Historical context in parable interpretation: 
A criticism of current tradition-historical interpretations of 
Luke 12:35-48

C W Schnell

ABSTRACT

The tradition-historical method emerged at the turn of the century. It is used to understand biblical texts not only as products of the final author or redactor, but as documents which evolved over a period of time within a particular society. Consequently it grapples with the problems of how such texts refers to historical events, how one relates individual and collective religious experience and what authority these texts have in the lives of Christians today. Luke 12:35-48 is used to investigate the application of these ideas to practical exegesis.

1 THE TRADITION-HISTORICAL APPROACH

Gunkel, in his Shöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit (1895, see Paulsen 1978:22), was the first biblical scholar to use the term "tradition-historical method" for a specific approach to reading the Bible. It soon gained popularity and by the turn of the century it was used in an exclusive sense as the historical-critical method by people such as A Eichhorn, W Bouset and W Wrede (see Paulsen 1978:22-39). In contrast to the aims of "Literarkritik", which focused only on the earliest written sources of a document (which at that time were also viewed as historically reliable accounts), or on its structure, "Traditionsgeschichte" investigated the oral origins of texts within the ancient religious world (Paulsen 1978:32). The new method required a rethink of various presuppositions such as the following:

1 The relationship between a text "produced" by various persons and the historical events to which it refers.
2 The relationship between the intention of an individual author and the cultural environment in which he worked.
3 The relationship between the message of the biblical texts (reporting on only a small fraction of ancient history) and our own religious convictions within our society.

In this paper we shall take a look at the first two of these problems to see how they feature in a study of the sayings of Jesus in Luke 12:35-48. The third
one, concerning the relevance and authority of the biblical texts, will not be considered here.

During the hey day of the tradition-historical approach many studies were published, but unfortunately these were accompanied by little well founded theoretical reflection (with the exception of the work of E Troeltsch, - see Botha 1987). The method fell into discredit mainly because each scholar applied it in his own way (see Paulsen 1978:43-45), and because the new "dialectical theology" stressed the revelatory character of the actual biblical documents.

Many of the aims of the tradition-historical method (which is closely related to the religion-historical school) were taken over by the later form-critical approach. Depending on one's delinition of form criticism, tradition criticism could be seen either as a specific step in or part of form criticism (cf Roloff 1977:25), sometimes as a method next to form criticism (cf Haacker 1981:68-78; Berger 1977 & 1984). Hence there are different interpretations - even within the "classical" constructive and analytical approaches - of what can be achieved by means of form criticism (see Hahn 1985b).

At the risk of oversimplifying, one could say that form critics use the literary structure of smaller textual units to evaluate the interpretive activity of the transmitters of the synoptic tradition. It is believed that the form of a text offers clues to the needs experienced by societies - needs which are fulfilled by the these texts. Moreover, form and content are interrelated in a way that permits the exegete to make deductions about material matters such as the historical reliability of an account or a saying, its meaning within a religious community, and so forth (cf Dibelius 1929; Bultmann 1934).

In the tradition-historical reading of Luke 12:35-48 which follows, I want to demonstrate that form critics (or tradition critics) were unable to advance grounds for their conviction that the texts of the individual metaphors and parables were corrupted or changed by the transmitters of the tradition. I also want to show that one should not be too sceptical about the way in which the sayings of Jesus were handed down to us in the synoptic gospels. It was not necessary for the original metaphors to be changed in order to have a different meaning in a new situation. It is characteristic of metaphorical speech that the same text can be interpreted in different ways.

To understand these metaphors one has to construct a picture of the extra-textual object to which they refer (because it cannot simply be accepted that Luke is correct in relating them to Jesus as the coming Son of man and because the metaphors themselves do not tell us anything about the object to which Jesus or the early church applied them). This extra-textual object can best be understood when it is related to the sociological (religious, political and economical) context within which these words were spoken or within which these texts were used.
2 DO THE PARABLES AS SUCH DISPLAY CHANGES INTRODUCED BY THE EARLY CHURCH?

