

Hermeneutics of Parable Interpretation in Ellen White Compared to Those of Archbishop Trench

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Introduction

It is probably an exaggeration to date the interpretation of parables BJ and AJ—before Jülicher' and 'after Jülicher'—but only a slight one. From the second to the nineteenth centuries there was one dominant way to expound parables, that of allegory.¹ Jülicher's work and publications changed that. His decisive contribution was to gather all previous comment on each of the parables, almost all of them allegorical in nature. An allegorical approach to a particular parable may well have had persuasive force when it was given, whether during the time of the church Fathers or during the Reformation. However, changing circumstances and perspectives, and the opportunity to read a number of mutually incompatible

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1. This is generally true, despite well known statements by some individuals to the contrary. For example, with typical dramatic flare, Luther disparages the allegorisation of Origen: 'When I was a monk I was a monster in the use of allegories. I allegorised everything' [54:47 this and following citations are from *Luther's Works*, edited by Helmut T Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959)]. 'When I was young I dealt with allegories, tropologies, and analogies and did nothing but clever tricks with them. If somebody had them today they'd be looked upon as rare relicts. I know they're nothing but rubbish.' [54:406]. Instead of allegory, Luther urged the interpretation of Scripture in its 'plain sense': 'The literal sense does it—in it there's life, comfort, power, instruction, and skill. The other is tomfoolery, however brilliant the impression it makes' [54:406]. While Luther wrote commentaries on the Psalms, Galatians, Romans, he did not write one on the Gospels, so it is not possible to know how he would have treated the parables. He does refer to them from time to time in his sermons, but always in the service of illustration of another point he is making. This references to three parables which illustrate the Christian's need to give generously to the poor is typical: '... there is the parable of the rich reveller in Luke 16[19–31]. He was not damned because he robbed or did evil with respect to these goods, for he feasted and clothed himself sumptuously every day with his own goods. He was damned rather because he did not do good to his neighbour, namely, Lazarus. This parable adequately teaches us that it is not sufficient merely not to do evil and not to do harm, but rather that one must be helpful and do good.' [51:8] From this, and other uses he makes of parables, it is apparent that his disparagement of allegory does not prevent Luther using the parables rather allegorically. On the other hand, John Calvin has provided commentary on all the parables, which is generally well considered, and still useful to modern commentators. He feels no compunction against using allegory where he considers that this is the best way to approach a particular parable, but compared to most ancient writers, Calvin uses it very cautiously.

allegorical interpretations at the same time, meant that after the publication of volume 1 of Adolf Jülicher's book *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, serious scholarship decisively rejected allegory. Any trace of it was ruthlessly eliminated from almost all scholarly interpretation of the parables for the first seven or eight decades of the twentieth century.² To this day, many serious commentators reject the authenticity of the interpretations of Jesus of the parables of the sower and the tares in Matthew 13:18–23, 36–43, mainly on the basis that they are allegorical.³ Conservative scholarship, though, generally accepts their authenticity, and they are not alone in doing so.⁴ Conservative scholarship, while learning from the excesses of the past, is not averse to using a mildly allegorical approach to those parables which appear to warrant it, although it eschews the method in parables for which the method is clearly inappropriate.⁵

Ellen White's major work on the parables, *Christ Object Lessons*, was first published in 1900, fourteen years after Jülicher had published *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*.⁶ Yet it is highly unlikely that she ever heard of Jülicher's work, which in any event has yet to be translated into English.⁷ Indeed, the new thinking about parables subsequent to Jülicher did not reach English-speaking circles for some time. CH Dodd's important short work, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, decisively

rejected of allegory, but was not published until 1935.⁸ Joachim Jeremias' influential book, *The Parables of Jesus* was not made available in English until 1954.⁹ So it is safe to conclude that anything that Ellen White wrote about parables is written BJ (before Jülicher).

