

CHAPTER III.

ON THE INTERPRETATION OF PARABLES.

THE parables, fair in their outward form, are yet fairer within, 'apples of gold in network of silver;' each one of them like a casket, itself of exquisite workmanship, but in which jewels yet richer than itself are laid up; or as fruit, which, however lovely to look upon, is yet in its inner sweetness more delectable still.¹ To find, then, the golden key for this casket, at whose touch it shall reveal its treasures; so to open this fruit, that nothing of its hidden kernel shall be missed or lost, has naturally been regarded ever as a matter of high concern.² In this, the interpretation of the parable, a subject to which we have now arrived, there is one question of more importance than any other—one so constantly presenting itself anew, that it will naturally claim to be the first and most fully considered. It is this, How much of them is to be taken as significant? and to this question answers the most different have been returned. There are those who lay themselves out for the tracing a general correspondence between the sign and the thing signified, and this having done refuse to advance any further; while others aim at running out the interpretation into the minutest details; with those who occupy every inter-

¹ Bernard: 'The very surface, if considered only from without, is beautiful indeed; and whoso cracks the nut will find in it a kernel still pleasanter and far more delightful.'

² Jerome (*In Eccles.*): 'The marrow of a parable is different from the promise of its surface, and like as gold is sought for in the earth, the kernel in a nut, and the hidden fruit in the prickly covering of chestnuts, so in parables we must search more deeply after the divine meaning.'

mediate stage between these extremes. Some have gone far in saying, This is merely drapery and ornament, and not the vehicle of essential truth; this was introduced either to give liveliness and a general air of verisimilitude to the narrative, or as actually necessary to make the story, the vehicle of the truth, a consistent whole, without which consistency the hearer would have been perplexed or offended; or else to hold together and connect the different parts,—just as in the most splendid house there must be passages, not for their own sake, but to lead from one room to another.¹ They have used often the illustration of the knife, which is not all edge; of the harp, which is not all strings; urging that much in the knife, which does not cut, the handle for example, is yet of prime necessity,—much, in the musical instrument, which is never intended to give sound, must yet not be wanting: or, to use another comparison, that many circumstances ‘in Christ’s parables are like the feathers which wing our arrows, which, though they pierce not like the head, but seem slight things and of a different matter from the rest, are yet requisite to make the shaft to pierce, and do both convey it to and penetrate the mark.’² To this school Chrysostom belongs. He

¹ Tertullian (*De Pudicitia*, 9): ‘Wherefore an hundred sheep? and why precisely ten pieces of silver? and what is the meaning of the broom? It was necessary, I answer, for the purpose of showing that the salvation of one sinner is most pleasing to God, to name some number out of which to describe one as lost: so, too, it was necessary to furnish the picture of the woman searching her house for the piece of silver, with the accessories of broom and candle. Anxious prying of this sort not only engender mistrust, but by the subtlety of their forced explanations generally divert men from the truth. There are details also which are simply inserted to build up, set forth and weave the parable, that men may be led to the point at which the illustration is aimed.’ Brower (*De Par. J. C.* p. 175): ‘Such details could not be omitted, inasmuch as only by their help could the matter be led easily to an issue, for without them there would be a break or gap in the narrative which would altogether injure the parallel; or, because the neglect of such points would perhaps invite the listeners to idle questionings and doubts.’

² Boyle, *Style of the Holy Scriptures: Fifth Objection*. Augustine (*De Civ. Dei*, xvi. 2) carries out this view still further: ‘Assuredly not everything which forms part of the story must be considered also to have

continually warns against pressing too anxiously all the circumstances of a parable, and often cuts his own interpretation somewhat short in language like this, 'Be not over-busy about the rest.' It is the same with the interpreters who habitually follow him, Theophylact¹ and others, though not always faithful to their own principles. So also with Origen, who illustrates his meaning by a comparison of much beauty: 'For as the likenesses which are given in pictures and statues are not perfect resemblances of those things for whose sake they are made—but for instance the image which is painted in wax on a plain surface of wood, contains a resemblance of the superficies and colours, but does not also preserve the depressions and prominences, but only a representation of

