

# The Power of Parables

*Essays on the Comparative Study of  
Jewish and Christian Parables*

*Edited by*

Eric Ottenheijm, Marcel Poorthuis  
and Annette Merz

JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVES 39

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## The Power of Parables

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and Christian Parables*

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Eric Ottenheijm  
Marcel Poorthuis  
Annette Merz

*With the editorial assistance of*

Nikki Spoelstra



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# Abbreviations

Abbreviations for primary sources, journals, series, reference works, and collections generally follow the SBL Handbook of Style (2nd ed.). The following additions or variations should be noted.

## 1 Rabbinic Sources

### 1.1 *Mishnah, Tosefta and Talmud*

Avod. Zar.	Avodah Zarah
Avot	Avot
Arak.	Arakhin
B. Bat.	Bava Batra
B. Mets.	Bava Metsia
B. Qam.	Bava Qamma
Eruv.	Eruvin
Git.	Gittin
Hag.	Hagigah
Meil.	Meilah
Menah.	Menahot
Peah	Peah
Shab.	Shabbat
Sheq.	Sheqalim
Sotah	Sotah
Yevam.	Yevamot
Zavim	Zavim

### 1.2 *Other Rabbinic Writings*

Ag. Ber.	Aggadat Bereshit
Avot R. Nath.	Avot de Rabbi Nathan
Mekh. R. Ishm.	Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael
Mekh. R. Shim. Yoh.	Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai
Pesiq. Rav Kah.	Pesiqta de Rav Kahana
Pirk. Avot	Pirkei Avot
Sem. R. Hiya	Semahot d'Rabbi Hiya
Sifre Deut.	Sifre Deuteronomy
Sifre Num.	Sifre Numbers
S. Olam Rab.	Seder Olam Rabbah
Tanh.	Tanhuma

## 2 Greek and Latin Sources

Aesop, <i>Vit. Aes.</i>	Aesop, <i>Vita Aesopi</i>
Aphthonius, <i>Prog.</i>	Aphthonius, <i>Progymnasmata</i>
Babrius, <i>Fab.</i>	Babrius, <i>Fabulae Aesopeae</i>
Diogenes Laertius, <i>Vitae</i>	Diogenes Laertius, <i>Vitae philosophorum</i>
Plato, <i>Resp.</i>	Plato, <i>Respublica</i>
Proclus, <i>Comm. Hes.</i>	Proclus, <i>In Hesiodi Opera et Dies</i>
Theon, <i>Prog.</i>	Theon, <i>Progymnasmata</i>
Vitruvius, <i>Arch.</i>	Vitruvius, <i>De Architectura</i>

## 3 Other Primary Sources

Cyril of Jerusalem, <i>Disc. Mary Theot.</i>	Cyril of Jerusalem, <i>Discourse on Mary Theotokos</i>
Eusebius, <i>Theoph.</i>	Eusebius, <i>Theophania</i>
Maimonides, <i>Hil. Tesh.</i>	Maimonides, <i>Hilkhot Teshuvah</i>

## 4 Journals, Series, Reference Works, and Collections

AJEC	Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity
AJS	<i>American Journal of Sociology</i>
<i>Antiquity</i>	<i>Antiquity / Journal of Archeology</i>
ANTZ	Arbeiten zur neutestamentlichen Theologie und Zeitgeschichte
AS	<i>Ancient Society</i>
ASCS	Afrika-Studiezentrum Series
BCA	Blackwell Companions to Anthropology
<i>Britannia</i>	<i>Britannia: A Journal of Romano-British and Kindred Studies</i>
BSPS	Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science
BThSt	Biblich-Theologische Studien
BVB	Beiträge zum Verstehen der Bibel (Contributions to Understanding the Bible)
<i>Cathedra</i>	<i>Cathedra: For the History of Eretz Israel and Its Yishuv</i>
CC	Cognition and Culture
Chambry	Chambry, É. <i>Aesopi Fabulae</i> . 2 vols. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1925–1926. Repr. Chambry, É. <i>Ésope fables: Texte établi et traduit</i> . 2nd ed. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1927.
CS	<i>Cognitive Semiotics</i>
CRS	Classical Resources Series

CSLC	Cambridge Semitic Languages and Cultures
<i>DI</i>	<i>Dine Israel: An Annual of Jewish Law</i>
<i>Diaspora</i>	<i>Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies</i>
DVjs	Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte
ECCA	Early Christianity in the Context of Antiquity
EJM	Études sur le judaïsme médiéval
<i>EJSP</i>	<i>European Journal of Social Psychology</i>
<i>EWE</i>	<i>Erwägen, Wissen, Ethik</i>
<i>GenSoc</i>	<i>Gender and Society</i>
Gibbs	Gibbs, Laura. <i>Aesop's Fables: A New Translation</i> . Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008
<i>Fabula</i>	<i>Fabula: Zeitschrift für Erzählforschung / Journal of Folktales Studies</i>
FCBT	Feminist Commentary on the Babylonian Talmud
<i>FJB</i>	<i>Frankfurter Judaistische Beiträge</i>
<i>FL</i>	<i>Folia Linguistica</i>
<i>HA</i>	<i>Hadashot Arkheologiyot</i>
HDRPM	Historical Dictionaries of Religions, Philosophies, and Movements
HSK	Handbücher zur Sprach- und Kommunikationswissenschaft
<i>HTS</i>	<i>HTS Theological Studies (Hervormde Teologiese Studies)</i>
IBAL	Internationale Bibliothek für allgemeine Linguistik
ICSS	International Comparative Social Studies
<i>IEJ</i>	<i>Israel Exploration Journal</i>
ISFCJ	International Studies in Formative Christianity and Judaism
<i>JAE</i>	<i>Journal of Arid Environments</i>
<i>JASR</i>	<i>Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports</i>
<i>JBTh</i>	<i>Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie</i>
JC	Judaism in Context
JEI	Jerusalem and Eretz Israel: A Journal for Land of Israel Studies and Archaeology
<i>JLE</i>	<i>Journal of Landscape Ecology</i>
JLSM	Janua Linguarum Series Minor
<i>JOWG</i>	<i>Jahrbuch der Oswald-von-Wolkenstein-Gesellschaft</i>
<i>JSHJ</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus</i>
<i>JSIJ</i>	<i>Jewish Studies Internet Journal</i>
KTVU	Kleine Texte für Vorlesungen und Übungen
LA	Linguistische Arbeiten
LAA	Late Antique Archeology
LAHR	Late Antique History and Religion
<i>Laographia</i>	<i>Laographia</i>

