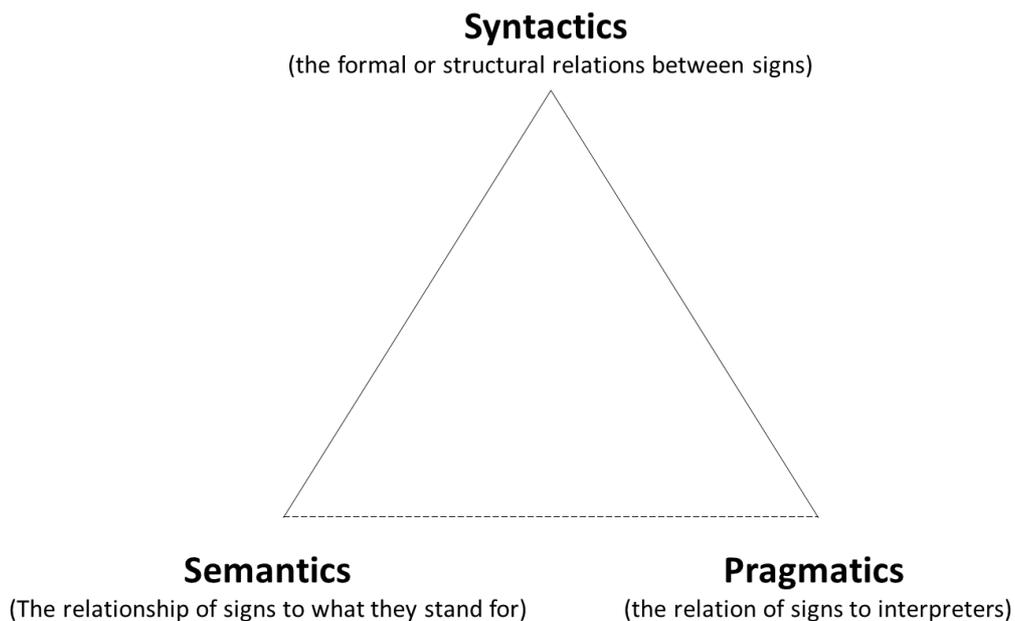


The Semiotics of the Sower and the Seed

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In this paper, I will argue that Jesus' parables should be seen in the tradition of Wisdom literature and that all Wisdom literature share a common epistemological framework that provides the key to their interpretation. For the sake of clarity, I will make use of semiology to identify the structural components of parables as well as their relationship to the Wisdom framework. I will demonstrate that Jesus' words in Matthew 13:10-17 affirm this Wisdom paradigm and the Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:3-9,18-23) expands on it. I will draw out the Christological ramification of this approach, explore its impact on parabolic studies and conclude with some thoughts on extending this framework to other aspects of Jesus' life and ministry.



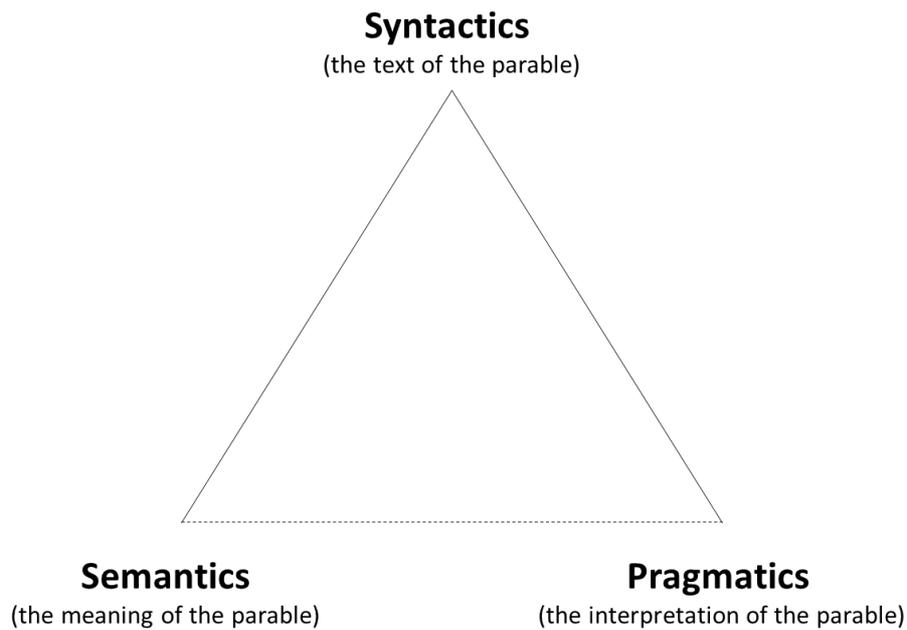
(Figure 1)