These days there is scarcely an undergraduate student let alone a commentator who has not been exposed to the work of Jülicher.¹⁰ We are all working AJ (after Jülicher), and it is just not possible to unlearn what has been brought to our attention by the nearly one hundred years of serious scholarship on parables that has taken place since the publication of *Christ's Object Lessons*. Consequently, it is perhaps unfair to consider the hermeneutics visible in Ellen White's interpretation of parables alongside contemporary approaches. Instead, it would be better to compare her with another writer on parables who also wrote before Jülicher, and who better to represent that period than Richard Chenivix Trench?

Richard Chenivix Trench—Principles of Interpretation

Trench published *Notes on the Parables of our Lord*¹¹ in 1841. The popularity of Trench's book is shown by the number of copies that are available in most second hand bookstores. It has provided materials for countless sermons in the past and continues to do so.¹²

Trench began by outlining where a parable differs from a Aesopic Fable, from mythus, and from proverbs.¹³ They differ from allegory 'in form rather than es-

2. Despite some protests, such as that of Matthew Black, 'The Parables as Allegory', in *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 42 (1959–60): 273–87.

3. As does Rudolf Schnackenburg, in his recently translated commentary, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 127. Schnackenburg and others, have found the extensive arguments of Joachim Jeremias persuasive, in his *The Parables of Jesus*, revised edition (London: SCM, 1972), *passim*, especially 66–89.

4. For example, Craig S Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 383 states that 'although parables generally exhibit a central thrust and the details are sometimes merely part of the story, one cannot exclude some allegory from even their earliest form (pace Jülicher, Dodd . . .)' WD Davies and Dale C Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 2:397–99, discusses the arguments for and against the authenticity of Matthew 13:18–23. This volume concludes that 'the case against authenticity is not conclusive', but 'At the same time, the case for a dominical origin, in our estimation, falls short of proof.'

5. As this is not an essay on modern parable interpretation, little more can be said. These readers interested in reading further about parable interpretation might wish to consult my book, *The Four Faces of Jesus* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 2000), 47–72. Also useful is Robert H Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1981), 15–26, 42–81. On the place of allegory in Rabbinic parables with a consideration for the implications for the use of allegory by Jesus in His parables, see Harvey K McArthur and Robert M Johnston, *They Also Taught in Parables* (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie, 1990).

6. Adolf Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1886 followed by further editions in 1888 and 1889; second edition 1910).

7. An English-language survey of the history of parable interpretation is available in Warren S Kissinger, *The Parables of Jesus: A History of Interpretation and Bibliography* (London: Scarecrow, 1979).

8. CH Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, revised edition (London: Fontana, 1961; first published by James Nisbet in 1935). Of Jülicher, Dodd comments: 'It was the great merit of Adolph Jülicher . . . that he applied a thoroughgoing criticism to this method [allegorical interpretation], and showed, not that the allegorical interpretation is in this or that case overdone or fanciful, but that the parables in general do not admit of this method at all.' (*Ibid*, 14).

9. My copy is the third revised edition of Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1972).

10. For example, the conservative writer Robert Stein devotes a significant amount of space to Jülicher. See Stein, *op cit*, 53–58.

11. New York, Revell, nd.

12. One of my 2002 students left me momentarily at a loss for words. I had asked him why, if he had read Jeremias, he had included in his paper one particular incorrect item of historical background. He said that he had indeed read Jeremias on the topic, but reminded me that I had stressed to the class that what Jeremias says must always be evaluated carefully, as conservatives such as Seventh-day Adventists would find much in Jeremias that they would not accept. He had also read Trench, who had said that he had done some research on the topic in question. So, of the two, Trench seemed the more reliable scholar to the student!

