

A SEMIOTIC APPROACH TO UNFOLD THE METAPHORICAL INTERPRETATION OF THE SELECT PARABLES OF THE SON OF GOD FROM THE *BOOK OF MATTHEW*

^{1*} Harikumar Pallathadka, ²Tiganlung Rikhi Panmei, ³Shoraisam Kiran Singh

^{1*,2,3} Manipur International University, Imphal, Manipur, India

^{1*}harikumar@miu.edu.in, ²tiganlung.panmei@miu.edu.in, ³kiran.sorai@miu.edu.in

ABSTRACT:

A parable is a metaphorical analogy and a form of narration used to teach ethical concepts, and Jesus Christ has prevalently used parables in his teaching. His parables are evident in the three synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Jesus employed parables in teaching to reach the commoners because the ethical concept that Jesus narrated was lofty. The bible scholars argue that Jesus adopted this method of teaching to reach the commoners to the fullest. The present research paper studies the following parables: 'The Lamp,' 'The Speck and the Log,' and 'New Cloth on Old Garment.' The present research paper aims to make a semiotic approach to the selected parables of Jesus Christ. It attempts to unfold the significance of the signs utilized and determines how the signs are correlated to the text of Jesus.

INTRODUCTION:

A parable is defined as “*an earthly story with a heavenly meaning*” (Doerksen 4). It is a distinct form of narration widely present in the three synoptic gospels of the Holy Bible. A parable is a metaphorical analogy that narrates a succinct, didactic story in prose or verse form. It is considered a straightforward narrative with a short tale. Parables are different from fables – parables deal with human characters, but fables deal with animals, inanimate objects, and plants. Therefore, the parables are widely recognized as stories with illustrations. The word 'parable' has been derived from the Greek word 'parabole.' Here, 'para' means 'alongside,' and 'bole' means 'throwing.'

Parables are used to teach ethical concepts, and Jesus Christ has prevalently used parables in his teaching. His parables are present in the three synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Jesus used parables in teaching to reach the commoners. The ethical concept what Jesus spoke seemed to be lofty to the commoners; therefore, He had to use parables in the course of teaching. It is a technique and method that Jesus extensively employed to reach the commoners to the fullest. The bible scholars argue that Jesus engaged his teaching with the parabolic method because He found that it was a catchy method of attracting the listeners. Jesus understood that

the disciples and the followers were far beyond understanding his message; thus, he tried communicating the moral messages through small tales.

The tales of Jesus carry multiple meanings and interpretations; however, they unfold the meaning of scripture. According to Vernon D. Doerksen, the parables are deciphered in numerous manners starting “*from the extreme allegorical method of Augustine to the topical method of Chrysostom*” (4). He argues that the “*parables are not mere human tales; they are teachings of the Son of God*” (Doerksen 3). The parables are considered as the sparks which Jesus brought to the earth. The purpose of parables, for Doerksen, is to teach truths to the believers and unbelievers of Christ. This research paper takes a semiotic approach to the selected parables of Jesus Christ. It tries to disclose the meaning of the signs used and how it is correlated to the text of Jesus.

METHOD AND METHODOLOGY:

The present study uses English Standard Version, and the selected parables are ‘*The Lamp*,’ ‘*The Speck and the Log*,’ and ‘*New Cloth on Old Garment*.’ ‘*The Lamp*’ is extracted from Matthew chapter 5 verses 14-16, ‘*The Speck and the Log*’ is taken from Matthew chapter 7 verses 1-5, ‘*New Cloth on Old Garment*’ is extracted from Matthew chapter 9 verses 16-17. All these parables are seen more than once in the Bible. A semiotic approach is taken to the selected parables to interpret the narratives from a metaphorical perspective.

