an impasse, facing insurmountable differences in their beliefs.

The subsequent outcome of this building frustration and rejection of the Lord’s words is the discourse on parables. Jesus stated explicitly that He spoke in parables “because it is given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given. Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand” (13:11, 13). It is as if to say, “I am through speaking with them, and now I will speak to you who are seeking to understand, but to those who seek my life I will veil my teachings.” The parables of Matthew 13 also support this conclusion.

The seven parables of Matthew 13, when read together, can be read as a road map to the beginning of the Restoration.⁹ They begin with the parables of the sower and the wheat and tares, which both suggest that during the early stages of teaching the gospel, there will also be corruption in the field and members who quickly wither away. The next parable is that of the mustard seed, something that starts out

very small yet grows to be quite remarkable in size. The concluding parables suggest such themes as finding hidden treasure, selling all to obtain a pearl of great price, and gathering all kinds of fishes in nets. Joseph Smith's inspired interpretation of these parables likewise supports this interpretation. He stated in reference to Matthew 13 that it affords "us as clear an understanding upon the important subject of the gathering, as anything recorded in the Bible."¹⁰ Joseph's statement recommends the interpretation that the Savior was focusing His attention on the tares that would infect the wheat during the process of the gathering of Israel. The Prophet's conclusion is supported by the context of the parable in Matthew 13. Several ancient authors also used the parable of the wheat and tares in their discourses concerning heretics within the Church. The most ancient of these is a retelling of the parable in *Gospel of Thomas*, chapter 57.¹¹ The parable is there retold with nearly all emphasis on the good seed, or wheat, removed. The tares, it says, will become "conspicuous" at that last day and therefore easily gathered and burned. Likewise, Irenaeus and Clement used the parable to describe the eventual fall of the wicked tares in the last days.¹² Of these two, Irenaeus named the parable the "tares and the wheat." Although the difference in the various names might appear slight ("wheat and tares," "tares in the field," and "the tares and the wheat"), the name has immediately directed our attention to, and possibly away from, an idea contained within the parable. One carries the suggestion that both the wheat and tares are to be considered equally in the parable while the other emphasizes the tares. Interestingly, the Savior's interpretation of the parable focused almost exclusively on the role of the tares and how they will be gathered and burned.¹³ The final reward for the wheat is not mentioned, but the final condemnation of the tare is. Is it a parable of wheat, tares, or both?

The Laborers in the Vineyard

In the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, the master of the vineyard hired servants to work in his vineyard for an agreed-upon price. During the course of the day, the master hired other servants to work in the vineyard. At the end of the day, the master paid all of his servants the same wage, at which point the servants who had worked the longest complained because they felt their wage should be greater than those who had worked less (20:1–16). This parable, unfortunately, was not given a name in the New Testament. There is also no accompanying interpretation given by the Savior or one of the Apostles.

Where exactly should we direct our attention? What was Jesus' original intent? Can we ascertain the original context of the parable?

In looking for contextual clues, we may recall that chapter divisions and verse divisions are completely arbitrary designations created by academics for purposes of studying the Bible. If we look back to the preceding chapter, we find a question by Peter that helps explain the reason for which it was delivered. Peter asked Jesus, "We have forsaken all, and followed thee; what shall we have therefore?" (19:27). Peter's concerned inquiry is precipitated by the Savior's statement that it will be easier to push a camel through the eye of a sewing needle than for a rich man to make it into heaven (19:24).¹⁴ This statement alarmed the brethren (19:25) and made them wonder how anyone would succeed in making it into heaven. The parable offers a comforting remedy to this unsettling image. Those who work the longest are paid the same wage as those who entered the field of labor toward the end. Both were given credit for their valuable service without any consideration of job training, experience, education, or relationship to employer. Those who were willing to work were paid appropriately.