13. Re fables: 'The parable is constructed to set forth a truth spiritual and heavenly: this the fable, with all its value, is not. It is essentially of the earth, and never lifts itself above the earth. It never has a higher aim than to inculcate maxims of prudential morality, industry, caution, foresight and the like . . .' (Tench, *Notes*, *op cit*, 8); re mythus: 'inasmuch as in the mythus the truth, and that which is only the vehicle of the truth, are wholly blended together' (*Ibid*, 10).

sence' (13). He then devoted a chapter to the reason Jesus taught in parables. He used them to illustrate and prove truths

Their power lies . . . in the harmony unconsciously felt by all men, and by which all deeper minds have delighted to trace, between the natural and spiritual worlds (16). . . . the earthly relation is indeed but a lower form of the heavenly, on which it rests, and of which it is the utterance (17). For such is the condition of man . . . Around him is a sensuous world, yet one which need not bring him into bondage to his senses, being so framed as, if he will use it aright, continually to lift him above himself—a visible world to make known the invisible things of God, a ladder leading him up to the contemplation of heavenly truth (19).

Had our Lord spoken naked spiritual truth, how many of His words, partly from His hearers' lack of interest in them, partly from their lack of insight, would have passed away from their hearts and memories, and left no trace behind them (26).

Trench devotes his third Chapter to discussing the interpretation of parables:

First, most of the details of the parable can convey meaning:

'There is one question of more importance than any other . . . How much of them is to be taken as significant?' There are those who say that much of the parable has no meaning other than to round out the story. 'On the other hand, Augustine, though himself sometimes laying down the same canon, frequently extends the interpretation through all the branches and minutest fibres of the narrative; and Origen no less, despite the passage which I have just quoted' (32). He criticises Calvin and Storr, for leaving the 'parables bare trunks, stripped of all their foliage and branches (33). After he cites the example of Jesus' interpretation of Sower and Tares (33), he says, ' . . . it must be confessed that no absolute rule can be laid down beforehand to guide the expositor how far he shall proceed. Much must be left to good sense, to spiritual tact, to that reverence for the word of God, which will show itself sometimes in refusing curiosities of interpretation, no less than at other times in demanding a distinct spiritual meaning for the words which are before it' (34). He quotes with approval:

. . . similitude is perfect in proportion as it is on all sides rich in application; and hence, in treating the parables of Christ, the expositor must proceed on the presumption that there is import in every single point, and only desist from seeking it when either it does not result without forcing, or when we can clearly show that this or that that

circumstance was merely added for the sake of giving intuitiveness to the narrative (34–35).

Second, it is often helpful to keep in mind the main point being made in the parable: 'It will much help us in this matter of determining what is essential and what not, if, before we attempt to explain the particular parts, we obtain a firm grasp of the central truth which the parable would set forth, and distinguish it in the mind as sharply and accurately as we can from all cognate truths which border upon it' (35).

Third, one should pay heed to the context, particularly how a parable is introduced and summed up (36).

Fourth ' . . . it is good evidence that we have discovered the right interpretation of a parable, if it leaves none of the main circumstances unexplained' (37).

Fifth, ' . . . the parables may not be made first sources and seats of doctrine. Doctrines otherwise and already established may be illustrated, or, indeed, further confirmed by them; but it is not allowable to constitute doctrine first by their aid' (37).

Richard Chenivix Trench—On the Parable of the Ten Virgins

Trench's exposition of the parable of the ten maidens in Matthew 25:1–13 serves as an illustration of his methodology and as a useful point of comparison with Ellen White, who has commented at length on this parable. Trench first outlines the marriage scene, which he describes as typical of Palestine. He then expounds the meaning of the parable, and true to his principles he seeks meaning in every possible detail. His interests show through in his exposition. He highlights points of personal application and of good doctrine, and does not neglect to draw out ethical implications. The meanings he attaches to each of the elements of the parable are as follows

Virgins: 'the fact that they are virgins implies the "profession of a pure faith (195).

Foolish Virgins: ' . . . we may . . . contemplate the foolish virgins, unprovided with oil, as those going through a round of external duties, without life, without love, without any striving after inward conformity to the law of God, whose religious is all husk and no kernel . . . It is clear that whatever is merely outward in the Christian profession is the lamp—whatever is inward and spiritual is the oil reserved in the vessels' (196–97).

Oil: [see also comments above on foolish virgins]: '... before we have exhausted all the meaning of the oil, we must get beyond both the works and the faith to something higher than either, the informing Spirit of God, which prompts the works and quickens the faith, of which Spirit oil is ever in Scripture the standing symbol' (197).