Semiotics is an academic discipline and a theory devoted to the study of signs. In simple terms, it is a theoretical approach to communication that is not only associated with signs but also with signification. Here, signification means the ‘process of creating meaning.’ Semiotics is a study to dissect how meaning is created and communicated. It has its roots in the academic study of signs and symbols, creating a sense in the contexts. It is seen as a tool to ensure the intended meaning and the meaning of words. Semiotics, for Umberto Eco, “*is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign*” (13). Semiotics is a lens to perceive the world and grasp how the land and culture make a significant impact on all human beings unconsciously.

Ferdinand de Saussure treats “*signs as the unity between the signifier and the signified*” (Figueiredo and Denis 334). A sign gives meaning in the context; therefore, any word, street signs, and the picture gets qualified to be called a sign. This sign system is looked at from three points of view: a) semantics, b) syntactic, and c) pragmatics. Semantics is related to the relationship between the signifier and signified. Syntactic signifies the structural relations, which means the formal relationship between signs that bring them together to build into a sign system. For Morris, pragmatics deals with the relationship between the reader and the sign. It unfolds what the sign means to the reader. Semiotics is applied to English studies and other disciplines like Zoology, film studies, medicine, and architecture. It is also associated with different fields dealing with signs and meaning-making in a particular context. The present study takes a semiotic approach to the selected parables to elicit the latent meaning of the images present in the parable narrations. The present study understands language as a system of signs that work to

convey meaning. In this manner, the parable narratives are a collection of signs that are to be interpreted to reveal the text's real meaning, written in a metaphorical form.

SEMIOTIC APPROACH:

'The Lamp' parable is documented in Matthew chapter 5 verses 14-16, Mark chapter 4 verses 21-25, and Luke chapter 8 verses 16-18. For the present discussion, the narrative mentioned in Matthew 5: 14-16 has been extracted. Jesus Christ narrates this parable while He was delivering a sermon. It was on 'who are the blessed ones. The peacemakers are blessed ones like that of the ones who feed the hungry stomach. Jesus enumerates the list of blessed ones and then proceeds to talk about the purpose and uniqueness of salt. In cooking, salt is an essential ingredient; without it, cooking is incomplete, and the food is unfit to eat. In this context, Jesus compares the position of his believers with that of the salt. He wants his believers to a beneficial people in the society as to how a pinch of salt is the most helpful ingredient in cooking. Completing the salt parable, Jesus draws the attention of the people towards the light. Every human being knows the importance of light. Jesus reiterates its significance in his narrative. He says in Matthew 5: 14-16 that,

¹⁴“*You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.*

¹⁵*Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house.*

¹⁶*In the same way, let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father, who is in heaven.*

Jesus addresses the believers as the light of the world. The dark world is made bright through the light, which is evident in Genesis chapter 1. When God made heaven and earth, He found that the planet is a dark and unfit place for the men to live, so He created the Sun to light the world during the day and the moon to glitter at night. From this, it is clear that God was aware of the need for light for his people to live on this earth. Knowing the significance of light, Jesus utters to his believers that they should be a light to the world. From this, it is transparent that Jesus has determined the darkness existing on the earth; therefore, He desires his people to torch for fellow beings. Jesus treats light as the knowledge about God. In this setting, Jesus did not mean the natural light that we use; instead, He signifies the knowledge about God to lead a disciplined life.

Jesus, who is called the teacher of all, makes a symbolic narration to communicate that nobody on this earth lights a lamp and puts it into a basket. A lamp is meant to be kept on its stand in a high place so that the surrounding place gets lighted and everyone gets benefitted out of it. But when a lighted lamp is kept inside a basket, the light is not shared with those who need it. A lamp that is put inside a basket is neither going to help the person who has lit the lamp nor the neighbor; therefore, Jesus wants the lamp to be fixed on the stand that is kept in a high place so that even the neighbors can get benefitted. In this context, Jesus teaches a divinely characteristic, that is, helping the needy. The person who has a lamp has to help with his light to guide the one who is walking in the darkness. This is the literal interpretation of the parable.