Semiotics can be defined as 'The study of signs and symbols and their use or interpretation'.¹ What is of interest in this paper are the three component branches of semiotics, their relationship with each other² (see figure 1) and their application to

¹ Oxford Dictionaries, <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/semiotics> (n.d.)

² Daniel Chandler, "Semiotics for Beginners," <http://visual-memory.co.uk/daniel/Documents/S4B/> (1994-2016)

parables. There is a direct relationship between meaning (semantics) and the signs (syntactics) in which meaning is encoded. There is also a direct relationship between the signs (syntactics) and their interpretation (pragmatics). However the relationship between the interpretation and meaning is indirect and can only be inferred through the signs or symbol. Consequently, the syntactic component can be deemed ambiguous in the sense that the sign or symbol may mean different things to the encoder and the decoder.³



(Figure 2)

When applying this semiotic framework to parables (see figure 2), it becomes immediately apparent that there is an added degree of complexity. In most parables⁴, the story (syntactics) is explicitly disassociated with its meaning (semantics). For example in Matthew 13, six times⁵, a parable is introduced with the phrase “the Kingdom of Heaven is like...” In other words, the reader or listener is alerted to the fact that the meaning of the story is not about a mustard seed, or a dragnet or a treasure and is in some way about the Kingdom of Heaven, but are

³ Daniel Chandler, “Semiotics for Beginners,” <http://visual-memory.co.uk/daniel/Documents/S4B/> (1994-2016)

⁴ Other than parables that are extended synecdoche, about a class or group of people described in the parables, such as the Parable of the Rich Fool or the Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican. Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables Second Edition* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 2012), 52

⁵ Matthew 13:31, Matthew 13:33, Matthew 13:44, Matthew 13:45, Matthew 13:47, Matthew 13:52.

given no further clues as to what the connection might be. Parables, therefore, deliberately conceal meaning whilst teasing the listener with the possibility of its discovery. Moreover, other than for two parables,⁶ the gospel writers have not provided any exegetical keys to decode their hidden meaning. As a result, ambiguity abounds and the interpretation of parables has become a veritable cottage industry.⁷

Much has been written about the parables and other rabbinical parables (or *meshalim*) and the ways in which Jesus' parables could be compared to Old Testament *meshalim*⁸. The point that seems to have been missed, however, is that all *meshalim*, including the parables of Jesus, come under a broader category of Wisdom literature found in the *Ketuvim* (writings) section of the Hebrew Bible. All *meshalim* share a common framework for understanding of what wisdom is and how wisdom is appropriated. This epistemological framework undergirds the whole of the Hebrew Bible. Specifically, it addresses the question "how do we know what we know about God?" or, "How does God communicate to humans what He wants them to know about Him?"

The following verses, amongst many, outline this framework:

"The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law."
(Deuteronomy 29:29)

"Where then does wisdom come from? And where is the place of understanding?
It is hidden from the eyes of all living." (Job 28:20-21a)

⁶ The parable of the sower (Mark 4:1–20, Matthew 13:3–23, Luke 8:5–15) and the parable of the wheat and tares (Matthew 13:24-30).