Luke 12:35-48 was not written by just one author. A comparison with Matthew suggests that Luke was either dependent on Matthew or that both go back to a common source (see Marshall 1978:533 and Fitzmeyer 1985:984f, 991 for an overview of the various theses concerning interdependence). One also suspects that Luke may have used some of his "Sondergut" and that in 12:36-39 he is dependent either on Mark 12:33-37 (e.g. Jeremias 1970:51) or on a source common to both Luke and Mark (see also Blomberg 1984:83-85). The author undoubtedly also left his own mark on the passage (see e.g. Jeremias 1980:219-222). Luke's Gospel, and the sources contained in it, originated in the context of the early church. It is also the written sediment of how people remembered and understood Jesus of Nazareth.

The text of Luke 12:35-48 therefore refers to the sayings of Jesus of Nazareth. It also reflects another extra-textual reality, namely that of the oral and written transmitters of the tradition. It is interesting that the extra-textual object (the parables) to which Luke refers, in turn refers to another extra-textual object (for instance the coming Son of man or the kingdom of God). It should be noted that we do not know for sure whether the parables derive from Jesus or from the church. We also do not know to what these parables refer - because it is a moot point whether Jesus spoke about the Son of man as Luke reports (Tödt 1965:94ff,293ff). In fact, they might refer to the kingdom (Weiser 1971:144-151,213f), to the "day of the Lord" (Jeremias 1970:45-60) or "the return of Christ" (Kümmel 1957:34-48).

The following sketch explains this complicated problem of text and reference:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lukan text (parable text)</th>
<th>Extra-textual object</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12:35-48</td>
<td>Son of man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Day of the Lord</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kingdom of God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Return of Christ</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The reason for this complexity lies in the fact that the parables in Luke 12 should be treated as *metaphors*, which are a special kind of language sign. These specific metaphors are not intended to entertain but to inform the listeners/readers about an extra-textual reality (see Vorster 1985:150). The speaker/author *creates* the image by encoding his ideas in language signs ac-
cording to the conventions of the language used. In the process he also applies his metaphor to an extra-textual object. Usually the speaker/author does not explain how the image should be understood, but expects the listener/reader to be able to creatively decode the text (in terms of the common linguistic and social conventions).

In other words, the reader of Luke 12 should know beforehand what object the parables refer to if he is to be able to interpret them. A metaphor as such does not reveal the object to which it refers, neither does it tell to what aspect(s) of the object it alludes. The extra-textual object may be of a physical nature, or it may be an idea or emotion. To illustrate the point, one could ask whether it is possible to share (understand) the meaning of an aphorism without sharing an experience of the speaker/author. The following sketch might be illuminating:

```
Language sign

Author

Extra-textual object

Reader
```

For a long time tradition critics (form critics) did not acknowledge these linguistic presuppositions in their research. They were convinced that the metaphor itself revealed its referent and that the reader needed no creativity to interpret the parables.

Jülicher was responsible for the linguistic presuppositions which put tradition critics on the wrong track for decades. He believed that a parable is similar to a (simple) comparison in which only one point of comparison (tertium comparationis) between the image and the object is possible. A parable is therefore said to reveal (the object and its meaning). An allegory, on the other hand, should be seen as a collection of metaphors, each having its own point of comparison, which in effect does not reveal, but disguises (Jülicher 1910: 57ff). Notwithstanding the fact that Jesus used different types of images, "Gleichnis" (from nature or everyday life), "Parabel" (a short fictional image) or "Beispielerzählung" (an extended fictional image), Jülicher believed that all three these types had only one point of comparison, and that they were revealing in nature. The reason for this assumption amongst tradition critics lay in their belief that the genius of Jesus constructed only "parables" (see Klauck 1978:10f), or that He used only pure, simple literary forms (see e.g Sanders 1969:13-26).

