
Introduction

*And he (Jesus) said to them,
“Do you not understand this parable?
How then will you understand all the parables?”¹
(Mark 4:13)*

The parables of Jesus are puzzling. A lack of comprehension is nothing unusual when one encounters these “short stories.” Even the earliest Christian texts share this assessment as one finds Gospel accounts relating that those listening to Jesus’ teaching did not understand the parables (Mark 4:10.13; John 10:6). The disciples themselves had to ask of Jesus, “Explain to us the parable ...!” (Matt. 13:36, cf. Mark 4:10), which is to say that even they did not understand the parables, or at least not immediately. Parable speech is incomprehensible and mysterious. This is also expressed by the term *παραβολή* (*parabolē*), the predominant term with which the genre is identified in the New Testament, since its traditional-historical derivation from the Hebrew *משל* (*mashal*) suggests precisely this enigmatic character (e.g., Ezek. 17:2; Prov. 1:6).² In this chapter I chart an approach that retains the

1. Unless otherwise noted all English Bible translations are taken from the NRSV or done by the author.

puzzling character of the parables while offering perspectives for capturing the potential of the parables to speak into different contexts. In this way the puzzle of the parables does not remain in shattered pieces but becomes a meaningful picture.

The Parables of Jesus: A Hermeneutical Challenge³

Understanding parables is clearly not simple, uncomplicated, or uncontroversial.⁴ This is true of the longer, more complex parables as well as of the shorter miniature narratives that were formerly called “metaphoric sayings” or “similitudes.”⁵ The German exegete Adolf Jülicher, one of the most influential parable scholars in the twentieth century, was of the opinion that an interpretation of the latter was not necessary because the message of these parable texts was immediately and directly apparent.⁶ After a moment’s consideration, however, it is by no means self-evident why, for example, the yeast is mixed with so much flour, how a mustard seed can grow into a tree large enough to house a bird’s nest, or how salt can lose its saltiness. Parables are simply not clear and unambiguous. They neither follow the laws of philosophical or mathematical logic nor express simple platitudes. It is not merely the diversity of more recent interpretation that provides confirmation for this conclusion.

2. In the LXX, *mashal* is usually translated with *παραβολή*; see also the discussion by Schüle, Andreas, “Mashal (lvm) and the Prophetic ‘Parables,’” in *Hermeneutik der Gleichnisse Jesu: Methodische Neuansätze zum Verstehen urchristlicher Parabeltexte*. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 231, ed. R. Zimmermann. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011).
3. The following is a translation and revision of Ruben Zimmermann, “Im Spielraum des Verstehens: Chancen einer integrativen Gleichnishermeneutik,” in *Hermeneutik der Gleichnisse Jesu: Methodische Neuansätze zum Verstehen urchristlicher Parabeltexte*. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 231, ed. Ruben Zimmermann and Mohr Siebeck (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 3–13.
4. Similarly David Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus: Pictures of Revolution* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1989), 244: “But the parables are not so simple and unambiguous that no one could mistake their meaning.” Also Thomas Söding, “Gottes Geheimnis sichtbar machen: Jesu Gleichnisse in Wort und Tat,” *Bibel und Kirche* 63 (2008): 60: “At the same time it is naive to assume that the parables of Jesus are as plain as day and as easy as pie.”
5. These terms render classifications that arose in German-speaking scholarship: *Bildwort* (Bultmann) and *Gleichnis im engeren Sinn* (Jülicher).
6. See Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, I, 114: “They need no interpretation; they are as clear and transparent as possible; they call for practical implementation. If one ... holds a mirror up in front of someone so that he sees his ugliness or the spots that ruin his looks, one does not need words of explanation. The mirror simply presents the reality better than one could with even the longest of descriptions.”

The striking differences in the understanding of these texts within the first decades of their reception, as can be seen from the parallel traditions of Matthew, Luke, and the Gospel of Thomas, already document a remarkable variety of interpretations. The oldest Gospel reflects the necessity for an interpretation of these texts (Mark 4:34) and offers explicit interpretations for two parables to serve as explanatory lessons for the disciples (the sower, Mark 4:13–20; the tares of the field, Matt. 13:36–43).