MAA	<i>Mediterranean Archaeology and Archaeometry</i>
Mahanayim	<i>Mahanayim</i>
Matrix	Matrix: The Bible in Mediterranean Context
MCM	Media and Cultural Memory
MHCS	Mainz Historical Cultural Sciences
MMS	Münstersche Mittelalter-Schriften
MnemSup	Mnemosyne Supplements
NC	<i>Narrative Culture</i>
NLH	<i>New Literary History</i>
NLR	<i>New Left Review</i>
NTT	<i>Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift (Dutch Theological Journal)</i>
OM	Oxbow Monographs
PAAJR	<i>Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research</i>
P&C	<i>Pragmatics &amp; Cognition</i>
Perry	Perry, Ben Edwin. <i>Babrius and Phaedrus: Fables</i> . LCL 436. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965
QI	Quaestiones Infnitae
ReCo	<i>Recherches en Communication</i>
RSECW	Routledge Studies in the Early Christian World
SAM	Studies in Ancient Medicine
SASLJS	The Samuel and Althea Stroum Lectures in Jewish Studies
SBLSS	Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series
SC	<i>Social Cognition</i>
SCCB	Studies in Cultural Contexts of the Bible
SG	Sprache der Gegenwart
Sidra	<i>Sidra: A Journal for the Study of Rabbinic Literature</i>
SocComp	<i>Sociology Compass</i>
SPPC	<i>Social and Personality Psychology Compass</i>
SSR	Scientific Studies of Religion: Inquiry and Explanation
StG	<i>Studium Generale</i>
STIS	Studies and Texts in Scepticism
TBW	<i>The Biblical World</i>
TLJS	Taubman Lectures in Jewish Studies
TSJTS	Texts and Studies of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America
UTB	Uni-Taschenbücher
VC	<i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>
VCSup	Vigiliae Christianae Supplements
WF	Wege der Forschung
WiBiLex	<i>Das Wissenschaftliche Bibellexikon im Internet</i>
Yeda'am	<i>Yeda'am: Journal of the Israel Folklore Society</i>
ZNT	<i>Zeitschrift für Neues Testament</i>

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# Introduction

*Eric Ottenheijm, Marcel Poorthuis and Annette Merz*

*The Power of Parables* is an apt title for the present volume. The contributions contained in it discuss the ability of these miniature fictive tales to bridge daily life and religious imagination, and in doing so to produce religious perceptions, emotions, and concomitant forms of belonging and social identity. They were offered as papers at the closing conference of the project *Parables and the Partings of the Ways* in Utrecht (2019). This project focusses on the comparative study of parables in early Christian and rabbinic traditions.<sup>1</sup> Our earlier collected volume, *Parables in Changing Contexts* (2020), demonstrated the importance of the context for the meaning and function of parables. It offered a wide variety of contexts: Buddhist, Christian, Islamic, and rabbinic, the latter further divided by their Palestinian or Babylonian settings. In the present volume, we hone in on the parable in rabbinic literature and early Christian sources. Its special emphasis is the astonishing power of parables in transforming ordinary, daily life events into religious messages. The thesis underlying the studies assembled here is that rabbinic and synoptic parables represent a regional variant of a universal genre, distinct in application yet overlapping in terms of form, motifs, and rhetoric. Crucial is their capacity to offer the hearer or reader access to religious knowledge by processing reality and, eventually, transforming it. This extraordinary power of parables as a tool in religious epistemology and concomitant social identity formation has been acknowledged in rabbinic literature, where, quite ironically, the parable itself is likened to a cheap wick that serves as a light in an oil lamp used to retrieve lost treasures:

---

1 The project was funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO-project no. 360 25 140) between 2014 and 2020. Earlier deliveries include Lieve M. Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhiltot: An Annotated Edition and Translation of the Parables in Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael and Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai*, TSAJ 176 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019); Eric Ottenheijm and Marcel Poorthuis, ed. *Parables in Changing Contexts: Essays on the Study of Parables in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism*, JCP 35 (Brill: Leiden, 2020); Albertina Oegema, "Negotiating Paternal Authority and Filial Agency Fathers and Sons in Early Rabbinic Parables," Q1 30 (PhD diss., Utrecht University, 2021); Martijn J. Stoutjesdijk, "Not Like the Rest of the Slaves? Slavery Parables in Early Rabbinic and Early Christian Literature" (PhD diss., Tilburg University, 2021). Jonathan Pater's PhD-project (Tilburg University) on meal parables is currently at an advanced stage, as is Ottenheijm's book on the early Jewish parable.



A parable of a King who lost a precious stone or a beautiful pearl in his house: was it not by means of a wick of a dime that he found it? Thus, let this parable not be esteemed low in your eyes since it is by a parable that man can come to the words of the Torah.