History reveals the fact that this parable has been thought of in many different ways. At the end of the first century, Irenaeus called the parable "the workmen who were sent into the vineyard at different periods of the day."¹⁵ Irenaeus may have used this name to distinguish this parable of the vineyard from the other parable of the vineyard in Matthew 21:33–41. This different title appears to be more descriptive of content and less focused on interpretation. Clement of Alexandria spoke extensively on this parable and focused his interpretation almost entirely on the price that the workmen were paid at the end of the day.¹⁶ The price, Clement taught, is indicative of the fact that salvation is the same for everyone regardless of the work performed. Likewise, the *Apocryphon of James*, a late first- or second-century Gnostic work from Nag Hammadi, called this parable "The Wage of the Workmen."¹⁷ The early title from the manuscript tradition for this parable is "the workers who are hired out."

Each of the different names carries with it a slight change in nuance. Is the parable a lesson about the laborers, the length of time the workers worked, or the price they were paid? Each name directs our attention to an aspect of the parable. If the parable is indeed a response to Peter's inquiry, "Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed thee; what shall we have therefore?" (19:27) then it is most likely that the parable was meant to focus on the wage. Peter, who is concerned about what he will ultimately receive after having given up all, would be comforted

to learn that his reward, and the reward of all eleventh-hour servants, will be the same as for those who have labored in the vineyard from the beginning.

The Prodigal Son

Perhaps the most famous of all the parables is the parable of the prodigal son. The details of the story are very well known, as are the possibilities for modern application of the parable. Many of us have experienced the pain that a prodigal son creates, or we may have been prodigals ourselves at one time. The potential for application of this parable is almost endless. There was, however, another son with another set of problems and concerns as well as a caring father who accepted both sons into his open arms. Is the parable of the prodigal son a parable of one son only? Or is it the parable of two sons, a father, and their reconciliation? We probably relate most closely with the prodigal son or the father in the story, and therefore our name for the parable is fitting for modern application.

Fortunately, for this parable we have both a very strong contextual setting as well as a statement by Joseph Smith regarding the proper interpretation of the parable. Luke 15:1–2 creates the setting for the delivery of the parable when it states, “Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners for to hear him. And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them.” Likewise, Joseph Smith taught, “What drew the saying out of Jesus? Pharisees and scribes murmured: ‘This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them.’ This is the key word—to answer the murmuring and questioning of the Sadducees and Pharisees.”¹⁸ The parable of the prodigal son is, therefore, really the story of two sons, the prodigal representing the publicans and sinners in this situation and the older son representing the Pharisees and scribes who questioned Jesus.

The first reference to this parable outside of the New Testament was by Irenaeus, and he called it the “parable of the two sons.”¹⁹ In the same manner, Joseph Smith referred to the parable as a “certain man had two sons.”²⁰ Tertullian also referred to the parable as the “parable of the two sons.”²¹ In the majority of references to this parable in the first three centuries of the Christian era, the parable of the prodigal son is most often referred to under the name of “the parable of the two sons.” This may simply be a result of the fact that many early Christian commentators thought of the parable as a story of Gentiles, exemplified by the younger brother, and Jews, exemplified by the older

brother. Their natural inclination, therefore, would be to look at how both sons reacted to their father, thus justifying their position as Gentiles who had recently entered the fold.

The tradition to identify only the prodigal son in the title can be identified quite early in Christian history. Clement, Tertullian, and the earliest title given in a biblical manuscript bear witness to a developing focus on the role of the prodigal son at the omission of the older brother.²² But, in reality, is the parable of the prodigal son really only about one of the sons? Are there not two sons and a father? Are the sons equally prodigal? Our modern name of the parable leads us in the direction of the younger son, but the older son has obstacles also, and the father is a model of forgiveness and acceptance.

Conclusion

While the names of the individual parables may appear at first glance to be insignificant, they lead us from the outset in a certain fixed direction of interpretation. The contents of the parables are brought into our minds through the recollection of the names that we have given them. Though not intentionally deceptive, the names of the parables set the stage for both our interpretation and subsequent application. Many feel that the application of a parable need not be responsible to the original intent and interpretation of the parables. However, our modern application of the parables can be greatly informed by their original context and purpose.