What is the meaning and intention of this mysterious form of speech? Why did Jesus employ precisely this manner of speech and make it his own? And why was it so successful in shaping early Christian tradition and memory? What has allowed the parables, despite their interpretive ambivalence, to remain treasured up to this very day? Is it only the close link to Jesus as the author of these texts, or do they transport the message of the New Testament in a concentrated form that cannot be replaced by any other way of speaking? Is it this literary form in particular by which religious truth takes shape?

Or by contrast, are they perhaps not even meant to be understood? Do they explicitly seek to veil the message of Jesus? This is the suggestion in Mark 4:11, which states that only the disciples will be entrusted with the secret (τὸ μυστήριον) and not “those outside” (τοῖς ἔξω). Are Jesus’ sayings, therefore, mysterious, esoteric speech intended only for an inner circle of Jesus’ followers? And are the outsiders, to whom the parables are addressed, supposed to remain confused or even be deceived? Did Mark want to say “that incomprehension was already there in response to Jesus’ message and Jesus therefore used riddle parables to increase and punish that incomprehension”⁷ Or should the so-called “hardening theory” of the parables be understood on a narrative pragmatic level as the attempt to process theologically the interpretative ambivalence of the

7. Crossan, *The Power of Parable*, 21. According to Crossan Mark interpreted Jesus’ parables as “punitive riddle parables for his opponents” (ibid.), but in doing so he was “not appropriate or adequate to the intention of Jesus ... because it is contradicted by the very context of Mark 4, with, for example, its parable of the lamp. Parables are no more meant for noncomprehension than a lamp is intended for nonlight” (ibid., 26–27).

parables?⁸ In addition to ears to hear (Mark 4:9), do we not also need an explanation of why some of Jesus' listeners were deaf to the message and the meaning of parables speech?

One may be tempted to relativize, to complain about, to rationalize, or even to curse the puzzling nature of the parables. However, it is this trait in particular that lends Jesus' parables their absolutely unmistakable character and corresponding impact. Incomprehensibility is a constitutive element of parable speech.

Yet the ambiguity of the parables is not created as part of some game or in order to annoy or frustrate the readers. In fact, parables are actually found in communication contexts that require clarity of meaning and straightforwardness as they are intended to fulfill a certain communicative function. They are meant, for example, to help settle arguments about the Torah, to expose the problems of family roles, or to denounce social injustices. They should cause one to pause for a moment, should lead to insights, or should even move people to action. Parables actually should be understood and take on significance in concrete situations and circumstances. They should become meaningful for one's life.⁹ But how can the parables' expectation of being understood and even calling for comprehension be reconciled with their well-known incomprehensibility and mysteriousness?

The seemingly paradoxical inner logic of this apparent contradiction is that parables are meant to create understanding through their mysteriousness. Initial incomprehension results in a process of questioning, marveling, and searching that can ultimately lead to deepened understanding. Parables are incomprehensible in order to lead to comprehension. That is to say, there is a calculated potential for misunderstanding ultimately to create deeper understanding.¹⁰ It is

8. See the reflection on this issue in Popkes, "Das Mysterion der Botschaft Jesu;" similarly Wenham, *Parables*, 244: "Jesus' parabolic ministry therefore comes as God's gift to some and as his judgement to others."

9. I disagree on that point with Hedrick, *Many Things*, 103: "They raise questions and issues but provide no answers."

10. The pragmatic function of the misunderstandings in John can be described very similarly (see Rahner, "Mißverstehen"). This strategy can be seen even more clearly in the "miracle stories," which present a hermeneutical challenge in that they intentionally present the "absurd," seeking to irritate and elicit incomprehension as they press beyond the end of "reality" in order to

precisely this hermeneutical strategy that is pursued by the parables and their narrators.¹¹ At the same time, the process of understanding cannot be restricted to one single meaning. Even though comprehension and understanding is the ultimate goal of the hermeneutical process, this goal cannot be equated with finding the solution to a mathematical problem. Parables are not equations. There may be different meanings, and they can even contradict to each other. The meaning of a parable will differ according to time and context, a reality that is unequivocally demonstrated in the history of parable interpretation. Different readings of the same parable may also occur at different points in one individual's lifetime.¹² However, this does not mean any of them are wrong. Furthermore, the meaning must not be limited to merely an individual process of discovery. Parables do not challenge only a singular reader or hearer. The attempt to understand a parable encourages a communal pursuit of meaning. It is precisely the many divergent interpretations and the resultant controversies and debates¹³ that they create that are an enticement for communication and stimulate a collective search for meaning.