a significance; rather for the sake of the parts which have a significance those also which have no significance are inwoven with them. For the earth is broken up only by the ploughshare, but for this to be possible the other parts also of the plough are necessary. In harps and similar musical instruments only the strings are adapted for song, but that these may be so adapted there are present in the structure of the instruments all the other parts, which are not struck by the singer, but to which the parts which resound at his touch are united. So also in prophetic narrations, details are told us which have no significance, but to which the points which have significance adhere and are in a manner attached.' Cf. *Con. Faust.* xxii. 94. A Roman Catholic expositor, Salmeron, has a comparison something similar: 'Certain it is that a sword does not cleave with all its parts, but only with one: for it does not cut with the hilt, or with the flat, or with the point, but it cuts only with the edge. And yet no one in his senses would say that either hilt, flat or point were unnecessary to the cleaving: for although they do not cleave in themselves, yet they help the part which is sharp and naturally fitted for cutting, so that it is able to cleave the more strongly and conveniently.' So also in parables many details are introduced, which, although they do not in themselves work any spiritual meaning, are yet helpful in enabling the parable to cleave and cut by means of that part which was appointed by the author for showing the desired lesson.'

¹ Theophylact (*In Luc.* 16): 'Every parable obliquely, and as in a figure, makes clear the nature of certain matters, without in every point corresponding to the matters for which it was taken. Therefore it does not behove us to be over-busy with minute consideration of all the parts of parables, but, making use of them as much as is suitable to the point before us, to let the rest go, as co-existing with the parable, but contributing nothing to the point.'

them—while a statue, again, seeks to preserve the likeness which consists in prominences and depressions, but not as well that which is in colours—but should the statue be of wax, it seeks to retain both, I mean the colours, and also the depressions and prominences, but is not an image of those things which are within—in the same manner, of the parables which are contained in the Gospels so account, that the kingdom of heaven, when it is likened to anything, is not likened to it according to *all* the things which are contained in that with which the comparison is instituted, but according to certain qualities which the matter in hand requires.’¹ Exactly thus Tillotson has said that the parable and its interpretation are not to be contemplated as two planes, touching one another at every point, but oftentimes rather as a plane and a globe, which, though brought into contact, yet touch each other only at one.

On the other hand, Augustine, though himself sometimes laying down the same canon, frequently extends the interpretation through all the branches and minutest fibres of the narrative;² and Origen no less, despite the passage which I have just quoted. And in modern times, the followers of Cocceius have been particularly earnest in affirming all parts of a parable to be significant.³ There is a noble passage in the writings of Edward Irving, in which he describes the long and laborious care which he took to master the literal meaning of every word in the parables, being confident of the riches of inward truth which every one of those words contained; he goes on to say: ‘Of all which my feeling and progress in studying the parables of our Lord, I have found no similitude worthy to convey the impression, save that of sailing through between the Pillars of Hercules into the Mediterranean Sea, where you have to pass between armed rocks, in a strait, and

¹ *Comm. in Matt.* xiii. 47.

² His exposition of the Prodigal Son (*Quæst. Evang.* ii. qu. 33) is a marvellous example of this.

³ Teelman (*Comm. in Luc.* xvi. 34–52) defends this principle at length and with much ability.

under a current—all requiring careful and skilful seamanship—but, being passed, opening into such a large, expansive, and serene ocean of truth, so engirdled round with rich and fertile lands, so inlaid with beautiful and verdant islands, and full of rich colonies and populous cities, that unspeakable is the delight and the reward it yieldeth to the voyager.’¹ He and others have protested against that shallow spirit which is ever ready to empty Scripture of its deeper significance, to exclaim, ‘This means nothing; this circumstance is not to be pressed;’ which, satisfying itself with sayings like these, fails to draw out from the word of God all the rich treasures contained in it for us, or to recognize the manifold wisdom with which its type is often constructed to correspond with the antitype. They bid us to observe that of those who start with the principle of setting aside so much as non-essential, scarcely any two, when it comes to the application of their principle, are agreed concerning what actually is to be set aside; what one rejects, another retains, and the contrary: and further, that the more this scheme is carried out, the more the peculiar beauty of the parable disappears, and the interest of it is lost. For example, when Calvin will not allow the oil in the vessels of the wise Virgins (Matt. xxv. 4) to mean anything, nor the vessels themselves, nor the lamps;² or when Storr,³ who, perhaps more than any other, would leave the parables bare trunks, stripped of all their foliage and branches, of everything that made for beauty and ornament, denies that the Prodigal leaving his father’s house has any direct reference to man’s departure from the presence of his heavenly Father, it is at once evident of how much not merely of pleasure, but of instruction, they would deprive us. It is urged, too, in opposition to this interpretation of the parables merely in the gross, that when our Lord Himself interpreted the two first

¹ *Sermons, Lectures, and Occasional Discourses*, 1828, vol. ii. p. 340.