The Lamp' parable deals with the symbolic interpretation to a greater extent. What Jesus wished to convey through this parable is evident in Matthew chapter 5 verse 16. It conveys that "let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." (866). The clause "may see your good works and give glory to your Father" (866) unfolds the truth that when the lamp is lighted, it will show the path to the ones who are in darkness; thereby, they will be able to see the good work and glorify the heavenly Father. From this, one can clearly understand that Jesus insists his believers do good work and help others so that even the unbelievers will praise God. He wants even the unbelievers to understand who God is and His divinely characteristics. The divine qualities can be brought to light only when the lamp is lightened. So, Jesus desires the lamp to be always lighted to show the right path to the people. In this 'Lamp' parable, Jesus is assigning a serious task to his believers. He wants his people to lead a moral life so that even the unbelievers will follow them. More than teaching morality and humanity, Jesus wished and was practicing humanity in his life, and he expected the same from his believers.

Jesus understood the importance of practicing humanity and moral values; hence he preached them to the followers. He knew well that knowledge about God is essential to walk in the light. In this context, the knowledge about God is treated as light because human life is dark if it does not have God in it. Life with God alone makes life brighter. In this respect, Jesus desires the unbelievers to acquire knowledge about God and His doctrines. The person who knows God is alone considered as the people walking in brightness. This brightness indicates spiritual illumination. Jesus wishes his followers to be bright and be knowledgeable in the spiritual realm. In this parable, the light refers to the '*knowledge about God.*' This symbolic representation of the lamp image has disclosed the concealed spiritual interpretation of the narrative.

Jesus has employed the image of a lamp with a symbolic representation of his notion about the knowledge about God. He interprets this parable from the concept of a sign proposed by Ferdinand Saussure, the lamp stands as a signifier in this context. Here, language is called sign which also works as a signifier. The word 'l-a-m-p' is considered as a signifier because it represents the image of a lamp which is a signified one. When the word 'lamp' is pronounced, the picture of the lamp appears in front of the sight. The word functions as a signifier in order to make the image signified. Likewise, as soon as one hears the work light, the white brightness appears. Here, the word 'l-i-g-h-t' is a signifier, and the picture that appears in front is called signified. The word 'light' works to bring the feature of it. Metaphorically, the light is compared with the word of God, which is the knowledge about God. Jesus preaches about God because He knew that the knowledge about God only could drive out the darkness and bring light into the people. Here, the light takes the position of the knowledge about God the Almighty, who created this universe.

The next parable is the '*Speck and the Log,*' which is documented in Matthew 7: 1-5. In the Holy Bible, this portion is entitled '*Judging Others.*' Jesus narrates this parable to the crowd, which encompasses both the believers and unbelievers of God. Son of God pronounces that

“Judge not, that you be not judged.

For with the judgment, you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure, you use it will be measured to you.

Why do you see the Speck that is in your brother's eye but does not notice the log that is in your own eye?

Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is the log in your own eye?

You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the Speck out of your brother’s eye.” (868)

The extract mentioned above is narrated in a metaphorical style. The essence of the extract is that when one has is completely submerging in the river of sin, he must not attempt to help the other struggling with sin. To help others to get rid of sin, primarily, he should be a victory over sin. A person who is already sinking in the river of sin will not be able to help others to get away from sin. Jesus observed from the people that they were pointing out others as sinners when already they are about to sink into the deep mire of sin. He found it hypocritical; therefore, He wished to instruct and chide them through his parable narrative.

In this parable, Jesus has employed the words like 'speck' and 'log.' Speck means a tiny spot, and log means a part of the tree. He metaphorically indicates the sin using terms such as 'speck' and 'log.' In this context, 'speck' and 'log' signify the same things, but they differ in pointing out the quantity. Speck and log denote sin, and log points at the huge sin, and speck points at the sin that is meager. A person struggles with a massive quantity of sin, which is like that of a log is trying to point at the person who is fighting with a speck-sized sin. Jesus found such behavior amidst the people of his society; therefore, he wished to point at their stupidity.