That which is true for the first community of hearers or a later community of readers is equally true for scholarly discourse concerning the interpretation of parables. Tolbert already came upon an interesting puzzle in parable research: There is not only a variety of interpretations. Even "scholars who share the same assumptions concerning how one must hear the parables often present radically different interpretations of the same parable stories."¹⁴ The ambivalence of Jesus' parables poses, in particular, a hermeneutical

achieve a new way of understanding. On this issue, see my recent article Zimmermann, "Wut des Wunderverstehens."

11. See also Lohmeyer, "Vom Sinn der Gleichnisse," 156–57: "Parable speech is intentionally abstruse speech. ... Every parable is capable of and in need of interpretation; individual parables may be easier or more difficult to understand—even the well known saying: 'A man is not defiled by what goes into his mouth, but by what comes out of it' (Matt 15:11) is a parable and in need of interpretation. The interpretation does not always need to be stated explicitly if comprehension is guaranteed (see Matt 13:51) but without interpretation every parable is basically abstruse and obscure."

12. Crossan refers to a process of "self-education." "Parables were the special pedagogy of Jesus' kingdom of God." Crossan, "The Parables of Jesus," 253.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Tolbert, *Perspectives*, 15.

challenge and thus provokes hermeneutical reflection. The fact that the understanding of the parables is so controversial results in basic questions concerning not only the prerequisites and various possibilities for understanding but also their justification and establishment. In other words, being confronted with incomprehension necessitates a discussion of the “hermeneutics of the parables of Jesus.” In this way the parables become a platform for discovering and gaining insight into biblical interpretation more generally.

The Three Perspectives of Understanding the Bible

The question of understanding parable texts leads to the fundamental issue of how understanding biblical texts or even more generally understanding texts takes place in the first place. The hermeneutics of Jesus’ parables thus remain linked to the fundamental issues of biblical hermeneutics, which themselves are closely interwoven with the hermeneutic discourse of related disciplines such as philosophy, historical studies, or literary studies.¹⁵ Clearly, it is not possible within the context of this monograph to discuss the genesis of biblical hermeneutics¹⁶ or to consider a multitude of individual issues.¹⁷ For this reason I will focus, in a heuristic sense, upon several aspects that are important for and helpful in the understanding of parable texts.

First, the term *understanding* must be clarified, especially because the possibility of understanding a text or discovering meaning in general has been called into question in radical deconstructivist (Derrida) or postmodern (Mersch) approaches.¹⁸ Is understanding really possible, and what does it mean when we think that we have “understood” a text?¹⁹ Drawing on Körtner, we can begin by stating that in

15. See the lucid overview of the definitions of hermeneutics in the various disciplines in Wischmeyer, *Lexikon der Bibelhermeneutik*; more recently the textbook with sources Luther and Zimmermann, *Studienbuch Hermeneutik*.

16. See the overview in the four-volume work of Reventlow, *History of Biblical Interpretation*.

17. See Körtner, “Biblische Hermeneutik;” also Luther and Zimmermann, *Studienbuch Hermeneutik*.

18. See my overview on the so called “Antihermeneutics” and “Posthermeneutic” in Zimmermann, “Wut des Wunderverstehens,” 37–41. See for the Gadamer-Derrida debate Michelfelder/Palmer, *Dialogue and Deconstruction*; more recently Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*; Albert, *Kritik der reinen Hermeneutik*; Mersch, *Posthermeneutik*.

understanding, the question of meaning is always posed. “Understanding means grasping the meaning of something. Meaning and significance are fundamental categories of all hermeneutics.”²⁰

At the same time, however, the question of the level upon which this meaning is manifested arises. What, concretely, should be understood; where do meaning and significance become visible? Should the intention of the author be reconstructed or should the significance inherent to the structure of the text be decoded? Or should a reader perhaps discover meaning through productive engagement with a text?