² ‘Some torment themselves greatly in the matter of the lamps, the vessels and the oil; but the main lesson is simple and natural, namely that eager zeal for a little time is not enough unless untiring perseverance is added to it.’

³ *De Parabolis Christi*, in his *Opusc. Acad.* vol. i. p. 89.

which He delivered, namely, that of the Sower and of the Tares, He most probably intended to furnish us with a rule for the interpretation of all. These explanations, therefore, are most important, not merely for their own sakes, but as supplying principles and canons of interpretation to be applied throughout. Now, in these the moral application descends to some of the minutest details : thus, the birds which snatch away the seed sown, are explained as Satan who takes the good word out of the heart (Matt. xiii. 19), the thorns which choke the good seed correspond to the cares and pleasures of life (Matt. xiii. 22), with much more of the same kind.

On a review of the whole controversy it may safely be said, that there have been exaggerations upon both sides. The advocates of interpretation in the gross and not in detail have been too easily satisfied with their favourite maxim, ' Every comparison must halt somewhere ; ' ¹ since one may fairly demand, ' Where is the necessity ? ' There is no force in the rejoinder, that unless it did so, it would not be an illustration of the thing, but the thing itself. Such is not the fact. Two lines do not cease to be two, nor become one and the same, because they run parallel through their whole course.² Doubtless in the opposite extreme of interpretation there lies the danger of an ingenious trifling with the word of God ; a danger, too, lest the interpreter's delight in the exercise of this ingenuity, with the admiration of it on the part of others, may not put somewhat out of sight that the sanctification of the heart through the truth is the main purpose of all Scripture : even as we shall presently note the manner in which heretics, through this pressing of all parts of a parable to the uttermost, have been able to extort from it almost any meaning that they pleased.

After all has been urged on the one side and on the other, it must be confessed that no absolute rule can be laid down

¹ Omne simile claudicat.

² Theophylact (in Suicer, *Thes.* s. v. *παραβολή*) : ' A parable, if it be maintained in all its points, is no longer a parable, but the very thing which occasions it.'

beforehand to guide the expositor how far he shall proceed. Much must be left to good sense, to spiritual tact, to that reverence for the word of God, which will show itself sometimes in refusing curiosities of interpretation, no less than at other times in demanding a distinct spiritual meaning for the words which are before it. The nearest approach, perhaps, to a canon of interpretation on the matter is that which Tholuck lays down :—‘ It must be allowed,’ he says, ‘ that a similitude is perfect in proportion as it is on all sides rich in applications ;¹ and hence, in treating the parables of Christ, the expositor must proceed on the presumption that there is import in every single point, and only desist from seeking it when either it does not result without forcing, or when we can clearly show that this or that circumstance was merely added for the sake of giving intuitiveness to the narrative. We should not assume anything to be non-essential, except when by holding it fast as essential, the unity of the whole is marred and troubled.’² For, to follow up these words of

¹ Vitringa : ‘ I am best pleased with those interpreters who extract from the parables of the Lord Christ some fuller truth than a mere general moral precept, illustrated and more strongly fixed in the minds of his hearers by means of a parable. Not that I would have the hardihood to maintain that such a kind of teaching or persuasion, if it had pleased our Lord to employ it, would have been inconsistent with his high wisdom ; but yet I contend that from wisdom at its highest, as was that of the Son of God, we may rightly expect something more. If, therefore, the parables of the Lord Christ can be so explained that their several parts may conveniently, and without violent contortions, be transferred to the economy of the Church, I hold that this kind of explanation should be embraced as the best, and be preferred to all others. For, if nothing stands in the way, the more solid truth we extract from the word of God, the more we shall commend the Divine wisdom.’