In practice this meant that wherever new metaphors were added to the simple parables (or whenever a parable is changed into an allegory) this could be attributed to the creative activity of the church in the process of transmitting the parables. The new metaphors were treated by scholars as if they revealed (disguised?) new objects (a direct relation between image and
object). Because the early church wanted to apply the images to new objects (e.g., the church, the Son of man, etc.), they had to change the simple "parables". In other words, it was not possible to use Jesus' revealing and simple sayings to "disguise" a plurality of objects. According to these scholars Jesus' words revealed only one aspect of the kingdom, but the allegories of the early church "disguised" quite a lot of objects. This assumption could be illustrated as follows:

Author/transmitter › added metaphor › extra-textual › object › reader

The last point might be even better explained by quoting a few influential studies of the parables currently under discussion. Bultmann endorsed Jülicher's view of the difference between parables and allegories in so many words (Bultmann 1968:198) and considered Luke 12:37f to be an allegorical addition to the image in 12:36. He substantiated his statement thus:

One gets the impression that what confronts us here are some gathered fragments of tradition which in their form and content are secondary and show themselves to be community formulations from the time when the delay in the Parousia began to be recognised (Bultmann 1968:118).

What was to be expected if Jülicher's principles were applied, in fact happened: every part of a narrative (parable) that could be viewed as an additional element in the story, without any recognition of or reference to the art of story telling (cf. e.g., Harnisch 1985:15-41), was promptly declared to be community formulations that refer to an object (the delay in the Parousia), and were said to have originated only after Jesus' death. It was not recognised that an image could apply to more than one object or that an imaginative reader could discover a new angle on the original object (for instance, the kingdom of God) by interpreting the metaphor in a particular way. (I sometimes wonder whether the reason why scholars found the concept "kingdom of God" void of any meaning other than that it is present and/or coming [e.g., Merklein 1979:110ff, 120] should not be sought in the fact that they were afraid of being accused of reading the parables allegorically [see also Schnell 1987:171f, 194]).

Dodd (1936:160ff) believes that Luke 12:35-38 and Mark 13:33-37 have a common source in the form of an original "nucleus". Although their respective additions differ in many respects, they agree in referring (allegorically) to the institutionalisation of the church and its vision of a coming Son of man. Dodd also surpassed Jülicher and Bultmann by proving their suspicions about additions by the church. Thus he pointed out that these additions caused the parables to "disintegrate" (Dodd 1936:164). Such disintegration means that the clear and simple images of Jesus' parables, in which all the details revealed one aspect of a single object, became unintelligible when the church added additional details referring to other objects or aspects of objects:
a parable is normally the dramatic presentation of a situation, intended to suggest vividly some single idea. Here the idea is that of alertness and preparedness for emergency. It is felicitously suggested by the tense atmosphere of a great household when the master is away but may turn up at any hour of the night. All the vivid detail need serve no other purpose than that of creating the atmosphere (Dodd 1936:165).

Julicher's proposition that Jesus' parables had only one point of comparison was amplified by the assumption that the image itself had to be a simple, unified whole. But not surprisingly, one finds that, although theoretically the original parable is viewed to contain a single simple and integrated image, it still does not itself indicate what Jesus was referring to, nor in what way he wanted the metaphor to be understood. There can thus be no doubt that Dodd himself decided on both the object and the interpretation of the image in is exegesis of Luke 12:35ff:

We know that He saw in His own ministry the supreme crisis in history. There is nothing in the parable itself against the view that the emergency He contemplated was in fact the crises created by His coming, rather than an expected crises in the more distant future. This crisis which He brought about was not a single momentary event, but a developing situation (Dodd 1936:165).