These questions reveal three aspects that have defined the (biblical) discourse on hermeneutics throughout the centuries, namely the (historical) author, the text, and the readers.

Following Dannhauer’s definition of general hermeneutics as employing methodological rules that serve the general interpretation of texts,²¹ hermeneutics were considered for a long time to be the methodologically governed *art of interpretation* of a written work. The goal of the process of understanding was therefore to grasp the inherent meaning of the text by means of the correct application of certain interpretive rules. This meaning had to be identical with the original intention of the author. Within this framework, understanding was regarded entirely as a reconstructive process through which, for example, deficits in understanding that arose due to the chronological distance from the author and to ignorance concerning the origins and provenance of a text had to be compensated for. The text and its author were clearly in the forefront of the search for meaning. Later, Schleiermacher emphasized two poles in the process of understanding

19. I am here focusing on the understanding of a text (i.e., textual hermeneutics, which is only one aspect of an overarching theory of hermeneutics).

20. See Körtner, “Biblische Hermeneutik,” 11: “Verstehen heißt, den Sinn von etwas zu erfassen. Sinn und Bedeutung sind grundlegende Kategorien jeder Hermeneutik.” In contrast to radical deconstructivist and interpretationist approaches, philosophical and literary-critical discourse adheres to meaning or at least postulates a successful, meaning-compatible communication as the minimal demand of understanding, though without claiming objectivity and uniformity for such meaning.

21. See Dannhauer, *Idea boni interpretis*; see excerpts of this text with German translation in Luther and Zimmermann, *Studienbuch Hermeneutik*, CD-Rom and the introduction found in Sparr, “Johann Conrad Dannhauer (1603–1666).”

and thus assigned a value in the construction of meaning not only to the text and its author but also to the reader or interpreters. Thus hermeneutics must be described both as “grammatical-historical” and “psychological” interpretation.²² According to Schleiermacher, the interpreter enters into an interaction with the text and its author in which the art of interpretation is described as a (post)creative process.

In the wake of Schleiermacher and Dilthey, the phenomenological hermeneutics of the twentieth century challenged the concept of understanding as an “object-related process of decoding” and instead concentrated on the subjective process of perception or reception. Gadamer wrote:

A philosophical hermeneutic will come to the conclusion that understanding is only possible when the one seeking to understand brings his own perspective into play. The productive contribution of the interpreter belongs, in an indissoluble manner, to the sense of meaning itself. This does not legitimize individual and arbitrary subjective biases since the issue at hand—the text that one wishes to understand—is the only criterion that one accepts. But the irresolvable, necessary distance of time, culture, class, race—or the person him- or herself—is, however, a super-subjective circumstance that brings tension and life into every understanding. One can also describe this state of affairs that interpreter and text each have their own “horizon” and that every act of understanding constitutes a fusion of horizons.²³

In (post)structuralist and reader-response hermeneutics, focusing on the reader even led to an explicit displacement of the text from its author and its original setting, which Barthes cast in the well-known dictum: the “death of the author.”²⁴ The text was regarded as an autonomous work of art that unfolds its meaning only in the productive “act of reading” (Iser)²⁵ and interpretation. “The meaning of the text no longer coincides with what the author wanted to say.”²⁶

22. Schleiermacher came to this insight by retrospectively retracing the origins of a speech; thus understanding is the reconstruction of the language and thought in a speech, see Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutik und Kritik*, 93–94.

