**RULES OF PARABLE METHODOLOGY**

**INTRODUCTION**

In chapter III we looked at the different types of parables but the student of prophecy still requires a distinct set of rules or principles in order to dig for their hidden treasure. Parables are crafted with specific rules embedded within them and if we break these rules we can make mistakes or fail to find the hidden information. The following chapter will briefly introduce some of the rules in the hope it will encourage the reader to study further for themselves.

**PLACE TWO ELEMENTS SIDE BY SIDE**

The word “parable” descends from the Greek *parabolē* meaning "a comparison", which in turn is from *paraballein.* The prefix *para-* means "beside" and *ballein* means "to throw." So a parable is to throw two objects, ideas, concepts etc. beside one another in order to compare them, noting the similarities as well as the differences. For example if I just pointed to a boat all on it’s own and asked you if it was large or small, you would only be able to answer if you compared it to the size of another boat. If I put a yacht beside a rowing boat the yacht is large, but next to an aircraft carrier it becomes small.

So the first and foremost rule is the parable has to present one element beside another to carry out a comparison. This rule is written into the very definition of the word parable and applies to all types of parable. If it is a pictorial parable then you will need two elements in your picture e.g. a mountain and a statue (re: Dan. 2). If it is textual, for example if you are investigating a repeat and enlarge pattern, then the first part of the phrase has been placed next to the second part in order to compare them and identify the extra information in the second part. Equally the first part of a chiasm is placed next to the second part where a mirror is imagined between them in order to identify balance or imbalance between the two.

**DO YOUR SURFACE GROUNDWORK FIRST**

Before you apply parable methodology to any passage of Scripture you will first need to perform a normal exegesis to understand the meaning of all the words, their tense etc. Perhaps you need to understand if a word in the original language had a definite article or not, or a gender. This will give you an understanding of the surface text which is first required before you can then dig proactively for hidden gems, perhaps looking for a chiasm, natural to spiritual parable or a repeat and enlarge pattern.

**UNDERSTAND THE ORIGINAL INTENT**

Then you will need to understand the original context of the Scripture you want to dig within. What was the author’s original intent? For example in Joel 1:4 there are four stages of locust mentioned. If one was to try to understand this as a parable for the last days it might be simple to just note that locusts represent Islamic powers in Bible prophecy. Rev. 9:3 & 7 refer to locusts which Uriah Smith and the pioneers understood to represent an Islamic power. Sister White says v12 onward is a prophecy about the Ottoman Empire (GC 334.4-335.1) which is of course another Islamic power. However the original intent of Joel is to describe the captivity of God’s people into Babylon, not any variety of Islamic or Arabian power. So these locusts are a representation of a Babylonian power, which at the end of the world would be described as modern Babylon. Hence the references to a *“lion”* (Joel 1:6) and *“the northern army”* (Joel 2:20). So it is only when you understand the original intent that you can confidently make application of the symbols to the end of the world. This would be taking a natural, literal, historical story and making application to an end time scenario, which would demand that literal Babylon represents spiritual Babylon. You could then place your two stories, one natural and one spiritual; one of ancient Babylon, the other of modern Babylon, beside each other and compare and contrast them to dig for further hidden, prophetic truths.

**THE PARABLE HAS TO BE FAMILIAR, COMMON KNOWLEDGE & EASILY UNDERSTOOD**

Another rule embedded in parables is that a familiar, well known concept will always be given to explain an unfamiliar or unknown concept. If you don’t know what God’s character is like then compare it to Jesus’. If you don’t know what the second advent will be like then compare it to a wedding.

*“*...*the unknown was illustrated by the known. Jesus taught by illustrations and parables drawn from nature and from the familiar events of every-day life... In this way he associated natural things with spiritual, linking the things of nature and the life-experience of his hearers with the sublime, spiritual truths of the written word.”* SpTEd 67.2-3.

When God wants you to understand what death is like He compares it to a sleep (Ps. 13:3). The similarities being that one day we will awake out of this sleep (Dan. 12:2, John 11:11) whereas the differences by contrast are that we stop breathing and are buried in the ground (Psalm 146:4). The point is, it would be futile for Jesus to compare death to a coma as that is a condition few of us are familiar with whereas we all know what sleep is like. Jesus would first have to try to explain what a coma was to His audience. So another rule is that the natural story has to be familiar, well known and well understood. Therefore you will never find a parable that uses a complicated scenario.