The contradiction between Dodd's interpretive theory and his actual reading of the parables becomes more apparent when one realises that Dodd has no option but interpret the parables allegorically himself. In practice he finds many points of comparison: the master who will judge whether the servants were waiting refers to the "coming crises in history"; the developing situation in the master's house refers to Jesus' teaching which will precipitate a crisis; the servants awaiting the judgement of the master refers to the disciples waiting in a situation of mounting crisis (Dodd 1936:165f) (see also Black 1960 about Dodd's allegorical reading of Mk 12:1-12).

Jeremias (1970:50ff) also observes a close relationship between Luke 12:35-38 and Mark 13:33-37. Whereas Dodd stressed the idea of an integrated image in the parables, Jeremias, with his profound knowledge of first century Palestine, tried to advance the idea that the images of the parables that were not consonant with the ancient Jewish world should be regarded as allegorical additions by the early church: a master of a house never served his servants; only the doorkeeper had to stay awake and not all the servants; people refrained from travelling at night; somebody going on a short visit did not appoint servants to special positions in his household, and so on. Jeremias accepted unquestioningly that Jesus did not tell allegories, and that he did not create illogical and incongruous images. (Although this applies to Jesus, Jeremias readily accepts that the church's position was entirely different).

Although Jeremias purges the parables of all incongruous allegorical elements, retaining only the image of the doorkeeper (Mk 13:34b) who received the command to wait and open the door when the master arrived (Lk 12:36,
Jeremias 1970:52), he nevertheless interprets this image allegorically: the command to wait refers to a summons to be prepared for the temptations of the end of time (52) and the doorkeeper refers to the Jewish authorities - mainly the scribes (55), to whom the summons was addressed. (See also Boers 1971:20 on what he calls Jeremias’ "refined form of allegorical interpretation").

Weiser goes even further in purging the parables of allegorical impurities. For instance, after removing every possible "allegorical addition" (1971:166) from Luke 12:36 ("to come home from the marriage feast", "so that they may open to him at once when he comes and knocks"), he finds even the choice of synonyms allegorical. According to Weiser Luke was most probably responsible for the formulation "wait" (προσδεχόμαι), because for Luke the word had salvation-historical connotations: waiting on the consolation of Israel (Lk 2:25), on redemption (Lk 2:38), on the kingdom of God (Lk 23:51) and the resurrection (Ac 24:21) (Weiser 1971:165). Luke thus replaced the original word with a synonym to allegorise the image even further.

Having read Weiser's analysis it is even more astounding to find him interpreting the "original" parable (underlying Lk 12:35-38 and Mk 13:33-37, Weiser 1971:149,175-177) allegorically: the command to wait refers to the unexpected, unknown future events in the kingdom of God; those who wait are those who will receive God's salvation; and those who are disobedient are the people who will be judged. (Weiser interprets Lk 12:42-46 in a similar allegorical way: people are called to await the kingdom just as the servant had to await the master. Jesus is the master who brings salvation and destruction. The obedient servants are those who takes Jesus' call to repentance seriously and vice versa. [215])

It has already been suggested that the linguistic premises of tradition critics are false. The sayings of Jesus - whether they are regarded as aphorisms (loγία), parables or allegories - are all metaphors (see also Schnell 1985a: 29ff) and do not differ in regard to revealing and disguising the object to which they are applied. When one does not know the object to which the speaker/author applied the image, one cannot infer it from the image itself, but has to supply it by way of reconstruction or hypothesis. The meaning of a metaphor depends on the context (application to an object), but the object is not dependent on the metaphor (see also Vorster 1985b).