Bridegroom delayed: 'We may number this among the many hints given by our Lord, that the time of his return might possibly be delayed very far beyond the expectation of his first disciples' (199).

Sleep: The fact that all slept does not mean that not all are unready, but rather is a reference to the sleep of death.

Trimming the lamps: 'In a higher sense, every one at the last prepares to give an account of his works, inquires into the foundations of his faith... When the day of Christ comes, it will be impossible for any to remain longer ignorant of their true state...' (202).

Refusal of oil: 'The request, with the refusal which it meets, -like the discourse between Abraham and Dives, -can only be the outer garb of the truth; but of truth how momentous! -no other than this, that we shall look in vain from men for that grace which God only can supply...' (208). 'In the reason which the wise virgins give for declining to comply with other's request, *'lest there be not enough for us and you'*, there lies a witness against the works of supererogation, however Roman Catholic expositors may resist the drawing of any such conclusion from the words (203-4).

The above is perhaps enough to illustrate Trench's general interpretative strategy with regard to this parable. Attention will now be given to Ellen White's parable interpretation.

Ellen Gould White—Principles of Interpretation

At the time of her death, Ellen G White owned several copies of Trench's book on the parables.¹⁴ It is not unreasonable to suppose that she had read the book prior to writing her principal work on the parables, *Christ's Object Lessons*. However, the materials consulted for this essay, while clearly written in the same era, were equally clearly formed in-dependently.¹⁵ Thus it makes sense that Ellen White's work be first

14. 'A Bibliography of Ellen G White's Privet and Office Libraries,' compiled by Warren H Johns, Tim Poirier and Ron Graybill (available as a 'shelf document' from the Ellen G White Research Centre, Cooranbong, NSW 2265).

15. Fred Veltman's extensive list of works contemporaneous to Ellen White in his 'Full Report of the Life of Christ Research Project,' (unpublished manuscript, available at the Ellen G White Research Centre, Cooranbong, NSW 2265), IV:W1-Z11, lists several works of Richard C Trench, but not his *Notes on the Parables of Our Lord*. None of the works of Trench are listed as major or

considered independently of Trench, before a final comparison is made between the two.

The book, *Christ's Object Lessons*, begins with a chapter entitled 'Teaching in Parables', in which Ellen White sets out the principles by which parables should be approached and understood.

First, parables link earthly things with spiritual truths. The first words of Ellen White's book are as follows: 'In Christ's parable teaching the same principle is seen as in His own mission in the world... Men could learn of the unknown through the known; heavenly things were revealed through the earthly' (17). This theme is developed over five pages, concluding with the words: 'The scenes upon which the eye daily rests were all connected with some spiritual truth, so that nature is clothed with the parables of the Master' (20).¹⁶

Second, through his parables, 'Jesus desired to awaken inquiry' (20).

Third, 'Christ had truths to present which the people were unprepared to accept or even to understand' (21).

Fourth, 'Jesus sought an avenue to every heart... He... appealed to the different hearers' (21).

Fifth, Jesus was surrounded by enemies, and by using parables he avoided giving them occasion to act against him, while at the same time rebuking them (22).

Comments later in the book reveal another principle. *Sixth, one should be careful about the danger of over-enthusiastic allegory.* For example, she says of the parable of the unforgiving servant: 'This parable presents details which are needed for the filling out of the picture but which have no counterpart in its spiritual significance' (244).

Seventh, parables may have more than one application. This will be demonstrated in the next section of the essay.

Ellen Gould White—On the Parable of the Ten Maidens

The writings of Ellen White have two extended treatments of the parable of the Ten Maidens (Matt 25:1-13), one in *Christ Object Lessons* and one in *The Great Controversy*.¹⁷

minor sources of the chapters from *Desire of Ages* that Veltman analyses (883-888). The chapters which Veltman chose to investigate involved no exposition of parables, and Trench's *Notes on the Parables* would have been a highly unlikely source. In her library Ellen White also had a copy of Trench's *Christ the Desire of All Nations, or the Unconscious Prophecies of Heathendom*.