Song Rab. 1:1, 8

The rabbis adduce the polysemy of the Hebrew *mashal*—and, similarly for the Synoptics, the Greek *parabolè*—to denote either a proverbial saying or a parable, in order to compare the function of both: just as, in rabbinic hermeneutics, the Proverbs of Solomon are adduced to unlock the meaning of Torah verses, so too parables are used to detect (“rediscover”) meanings of the Torah. The use of parables buttresses the authority of a rabbinic elite. The finding of precious lost items is a motif which also occurs in a Lukan parable that tells of a woman who had to use an oil lamp (*lychnon*) to retrieve a lost coin (*drachma*, Luke 15:8–10). The motifs (coins, oil lamps) and the theme (retrieving what was lost) point to a similar narratology deploying daily devices, but the application differs. Where the rabbis celebrate Torah, in Luke the story serves to comment on the repentant sinner as a member of the movement of Jesus and his disciples.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the use of parables in the Synoptic Gospels is uniquely attributed to Jesus. In this example, we encounter both similarities and differences: where rabbinic sources prefer parables as tools for Torah knowledge and human behaviour or emotional response, the synoptic parables usually shed light on the kingdom of God or on human behaviour before God. However, both traditions use a similar literary form and deploy a shared repertoire to address ultimate concerns.

However, we understand genre not only to include literary characteristics, but also to imply performance. Each parable represents such a performance, and this necessitates comparison of literary or social contexts. In this respect, the contributions in the present volume profit from the form- and redaction-critical approach, the so-called “literary turn” in parable research, alongside insights from folklore studies, especially on orality and social performance, as

2 Interestingly, neither parable really fits in its current textual frame, suggesting that an older tradition is being reworked here. The editorial frame in Luke could suggest that the woman who loses her coin represents the sinner, yet her joy is compared to the joy in the angelic realm, and in terms of metaphor, she and her neighbours rather represent God and the angels, while the coin represents the sinner. For these tensions, cf. Annette Merz, “Last und Freude des Kehrens,” in *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu*, ed. Ruben Zimmermann et al. (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2007), 615–616. On the highly ambiguous rhetoric of the rabbinic “theory” of the parable, see David Stern, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 66–67.

well as modern theories on metaphor. Finally, material culture of late antiquity is quintessential for our access to daily reality, offering motifs and metaphors for parables. These approaches have already been treated by scholars, albeit mostly independently of the New Testament and rabbinic literature. It is by bringing together these scholarly fields and methods that this volume offers a new and promising approach to parable research.<sup>3</sup>

Briefly formulated, the guiding question for the contributors to our conference and the present volume was: how do parables reflect, process, and imbue reality? With “reflecting” and “processing” reality we refer to the ways parables relate to social, material, and cultural dimensions of lived reality, and with “imbuing” reality we refer to the social and religious perceptions inculcated by means of these miniature stories. In assessing these issues, we hope to obtain a clearer picture of why these literary forms, at least for the first centuries, enjoyed the preference of early Christian and rabbinic elites. By doing so, we also expect to shed light on how these tales contribute to establishing modes of Christian and Jewish identity formations, and to the process which scholars have labelled as the “partings of the ways.”<sup>4</sup>

It is in this threefold dimension of reflecting and processing reality, producing cultural and religious knowledge, and imbuing social belonging that the power of parables becomes manifest. In the following, we will address these three dimensions of the parable from a methodological point of view, referring in the footnotes to the relevant essays in this volume where these aspects are discussed: 1) rhetoric of realism and pseudo-realism in the parable; 2) the impact of the *nimshal* (application) on the parable’s rhetoric; and, finally, 3) the location of the parable in current debates on the history of the genre and the so-called partings of the ways between Jews and Christians.

After dealing with these three dimensions, we will in a fourth section briefly address the individual contributions gathered here, ordered along these three dimensions, although many of them by necessity cover more than one.

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3 For the form critical approach, see David E. Aune, “Form criticism,” in *The Blackwell Companion to the New Testament*, ed. David E. Aune (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 140–155. In the so-called literary turn, parables appear as “aesthetic objects”; see Stern, *Parables in Midrash*. For synoptic parables, building on the earlier work of Dan Via, see Charles W. Hedrick, *Parables as Poetic Fictions: The Creative Voice of Jesus* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994). For the importance of performance, see Amy Shuman and Galit Hasan-Rokem, “The Poetics of Folklore,” in *A Companion to Folklore*, ed. Regina F. Bendix and Galit Hasan-Rokem, BCA 15 (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 55–74.

4 The fact that the rabbinic parables have been produced over a much longer period than the early Christian parables requires explanation. Eric Ottenheim, one of the volume editors, is currently writing a monograph focussing on the history of the early Jewish parable in the context of the so-called “partings of the ways.”

## 1 Realism and Pseudo-realism of the Parable (*Mashal*)

Parables are fictional, yet seemingly realistic narratives, adduced for their capacity to shed light on a basic situation that raises questions or requires religious knowledge.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, they serve as rhetorical tools in contexts of teaching or learning, inviting the hearers to associate themselves with these stories by providing solutions to the issues contained in them. It is for this reason that parables, in order to be operative in a specific social or literary context, have to address, in their narratives and metaphors, the cultural and social background of the audience or intended reader. The high degree of realism in synoptic and rabbinic parables required to fulfil these rhetorical aims has indeed become one of their defining qualities.<sup>6</sup> Yet informing the listener or reader about realia is not their primary aim, nor does realism equate crisp naturalism.<sup>7</sup>