² Out of this feeling the Jewish doctors distinguished lower forms of revelation from higher, dreams from prophetic communications thus, that in the higher all was essential, while the dream ordinarily contained something that was superfluous ; and they framed this axiom,—‘ As there is no corn without straw, so neither is there any mere dream without something that is ἀργόν, void of reality and insignificant.’ Thus in Joseph’s dream (Gen. xxxvii. 9), the moon could not have been well left out, when all the heavenly host did obeisance to him : yet this circumstance was thus ἀργόν, for his mother, who thereby was signified,

his,—in the same manner as a statue is the more perfect in the measure that the life, the idea that was in the sculptor's mind, breathes out of and looks through every feature and limb, so much the greater being the triumph of spirit, penetrating through and glorifying the matter which it has assumed; so the more translucent a parable is in all parts with the divine truth which it embodies, the more the garment with which that is arrayed, is a garment of light, pierced through, as was once the raiment of Christ, with the brightness within—illuminating it in all its recesses and corners, and leaving no dark place in it—by so much the more beautiful and perfect it must be esteemed.

It will much help us in this determining of what is essential and what not, if, before we attempt to explain the particular parts, we obtain a firm grasp of the central truth which the parable would set forth, and distinguish it in the mind as sharply and accurately as we can from all cognate truths which border upon it; for only seen from that middle point will the different parts appear in their true light. 'One may compare,' says a late writer on the parables,¹ 'the entire parable with a circle, of which the middle point is the spiritual truth or doctrine, and of which the radii are the several circumstances of the narration; so long as one has not placed oneself in the centre, neither the circle itself appears in its perfect shape, nor will the beautiful unity with which the radii converge to a single point be perceived, but this is all observed as soon as the eye looks forth from the centre. Even so in the parable; if we have recognized its middle point, its main doctrine, in full light, then will the proportion and right signification of all particular circumstances be clear unto us, and we shall lay stress upon them only so far as the main truth is thereby more vividly set forth.'

was even then dead, and so incapable of rendering the homage to him which the others at last did (see John Smith, *Discourses*, p. 178).

¹ Lisco, *Die Parabeln Jesu*, p. 22; a sound and useful work, though content to remain too much on the surface of its subject.

There is another rule which it is important to observe, one so simple and obvious, that were it not continually neglected, one would be content to leave it to the common sense of every interpreter. It is this, that as, in the explanation of the fable, the introduction (*προμύθιον*) and application (*ἐπιμύθιον*) claim to be most carefully attended to, so here what some have entitled the pro-parabola and epi-parabola, though the other terms would have done sufficiently well; which are invariably the finger-posts pointing to the direction in which we are to look for the meaning—the key to the whole matter. The neglect of these often involves in the most untenable explanations; for instance, how many interpretations which have been elaborately worked out of the Labourers in the Vineyard, could never have been so much as once proposed, if heed had been paid to the context, or the necessity been acknowledged of bringing the interpretation into harmony with the saying which introduces and winds up the parable. These helps to interpretation, though rarely or never lacking,¹ are yet given in no fixed or formal manner; sometimes they are supplied by the Lord Himself (Matt. xxii. 14; xxv. 13); sometimes by the inspired narrators of his words (Luke xv. 1, 2; xviii. 1); sometimes, as the prologue, they precede the parable (Luke xviii. 9; xix. 11); sometimes, as the epilogue, they follow (Matt. xxv. 13; Luke xvi. 9). Occasionally a parable is furnished with these helps to a right understanding both at the opening and the close; as is that of the Unmerciful Servant (Matt. xviii. 23), which is suggested by the question which Peter asks (ver. 21), and wound up by the application which the Lord Himself makes (ver. 35). So again the parable at Matt. xx. 1–15

¹ Tertullian (*De Res. Carn.* 33): 'You will find no parable which is not either interpreted by Christ Himself, as that of the Sower, which finds its meaning in the ministry of the word; or explained beforehand by the author of the Gospel, as the parable of the Proud Judge and the Urgent Widow, in its reference to perseverance in prayer; or may be freely conjectured, as the parable of the Fig-tree, whose spreading branches aroused expectation, with its likeness to the unfruitfulness of the Jews.'

begins and finishes with the same saying, and Luke xii. 16–20 is supplied with the same amount of help for its right understanding.¹