16. 'So through the creation we are to become acquainted with the Creator,' (Ellen G White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Washington DC: Review and Herald, 1941), 24).

17. The other place one might fairly expect to find a lengthy treatment of the parable is in Ellen G White, *Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific, 1970). The scriptural index at the back of my copy contains seven closely typed pages of scriptural citations (*Ibid*, 735-41). However, there are no references to any verse in Matthew 25:1-13.

The chapter in *Christ's Object Lessons*, 'To Meet the Bridegroom', begins by painting the picture of Jesus and his disciples overlooking a marriage party from the Mount of Olives. The basic outline of the parable of the five wise and five foolish maidens is told, then the basic approach that Ellen White takes to this parable is outlined in a few words:

He told His disciples the story of the ten virgins, by their experience illustrating the experience of the church that will live just before His second coming.

The two classes of watchers represent the two classes who profess to be waiting for their Lord. They are called virgins because they profess a pure faith. By the lamp is represented the word of God . . . The oil is a symbol of the Holy Spirit [pp 406–407]

The points made in the rest of the chapter are more fully developed than those made above. Some attention is given to the 'class represented by the foolish virgins' (411). They have a 'regard for truth, . . . they are attracted to those who believe the truth, but they have not yielded themselves to the Holy Spirit's working. They have not fallen upon the Rock, Christ Jesus, and permitted their old nature to be broken up' (411). When the cry goes forth, 'Behold the Bridegroom,' it is revealed that the foolish 'have not entered into fellowship with Christ' (413). The last eight pages are devoted to developing the implication of what is means to be a wise virgin who has enough oil to be a light giver: ' . . . in the night of spiritual darkness God's glory is to shine forth through His church in lifting up the bowed down and comforting those that mourn' (417). In other words, the light which the Christian sheds in this time dominated by the darkness of evil is expressed in very practical terms. Indeed, 'Practical work will have far more effective than mere sermonising. We are to give food to the hungry, clothing to the naked, and shelter to the homeless' (417).

In sum, in *Christ Object Lessons*, Ellen White uses a mildly allegorical approach to the parable which she sets in the context of the church just before the second coming of Jesus. Each of the various items are explained, and great care is taken to highlight the spiritually edifying message of the parable.

The treatment in *Great Controversy* has some elements in common with that in *Christ's Object Lessons*, but also some significant differences. Chapter 22, 'Prophecies Fulfilled,' deals with the seventh-month movement, or developments within the Millerite movement between the time of Spring 1844 and Oct 22, 1844. Spring 1844 passed without the second coming of Jesus, and the Millerites were disappointed. Ellen White cites the theme of delay found in Hab 2:1–4; and Ezek 12:21–25, 27–28, then states, "The parable of the ten virgins of Matthew 25 also

illustrates the experience of the Adventist people' (392–393¹⁸). Matthew 24 points to the signs of the second coming. 'Then [original italics] shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins.' Here is brought to view the church living in the last days' (393–94). The wise 'had reviewed the grace of God, the regenerating, enlightening power of the Holy Spirit, which renders His words a lamp to the feet and a light to the path... These had a personal experience, a faith in God and in His word, which could not be overthrown by disappointment and delay' (393–94). 'By the tarrying of the bridegroom is represented the passing of the time when the Lord was expected, the disappointment, and the seeming delay' (394–95). During this time, an element of fanaticism appeared among the Millerites, which Ellen White attributes to the work of Satan. Then, 'In the summer of 1844, midway between the time when it had been first thought that the 2300 days would end, and the autumn of the same year, to which it was afterward found that they extended, the message was proclaimed in the very words of Scripture: 'Behold, the bridegroom cometh!' (398–99). A page is devoted to pointing out that feasts which are associated with the first-coming of Jesus (such as Passover) were spring feasts, while those associated with the second coming (primarily the Day of Atonement) were autumn feasts. The tenth day of the seventh-month, the day of atonement, fell on Oct 22 in 1844. 'In the parable of Matthew 25 the time of waiting and slumber is followed by the coming of the bridegroom. This was in accordance with the arguments just presented, both from prophecy and from the types. They carried strong conviction of their truthfulness, and the 'midnight cry' was heralded by thousands of believers. Like a tidal wave the movement swept over the land . . . Fanaticism disappeared before this proclamation' (400–1). From this point, the chapter describes the spiritual wholesomeness of the movement and the terrible nature of the disappointment which followed when Jesus did not come on Oct 22, 1844.