23. Gadamer, “Hermeneutik,” 109.

24. See Barthes, “La mort de l’auteur,” 491.

25. See Iser, *Akt des Lesens*.

26. Ricœur, “Theologische Hermeneutik,” 28.

Thus, hermeneutics is no longer restricted to the interpretation of a text and is expanded to a general consideration of understanding and of the world in which interpretation takes place. As such, the goal of the hermeneutical process is no longer the decoding of textual meaning but the comprehensive interpretation of the self and of the world that is initiated through engagement with text.²⁷

Structuralist and form critical approaches incontrovertibly take credit for emphasizing the autonomy of the text on the one hand and the autonomy of the recipient on the other. Nevertheless, many questions remain unanswered. Excessively structuralistic approaches must be challenged on the question of how the meaning of a text can be stated when a reader has not first discovered and described it. An autonomous structure of texts without readers remains meaningless. On the other hand, however, can the construction of meaning be left completely up to the reader? Does this not reduce the meaning—or even the truth of the text—to an arbitrary subjective construction? What then guarantees the successful communicability of (textual) meaning? How do constructions of meaning remain justifiably related to the text and not subject to an ever-new act of speaking or cognition? Is there not at least minimal continuity in the understanding of a text?

Although differentiating the various perspectives appears helpful, it would be wrong to separate and isolate the individual aspects. With regard to deconstructionist approaches, U. Eco pressed for a balance between the intention of the reader (*intentio lectoris*), of the author (*intentio auctoris*) and even of the text itself (*intentio operis*).²⁸ Meaning and significance cannot be made merely one-sided by limiting them to only one of the three aspects. In agreement with this perspective, the hermeneutical approach of this volume is marked by the conviction that historical author, text and recipient all belong together and that meaning is constituted in and through their reciprocal engagement with each other.

A possible integration of the three components involved in the

27. See *ibid.*: Hermeneutics aim “not really at a hermeneutics of the text, but at a hermeneutics that begins with the problems posed by the text.”

28. See Eco and Goll, *Autor und Text*; Eco, *Grenzen der Interpretation*.

comprehension of a text can be demonstrated by explaining the hermeneutical process through a communication model. Whereas Gadamer described the process of understanding using the metaphor of “conversation” as a dialogue of two components—text and interpreter—in their respective scopes of understanding,²⁹ there is a tendency within biblical studies to consider especially the historical author or more generally the historical context of the text’s origin. Expanding on Gadamer’s conversation metaphor, however, the understanding of biblical texts should be described as a *three-point process of communication* that involves, to the same extent, the text, the setting of its origin and its contemporary reception.

The so-called *organon*-model³⁰ developed by Karl Bühler is helpful in describing and disclosing how meaning is generated in the communicative process. With reference to Plato, language is an “*organum* for one person to be able to communicate with another about certain things.”³¹ Bühler here distinguishes between three “foundations” in the linguistic process of communication that correspond to the sender, receiver, and object. Understanding thus takes place as an act of communication between a sender (S) and a receiver (R) about objects and circumstances (O).³²

29. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 391: “Thus it is completely justified to speak of a hermeneutical conversation. ... Communication that is more than simple assimilation takes place between the partners in this ‘conversation’ just as it does between two people. The text may speak of some matter, but that it does so is ultimately the achievement of the interpreter. Both participate in the process.”

30. Vgl. Bühler, *Sprachtheorie*, 24–33. The Greek term *organon* (instrument) was traditionally used for a selection of Aristotelian texts, which served as an elementary methodological introduction for humanists. Bühler uses the term *organon* in a broader, metaphorical way. A similar application to form-critical exegesis is carried out by Backhaus, “Die göttlichen Worte.”

31. Bühler, *Sprachtheorie*, 24.

32. See the diagram in *ibid.*, 28.

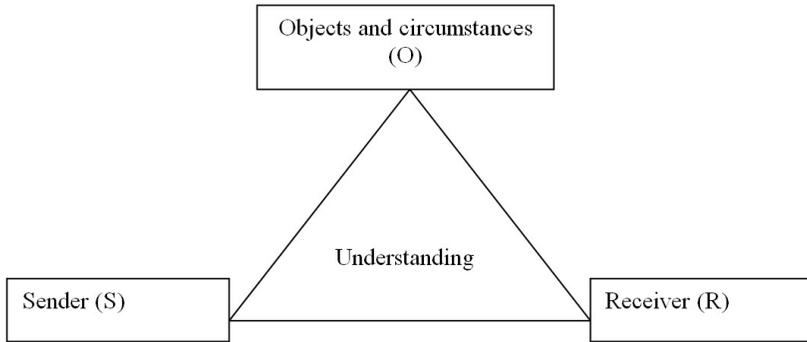


Figure 1: Understanding as communication in Bühler's Organon Model.