Again, we may observe that a correct interpretation, besides being thus in accordance with its context, must be so without any very violent means being necessary to bring it into such agreement; even as, generally, the interpretation must be easy—if not always easy to discover, yet, being discovered, easy. For it is here as with the laws of nature; the proleptic mind of genius may be needful to discover the law, but, once discovered, it throws back light on itself, and commends itself unto all. And there is this other point of similarity also; it is a proof that we have found the law, when it explains *all* the phenomena, and not merely some; if, sooner or later, they all marshal themselves in order under it; so it is good evidence that we have discovered the right interpretation of a parable, if it leave none of the main circumstances unexplained. A false interpretation will inevitably betray itself, since it will ‘invariably paralyse and render nugatory some important member of an entire account.’ If we have the right key in our hand, not merely some of the wards, but all, will have their parts corresponding; the key too will turn without grating or over-much forcing; and if we have the right interpretation, it will scarcely need to be defended and made plausible with great appliance of learning, to be propped up by remote allusions to Rabbinical or profane literature, by illustrations drawn from the recesses of antiquity.²

¹ Salmeron (*Serm. in Evang. Par.* p. 19) recognizes in the parable a *radix*, a *cortex*, a *medulla*; first, the *radix* or root out of which it grows, which may also be regarded as the final cause or scope with which it is spoken, which is to be looked for in the *προμύθιον*; next, the *cortex* or outward sensuous array in which it clothes itself; and lastly, the *medulla* or inward core, the spiritual truth which it enfolds.

² Teelman (*Comm. in Luc.* xvi. 23): ‘Let there be no gaps in the explanation, let it be neither harsh, nor difficult to the hearing or judgment, nor yet ridiculous; let it be easy and reverent, like a gently flowing river let it stream with amenity upon the hearing and the

Once more : the parables may not be made primary sources of doctrine, and seats of this. Doctrines otherwise and already established may be illustrated, or indeed further confirmed by them ; but it is not allowable to constitute doctrine first by their aid.¹ They may be the outer ornamental fringe, but not the main texture, of the proof. For from the literal to the figurative, from the clearer to the more obscure, has been ever recognized as the order of Scripture interpretation. This rule, however, has been often forgotten, and controversialists, looking round for arguments with which to sustain some weak position, for which they can find no other support in Scripture, often invent for themselves supports in these. Thus Bellarmine presses the parable of the Good Samaritan, and the circumstance that in that the thieves are said *first* to have stripped the traveller, and *afterwards* to have inflicted wounds on him (Luke x. 30), as proving certain views upon which the Roman Church sets a high value, on the order of man's fall, the succession and

judgment of its hearers ; let it be appropriate, close, and removed from all trace of the far-fetched.'

¹ This rule finds its expression in the recognized axiom : ' In theology parables do not count as arguments ; ' and again : ' Only from the literal meaning can arguments of weight be sought ' (see Gerhard, *Loc. Theoll.* ii. 13, 202). There is a beautiful passage in Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo*, i. 4, on the futility of using as primary arguments, and against gain-sayers, what can only serve as the graceful confirmation of truths already on other grounds received and believed. An objector is made to reply to one who presses him with the wonderful correspondences of Scripture. ' All these things should be received as beautiful and as a kind of picture ; but if there be not some solid ground on which they may rest, they do not seem to the faithless to be satisfactory ; for he who wishes to make a picture, chooses something solid on which to paint, that what he is painting may abide : and so no one paints on water or on air, because there no traces of a picture abide. When, therefore, we display to the faithless these harmonies of which you speak, as a kind of picture of the actual fact, inasmuch as they hold that what we believe is not an actual fact but a figment, they deem us as men painting on a cloud. First we must show the reasonable ground of our truth. Then, that this body of truth, as we may call it, may shine the clearer, these harmonies may be set forth as pictures of the body.'

sequence in which, first losing heavenly gifts, the robe of a divine righteousness, he afterwards, and as a consequence, endured actual hurts in his soul.¹ And in the same way Faustus Socinus argues from the parable of the Unmerciful Servant, that as the king pardoned his servant merely on his petition (Matt. xviii. 32), and not on the score of any satisfaction made, or any mediator intervening, we may from this conclude, that in the same way, and without requiring sacrifice or intercessor, God will pardon sinners simply on the ground of their prayers.²

But by much the worst offenders against this rule were the Gnostics and Manichæans in old time, and especially the former. Their whole scheme was one, which however it may have been a result of the Gospel, inasmuch as that set the religious speculation of the world vigorously at work, was yet of independent growth; and they only came to the Scripture to find a varnish, an outer Christian colouring, for a system essentially antichristian;—they came, not to learn its language, but to see if they could not compel it to speak theirs;³ with no desire to draw *out of* Scripture its meaning, but only to thrust *into* Scripture their own.⁴ When they fell thus to