It is clear that what is said about the parable of the ten maidens in *Great Controversy* is of quite a different character to the exposition found in *Christ's Object Lessons*. It is nearly a typological approach to the parable. The experience of the wise and foolish maidens 'illustrates' (392–93) the experience of the Adventist people. Here Ellen White, of course, is doing nothing more than using the language and interpretation of the 1844 Millerites. Yet she does so with apparent approval and without any comments that such use was inappropriate. Her two expositions are complimentary, rather than contradictory. What is said in *Great Controversy* about the experience of the wise maidens corresponds significantly with what is said in *Christ's Object Lessons*, and they both place the interpretation of the parable in the context

18 Page numbers to *Great Controversy* are given in terms of the standard pagination from the 1911 edition, and found printed at the bottom of my 1974 paperback edition. Pp. 392–393 corresponds to p. 347 in this paperback edition.

of the Church in the last days. At the very least, on the basis of these two expositions of the parable of the ten maidens, one must say that Ellen White is comfortable that a parable has several applications. In fact, she explicitly gives more than one application in her *Christ's Object Lessons* exposition of the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus: on pages 267–69 we have the 'Application to the Jewish Nation', while on pages 269–71, we have the application of the parable, 'In the Last Days'.

Conclusions

Archbishop Trench's work on the parables is indeed closer to that of Ellen G White than to a contemporary scholarly treatment of parables. In Trench's work there is little of the divide that exists in contemporary writing between the type of objectivity that is found in scholarly works and the warm personal application that is found in sermons. Trench considers himself at liberty to move freely from a discussion of a Greek term, interaction with Augustine, Tertullian, and the academic writers of his time, to the application of a parable to the personal spiritual life of his reader. Ellen White likewise moves freely from commenting on relevant historical backgrounds and detailed exposition of the text to personal and spiritual application. Both Trench and White are comfortable with what might be described as 'natural theology.' God, as creator, has revealed himself in nature, as well as in his Son and in Scripture.¹⁹ The parables of Jesus are but an extension of this idea. In his parables Jesus reveals the spiritual truths already inherent in nature.

Both Trench and White are very comfortable with using allegory as a method of interpreting the parables, although there is a difference between them in this regard. Compared to Trench, White is relatively conservative in the amount of allegorisation. Not every element of the parable is pressed for a meaning—only those that are most important to the meaning.

The biggest contrast between the two authors lies in the relative importance given to the imminence of the eschaton. Trench does consider the near return of Christ an important teaching of the Church. As he discusses the hint of the delay of our Lord contained in the phrase 'while the bridegroom delayed', he says:

It is not that He desires each succeeding generation to believe that in their day He will certainly return; for He cannot desire our faith and our practice to be founded on a misapprehension, but then the faith and practice of all but the last would be. But it is a necessary ele-

ment of the doctrine concerning the second coming of Christ, that it should be possible at any time, that none should consider it improbable in theirs.²⁰

For Ellen White, alongside of her consistent personal and spiritual applications, is clear in her consciousness that the message is urgent because of the soon expectation of the second coming of Jesus. Jesus is not just coming in some generation. Jesus is coming soon, *very* soon. This gives an urgency to her exposition: an urgency that, let it be said, represents the New Testament well.

19. 'The universe is a source of theology. The Scriptures assert that God has revealed himself in nature . . . The systematic exhibition of these facts, whether derived from observation, history or science, constitutes natural theology', in Augustus Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1907), 26.

20. Trench, *Notes, op cit*, 199.