Jülicher's premises were criticised long ago by Fiebig (1912b) (see also Klauck 1978:12ff; Weder [1978:11ff] and Harnisch 1979 for an overview of the discussion and application of Jülicher's presuppositions and recent developments in parable interpretation). It seems, however, as if tradition-historical research on the parables of Jesus entered a new era with the revision of Jülicher's linguistic assumptions in the seventies. Here I do not refer to the semiological or structural studies using a "linguistic paradigm" (Patte 1976:vi) instead of a historical paradigm (see also Delorme 1979). Neither do I refer to the literary and existential (Via 1967), the poetical
To summarise: it is wrong to distinguish between the original parables of Jesus and the additions of the church, substantiating the distinction by taking certain metaphors to refer constantly to the same object. A metaphor does not suggest its context (the object to which it is applied), but can have different meanings in different contexts. This makes it impossible to identify the hand of the early church in the present-day texts of the parables. All that modern tradition critics can do is to speculate about the context in which Jesus and the church told and retold them - that is, if we do not want to investigate their aesthetic (cf Crossan 1973) and rhetorical value or apply them to new contexts (materialistic, black theological, etc). Within the (re)constructed context one could also try to find the points of comparison which Jesus and the church might have intended.

A note on stereotyped metaphors should be added at this stage: One might question the linguistic premises discussed above if one accepts the existence of stereotyped metaphors that can only refer to a certain object. Did Jesus use such metaphors? How should we deal with this question? Does the word "doorkeeper" (θυρωρός) necessarily refer to God, and servants (δούλοι) to prophets (scribes)? Some scholars claim that Jesus used such metaphors (Fiebig 1912a; Dodd 1936:160; Jeremias 1970:55), but one could seriously question the statement that the parables themselves were stereotyped. Jesus told his own (new) parables (allegories) which he applied to an extra-textual object or objects, described in his own (new) way.

3 LUKE 12:35-48 IN ITS HISTORICAL CONTEXT
Up to now we have concentrated on the first aim of the tradition-historical approach as outlined above, namely that of describing the relationship between the biblical text and the historical events to which it refers. We shall now turn to the second aim, namely that of interpreting the intention of the author(s) within his (their) sociological-historical setting. Because this raises philosophical issues, as has been noted previously (part 1), I will start this section of the paper by stating my main theoretical presuppositions.

I employ the epistemological neo-Kantian assumptions of Talcott Parsons (e.g. 1937; 1947, see also Adriaansens 1980:9-27) by accepting that aspects of reality can be mediated by predefined concepts. This is an acknowledgment of the fact that one can never capture social reality in all its complexity in terms of accurate formulas. It is possible, however, to create concepts which serve to describe aspects of reality. This type of interpretation would never lay claim to being totally objective or wholly subjective but lies somewhere between the two (see also Schnell 1985b).
Methodologically I prefer to use Parsons' *four-function paradigm* as a conceptual framework, especially those concepts that are suitable for describing the relation between religious symbols and society (for a brief summary see Parsons & Platt 1973:1-32; for an introduction into functionalism see Turner & Maryanski 1979). Parsons uses the expression *social system* to refer to the functional interaction between the *cultural system* (including religion) and the *societal community*: Within the social system religion provides patterns or precepts for behaviour and the societal community fulfils the practical need to integrate parts of society into the whole.

It was mentioned above that we should reconstruct the context (object) of the parables and interpret them within this context. In our attempting to do so we shall use the above-mentioned conceptual framework in the remainder of this paper.

Jesus used his parables to inform his disciples and opponents about different aspects of the *kingdom of God*. The kingdom is viewed as a society in which people act in a spirit of forgiveness and love. These moral values of forgiveness and love can - in Parsons' conceptual framework - be seen as "pattern maintenance", that is, providing society with norms to live by. The moral values of forgiveness and love are related to Jesus' ultimate or most basic religious symbol, namely God, as the forgiving and loving Father (Schnell 1987:170-173).

The *kingdom of God* therefore comes into being where people forgive and care for one another. This process creates an invisible barrier between people in their everyday lives, a barrier between those who accept Jesus' moral values and concomitant religious symbols (to form the kingdom of God) and those who do not accept it, a barrier that will become eternal in the unknown future judgement of the Son of man (Schnell 1987:175ff).