¹ *De Grat. Prim. Hom.*: 'It was not without a reason that the Lord in that parable said that the man was first stripped and afterwards wounded, whereas in real robberies the reverse is usual: plainly He wished to indicate that in this spiritual robbery the wounds of our nature arise from the loss of original righteousness' (see Gerhard, *Loc. Theoll.* ix. 2, 86). His fact is inaccurate, for Eastern robbers are careful to strip, if possible, before they slay; that so the wounds and blood may not injure the garments, often the most precious portion of the spoil.

² Deyling, *Obs. Sac.* vol. iv. p. 649. Socinus here sins against another rule of Scripture interpretation as of common sense, which is, that we are not to expect *in every place* the whole circle of Christian truth, and that nothing is proved by the absence of a doctrine from one passage which is clearly stated in others. Thus Jerome (*Adv. Jovin.* 2): 'For all things are not taught in every place; but each similitude is referred to that of which it is a similitude.'

³ Jerome: 'To twist to their own will a contrary Scripture.'

⁴ Irenæus (*Con. Hær.* i. 8): 'That their fabrication might seem to be not without a witness.' All this repeats itself in Swedenborg, who has many resemblances to the Gnostics, especially the distinctive one of a

picking and choosing what in it they might best turn to their ends, the parables naturally invited them almost more than any other portions of Scripture. In the literal portions of Scripture they could find no colour for their scheme; their only refuge therefore was in the figurative, in those which might receive more interpretations than one; such, perhaps, they might bend or compel to their purposes. Accordingly, we find them claiming continually the parables for their own; with no joy, indeed, in their simplicity, or practical depth, or ethical beauty; for they seem to have had no sense or feeling of these; but delighted to superinduce upon them their own capricious and extravagant fancies. Irenæus is continually compelled to rescue the parables from the extreme abuse to which these submitted them; for, indeed, they not merely warped and drew them a little aside, but made them tell wholly a different tale from that which they were intended to tell.¹ Against these Gnostics he lays down that canon, namely, that the parables cannot be in any case the primary, much less the exclusive, foundations of any doctrine, but must be themselves interpreted according to the analogy of faith; since, if every subtle solution of one of these might

division of the Church into spiritual and carnal members. One has well said: 'His spiritual sense of Scripture is one altogether disconnected from the literal sense, is rather a sense before the sense; not a sense to which one mounts up from the steps of that which is below, but in which one must, as by a miracle, be planted, for it is altogether independent of, and disconnected from, the accidental *externum superadditum* of the literal sense.'

¹ In a striking passage (*Con. Hær. i. 8*) he likens their dealing with Scripture, their violent transpositions of it till it became altogether a different thing in their hands, to the fraud of those who should break up some work of exquisite mosaic, wrought by a skilful artificer to present the effigy of a king, and should then recompose the pieces upon some wholly different plan, and make them to express some vile image of a fox or dog, hoping that, since they could point to the stones as being the same, they should be able to persuade the simple that this was the king's image still. In the same manner there is a vile poem by one of the later Latin poets in which he puts together lines and half lines and bits of lines from Virgil, so contriving to weave out of the pure a composition of shameful impurity.

raise itself at once to the dignity and authority of a Christian doctrine, the rule of faith would be nowhere. So to build, as he shows, were to build not on the rock, but on the sand.¹

Tertullian has the same conflict to maintain. The whole scheme of the Gnostics, as he observes, was a great floating cloud-palace, the figment of their own brain, with no counterpart in the world of spiritual realities. They could therefore mould it as they would; and thus they found no difficulty in forcing the parables to seem to be upon their side, shaping, as they had no scruple in doing, their doctrine according to the leadings and suggestions of these, till they brought the two into apparent agreement with one another. There was nothing to hinder them here; their creed was not a fixed body of divine truth, which they could neither add to nor diminish; which was given them from above, and in which they could only acquiesce; but an invention of their own, which they could therefore fashion, modify, and alter as best suited the purpose they had in hand. We, as Tertullian often urges, are kept within limits in the exposition of the parables, accepting, as we do, the other Scriptures as the rule of truth,

