

Parable, Myth, and Allegory

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Today we're going to look at some of the different ways that religious principles are communicated within religious texts and the customs and practices of their traditions. This lesson will distinguish between parable, myth, and allegory. Then you'll look at a few examples of how they are applied in the text and the teachings of a few of the religions. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Parables

2. Myths

3. Allegory

1. Parables

A **parable** is a form of narrative, usually a shorter story, told for the purpose of teaching a religious lesson, usually with a moral significance. So, it has a didactic intention and structure.

Judaism's long tradition is no stranger to parables. They are called *mashal* or *nimshal* in Hebrew. In the Torah, Solomon's Song of Songs is a short, intense, and passionate book that uses the allegory of the love between man and woman to communicate the boundless love between God and the Israelites. It is written in the form of **poetry**. These parables are usually read during Passover to celebrate the Jewish exodus from Egypt.

In Christianity, parables were a common method of instruction and guidance in the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. In this context of Christianity, parables were also a safe way to communicate controversial, even dangerous, ideas and themes. The broad message that Jesus was bringing to the world suggested many challenges to the status quo. These included challenges to the idea of a divine emperor ruling the state and challenges to the Jewish tradition.



DID YOU KNOW

One of these dangerous teachings was that Jesus was the son of God. In the Gospel of John, it says: "Lord, we don't know where you are going so how can we know the way?" Jesus responds, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." This idea that Jesus was the Christ, the

Son of God, and could guide people to God was, therefore, shrouded in a **prose**. It had to be covered, or shrouded, in a way that often took the form of a parable.

IN CONTEXT

In the Christian Bible, in the book of Matthew, there is the parable of the sower. In this parable, a planter goes out with his bag of seeds to his day's work.

“And he spake many things unto them in parables, saying, behold, a sower went forth to sow. And when he sowed, some seeds fell by the wayside and the fowls came and devoured them up. Some fell upon stony places where they had not much earth. And forthwith, they sprung up because they had no deepness of earth. And when the sun was up, they were scorched. And because they had no root, they withered away. And some fell among thorns and the thorns sprung up and choked them. But others fell into good ground and brought forth fruit, some in hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold. Who hath ears to hear, let him hear.”

Each one of the settings where seeds fell—the wayside, the stony path, the thorn bushes, and the good ground of fertile soil—represent some aspect of humanity:

- There is the one that snatches up the truth without respect.
- The second type is the one that finds joy in the truth but when challenged and difficulty arises, they can't stay with it for lack of roots.
- Third is the one who hears the truth but is in the thorns, which represent worldly preoccupation and vices, so the ears to hear are not available.
- Finally, one hears, understands, and bears the fruit that yields a bounty.

The message, the didactic teaching, is that only those with eyes to see and ears to hear will bear the fruit of salvation. Fertile soil symbolizes reception and perception of the truth.

The didactic structure of parables uses one or more everyday situations as a port of entry for the mystery.



TERMS TO KNOW

Parable

A story that typically aims to make a single teaching point rather than make an extended comparison.

Poetry

Non-prose speech or writing that typically expresses ideas indirectly and metaphorically, and/or uses specific forms of meter and rhythm.

Prose

Language that is written or spoken without poetic rhythm or structure.

2. Myths

Myth is a commonly held belief that has little rational justification. This means it is not provable with empirical data; it's neither rational nor irrational. Myths are not relics that have importance only for history.

Many beliefs based on myth are part of spiritual and religious tradition, and they aren't necessarily provable in the usual sense of the word. They have more to do with collective knowledge and wisdom based on non-rational or even extra-rational stories. Beliefs of this sort often form the ground and justification for engaging with myths, such as creation stories.



BIG IDEA

This is the project of religion, you could say, to link the conscious realm of experience and sensation with the deep forms of some essential truth. While these truths are, in the usual sense, not provable, they are true from an anthropological, sociological, and psychological perspective.

IN CONTEXT

Many of our commonly held beliefs might be thought of as myths. A good example is a line from Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal, endowed by their creator."

These lines from the Declaration of Independence can't be empirically proved. The idea of equality can't hold really, but this form of prose is a myth functioning as a spiritual guide. It does this well beyond the context of just the Declaration of Independence, and it points to the relationship between the idea of "self-evident" and "endowed by their creator." This myth is referred to as a guiding principle. It is built into personal and political judgments for perhaps billions of people.

3. Allegory

The last literary device to discuss is **allegory**. Allegory compares things that are usually thought of as being dissimilar. It conveys its message by often referring to this dissimilarity, bringing insight into the original situation.

IN CONTEXT

A good example of this is from Buddhism. It's called the allegory of Enyadatta.

She's a beautiful woman who looks in the mirror one day to discover that she has no head. She freaks out, running everywhere, asking people where it was and what happened to it. Well, everyone told her not to worry, that it was right where it should be and has been all along. She was still as beautiful as ever.

The allegorical symbol here is the head, which refers to her Buddha Nature, or her true nature and perfection. Buddha Nature is a foundational principle in Buddhism. This narrative, using allegory, is intended to bring attention to the truth that someone's Buddha Nature, their perfection, is always there even when they can't see it.



TERM TO KNOW

Allegory

An analogy or illustration that draws comparisons between two apparently dissimilar situations at many points, most often with the effect of casting the original situation in a different light.



SUMMARY

Parables generally have the intention of teaching some kind of moral lesson, and are shorter narratives. The parable of the sower was used as an example. **Myths** are of any length, but they generally are non-rational. They form the foundation for many beliefs both religious and nonreligious. You looked at an example from the Declaration of Independence and the idea of equality. Lastly, you learned about **allegory**, which uses comparison to shed light on something. It's an extended comparison, intended to bring some kind of insight into the initial relationship. The allegory of Enyadatta was your example.

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