**START WITH WHAT YOU ALREADY KNOW**

Therefore when you come across a compare and contrast in Scripture, when you start to dig for the treasure within it, always start with the entity or concept of which you already have the most understanding. If you want to dig into Daniel 2 where God throws beside one another the mountain and the statue, start with the entity you understand the most. If you already know a mountain represents a kingdom in biblical symbology, then look at the mountain to discover what the statue is rather than vice versa. If the mountain is a kingdom then the statue is a kingdom because they have been placed beside each other to compare. You cannot place a yacht next to a horse to discover the colour of the horse (to borrow an example from chapter III).

Then you could contrast the two and see that there is tension between them. The stone destroys the statue then takes its place on Earth, so these kingdoms are in opposition somehow. One is good and one is bad.

So if you are studying the woman riding the beast of Rev. 17 and you already know more about the woman than the beast, start by listing out the characteristics of the woman and comparing them to the beast, for God has thrown them beside each other in this parable/prophecy. *“What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder”* in an attempt to study the beast independently of the woman solely by proof texting. If you already know the woman is a religious power then compare her to the beast rather than vice versa. This is the primary rule utilised in natural to spiritual parables. Start with what you already know and understand.

*“...Christ had truths to present which the people were unprepared to accept or even to understand. For this reason also He taught them in parables. By connecting His teaching with the scenes of life, experience, or nature, He secured their attention and impressed their hearts... Mysteries grew clear, and that which had been hard to grasp became evident.”* COL 21.1

In order to help us understand elements of His second advent, Christ compares and contrasts it to a natural, literal wedding. Everyone in His audience at that time understood what a wedding was like. For obvious reasons, it would be completely ineffective to compare His second advent to a story of an alien arriving from outer space to planet Earth and then calling one group of people up into the air to take them back to his planet. The audience would be so unfamiliar with such a fantastical event it would not add any understanding whatsoever to the spiritual lesson. Just as a coma as a parable of death is a natural, real life experience it is not a good parable as most people have never experienced a coma themselves. So we need an acute understanding of how the natural concept or story works.

**PARABLES HAVE TO CONFORM TO THE NATURAL LAWS**

This rule demands that the story has to conform to the natural world, natural law, human life, human feelings, society etc. Examples might be those of love, hate or jealousy; of birth and death. We know the natural response to the death of a loved one is grief, so your story has to conform to that and you cannot interpret a parable about the death of a loved one as a happy event. This would contradict the natural laws of human life and society. Other parables might use stories of marriage and divorce; economy, lending and borrowing; fishing, farming or hunting etc. We know a marriage is a happy occasion. We know that if people are defrauded of money it can anger them. From natural life we know they can feel betrayed. So any interpretation of a parable has to adhere to these natural laws. The spiritual lesson is figuratively portrayed in a normal, natural story. It can be a fictitious story like the rich man and Lazarus, or it can be a true story like the good Samaritan (COL 379.1) but it has to conform to the natural laws of life and nature.

From an understanding of natural, societal life, a vainly adorned harlot carries the suggestion she is outwardly attractive (re: Rev. 17). This would be the polar opposite to a beast with seven heads and ten horns. Prophetically the opposite of a religious power is a state power. While the woman and the beast are opposites in their identities, they are in cahoots as the woman is riding the beast. From natural life we know when a person rides on the back of a beast they are directing and controlling it, and the way that is performed is by steering the head of that beast. When you are trying to interpret Rev. 17 as a parable all these natural laws have to be taken into consideration.

**MAKE SURE THE PARABLE IS FAMILIAR AND WELL KNOWN TO YOU**

If you don’t know the sequence of events in a literal eastern marriage ceremony in biblical times, or the role of the virgins etc. then you will need to study this first before you could hope to understand the spiritual lesson derived from it. If you read about an ancient, eastern wedding with a modern, western perspective you can make mistakes when you seek to apply it eschatologically.

If you were born and raised in a large, western city and as far as you are concerned wheat only ever comes from a shop, you may have no idea what the natural rules for the eastern agricultural cycle are. So in order to apply the agricultural model of ploughing, sowing, early rain, latter rain and harvest to the end of the world, you will need to understand the correct natural model first. You need to know winter is cold so one cannot plant crops. If you understand there is no rain during the harvest then you will understand there is no new message during that prophetic event too.

**THE NATURAL LAWS HAVE TO AGREE WITH THE SPIRITUAL LAWS**

Not only do you have to correctly understand the rules of the natural phenomena, but those rules of the natural world have to follow the rules of the spiritual world. You cannot liken Jesus to a shepherd and us to His sheep and then claim, “In the natural world the good shepherd protects his flock but with God it’s different”.