Bühler's work has contemporary speech acts in view, and therefore, I believe several modifications are necessary with regard to understanding a text or the Bible. The medium or *organon* through which the message is transferred between S and R itself becomes an object.³³ In the text (T), the matter concerning which communication takes place becomes the representation. The object of understanding is thus not located outside of the text but rather in and with it.³⁴ Further, the sender can be described as author (A) and the receiver as reader (Rd). If we attempt to fill out this communicative model of understanding by taking the dimension of time into account, we can link the sender to the context surrounding the origin of the text and the receiver to the process of reading. Because the original reader (Rdo) is no longer directly accessible and like the historical author, must be reconstructed, the receiver aspect can be concentrated on the contemporary process of reading. The text as a philological artifact takes up a central position in which it breaks through the dimension of time and becomes a connector between history and the present day.

33. Perceiving the Bible as "organon" is linked to two relativizing implications. On the one hand, the Bible is then not directly "the work of God" but rather the indirect bearer of a message; on the other hand it is not an end in itself but rather "only" a tool—that is a medium within a communication event.

34. Alternatively one could describe the process in a four-point constellation (perhaps in the form of a tetrahedron, rectangle) in which the "matter" is individually and separately identified in addition to text, sender, and receiver as developed by Oeming, *Biblische Hermeneutik*, 176.

Therefore, the hermeneutical process of understanding the Bible can be portrayed schematically as follows (see Fig. 2):

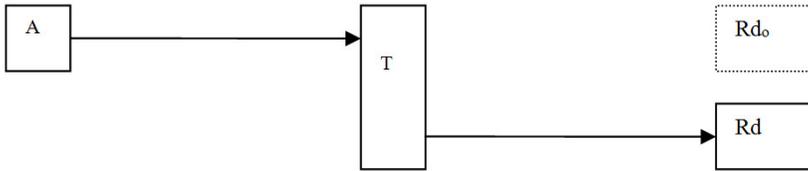


Figure 2: Text hermeneutics as a communicative process.

The arrows in the diagram (fig. 2) must, however, not be misunderstood as a unilinear transfer of meaning. Understanding is not the retracing of a linear, historical path of meaning. Instead, the question of meaning can be posed only through approaches on all three levels with the use of different methods on each level. Though earlier approaches to biblical hermeneutics differentiated strictly between methodologically controlled exegesis and hermeneutical application,³⁵ more recent approaches have noted the close interconnection of hermeneutics and methodology.³⁶ On the one hand hermeneutics cannot be reduced to a problem of method; on the other hand methods of interpretation cannot escape from the hermeneutical circle. Hence, it is helpful to link individual methods of biblical interpretation to each of the hermeneutical perspectives.³⁷ This enables each side of the hermeneutical triangle to be connected with certain interpretive methods (see fig. 3). In order to interpret the text appropriately, one needs linguistic methods. Methods of historical

35. See Weder, *Neutestamentliche Hermeneutik*, 5, who strictly separates his hermeneutics from methodology; also the distinction between exegesis and application in Berger, *Hermeneutik*.

36. O. Wischmeyer “programmatically assumes that the exegesis, which is the methodology-oriented interpretation of the New Testament texts, is also the appropriate instrument for understanding these texts. An understanding of the New Testament texts that avoids their methodical interpretation is nonsense.” Wischmeyer, *Hermeneutik*, IX-X.

37. See in Oeming the summarizing diagram with the classification of fourteen methods of interpretation to the four poles of the understanding process, see Oeming, *Biblische Hermeneutik*, 176; O. Wischmeyer also integrates the methods of Bible interpretation into hermeneutics, which is structured as “A: historical understanding” (21-59), “B: form critical understanding” (61-125), “C: factual understanding” (127-71) and “D: textual understanding” (173-209), Wischmeyer, *Hermeneutik*; Backhaus, moreover, speaks about “reconstructive” or “applicative hermeneutics,” see Backhaus, “Die göttlichen Worte,” 153-60.

research can be used to understand the sender or the author of the text in his or her historic context while the recipient side can be illuminated using reader-oriented methods.