Parables, like fables, deal with profane or religious themes, although a strict separation between the “profane” and the “religious” is hard to make in both genres. This is not meant to repeat the entire debate that started with Adolf Jülicher’s attempt to identify parables by using Greek rhetorical categories and differentiating between the sheer realistic “one-point parables” and allegorising religious parables.<sup>8</sup> It is clear that his wholesale rejection of allegorical elements as a deterioration of the “pure” parable, for which he blamed rabbinic literature without even really dealing with it, cannot be maintained. The parable genre must be described in such a way that the close affinity between New Testament parables and rabbinic parables comes to the fore.<sup>9</sup> The other approach, which prefers to ascribe the term “parables” to all such metaphorical stories as *exempla* and the Johannine similes or *Bildwörter* (Rudolf Bultmann) without further ado (Ruben Zimmermann), may appear justified as a reaction to Jülicher, but calls for a further synthesis.<sup>10</sup> Parables appear in different forms and functions, following either intuitive and easily understandable patterns

5 See Teugels, *Meshalim in the Mekhilot*, 11.

6 See Zimmermann, *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu*, 27.

7 This was Jülicher’s view of the parables of Jesus, shared by Joachim Jeremias, by which these were contrasted with the “bookish” artificial parables of the rabbis; see Adolf Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 2 vols. (Freiburg: Mohr, 1899), 1:172–173.

8 See Ruben Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables of Jesus: Methods and Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 105–150, and his argument for polyvalence in discussion with both Adolf Jülicher and Daniel Boyarin (!) on 164–172.

9 For an up-to-date historiography and *status quaestionis* of rabbinic parables, see Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhilot*, 3–64.

10 Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables*, 132–150. Gerd Theissen’s chapter in this volume addresses the debate on genre on the grounds of cognition theory and modes of referentiality.

or counterintuitive and paradoxical imagery, the latter stimulating human interpretation. However, in bridging the material and the spiritual, parables, and, to a certain extent, fables as well, cross boundaries and locate the spiritual as a possibility to be detected in and through the ordinary.<sup>11</sup> In this way, the ordinary becomes a window, offering a glimpse of the religious or moral realm, albeit sometimes in paradoxical or even brutal ways. In certain parables, some of which are also discussed in this volume, daily language offers a striking coping mechanism for dealing with crisis or unsolved tensions.<sup>12</sup> This is a remarkable rhetoric embedded in the power of the *mashal's* comparison of the religious reality with lived reality. Likewise, and against the aesthetic theory of Jülicher, the presence of religious motifs within the *mashal* of some rabbinic and synoptic parables reflects the sheer impossibility of sharply distinguishing the “profane” from the “religious” in late antiquity.<sup>13</sup> What we would qualify as “sacred” is often a deeply felt divine presence in nature itself, in social habits, morals, or even in political life. Objects such as coins or, to take up the example evoked before, the wick used in an oil lamp, are never sheer “profane” or religiously neutral, but can be invested with religious significance and sensibilities.<sup>14</sup> These religious connotations and sensibilities resound in the metaphorical use of the oil lamp as well, in order to refer to the quest for ultimate values such as Torah or the kingdom of God. In that respect, the above

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- 11 In this respect, parables are a continuation of biblical aesthetics, which also locates the divine presence or meaning in daily life (family, tribe, individual) and even the political realm. After the conference, and during the editing of this volume, Justin Strong's dissertation on the fables and parables of Jesus appeared: Justin David Strong, “The Fables of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke: Their Form, Origins, and Implications” (PhD diss., University of Notre Dame, 2019). A revised version of his dissertation has been published as Justin David Strong, *The Fables of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke: A New Foundation for the Study of Parables*, SCCB 5 (Paderborn: Brill, 2021). His contribution to our volume is expressive of his basic thesis that the fable underlies and informs the parables of Jesus and the rabbi. Eric Ottenheijm, however, emphasizes the development of parables from late biblical wisdom traditions.
- 12 For New Testament examples, see the contributions of Catherine Hezser, and Eric Ottenheijm and Boaz Zissu in this volume. For rabbinic examples, see the contributions of Tal Ilan, Ronit Nikolsky, Marcel Poorthuis, and Constanza Cordoni.
- 13 Jülicher's category of the “example story” (*Beispielserzählung*) presupposes that a parable does not feature religious language within the story. On the problems of this view, see Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables*, 114–117. Adiel Kadari offers a nice example of the contrary in his contribution to the present volume.
- 14 On oil lamps and religious sensibilities involved in their adornments, see Varda Sussman, “Secular and Religious Life in the Holy Land in the Roman and Byzantine Periods as Illustrated on Oil Lamps,” in *Nouveautés lychnologiques/Lychnological News*, ed. Laurent Chřsanovski (Hauterive: Lychno Services, 2003), 223–235. On religious sensibilities and meanings surrounding coins in parables, see Eric Ottenheijm in this volume.

parable, in which a cheap wick serves to detect valuable commodities *in one's own house*, can be considered programmatic for the power of parables as such.

Having noted parables' dependence on realism, we must nevertheless add that many parables derive their power to astonish the audience from a precious blend of realism and pseudo-realism, detectable in the metaphors developed in the story. Once again, it is only by assessing the ways in which the narrative reflects and processes realia that one may detect the deliberate anomalies, bizarre elements, and *Entfremdung*. Hence, knowledge of the realia of the parables' context is mandatory, but not, as in the Romantic aesthetics of Jülicher, because the sublime parable should reflect the realia in all respects. The essential transition from daily realia to a strategy of baffling the audience, or of ensnaring it in intertextually buttressed meanings and notions, happens in quite a few parables both in the New Testament and in rabbinic literature. As this strategy is part of the communicative process, it presupposes knowledge of the shared cultural codes, encompassing genre as well as its constituent stock metaphors. This requires a vast knowledge of Graeco-Roman culture, including the Jewish and early Christian world, material culture, as well as early Jewish biblical interpretation.