⁷ Until the nineteenth century, the interpretive approach was based on an Allegorical approach, not surprisingly, as the two parables that have interpretive keys have a one to one correspondence between the story and its hidden meaning. Jülicher using Aristotelian understanding of metaphor and simile and dismissing any allegorical interpretation as subsequent interpolation by the church, insisted that all Jesus' parables in their true form were not parables but were extended similes and only made one point. The form critics in the first half of the twentieth century spent much of their effort at trying to get to the original stories as Jesus would have told them without arriving at any consensus. The Redactionist were concerned with the editorial intent and tried to see who the parables were used to communicate their specific messages. In recent years there has been a return to a more textual interpretation approach, looking at similar patterns and content in parables. At the same time, there has also been a parallel thread of examining parables using literary criticism. The point of highlighting these approaches is to illustrate how problematic parabolic interpretation have become. (Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables Second Edition*, 17-194)

⁸ See for example Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus A commentary* (Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 5-11

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; Fools despise wisdom and instruction.” (Proverbs 1:7)

“It is the glory of God to conceal a matter, but the glory of kings is to search out a matter.” (Proverbs 25:2)

The framework can be summarized as follows:

- The attributes and ways of God belong to God and are his secrets. (Deuteronomy 29:29)
- Some of these secret things God has chosen to reveal to man. (Deuteronomy 29:29)
- What God has chosen to reveal he paradoxically hides. (Proverbs 25:2)
- Collectively these hidden things are known as Wisdom (Job 28:20-21a)
- What is hidden is meant to be found (revealed). (Proverbs 25:2)
- However only the wise and noble will find it whilst fools will never discover it. (Proverbs 25:2, Proverbs 1:7)

This pattern permeates every book of the *Tanakh* so that even if it were not explicitly described in this way, it would have resonated with all those that Jesus interacted with. Take the dreams of Pharaoh (Genesis 41) for example. God chose to reveal the future of Egypt but he does so in a dream that Pharaoh does not understand, it is hidden from him. Pharaoh is not worthy to understand the dream but Joseph is. Once the dream is interpreted Joseph is exalted to the kingly position appropriate to his standing with God. ⁹

Reading Jesus' words in Matthew 13:11-17, it should be evident that the purpose of parables fit perfectly into this epistemological paradigm. Parables contain the 'secrets of the kingdom of heaven' (v11). As Theodore of Mopsuestia noted, Jesus speaks in parables “to make invisible things seen” ¹⁰. However, whilst what is invisible has been given visible form in the parables, it remains hidden in the tradition

⁹ There are plenty of other Biblical examples, all dreams would fit into this category, as would many prophecies or prophetic acts or stories like Moses and the burning bush (Exodus 3) or the anointing of David to be king (1 Samuel 16:1-13). The basic idea is that God's revelation to man is given in a hidden form, many times hidden in plain sight, and requires decoding before the true meaning can be understood.

¹⁰ Manlio Simonetti, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture - New Testament 1a - Matthew 1-13* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 2001), 271

of ancient Wisdom. It is not the text of the parable – the syntactic component – that provides the interpretive key, but the attitude of the interpreter – the pragmatic component – that determines whether the meaning of the parable will be revealed or remain hidden. Thus Jesus’ disciples, those who follow him, will have eyes to see and ears to hear and will perceive the truth (v16), whilst the crowd, who have not yet committed to follow, may see and hear the parables at the story level but will not understand their meaning (vv14-15).

Jesus’ explanation of the Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:18-23) expands this wisdom framework. First there is liberality in terms of what God has chosen to reveal, both in terms of the breadth of coverage and in terms of its quantity. In the Old Testament, there is a sense in which the wisdom of God is scarce. Amos, for example, speaks of a ‘famine of hearing the word of the Lord’ (Amos 8:11). The picture here of the sower sowing on all types of soil, seemingly with an endless supply of seeds would indicate the opposite. Jerome, in his commentary on Matthew writes, “The crowd is not of a single mentality for each person has a different frame of mind. He therefore speaks to them in many parables so they may receive different teachings depending on their frame of mind.”¹¹ The Kingdom of Heaven extends to all kinds of people in all kinds of circumstances and is palpably ‘at hand’. (Matthew 3:2, 4:17, 10:7).