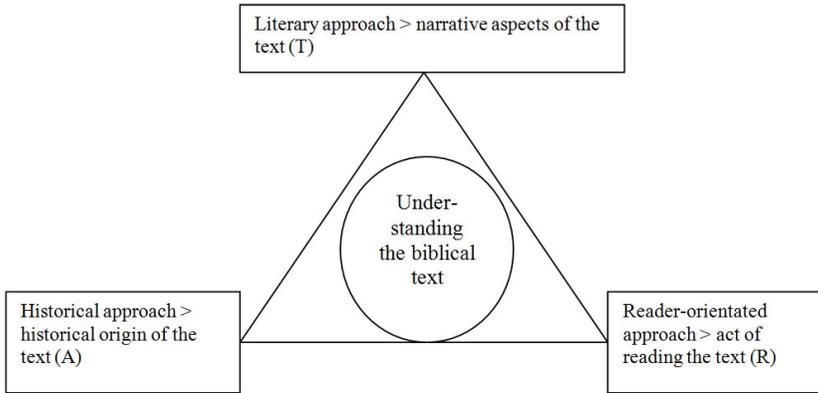


Fig. 3: Hermeneutical triangle for understanding the biblical text.

The understanding or meaning of a biblical text, therefore, should not be misunderstood as merely an author-fixated process of communication or solely as a text-related *Wirkungsgeschichte* [AQ: **translate for the reader?**] or uniquely as a reader-directed process of construction. In the process of finding meaning, the original setting, the structure and form of the text, and the situation of the recipient interact and influence each other. Although meaning may be decisively influenced by a text's linguistic structure and content, it is not possible to completely decipher that which is recorded in a historical text if the historical context of that text's origin is unknown. A contemporary reader also brings preconceptions and his or her own questions and concerns into the process of reading, which results in the transformation of meaning from a purely reconstructive event into a productive activity.³⁸ Every dimension has its own intrinsic value and at the same time interacts with the other dimensions so that they

38. Approaches focusing particularly upon the reader have been helpfully employed in more recent literary studies, above all in reader-response criticism, for the understanding of biblical texts. See Warning, *Rezeptionsästhetik*, also Iser, *Akt des Lesens*; Nißmüller, *Rezeptionsästhetik*; Körtner, *Der inspirierte Leser*.

all influence each other in a circular or spiral-shaped process. Thus, understanding takes place only with the reciprocal cooperation of all three components of the triangle.

If we regard biblical hermeneutics from a framework focusing on the text as an act of communication, it is possible to integrate the various perspectives and approaches found in the history of research into one complete model.³⁹ In this way, hermeneutics concerned primarily with questions of history, from Semler to the historical-critical method or in contemporary biblical archaeology, can be regarded as invaluable for its attention to the situation and context concerning the origin of the text. Linguistic methods of interpretation developed during the *linguistic turn* place the text itself at the forefront, while reader-oriented approaches to the text, as they have emerged clearly and with considerable reflection in liberation-theological or in feminist approaches, provide important insight into the perspective of the recipient. The individual aspects, however, do not have to be played off against or demarcated from each other. Each of them has its own justified place in the hermeneutical endeavor in that each one contributes to interpretation by means of specific methods that shift individual aspects of meaning evoked by the biblical text to the fore. Each perspective, however, also has its limitations because focusing on one aspect leaves other equally important aspects unconsidered. An appropriate understanding of biblical texts is only possible when the different perspectives are employed in cooperation.