The issue at hand here is, indeed, the kind of realism displayed by the parable. Clearly, reality itself, as experienced by the parable's audience or reader, could be a mixed bag of profane and religiously imbued elements, or of unexpected or shocking elements next to everyday situations. We already pointed to religious sensitivities embodied by daily objects such as oil lamps or coins. A similar observation can be made with regard to meals, marriage, or family relations. Meals are marked by social and religious codes and moral discipline, marriage is governed by religious contract and social expectations, and family relations attest to culturally and religiously endowed regimes of power hierarchies and concomitant behaviour.<sup>15</sup> What about parables that deal with other dimensions of ordinary daily life such as tenants and their fields vis-à-vis a cruel master, vineyards and the way to build a fence around them, the secret growth of seed in the ground to a harvest, or kings and princes, sisters and brothers? Obviously, the strength of these parables is that they not only reflect issues of daily life known to the general audience, but also do so in such a way as to open up new perspectives or to evoke a preferred emotional response. Parables are like the legendary Philosopher's Stone: apt to transform even the grey lead of ordinary life into the spiritual realm. From a somewhat different perspective, one could say that all parables are able to unlock the revelatory potential of everyday life, to adduce a concept of Walter Benjamin's aesthetics

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15 See the combined contribution of Annette Merz and Albertina Oegema in this volume.

of modern, secular society. In that respect, our reception of late antique parables necessarily presupposes a hermeneutical distance that must be bridged, as our experience of agriculture in late antiquity, for example, or of slavery, is generally speaking less immediate than it was for the original audience. Still, one should not exaggerate this difference: Which authentic experience of the original audience is reflected in the royal imagery of palaces and courts? What did the general late antique folk know of, and imagine, in the case of these enclosed elite spaces and whereabouts? In other words, and contrary to the views that understand parables as clear and lucid tales, also the implied reader was forced to process these tales and their intricate relation to daily experience.<sup>16</sup>

The impressive collection of hundreds of rabbinic parables by Ignaz Ziegler, for example, remains an invaluable deposit, long neglected by New Testament exegesis.<sup>17</sup> However, his conviction that it was the Roman imperial court that provided the *couleur locale* and, moreover, that the audience was aware of these realities, should be treated with caution.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, and here we come across the issue of elite and folk, parables make use of a narrative stock, drawing from cultural memory as embodied by folk tales, consisting of, for example, “a king who goes to war,” “a landlord inspecting the harvest,” “a real estate owner who owns a vineyard,” “someone inviting guests for a banquet,” and so on. These stock metaphors and basic story patterns tap into or emulate biblical, postbiblical, as well as cross-cultural folk traditions, also crossing the social boundaries of elite and common folk.<sup>19</sup> Clearly, naturalistic realism is not the prime goal of the parable, but a rhetorical device in addressing topics among a specific audience. In this respect, also the scholarly divide between naturalistic or rhetoric (moral, religious, etc.) parables and scriptural, scholastic parables is in dire need of revision, since both kinds of parables make use of similar stock

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16 Cf. the methodological caveats in Catherine Hezser's contribution.

17 Ignaz Ziegler, *Die Königsleichnisse des Midrasch beleuchtet durch die römische Kaiserzeit* (Breslau: Schottlaender, 1903).

18 See Alan Appelbaum, *The Rabbis' King-Parables: Midrash from the Third Century Roman Empire*, Jc 7 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2010). Appelbaum refines Ziegler's approach by distinguishing kings from biblical sources, from folklore, and from the Roman Empire, while challenging the idea that all kings in parables refer to God.

19 See Teugels, *Meshalim in the Mekhiltot*, 51, referring to Yonah Fraenkel, *Darkhei ha-aggadah vehamidrash* (Givatayim: Yad Lataalmud, 1991), 216. These stock metaphors act as a “virtual *mashal*”; see also Marcel Poorthuis, “The Invasion of the King: the Virtual *Mashal* as Foundation of Storytelling,” in *Parables in Changing Contexts: Essays on the Study of Parables in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism*, ed. Eric Ottenheijm and Marcel Poorthuis, JcP 35 (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 205–225.

phrases, as indeed illustrated in contributions in this volume (see also below, section 3).

Again, we have to ask ourselves what kind of reality or pseudo-reality is presented in a parable, and for what purpose. At times the parable is able to shock the audience by its very daring choice of human behaviour or human emotions to still be able to convey its religious message.<sup>20</sup> Our point may be illustrated with an example. One characteristic of several parables is that the analogy between human behaviour and God is not limited to the best of such human behaviour. Moreover, quite often the parable focusses not upon God's acting, but upon the human response to God.<sup>21</sup> Clever girls who keep the oil for themselves (Matt 25:1–13) might be considered selfish, but they symbolize the appeal to be prepared for the sudden-yet-expected arrival of God's kingdom. The Unjust Judge (Luke 18); The Shrewd Manager (Luke 16); The Man Intending to Kill a Mighty Person (Gos. Thom. 98; cf. Luke 14:30–31); A King Punishing His Son (Sifre Deut. 45) without any explanation; or The Women Reading Her Marriage Contract (Lam. Rab. 1:1) who is left abruptly and without explanation by her husband—in all these instances, it is not just unproblematic reality that is transformed into a lofty religious message, but cruelty, aggression, and devious or unexplained behaviour come into view as well. Both in New Testament parables and in rabbinic literature the owner or master is often harsh and even cruel, and yet his behaviour in one way or another symbolizes how God deals with human beings. Attempts to interpret these parables in such a way that God is no longer symbolized by the greedy owner, the cruel king, or the absent husband have misunderstood this remarkable feature.<sup>22</sup> The answer may rather be sought in the parable as expressive of anxieties or resistance, or as simply portraying a religious conundrum that is only answered by an ethos of patience and acceptance of the inevitable.