A person struggling with a huge-sized sin cannot help a person fighting a speck-sized sin. This truth is put forth to the crowd by Jesus to communicate that they must not judge others. Judgment brings condemnation which is a serious sickness that people were suffering from in the hands of the preachers. Jesus did not like this; therefore, he wished to tell them that judging others is not a human quality, instead; loving others is an appreciated quality. Jesus knew well that judging could bring only condemnation, but love can be the salvation; that is why He surrendered himself to death and sacrificed his life for the welfare of the entire universe at the end of his ministry. From this, it is transparent that Jesus wishes to love others rather than condemning them because love can unite the entire human body.

Taking a semiotic approach to the parable unveils certain truths. Firstly, as mentioned above, the terms Speck and log have been used to make a metaphorical narration. Secondly, these terms can be dissected by making a sign approach. The words 'speck' and 'log' are called signs. According to Saussure, these signs render two different meanings, and they can be interpreted using a semiotic theory to elicit the real meaning and their ways of function. The word 'speck' can be taken to analyze its semiotic meaning. As mentioned above, Speck is a tiny spot, and, in this context, it indicates a meager sin. The moment the word 'speck' is uttered, a tiny

spot appears. The tiny spot that appears in front is called the signified, and the word 's-p-e-c-k' is called the signifier. The signifier functions to bring its meaning that is the signified picture of the word 'speck.'

The signifier and the signified function are interconnected, and they work simultaneously to deliver the meaning of the word. No sooner one pronounces the word 'speck,' the picture of Speck appears in front of the eyes. Likewise, as soon as uttering and looking at the word 'log,' the picture of it appears in front of the eyes. From this, one can argue that the sensory organs like eyes and ears are engaged simultaneously to grasp the meaning of the Speck and log. When they are looked at through a metaphorical lens, they function to give different interpretations and meanings in the respective contexts. Their metaphorical meanings are interwoven with that of the signifier and the signified.

There are two objects in this narrative parable, as they are mentioned above. Firstly, the Speck which is a tiny spot. Secondly, the log is a part of a trunk. The first object that is Speck has a signifier and a signified, which is the same as that of the second object. Thought Speck brings to the mind the image of a tiny spot when it is looked at from a metaphorical point of view, it points at a meager sin or the sin that is not too heavy to be worried about. Similarly, while listening and reading the word 'log,' it brings to the mind a picture that has a huge trunk. When it is looked through a metaphorical lens, it gives the picture of a grave sin that is too heavy to be carried. In this context, the picture of meager sin is associated with the Speck, and the picture of a serious sin is related to the log. The signifier and the signified function collaboratively give the denotative meaning of the words but take a metaphorical approach on these points at the connotative meaning of these words. Here, the sin and the spot and the sin and the trunk are juxtaposed. From this, it is clear that the signifier functions to give the signified and the metaphorical meaning. So, it can be argued that the position of the signifier is paramount in this context.

The third parable the paper deals with is the '*New Cloth on Old Garment*.' This narrative parable is recorded in Matthew 9: 16-17. It is entitled '*A Question About Fasting*.' Jesus narrates this parable as a response to the question asked by John and his disciples and the Pharisees. These people fast and pray, whereas the people who followed Jesus refrained from fasting, which made them envy the followers of Jesus. So, they throw this question to Jesus: "*Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?*" (870). Jesus threw an interrogative statement as a reply to the question: "*Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them?*" (870) and go on to enumerate that they will fast when the bridegroom vanishes from their midst. Completing his reply, Jesus narrates the parable as:

¹⁶ *No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch tears away from the garment, and a worse tear is made.*

¹⁷ *Neither is new wine put into old wineskins. If it is, the skins burst and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed. But new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.*" (870-71)

The above-mentioned extract is a parable of Jesus Christ which was narrated as an elaborate response to the question asked by John and his disciples and the Pharisees. When these people wanted to know that why the followers of Jesus are not fasting; Jesus gave them a sharp reply, telling them that there is no need to mourn when the bridegroom is with the wedding guests. In this context, Jesus compares fasting with that of mourning, which means crying over the beloved one's death or being sad because of losing the beloved one. He positions himself as the bridegroom and the people around him as the wedding guests. It is a metaphorical connotation. This metaphorical story is extended by the parable that Jesus narrated.

