

Larry V. Crutchfield



FON SCOFIELD PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTION/E.C. DARGAN RESEARCH LIBRARY/NASHVILLE (S 10955)

Jesus' Use of Allegory

WHILE CHRISTIANS CONSIDER Jesus to be the greatest teacher ever, as well as their Lord and Savior, even people of other faiths regard Him as one of the greatest teachers who ever lived. His teaching, although simple and uncluttered with high-flown rhetoric, has retained its freshness and vitality down through the centuries, while the once powerful prose of others has grown pedestrian with the passing of time. Scripture itself records that "the multitudes were amazed at [Jesus'] teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes" (Matt. 7:28b-29, NASB).¹

What is it that gives the teaching of Jesus such penetrating power and enduring value? Aside from the obvious answer that His teaching was of divine rather than human origin, it must be taken into account that Jesus was a master of teaching technique.

He deftly used a variety of ordinary instructional devices to drive home extraordinary spiritual truths.

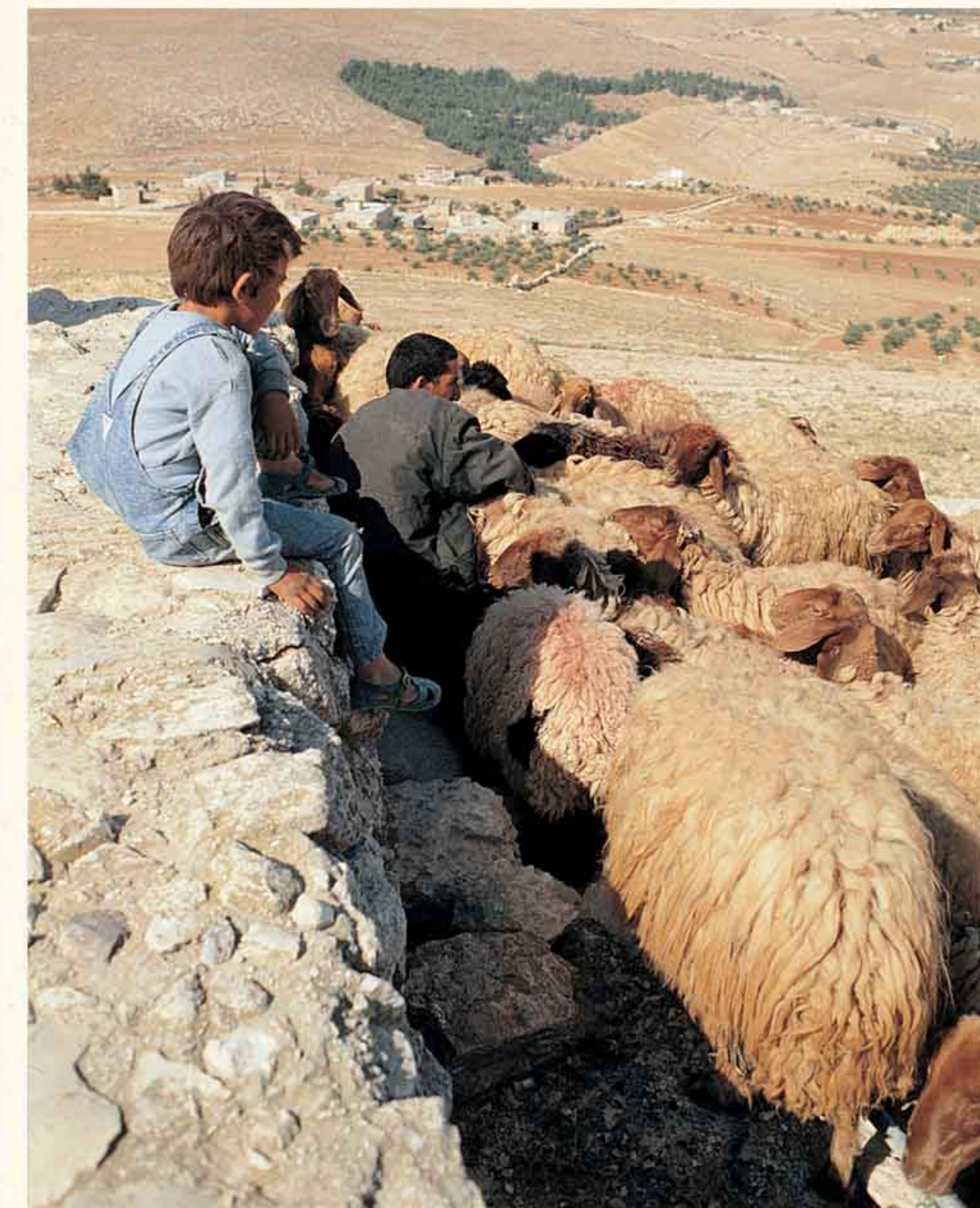
Included in Jesus' teaching methods were Hebrew poetic forms (for example, Matt. 20:16, NASB, "Thus the last shall be first, and the first last"), rhetorical devices (Matt. 16:13, 15, NASB, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is? . . . But who do you say that I am?"), and a number of others. However, perhaps the best known and most often repeated are those sayings presented in the form of piercing parables and unforgettable allegories. While the term *parable* is familiar to every student of the Bible, the literary device known as the allegory is less well-known.