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20 For discussions of this “pseudo-realism,” see the contributions of Anders Martinsen, Marcel Poorthuis, and Martijn Stoutjesdijk in this volume.

21 See the contributions of Ronit Nikolsky, Constanza Cordoni, Arnon Atzmon, and Lieve Teugels in this volume.

22 This “misunderstanding” of the element of shock in these parables can already be traced subsequent to the parable itself. An example is the transformation of the parable of the Talents in such a way that the servant who hid the money in the ground is no longer punished. See Marcel Poorthuis's and Lieve Teugels's contributions in this volume. Likewise, Luke 16:13 seems to be a secondary explanation of the parable of the Shrewd Manager.

## 2 Realism and the Power of the *Nimshal*

As we already intimated, the power of parables to transform reality becomes not only apparent in the manifold metaphors that connect them to reality, but maybe even more so in the *nimshal*, the application. Quite often the *mashal* (the metaphorical part) is dictated by the *nimshal* (the application) and for that reason alone does not reflect real life without further ado.<sup>23</sup> However, the *mashal's* relationship to the biblical text does not boil down to exegesis alone, and this requires a reassessment of the alleged realism in parables.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the rhetorical application of the parable often aims not only at the disclosure of another perspective, for instance in assessing biblical imagery, narrative or ideological values, such as repentance or loyalty to Torah study, but also at another practice, as an appeal to change one's way of life, more concretely as an appeal to prepare for or participate in God's reign on earth. The New Testament parables are obviously the earliest attested ones and may be the clearest examples of that rhetoric, but the intrinsic connection with rabbinic parables should not be ignored. "Kingdom of God," "community," and "Torah" are not only interrelated values attested in both corpora, but also transcending realities that defy a clear description, only to be invoked by multiple converging parables. In this respect, the parable is like a finger that points to the moon but is not identical with it.

The *nimshal* of parables contains a message for the audience, but may also contain a self-referential element; quite often the two are even intertwined. Some New Testament parables testify to Jesus's self-perception as part of the message of the parable (e.g., Matt 21:38–41; cf. v. 42), but the massive term "Christocentric" has obscured the same phenomenon in some rabbinic parables. The "arch-heretic" Elisha ben Abuya (second century CE) brings forward a parabolic dictum about glass that cannot be mended when it is broken, applied to the wisdom of Torah, which when lost cannot be retrieved. His own tragic existence consists in his inability to repent from his ways, convinced that no forgiveness is available for him, obviously expressed in the metaphorical

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23 For the debate between David Stern and Daniel Boyarin on the priority of the *nimshal*, to which the *mashal* may have been adapted, even if for the audience the reverse appears to be true, see Teugels, *Meshalim in the Mekhiltot*, 54–58.

24 Arnon Atzmon's article in this volume illustrates how parables insert new and daring theological information in biblical texts, and by appealing to the reader's reality. On a cognitive theoretical level, Ronit Nikolsky argues that parables serve to cope with tensions between biblical information and lived reality or reigning rabbinic ideology.



use of glass.<sup>25</sup> The famous Hillel was known for his modesty, but this was embedded in a sharp consciousness of a responsibility of cosmic dimensions (m. Avot 1:13). Hillel, or rather rabbinic tradition commenting on him, does not hesitate to apply a Scripture quotation concerning God to himself.<sup>26</sup> His parabolic saying about “my degradation is my elevation” (Lev. Rab. 1:5; cf. Matt 23:12), which Simon ben Azzai combines with the exhortation to take a humble seat at meals (cf. Luke 14:7), are clearly self-referential, the meal serving both as a concrete example and as a metaphorical model for moral and religious behaviour.<sup>27</sup>

Indeed, images from everyday life should not deceive us: parables are capable of debating, in their applications, such complex theological issues as theodicy, albeit in a veiled manner. Tenants who bring the harvest to the owner of the land get to hear that the produce is not even sufficient to satisfy the owner, let alone to earn them their own share. Bitter experiences in which God’s justice is questioned find here a leeway, without, however, leading to an outright complaint against God. This “pious intrepidity” (a felicitous term coined by Dov Weiss) is not only a feature of rabbinic parables, but the same device is operative in the New Testament.<sup>28</sup> In all instances, these parables shape a fictionalized, yet highly tangible realm where the reader or listener can dwell with his doubts, fears, and anguishes, thus providing a sense of being at home. The *nimshal*—somewhat similar to the *epimythion* of the fable—in this respect shows some similarities with Sigmund Freud’s view of the joke (*Witz*): a sudden change of perspective, an undermining of accepted values, and a disclosure of another reality are the common elements between the joke and the parable, and both offer a moment of emotional relief.

25 Avot R. Nath. A 24 (Schechter 78); because of the shocking nature of this dictum, the text may have become somewhat blurred; b. Hag. 15a and y. Hag. 21 (77b) contain a mitigated version.

26 m. Avot 1:13–14; Avot R. Nath. A 12 (Schechter 55); b. Sukkah 53a.