Names are one thing that can get in the way of our understanding the original context or meaning of the parable. Only two of the names are original to the New Testament; every other name is a later designation by later compilers and editors. Those names are subjective and often reflect a certain predisposition in interpreting the parables. While no evidence suggests the names of the parables have been influenced by conspiring men in the depth of apostasy, many of the names may unintentionally mislead. ■

Notes

1. Scant research has been done on the origins of the names of the parables, although interpretive approaches abound. The major commentaries on the parables of Jesus are almost completely silent on this issue (see Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* [Grand Rapids, Michigan: W. B. Eerdmans, 2000]; Claus Westermann, *The Parables of Jesus in the Light of the Old Testament*, ed. and trans. Friedemann W. Golka and Alastair H. B. Logan [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990]; Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 3d ed. [London: S.C.M,

1972]). Hermann Von Soden has collected the ancient names of the parables, but they have yet to be fully analyzed and discussed (see *Die Schriften des Neuen Testaments in ihrer ältesten erreichbaren Textgestalt* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1911], 1:448–54).

2. In one instance, there is a parable that is named both by the Savior and by His disciples. In this instance, the two names are slightly different. The disciples called it the parable of the “tares of the field” (Matthew 13:36), while Jesus referred to it in modern revelation as the “parable of the wheat and of the tares” (D&C 86:1).

3. Robert J. Matthews, *The Parables of Jesus* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1969), 7–8.

4. In Matthew 24:32, “a parable of the fig tree” cannot rightly be regarded as a proper name for one of Jesus’ parables. The Greek for this verse could be more accurately rendered, “Regarding the fig tree, learn this parable.” The construction suggests that Jesus has in view a certain fig tree and that He now has pulled His disciples aside to teach them something concerning it.

5. These divisions are known as the *kephalaia majora*, or chapters, and the *titloi*, or titles. They are first found in the codex Alexandrinus and can be firmly dated to the fifth century. At the end of Alexandrinus, there is also a section known as the Eusebian canons or Ammonian canons. These tables, known anciently as canons, were used to divide the Gospels into sections to facilitate comparisons among the individual Gospels. The divisions were extensive, with Matthew having 355 divisions; Mark, 233; Luke, 342; and John, 232.

6. Bruce M. Metzger, *Manuscripts of the Greek Bible: An Introduction to Greek Paleography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 41–42.

7. Our modern chapter headings are the product of the 1979 Latter-day Saint edition of the scriptures and were not a part of the 1611 King James text.

8. The majority of the parables bear no significant changes in title, whereas a select few do demonstrate significant transformation in name. It is beyond the scope of this article to consider all of these changes and their significance.

9. Andrew C. Skinner and W. Jeffrey Marsh, *Scriptural Parables for the Latter Days* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 45–49.

10. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 94.

11. A complete manuscript of the *Gospel of Thomas* was found at Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt in 1945 and has been subsequently translated from Coptic into English. For a reader-friendly edition, see James M. Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), 124–38.

12. Irenaeus, *Against All Heresies*, 4.40.2; Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies*, 7.15.

13. Of the eight verses that give the interpretation of the parable of the wheat and tares, only three of them mention the wheat at all, and then it is only in passing as the Savior moves on to explain what will happen to the tares. The only real insights given regarding the wheat are that they are “the children of the kingdom” (Matthew 13:38) and that they “shall . . . shine forth as the sun” (13:43). A similar situation occurs in D&C 86:1–7, where the Savior interprets the parable to Joseph Smith. Once again, the interpretation considers in detail the fate of the tares.

14. Joseph Smith’s key to understanding the parables is quite helpful here. He stated, “I have a key by which I understand the scriptures. I enquire, what was the question which drew out the answer, or caused Jesus to utter the parable?”

History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, ed. B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980), 5:261.

15. Irenaeus, *Against All Heresies*, 4.36.7; 1.1.3.
16. Clement, *Miscellanies*, 4.6.
17. See *Apocryphon of James*, 8.1–10, in *Nag Hammadi Library*, 33.
18. Joseph Smith, *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph*, ed. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book, 1991), 161; grammar and punctuation modernized.
19. Irenaeus, *Against All Heresies*, 4.36.7.
20. Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 161.
21. Tertullian, *On Modesty*, 8, 9.
22. Clement, *Instructor*, 2.1; Tertullian, *On Repentance*, 8. The ancient *titloi*, or title, for Luke 15:3 reads, “concerning him who traveled to a distant land.”