The word "allegory" is a combination of the Greek words *allos*, "other" or "another" and *agoreuein* [ah-GORE-u-eyn], "to speak." Literally, it means to speak of (or describe) one thing under the image of another. In other words, an allegory is a

story—a symbolic or pictorial representation—in which people, things, and events have a meaning other than those conveyed by the normal, literal meaning of the words used. Allegories commonly are used for the purpose of explaining or teaching ideas and concepts.

This definition makes it immediately apparent that there is some similarity between an allegory and a parable. Indeed, to some they are synonymous. However, a close examination and comparison of the two literary forms reveals that differences do exist (see the chart, page 22).

An allegory has been called an extended metaphor, that is, it has several points of comparison rather than a single point as in a metaphor; while a parable is frequently an extended simile. A metaphor may be defined in part as a figure of speech in which one thing is compared directly to another (Jesus: I am the



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BOB SCHATZ (12/36/7)

In his classic work, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, Milton S. Terry explains the difference between a parable and an allegory. He writes that a parable either makes a formal comparison (such as the mustard seed) or is so distinct from the object described that an explanation is needed for clarity (such as in the parable of the sower). An allegory is self-interpreting and identifies an image with the object being described (Jesus as the "door" of the sheep). A parable uses words literally; an allegory uses them figuratively. A parable could be factual; an allegory is fictitious.

In addition to these points, it might be said that a parable usually makes only one main point of com-

of each type, all making reference to the same animal, the sheep:

simile - "He was led as a sheep to slaughter; and as a Lamb before its shearer is silent, so He does not open His mouth" (Acts 8:32; Isa. 53:7, NASB);

parable - "What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture, and go after the one which is lost, until he finds it?" (Luke 15:4, NASB, see vv. 5-7);

metaphor - "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29, NASB);

allegory - "I am the door . . . I am the good shepherd . . ." (John 10:7,9,11,14; see vv. 1-16,26,27).

The context for the allegory of Jesus as the door and good shepherd in John 10 is the same as that for John 9. When the Pharisees objected to Jesus' sabbath healing of the man born blind, He accused them of spiritual blindness (John 9:39-41). This indictment of the religious leaders of Israel is continued in John 10:1-16 in allegorical form.

The allegory is presented in two distinct but clearly related parts. In verses 1-5, Jesus instructed the Pharisees with a strict allegory. However, verse 6 reveals that this "figure of speech" was not understood by its intended audience. Subsequently, in verses 7-16, Jesus enlarged the allegory and explained its meaning.