Secondly, there is a shift in understanding of what constitutes revelation and thus the appropriation of wisdom. In the Old Testament, we might conclude that wisdom is received through understanding, through the discovery of the truth that God intends to reveal. It is an exercise of the mind, or perhaps of the heart. In the Parable of Sower however, it is clear that what counts is not understanding but action; success is defined by growth, not insight. Moreover, Jesus introduces a sliding scale to measure the effectiveness of revelation, ranging from completely ineffective to supernaturally fecund. There is a new challenge here. Pope Benedict XVI writes, “the parable demands the collaboration of the learner...he himself must enter into the movement of the parable and journey along with it. At this point we begin to see why parables can cause problems...in the case of parables that affect

¹¹ Thomas C Oden, *Ancient Christian Devotional: Lectionary Cycle A, Volume 1* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 2007), 168

and transform their personal lives, people can be unwilling to be drawn into the required movement.”¹²

The ramifications of understanding parables within this wisdom framework are significant. First, in its contribution to the Christological debate. In the Wisdom paradigm, it is God that conceals revelation for us to find. (Proverbs 25:2). In the parables, it is Jesus that encodes the mystery of the kingdom in the parables. Jesus thus takes the place of God. This connection is reinforced in some of the parables where Jesus explicitly tells the listener to put into practice “these words of mine.” (e.g. Matthew 7:26). Just before the barrage of parables in Matthew 13, we read, “The Queen of the South will rise up with this generation at the judgment and will condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and behold, something greater than Solomon is here.” (Matthew 12:42) Who is greater than Solomon? Wisdom herself as personified in Proverbs 8. In the parables, Wisdom speaks. There is a symmetry which the writer of Matthew is careful to construct between Jesus’ teaching and the *Tanakh*. We see in the Sermon on the Mount the emergence of the new *Torah*. In the prophetic discourses, Jesus embodies the new *Nevi'im*. With the parables, as we have just demonstrated, Jesus ushers in the new *Ketuvim*.

The second implication has to do with parable interpretation. In the Wisdom paradigm, a divine truth only becomes revealed truth at the moment of its discovery; prior to that it is a hidden truth. The same applies to Jesus’ teaching on parables. What is clear however is that correct interpretation of the parables, as Jesus taught it, requires a change in the life of the hearer or reader for it to be considered valid. It echoes Jesus’ opening ministry salvo, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matthew 4:17).¹³ As Luther has said, for religion to have any meaning it must be ‘*Pro me*’, for me.¹⁴ The focus on parables studies in recent years has been on the correct exegesis of the text. The import of what we have just outlined is that the exegesis of a parable may be accurate but if it does not result in personal change for the interpreter it would be hermeneutically inadequate.

¹² Joseph Ratzinger Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 192

¹³The word for repent, ‘μετανοέω’ literally means ‘think differently afterwards’ and the first part of the word ‘μετα’ implies ‘being changed’. Word study derived from Bible Hub - Strong's Concordance, <http://biblehub.com/greek/3340.htm>