¹ Thus *Con. Hær.* ii. 27: 'Parables must not be applied to matters of uncertainty; for, if this rule be observed, their interpreters interpret without dangers, and the parables will receive at all hands an interpretation on similar lines, and so collectively hold their ground unassailed by truth, and with their parts applied on a common system and without collision. But to link to matters which are not openly asserted, nor put plainly before us, interpretations of parables which anyone invents at his pleasure, is mere folly. For thus the rule of truth will be regarded by none, but as many as are the interpreters of parables, so many truths will there seem to be contending against each other.' So too 3: 'But, forasmuch as parables may receive many interpretations, who that loves the truth will not confess that to leave what is certain and indubitable and true and assert from these aught concerning our enquiry into God's nature, is to act like men who hurl themselves into peril and are devoid of reason? Is not this indeed to build one's house, not on the firm and strong rock, in an open position, but on the unstable waste of sand? Whence also to overthrow buildings of this sort is an easy task.' Cf. ii. 10; and i. 16, for monstrous and fantastic interpretations, after this fashion, of Luke xv. 4-6, and 8, 9. The miracles were made by them to yield similar results (see i. 7; ii. 24).

as the rule, therefore, of their interpretation. It is otherwise with these heretics; their doctrine is their own; they can first dexterously adapt it to the parables, and then bring forward the conformity between the two as a testimony of its truth.¹

As it was with the Gnostics of the early Church, exactly so was it with the sects which, in a later day, were their spiritual successors, the Cathari and Bogomili. They, too, found in the parables no teaching about sin and grace and redemption, no truths of the kingdom, but fitted to the parables the speculations about the creation, the origin of evil, the fall of angels, which were uppermost in their own minds; which they had not drawn from Scripture; but which having themselves framed, they afterwards turned to Scripture, endeavouring to find there that which they could compel to fall into their scheme. Thus, the apostasy of Satan and his drawing after him a part of the host of heaven, they found set forth by the parable of the Unjust Steward. Satan was the chief steward over God's house, who being deposed from his place of highest trust, drew after him the other angels, with the suggestion of lighter tasks and relief from the burden of their imposed duties.²

¹ *De Pudicitia*, 8, 9. Among much else which is interesting, he says: 'Heretics draw the parables whither they will, not whither they ought, and are the aptest workers in them. Why so apt? Because from the very beginning they have fashioned the matter of their teaching according to the hints of parables. Unrestricted by the rule of truth, they were free to seek out and put together the doctrines of which the parables seem suggestive.' Thus, too, *De Præsc. Hæret.* 8: 'Valentinus did not devise Scriptures to suit the matter of his teaching, but devised the matter of his teaching to suit the Scriptures.' Compare *De Anima*, 18.

² Neander, *Kirch. Gesch.* vol. v. p. 1082. They dealt more perversely still with the parable of the Unmerciful Servant (*Ibid.* vol. v. p. 1122): This servant, too, with whom the king reckons, is Satan or the Demiurgus; his wife and children, whom the king orders to be sold, the first is Sophia or intelligence, the second the angels subject to him. God pitied him, and did not take from him his higher intelligence, his subjects, or his goods; he promising, if God would have patience with him, to create so great a number of men as should supply the place of the fallen angels. Therefore God gave him permission that for six days, the

But to come to more modern times. Though not testifying to evils at all so grave in the devisers of the scheme, nor leading altogether out of the region of Christian truth, yet sufficiently injurious to the sober interpretation of the parables is such a theory concerning them as that entertained, and in actual exposition carried out, by Cocceius and his followers of what we may call the historico-prophetical school. By the parables, they say, and so far they have right, are declared the mysteries of the kingdom of God. But then, ascribing to those words, 'kingdom of God,' a far too narrow sense, they are resolved to find in every one of the parables a part of the history of that kingdom's progressive development in the world to the latest time. They will not allow any to be merely ethical, but affirm all to be historico-prophetical. Thus, to let one of them speak for himself, in the remarkable words of Krummacher: ¹ 'The parables of Jesus have not primarily a moral, but a politico-religious, or theocratic purpose. To use a comparison, we may consider the kingdom of God carried forward under his guidance, as the action, gradually unfolding itself, of an Epos, of which the first germ lay prepared long beforehand in the Jewish economy of the Old Testament, but which through Him began to unfold itself, and will continue to do so to the end of time. The name and superscription of the Epos is, THE KINGDOM OF GOD. The parables belong essentially to the Gospel of the kingdom, not merely as containing its doctrine, but its progressive development. They connect themselves with certain fixed periods of that development, and, as soon as these periods are completed, lose themselves in the very completion; that is, considered as independent portions of the Epos, remaining for us only in the image and external letter.' He must mean, of course, in the same manner and degree as all other fulfilled prophecy; in the light of such accom-

six thousand years of the present world, he should bring to pass what he could with the world which he had created—but this will suffice.