The Search for an Integrative Approach to Parables

The above approaches to understanding the Bible, which can be labeled heuristically as historical, literary, and reader-orientated approaches, can be seen especially clearly in the interpretation of the parables. Thiselton is right when he states that “the parables offer an excellent workshop of examples”⁴⁰ in which hermeneutics can be studied. The

39. See also Oeming, *Biblische Hermeneutik*, 175: “On the one hand it is has been shown that *each* of the methods can clearly illuminate certain facets of the biblical text and thus has a relative right to be heard, but on the other hand *each* one has its blind spots and thus needs critical supplementation.”

fact that a hermeneutics of the parable can be developed in this threefold manner is actually evoked and brought about by the texts themselves. The parables can be understood from an historical perspective as well as from a text-based, literary perspective. As they are, however, also reader-oriented to a significant extent, the recipient must also be given his or her due space. Therefore, it is not surprising that the entire parable interpretation of the past one hundred years can be understood within a framework including these three perspectives.⁴¹

The hermeneutics of parables is based on these different perspectives: In the *historical perspective*, the issue is not the reconstruction of the authentic words of Jesus and a postulated path of transmission. Nevertheless, we ask historical questions when we look socio-historically for the “reality” from which the metaphor of the parable draws its imagery (*Bildspendender Bereich*), when the transmission processes can be placed diachronically into the tradition of the imagery (*Bildfeldtraditionen*) or when early traces of impact (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) can be perceived in the parallel textual traditions

The *literary dimension* comes to the fore to the extent that an exact “narrative analysis” of the texts is called for. In such an analysis, the examination of the plot structure, the characters, time and space, the focalization, etc., reveals important insights in the way of recounting this particular parable. Furthermore, the parables are metaphorical texts. Thus, we may ask how a metaphor is to be recognized, and how it functions. We are looking for signals in the text indicating a transfer of meaning (e.g., the kingdom of God is like...) and the manner in which interaction between the two semantic fields is brought together within the metaphoric text. In order to protect the text from purely ideological agendas and prematurely articulated appropriations, its literary form and aesthetic structure should first be examined and described. Nevertheless, parables are not regarded in this process as poetic “autonomous works of art” that can be understood in pure

40. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics*, 35. See the entire chapter III: “An Example of Hermeneutical Method: The Parables of Jesus” (35–59).

41. See the survey on research in chapter 2.

isolation. Reading a particular text within the context of the macro text is also an important aspect of the literary analysis.

The aim of the parables is, however, to instigate the process of understanding. Historical and literary aspects should not be investigated for their own sake; instead they ultimately serve to attain deeper understanding. Although a certain structuring already takes place on the literary level, the meaning of each parable must ultimately be discovered anew by every *reader*. In which way is the reader addressed? What are the literary devices or “gaps” in the text that appeal the reader in her or his cognitive as well as affective dimension? In this consideration, therefore, the recipient is at the forefront. However, the communication structure of parables is more complex than that found in other biblical texts. The parables are narrated narratives with a narrated narrator and narrated addressees. Thus, there are actually three identifiable levels of addressees: (1) the listeners to the parable in the narrated world, (2) the first addressees of the Gospel, and (3) the contemporary readers. The third level is the primary focus in a reader-response search for meaning; however, the other addressee or recipient levels can also influence the contemporary process of constructing meaning. Perceiving this complexity in the communication structure is particularly relevant when posing questions concerning the necessary requirements for as well as the potential difficulties of understanding and comprehending the parables.

Although it is useful in a heuristic sense to distinguish each of these issues or foci as sharply as possible, the results of such a sharp delimitation are often one-sided and inappropriate. It is far too easy to distort other positions through caricature or to employ only those methods most inclined to support one’s own position. The various approaches to understanding Jesus’ parables must not be played out against each other.

Instead, it is my goal to unify different perspectives into an integrative hermeneutic. The individual steps of interpretation that, for example, are employed in the examples in chapters 7 to 12 are

thus not new methods, and neither do they lead to the discovery of new, previously unrecognized details. New, instead, is the integrative and balanced combination of different aspects that go beyond earlier interpretations and lead to a multi-perspectival, open, and thus—to a certain extent—postmodern hermeneutic.⁴²

However, before we pursue this approach further, it is important to locate the present discussion within the context of the current state of parables research.

42. It is evident, however, that the overlapping aspect between this approach and postmodern thought is the openness to different variations and “truths.” Quite different from postmodern philosophy is the search for meaning and even the use of the term *hermeneutics*; for most postmodern thinkers a term like *postmodern hermeneutics* would be—following Derrida—an oxymoron.