Jesus' extraordinary ability to take the common experiences of life and skillfully mold them into didactic (teaching) gems is nowhere better illustrated in Scripture than in John 10. His use of the pastoral imagery of shepherding was most appropriate, for in Palestine the skills necessary for good shepherding and the intimate relationship that existed (and still ex-



FON SCOFIELD PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTION/E.C. DARGAN RESEARCH LIBRARY/NASHVILLE (S 3393)

Above left: Much of Jesus' teaching was done on the hills and mountains in His home region of Galilee. Some believe Mount Tabor was one of those places where the multitudes came out to hear the Master. **Above right:** In some of His most important descriptions of His relationship to His followers, Jesus used the allegory of the shepherd and sheep. **Above:** Trees mark the site of the ancient city of Capernaum, which Jesus made His base of ministry while in Galilee. The city sits on the northern shore of the sea.

bread of life). In a simile, the comparison is formal, with the things compared typically accompanied by the words "like" or "as" (the kingdom of heaven is like a net). Although the point of comparison in a metaphor is more direct than in a simile, its underlying meaning is more subtle, while that in the simile is more obvious.

parison to teach one principal truth. By contrast, an allegory customarily makes several points of comparison using tangible representations of everyday life to teach a variety of intangible, spiritual truths.

The relationship between the simile-parable and metaphor-allegory couplings can be seen best by looking at several biblical examples

Lesson reference:
L&W: John 10:9,14

ALLEGORY AND PARABLE COMPARED

ALLEGORY	PARABLE
Ex: Good Shepherd (John 10:1-1)	Ex: Lost Sheep (Luke 15:3-7)
Direct Comparison <i>I am</i> the door <i>I am</i> the good shepherd	Formal Comparison Rejoicing over one lost sheep found against 99 safe; rejoicing over repentance of one sinner against 99 righteous
Figurative Words Jesus represented by door and good shepherd; believers by sheep, religious leaders by thieves and robbers, etc.	Literal Words Sheep are animals, man (shepherd) is human being, pasture is a field, home is family's house, friends are beloved people, etc.
Multiple Comparisons Jesus compared to door and good shepherd, Jewish religious leaders to thieves and hirelings, etc.	Single Comparison Rejoicing over recovery of lost sheep compared to rejoicing over repentance of one sinner
Imagery Equated with the Thing Signified Jesus is said to <i>be</i> the door of the sheep and to <i>be</i> the good shepherd	Imagery Distinct from the Thing Signified Lost sheep/rejoicing friends are distinct from repentant sinner/joy in heaven
Factual and Nonfactual Experience Blended Shepherding elements are factual; Jesus as door/shepherd, etc., are non-factual	Factual Experience Adhered to Throughout Imagery of both shepherd in search of lost sheep, and rejoicing of friends is all factual
Spiritual Truths Explained as Imagery Is Presented Door imagery presented <i>and</i> explained in vv. 7-10	Spiritual Truth Explained After Imagery Presented Imagery presented in vv. 4-6 <i>then</i> explained in v. 7

Adapted from A. Berkley Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1963), 213,230.

ists) between a shepherd and his sheep were familiar to everyone. It was common knowledge, for example, that sheep would respond only to the voice of their shepherd and to no other, and that the shepherd knew his own sheep individually by name. It was he—the “good shepherd”—who cared for every need of the sheep and protected them from every danger, even to the point of laying down his life for them. By contrast, thieves, robbers, and hirelings cared nothing for the sheep, but were interested only in personal gain at the sheep’s expense (see Jer. 23:1-2; Ezek. 34:1-10).

However, Jesus said “I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture” (John 10:9, NASB; see 14:6). The sheep who enter through Christ experience God’s full spiritual and material provision. While He came to give abundant life to His sheep, the thief, on the contrary, “comes only to steal, and kill, and destroy” (John 10:10, NASB).

Some of the most memorable words Jesus ever spoke were in the form of metaphors and allegories uttered in response to the immediate need of the moment. My view is that they were not the planned products of long and thoughtful hours of study. Yet whether our Lord spoke of Himself as “the light of the world” (John 8:12; 9:5; see 1:4 and 12:35), or as “the true vine,” (John 15:1, 5), after two millennia, His words still have the power to convince the skeptic, to reassure the faint-hearted, and “to save forever those who draw near to God through Him” (Heb. 7:25, NASB). ○

1. From the *New American Standard Bible*. ©The Lockman Foundation, 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977. Used by permission. Subsequent quotations are marked NASB.

Larry Crutchfield is adjunct professor of religion, Burlington County College, Pemberton, NJ.