Jesus utters that no man joins a piece of unshrunk cloth with an old garment because it will worsen the condition of the garment. Likewise, no man puts new wine into the old wineskin because the new wine will be spoiled, and the old wineskin will be destroyed; therefore, to preserve the new wine, it has to be stored in a new wineskin. There are two ideas conveyed in a parable; firstly, the old cloth on a new garment and secondly, new wine into an old wineskin. In both the narratives, Jesus uses old and new to convey his message. To take a semiotic approach to the parable, it is necessary to look at the following components associated with the parable. The tabulation mentioned below vividly shows the relation between the signifier and the signified.

Serial .No.	Sign	Signifier	Signified
1	Old cloth	O-l-d c-l-o-t-h	
2	New garment	N-e-w g-a-r-m-e-n-t	
3	Old wineskin	O-l-d w-i-n-e-s-k-i-n	

4	New wine	N-e-w w-i-n-e	
---	----------	---------------	---

The above tabulation shows an apparent picture of the relationship between the meaning and the word and how they collaborate and work to produce meaning in the context. When the words 'old cloth' is heard or read, the picture of an old cloth appears immediately. Likewise, the words new garments bring the picture of a new dress. The words 'old wineskin' flashes the picture of an old wineskin, and the words 'new wine' brings to mind the picture of new wine. This shows that the pictures are associated with the words that one pronounces. Pictures serve as the meaning to the sound that is uttered. The words are connected to the sounds and the images of the words. They function collaboratively to form the apt meaning in the respective context.

It is necessary to perceive this parable through a metaphorical lens to understand the meaning of the narration. There is a need to juxtapose and connect the signifiers to locate the real meaning of the narration. Old and old can be put together, and the new and new can be put together to draw out the real meaning. Firstly, the old cloth and old wineskin try to indicate a single idea. The first signifier, 'old cloth,' and the third signifier, 'old wineskin,' refer to the old doctrine formulated and followed by the elders of the Society of Jesus. The Pharisees and the elderly ones have been following the old doctrine since their birth. Now the newborn king who has come to create a new era observes the people following the old practices, which are of no use at present. Jesus waits until the Pharisees meet him to get clarification on certain practices of the religious community.

The Pharisees followed the old doctrine of fasting and praying regularly, but the disciples and the people around Jesus did not observe it. As a result, the Pharisees and the elderly ones envied the followers of Jesus. They met Jesus and asked for clarification regarding fasting. At this juncture, Jesus talks about the old cloth in the new garment and the new wine in the old wineskin. The Pharisees and the disciples of John were not aware of whom Jesus is; therefore, they were too busy observing the old doctrines. Jesus understood their ignorance and stupidity; thus, he narrates this parable to make them aware of the new doctrine that has come into existence after the arrival of Jesus Christ. He wanted to point out the truth that the old doctrine does not have value now. His arrival has formulated a new doctrine that is more important and meaningful than the old. Following the old doctrine and then trying to fit the new doctrine into the old one will spoil both and become futile. Thus, Jesus insists that before adhering to the new doctrine, it is essential to get away from the old practices because the old doctrine and the new doctrine do not go hand in hand. The new doctrine revolts against the old doctrine as they make no meaningful sense in the contemporary Christian community. This is the signifier's underlying meaning and the signified when they are perceived through a symbolic interpretation.

Conclusion:

The three parables: 'The Lamp,' 'The Speck and the Log,' and 'New Cloth on Old Garment,' have undergone a semiotic analysis to shed light on the metaphorical meaning of the narrations. Dealing with signifiers and signified has brought a new understanding of the text and the meaning. The metaphorical meaning of the text is highly evident when they are looked at through the lens of sign and signification. In the first parable, there is a signifier and signified, that is, the lamp which refers to the knowledge about God. In the second parable, there are two signifiers and signified: the Speck and log, which refer to meager sin and huge sin. In the third parable, there are four signifiers and signified. They are old cloth, a new garment, new wine, and old wineskin. All these old objects signify the old doctrine that had been followed from the time immemorial to the arrival of Christ. The new garment and new wine refer to the new doctrine that has come in with the birth of Jesus Christ.