27 See David Flusser, “Hillel’s Self-Awareness and Jesus,” in *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity*, ed. David Flusser (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1988), 509–514; David Flusser, *Die rabbinischen Gleichnisse und der Gleichniserzähler Jesus*, vol. 1, *Das Wesen der Gleichnisse*, JudChr 4 (Bern: Lang, 1981), 94–96. On parabolic sayings and the absence of full-fledged parables in Hillel traditions, see Eric Ottenheijm, “Hillel as a Teacher: Sayings and Narratives,” in *Multiple Teachers in Biblical Texts*, ed. Bart Koet and Archibald L.H.M. van Wieringen, CBET 88 (Leuven: Peeters, 2017), 207–224. It should be noted how Aesop, being a slave himself, may have been referring to himself as well in his fables about slaves. See also Justin Strong’s contribution to this volume.

28 For this concept, see the contributions of Marcel Poorthuis and Ronit Nikolsky in this volume.

### 3 Parables, Genre, and the “Partings of the Ways”

Parables have fascinated scholars due to their ability to trigger debates on authenticity, an amalgam of historical, aesthetic, and theological originality. Jülicher and Jeremias, for example, in acknowledging the existence of rabbinic parables and the awareness of the gospel writers of an existing genre, still regarded Jesus as the authentic if not unique storyteller, contrasted his parables with rabbinic parables whose origins they located in the academy, and emphasized the revolutionary theology conveyed in them. In the eyes of Christian exegetes, rabbinic parables are more “scholastic” than the “fresh” New Testament parables and their reflection of daily life. This dichotomy established Christianity as a universal religion based on universal morality (Jülicher, clearly echoing Immanuel Kant) versus rabbinic Judaism based on a scholarly elite legitimising itself with hermeneutical techniques. Here a theological bias against rabbinic tradition is undeniable.<sup>29</sup> Scholarship on rabbinic parables also points to the distinction between exegetical parables explaining Scripture and rhetorical parables, without, obviously, the negative connotations.<sup>30</sup> Historically, however, this view is quite problematic. First, the differentiation of moral versus exegetical parables obfuscates the fact that moral or apocalyptic teachings (e.g., kingdom of heaven, heavenly justification of religious belongings) develop biblical values or allude to them, and that, conversely, exegetical parables fuse traditional or elite values with readings of biblical texts. Admittedly, exegetical parables may at times indeed be less “striking” and less vivid about everyday life than rhetorical parables. However, this distinction should not be applied without further ado to the difference between rabbinic and New Testament parables, as we have argued above. Parables appear in debates on biblical law both in the New Testament and in rabbinic literature, and the same holds true for parables of growth which remain indebted to late biblical, apocalyptic imagery, and clearly aim at a folk perspective. In addition, exegetically motivated parables feature in

29 It is remarkable to see Flusser agreeing on this point with Adolf Jülicher and Joachim Jeremias, despite his criticism of the latter for neglecting the rabbinic parables, even though they belong to the same genre as those of Jesus. Cf. Peter J. Tomson, “David Flusser, Die rabbinischen Gleichnisse und der Gleichniserzähler Jesus (1981),” *NTT* 71 (2017): 208.

30 This view, as defended by among others Yonah Fraenkel in his *Darkhei ha-aggadah vehamidrash*, dominates scholarly approaches to parables. See Mordechai Z. Cohen, “*Mashal* as Hermeneutical Model,” in *Opening the Gates of Interpretation: Maimonides’ Biblical Hermeneutics in Light of His Geonic-Andalusian Heritage and Muslim Milieu*, ed. Mordechai Z. Cohen, *EJM* 48 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 185–239. For a sustained critique of this distinction, see the contribution of Tal Ilan in this volume.

the synoptic tradition as well.<sup>31</sup> Secondly, exegetical parables often enjoyed a previous life as independent parables.<sup>32</sup> Finally, the function of an exegetical parable is far more than just “explaining” Scripture; quite often a new dimension is opened up, in which profound religious motives play their part.<sup>33</sup> In short, the strict separation between Christian moral or religious parables (e.g., on the growth of the kingdom of God), as relevant for all social realms, versus the rabbinic scriptural parables, as operative in rabbinic midrash and relevant especially for a scriptural elite, is badly in need of revision.

Indeed, both synoptic and rabbinic parables share a common legacy with Graeco-Roman rhetorical forms such as examples (*paradeigmata*) and fables. It is not a simple task to describe the difference between fable and parable, especially if we abandon the idea that fables invariably deal with animals. Both genres derive their power from a picture of everyday life, which with a sudden twist is rendered into a metaphor for human behaviour. Philosophers of language speak about “the penny drops” or “the ice cracks,” hereby denoting that disclosure experience, a sudden revelation of another reality. Parables are characterized by that even more than fables. Still, fables belong to the pre-history of parables. Next to this indebtedness, late biblical wisdom traditions may have stimulated the production and use of parables.<sup>34</sup>

As the discussion on the *nimshal* has shown, the comparison of rabbinic and synoptic parables reveals a triggering paradox for scholars: similar motifs and even similar plotlines can be used for different rhetorical aims. One could speak of a certain resilience on the part of the plots and metaphors deployed; a resilience that may, most plausibly, be due to a shared cultural milieu and

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31 On parables in legal debates, see the contribution of Adiel Kadari in this volume, and Eric Ottenheijm, “On the Rhetoric of ‘Inheritance’ in Synoptic and Rabbinic Parables,” in *Parables in Changing Contexts*, ed. Ottenheijm and Poorthuis, 15–36. On apocalyptic motifs in rabbinic and synoptic parables of growth, see Eric Ottenheijm, “Waiting for the Harvest: Trajectories of Rabbinic and ‘Christian’ Parables,” in *Religious Stories in Transformation: Conflict, Revision and Reception*, ed. Alberdina Houtman, Tamar Kadari, Marcel Poorthuis, and Vered Tohar, JCP 31 (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 314–333.