¹⁴ Quoted from John Drury, *The Parables in the Gospels* (London: SPCK, 1985), 2

Carrying this thought further, we could also say that what is hermeneutically correct may be exegetically deficient. In the Wisdom paradigm, meaning is appropriated only when it engages with the interpreter. As the interpreters or the parables are now varied and numerous and are located in different life situations, the truth that is revealed will no longer be identical but will mesh with the situation of each individual. The meaning behind each parable becomes multi-faceted. To steal a phrase from the form critics, it is not the *sitz im leben Jesu* that matters, but the situation in life of the listener or reader. Take for example, the parable of the Pearl of Great Price (Matthew 13:45-46), both Blomberg and Hultgren interpret the pearl merchant to be a follower of Jesus and the parable is about re-prioritising life in light of discovering the kingdom of heaven. Jackie Pullinger, who works with drug addicts in Hong Kong, has discovered that whenever she studies this same passage with those that have been rescued through her ministry, the interpretation is uniformly the same: the pearl merchant is God and they are the pearl of great price. Not great exegesis but profound hermeneutics. Ultimately, parables, in Jesus' paradigm, are just approximation of heavenly truths and, at some point, all analogies will be found wanting.¹⁵ So parables, at least for Jesus, are not about one point, as Jülicher would have insisted¹⁶ or triadic in nature as Blomberg so persuasively argues¹⁷ but they are an invitation to a journey where the reader or listener enters the story and is transfigured.

This brings me to my final point and the conclusion of this paper. What I have uncovered is a schema, an epistemological framework for knowing God, knowing his ways and receiving his revelations for our lives. This paradigm provides a coherent key to interpreting the parables. It can also be applied to interpret all of Jesus' teaching, his works and indeed his life, death and resurrection.¹⁸ In figure 3 below, we simply substitute parables with these other components. At first glance, there may seem to be little that is hidden in say, one of Jesus' miraculous healing stories or one of his personal encounters story. Then we remember that God hides things for us to find – the moment of forgiveness for our own sins, the discovery of comfort

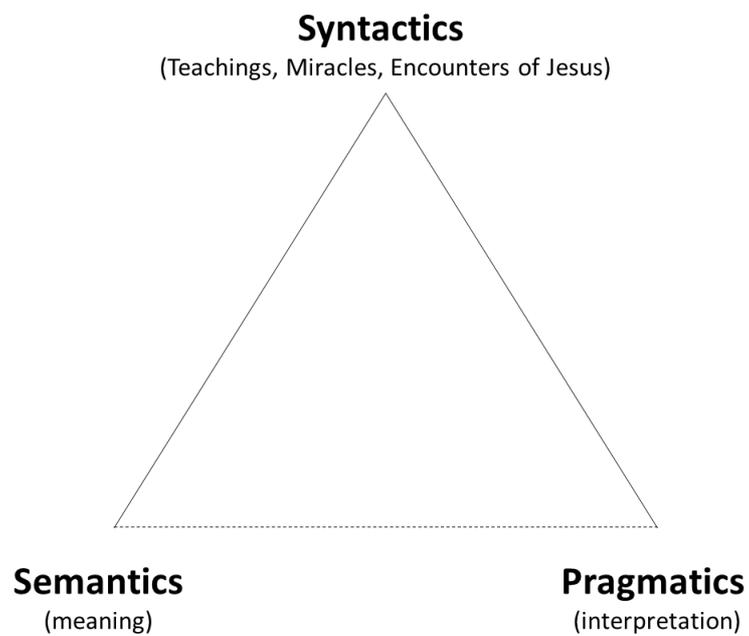
¹⁵ See also Jesus' words to Nicodemus in John 3:12

¹⁶ J D Kingsbury, *The Parables of Jesus in Matthew 13* (London: SPCK, 1969), 1-3

¹⁷ Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables Second Edition* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 2012)

¹⁸ In semiotics, the syntactic component does not have to consist of text, it could be a sound, a picture or an action – anything that could be regarded as a symbol or sign for something else. Daniel Chandler, "Semiotics for Beginners," <http://visual-memory.co.uk/daniel/Documents/S4B/> (1994-2016)

as our tears are wiped away, the receiving of healing both physical and emotional as we find ourselves in the stories told and enacted long ago. Alternatively, like the crowd in Matthew 13, we can “keep on hearing but not understand...keep on seeing but not perceive” (Matthew 13:14) because we have refused to enter the story.



(Figure 3)

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