We also have to take a look at these ideas about the kingdom of God against the background of first-century Palestine. Ancient Jewish society was integrated mainly by an exclusive image of God (the God of Israel) and by ritual precepts. Within this society some people were either degraded to humiliating social positions or cast out from the community (Schnell 1987:194ff). A need was felt for religious symbols and practical norms which could integrate society on a more acceptable basis. Jesus most probably wanted to resolve the problem by calling the masses to enter or create a new well integrated society (kingdom of God), by training disciples to proclaim this message and by confronting the scribes and Pharisees with what he considered to be the real will of God.

Within this context the parables in Luke 12:35-48 can be interpreted (creatively) as follows:

12:35: A general call on the new members to be prepared to serve their fellow men in keen expectation of the future events.

12:36-38: The Son of man will come unexpectedly; everybody should be prepared for his coming; when he comes the faithful will be rewarded.
12:39: The Son of man will indeed come unexpectedly.
12:42-46: The Son of man will judge according to the criterion of faithful service to one another.
12:47f: Those who know God's will well but do not obey it (the scribes and the Pharisees) will be punished more severely than those who disobeyed Jesus call with less knowledge.

The parables are thus interpreted both allegorically and creatively — in terms of our understanding of Jesus' teaching about the coming kingdom. Having reconstructed the extra-textual object, I choose which part of the image should be applied to which part of the object, and therefore what the parables mean. This type of reading does not ask whether a specific image is the most suitable one to clarify an object (contra Jeremias), nor does it matter whether or not an image is "integrated" (contra Dodd). I would, however, like to believe that my tradition-historical reading comes close to what Jesus of Nazareth intended to say.

But what about the meaning of these parables in the context of the early church? If by "church" we mean the first followers of Jesus (cf Theissen 1978) or transmitters of the tradition who were active in Palestine, with a few offshoots in Greece, Asia and Rome, we would have to admit that their religious symbols could have remained much the same as those of Jesus. Did they not indeed preserve Jesus' sayings and message for the very reason they were relevant to their own situation? For them God remained the forgiving and caring Father who wanted to express his forgiveness and love in a new salvation-society and who in the future would effect an eternal separation between the obedient and disobedient. The only difference is that the same Person who announced the message of salvation and judgement would also be the judge, as the following contextualisation by the early church shows:

When once the householder has risen up and shut the door, you will begin to stand outside and knock at the door, saying, "Lord, open to us". He will answer you, "I do not know where you come from". Then you will begin to say, "We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets". But he will say, "I tell you, I do not know where you come from; depart from me, all you workers of iniquity!" (Lk 13:25-37; RSV).

One should be careful not to view the so-called delay in the parousia and the institutionalisation of the church as the only theological themes which concerned the transmitters of the tradition (contra e.g Conzelmann 1960; Grässer 1957; Schneider 1975:9-19). There were more agreements than differences between the contexts of Jesus and his first followers. In addition Jesus' words were relatively accurately preserved (Schürmann 1960) - especially when contrasted with the narrative material (Kelber 1983; Breytenbach 1986). One may therefore conclude that the church intended to say much the same thing as Jesus did.

Following Kümmel (1975:64ff) I would ask whether Jesus did not in fact foresee an interim period in which the disciples whom Jesus had taught to
proclaim his message would have the time to do just that. To me it seems as if the proclamation of the message of God’s forgiveness and love within the new salvation-society (kingdom or church) was much more important to the Jesus-movement than coming to terms with delay in the parousia.

The elements in the parables in Luke 12:35-48 which allude to the interim and the greater responsibility of the disciples need not be seen as a new development, but rather as an unfolding of an original idea. The only new element is the conviction that Jesus himself will be the judge of the end-time.

WORKS CONSULTED


Black, M 1960. The parables as allegory. BJRL 42, 273-287.


Dodd, C H 1936. The parables of the kingdom. Welwyn: James Nisbet.


C W Schnell, Department of New Testament, University of South Africa, P O Box 392, Pretoria 0001. Republic of South Africa.