¹ Not the Krummacher lately so popular in England, but his father, himself the author of a volume of very graceful original parables.

plished prophecy, he would say, they must henceforth be regarded.

Boyle gives some, though a very moderate, countenance to the same opinion: 'Some, if not most, do, like those oysters that, besides the meat they afford us, contain pearls, not only include excellent moralities, but comprise important prophecies;' and, having adduced the Mustard-seed and the Wicked Husbandmen as plainly containing such prophecies, he goes on, 'I despair not to see unheeded prophecies disclosed in others of them.'¹ Vitringa's *Elucidation of the Parables*² is a practical application of this scheme of interpretation, and one which will scarcely win many supporters for it. Thus, the servant owing the ten thousand talents (Matt. xviii. 23), is the Pope or line of Popes, placed in highest trust in the Church, but who, misusing the powers committed to them, were warned by the invasion of Goths, Lombards, and other barbarians, of judgment at the door, and indeed seemed given into their hands for doom; but being mercifully delivered from this fear of imminent destruction by the Frankish kings, so far from repenting and amending, on the contrary now more than ever oppressed and maltreated the true servants of God, and who therefore should be delivered over to an irreversible doom. He gives a yet more marvellous explanation of the Merchant seeking goodly pearls, this pearl of price being the Church of Geneva

¹ *On the Style of the Holy Scriptures; Fifth Objection.* There is nothing new in this scheme; Origen held it long ago; see, for example, on the Labourers in the Vineyard (*Comm. in Matt. xx.*), how he toils under the sense of some great undisclosed mystery concerning the future destinies of the kingdom lying hidden there. St. Ambrose (*Apolog. Proph. David.* 57) gives a strange historico-prophetical interpretation of Nathan's parable of the Ewe Lamb (2 Sam. xii. 1-4); and Hippolytus (*De Anti-christo*, 57) of the Unjust Judge.

² Being published, not like most of his other works in Latin, but in Dutch, it is far less known, as indeed it deserves to be, than his other oftentimes very valuable works. I have used a German translation, Frankfort, 1717. The volume consists of more than a thousand closely-printed pages, with a few grains of wheat to be winnowed out from a most unreasonable quantity of chaff.

and the doctrine of Calvin, opposed to all the abortive pearls, that is, to all the other Reformed Churches. Other examples may be found in Cocceius—an interpretation, for instance, of the Ten Virgins, after this same fashion.¹ Deyling has an interesting essay on this school of interpreters, and passes a severe, though not undeserved, condemnation on them.² Prophetical, no doubt, many of the parables are; for they declare how the new element of life, which the Lord was bringing into the world, would work—the future influences and results of his doctrine—that the little mustard-seed would grow to a great tree—that the leaven would continue working till it had leavened the whole lump. But they declare not so much the *facts* as the *laws* of the kingdom. Historico-prophetical are only a few; as that of the Wicked Husbandmen, which Boyle adduced, in which there is a clear prophecy of the death of Christ; as that of the Marriage of the King's Son, in which there is an equally clear announcement of the destruction of Jerusalem, and the transfer of the kingdom of God from the Jews to the Gentiles. But this subject will again present itself, when we consider, in their relation to one another, the seven parables in the thirteenth chapter of St. Matthew.

¹ *Schol. in Matt.* xxv. More may be found in Gurtler, *Syst. Theol. Proph.*; as at pp. 542, 676. Deusingius, Teelman, D'Outrein, Solomon Van Till, are among the chief writers of this school.

² *Obs. Sac.* vol. v. p. 331, seq. The same scheme of interpretation has been applied by the same school of interpreters to the miracles; as by Lampe in his *Commentary on St. John*,—see, for instance, on the feeding of the five thousand (John vi.) They form the weakest side of a book, most worthy, in many respects, of all honour.