William Miller’s first rule of interpretation is, *“Every word must have its proper bearing on the subject”*. So you cannot say in the natural world sheep follow their shepherds but when the Bible compares shepherds to God’s appointed leaders (Num. 27:16-17) we are not supposed to follow their leading because the Bible says not to put your trust in man. If the natural story dictates that sheep follow their shepherd, then this fact has to *“have its proper bearing on the subject”*. So again the natural rule of law must follow the spiritual rule of law and you cannot say, “but it is different with God”.

You will find that some words have more bearing or import than others. That can be expected, but if for example an important word has no moral value then you know it is most likely in the text as it has hidden prophetic value, but it will have its proper bearing. By way of example there is no moral value to knowing there were 276 people on the ship in Acts 27:37, so you know for a certainty that this information has hidden prophetic value for the end of the world.

**HOW TO DROWN OUT THE NOISE**

Now, there is another rule which would appear to be in stark opposition to the above rule. That is to identify “noise” in the story. Noise is a term given to irrelevant information in a story or information that has no bearing on the spiritual lesson. For example, while sheep follow their shepherd they do so by walking on all fours. So while we are supposed to follow our shepherds we are not meant to walk on all fours. This is noise and can be identified as such because the way we follow our shepherd is not to physically follow them the way sheep do. We don’t literally follow them to work and then follow them home whereas sheep literally do follow their master if he is leading them physically from one field to another.

So when approaching a text as a parable you need to ask yourself, what is the parable teaching us? Is it teaching us how to literally, physically walk or is it teaching us how to follow the guidance of our church leaders? Then you will be able to identify the difference between every word having its proper bearing on a subject and noise. The parable is also teaching the church leaders how to lead their flock, with love and care, and warning them that like sheep, people have a bad tendency to just follow the person in front without knowing why. They can be creatures of thoughtless habit. So if a false leader or a false influence rises up in their flock they should not just ignore it and say, let’s just show love to that false leader or tolerance to that false influence. If they do they risk losing the entire flock.

In asking ourselves what lesson God wants us to learn from this parable, we can identify the important lessons from the irrelevant noise. While shepherds are often poor and uneducated, Jesus is all knowing and owns the cattle on a thousand hills (Psalm 50:10). The words that have proper bearing are that a good shepherd works long hours often not sleeping. He is diligent in his work of protecting his flock from wolves and cares about even one of his lambs. He respects the gentle nature of his sheep.

Another of Miller’s rules is *“Figures sometimes have two or more different significations”.* In other words, symbols can have more than one meaning. Jesus is the good Shepherd but He is also likened to a lamb in the Bible (John 1:29). So for example, you cannot use Numbers 27:16-17 to show our earthly church leaders are shepherds and then claim Jesus is their lamb so He has to follow them. The lesson God wants us to learn from John 1:29 is that Jesus is our Sacrifice for sin so it cannot be used to allege He is supposed to follow the human leaders of the church. Every word has to have its “proper” bearing.

**CONCLUSION**

There are principles and rules written into parables that have to be adhered to in order to correctly interpret them. These include the necessity of placing two stories, elements, entities, phrases etc. beside each other in order to compare them. You must perform a normal exegesis of the surface text first and also understand the original intent of the author. Parables have to be simple, familiar and easily understood. They have to be a simple, understandable representation of a more complex, spiritual lesson, of which the focus of this movement is predominantly that of end time prophecy. The natural laws of life have to be adhered to. You cannot interpret a parable about betrayal as a positive, prophetic event at the end of the world. Parables will inevitably contain some irrelevant noise which can be identified by understanding what lesson God is trying to teach you from the parable. Once that noise has been disregarded, every word has its proper, prophetic bearing.

The phrase “digging for hidden treasure” is an apt parable in and of itself, because physically digging for literal hidden treasure requires skill, patience and hard work, but the spiritual dig is comparably rewarding. Sister White says, *“Parable teaching was popular, and commanded the respect and attention…”* and that *“No more effective method of instruction could* [Jesus] *have employed.”* COL 20.3. This labour is essential at this time, as it is inconceivable that we fail in our message and mission at this stage. We cannot give the loud cry unless we uncover the remaining truths which so far have been undiscovered and kept secret since the inception of His word. Parable methodology is the only way to uncover these essential truths, without which we cannot successfully navigate our last few remaining waymarks.

*“All these things spake Jesus unto the multitude in parables; and without a parable spake he not unto them: That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying, I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter things which have been kept secret from the foundation of the world.”* Matt. 13:34-35.