Works Cited:

- 1) Abrams M H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Prism, 1999.
- 2) Ackroyd, P. R. and C. F. Evans, editors. *The Cambridge History of the Bible: From Beginnings to Jerome*. Vol. 1. Cambridge UP, 1970.
- 3) Barthes, R. *Elements of Semiology*. Hill and Wang, 1967.
- 4) Barthes, R. *The Semiotic Challenge*. University of California Press, 1988.
- 5) Campenhausen, Hans von. *The Formation of the Christian Bible*. Trans. J. A. Baker. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1972.
- 6) Chandler, D. *Semiotics: The Basics*. Routledge, 2002.
- 7) Cobley, P. and Jansz, L. *Introducing Semiotics*. Icon Books. 2000.
- 8) De Saussure, F. *Course in General Linguistics*. Translated by W. Baskin, McGraw-Hill. 1965.
- 9) Doerksen, Vernon D. The Interpretation of Parables. *Grace Journal*, 1983, pp. 3-19.
- 10) Eco, U. *A Theory of Semiotics*. Indiana University Press. 1976.
- 11) Elliott, R. *Bible Translation in The Origin of the Bible*. Westwood: Revell Evans, C.A. *Exploring the Origins of the Bible: Canon Formation in Historical, Literary, and Theological Perspective*. Baker Publishing Group, 2008.
- 12) *English Standard Version Bible*. The Compact Edition, Bible Society of India, Good News Publishers, 2007.
- 13) Figueiredo, João F. D. and Denis A. Coelho. "Semiotic Analysis in Perspective: A Frame of Reference to Inform Industrial Design Practice." *Design Principles and Practices: An International Journal*, Volume 4, Number 1, 2010, pp. 333-46.
- 14) Goodwin, T. "Measuring the effectiveness of online marketing." *Journal of the Market Research Society*, vol. 41, no. 4, 1999, pp. 403-407.
- 15) Hodge, R., and Kress. G. *Social Semiotics*. Cornell University Press, 1988.
- 16) Kress, G. *Multimodality: A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication*. Routledge, 2010.

- 17) Lawes, R. "Demystifying semiotics: Some key questions answered," *International Journal of Market Research*, vol. 44, no. 3, 2002, pp. 251-264.
- 18) Lawes, R. Demystifying semiotics: Some key questions answered, *International Journal of Market Research*, vol. 44, no. 3, 2002, pp. 251-264.
- 19) Mendoza-Denton, N. "The Semiotic Hitchhiker's Guide to Creaky Voice: Circulation and Gendered Hardcore in a Latina Gang Persona." *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, no. 21, 2011, pp. 261-280.
- 20) Mertz, E. "Semiotic Anthropology." *Annual Review of Anthropology*, no. 36, pp. 337-353. 2007.
- 21) Nöth, W. *Handbook of Semiotics*. Indiana University Press. 1990.
- 22) Paul, E. *The Moody Handbook of Theology*. Moody, 1989.
- 23) Prior, P. and Hengst, J. *Exploring semiotic remediation as discourse practice*. Palgrave MacMillan, 2010.
- 24) Prior, P. and Hengst, J. *Semiotic Remediation as Discourse Practice*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- 25) Sebeok, Thomas A. *Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics*. University of Toronto Press, 2001.
- 26) Tsotra, Danai and et al. "Marketing on the Internet: A Semiotic Analysis." *Proceedings of the Tenth Americas Conference on Information Systems*, New York, New York, August 2004, pp. 4210-20.
- 27) Voloshinov, V. *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. Harvard University Press, 1973.