32 Catherine Hezser, “Rabbinische Gleichnisse und ihre Vergleichbarkeit mit Neutestamentlichen,” in *Hermeneutik der Gleichnisse Jesu: Methodische Neuansätze zum Verstehen urchristlicher Parabeltexte*, ed. Ruben Zimmermann, WUNT 231 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 227. A good example of this phenomenon is discussed by Reuven Kiperwasser in this volume.

33 Stern, *Parables in Midrash*, 37–45, 102 ff., argues that the *mashal* is part of the hermeneutical narrative of midrash itself. See also Ronit Nikolsky’s contribution on this topic.

34 See the articles of Justin Strong and Eric Ottenheijm in this volume. Cf. also the concept of the “Bildwelt,” a cultural treasure of metaphorical meanings and applications, as discussed by Petra von Gemünden in her contribution.

social locations of the implied audience. It is first and foremost in the application that we may detect modes of religious belonging or religious regimes inculcated by the parable. Identity formations either take shape through parables alluding to biblical figures or current teachers (e.g., Jesus, John the Baptist, Moses, Rabbi Akiva), buttressing exegetical interpretations of biblical values, such as keeping commandments or trusting a religious belonging experienced as social or political marginalization. A close look reveals, however, that these gradual differences do not necessarily point to a distinct religious regime, let alone a different religion.<sup>35</sup> “Christian” and rabbinic parables exploit a shared, biblically and culturally shaped universe of values and meanings. In short, parables take us back to the oral and early textual phases of two nascent religions, early Christianity and rabbinic Judaism, and inform us about outlooks, perceptions, and modes of responding to religious crises and communal issues. It is in their literary setting that we may detect the first modalities of different social-religious belongings, even if these belongings may not be labelled a separate religion yet. Following the wave theory approach to language as reflective of separate identity formations within shared linguistic practices (Daniel Boyarin), parables present themselves as crystallized moments of intersecting cultural productions, yielding (Graeco-Roman) fables, “Christian” parables, or “Jewish” *meshalim*.<sup>36</sup> It is only in a tertiary, allegorising mode of interpreting older traditions that elite-based theological ideas are aligned with these stories, and here we may detect reflections of religious elite formations and their auditors that can be clearly labelled as either “rabbinic Jewish” or “early Christian.”<sup>37</sup> As such, parables come to inculcate more or less institutionalized ideas and practices.

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35 The modality of difference may differ, however, depending also on method. Cf. the social cultural approach of the parables as discussed by Annette Merz and Albertina Oegema with the redaction critical results of Bart Koet, Tamar Kadari, and Catherine Hezser, and the ramifications of social theory for the *meshalim*'s rhetoric in the contribution of Ruben Zimmermann.

36 The terminology “Jewish” and “Christian”—suggesting a linear or polemical development of two separate religions—rather reveals differing social applications as well as “dialectical variants” within a shared cultural language present in this genre; see Daniel Boyarin, “Semantic Differences; or, ‘Judaism’/‘Christianity,’” in *The Ways that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Adam Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed, TSAJ 96 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 65–85. It is only in the mid-second-century (gnostic sources) and third-century CE (Origen) allegorical interpretation of the Jesus parables that we may detect a more distinct idea of Christianity; see Riemer Roukema, “The Good Samaritan in Ancient Christianity,” VC 58 (2004): 56–97.

37 See, in particular, the articles of Martijn Stoutjesdijk, Arnon Atzmon, and Constanza Cordoni in this volume. Of course, many contributions cover more than one stage.

#### 4 The Contributions to This Volume

Following the tripartite structure of this volume, as sketched out above, the first part, Parables and Realism, offers studies that revisit in particular the issues of realism and pseudo-realism in the parable itself (the so-called *mashal* proper), as well as the role played by realism and pseudo-realism in scholarly definitions of the genre.

Gerd Theissen undertakes a synthesis between two widely divergent approaches to the realism in parables by using a so-called cognitive approach, a promising new method for analysing parables that operates with the notion of memorability serving the creation of stories and traditions. Parables appear in different forms and functions, either following intuitive and easily understandable—read: realistic—patterns, or counterintuitive and paradoxical imagery, the latter stimulating human interpretation.

In a joint contribution, Eric Ottenheijm and Boaz Zissu offer a visual rhetoric reading of Matthew's version of the parable of the Bad Tenants (Matt 21:33–45), focussing on material culture and the landscape archaeology of the "vineyard." It is striking how not only vineyard and winepress, but also tower and wall can be assessed in archaeological excavations, and how these elements form part of a visible landscape, detectable in the performance of the parable in Matthew. It is in the merging or "blending" of these tangible, material dimensions with the intertextuality of the vineyard metaphor (early Jewish readings of Isa 5:2) as referencing the Second Temple and its reigning elite that the parable of the Bad Tenants acquires its meaning, alluding to a pending crisis: a crisis of religious elites surrounding the fate of Jesus and of its own post-70 CE context, justifying the Temple's present absence by seeing it replaced with a new community.

Bart Koet points out how the meal plays a double role in the New Testament, both as parable and as reality, especially evident in Luke 14. By connecting the healing of the person with dropsy (explicitly in the context of a Sabbath meal with Jesus's instruction concerning one's behaviour at a meal), both episodes function as introductions to the parable of the Meal (Luke 14:15–24). The question as to whom one should invite to a meal receives a ready answer, according to Koet—namely, guests such as the person with dropsy, caused by hunger. Whether or not this person actually joined the table remains a moot question. In terms of method, Koet points to the necessity of reading the parable in its literary context, with the dropsy as the implied *nimshal*, as one of the rhetorical means used by Luke to depict Jesus as a teacher of the law.

Adiel Kadari considers the changing contexts of a parable dealing with "someone who immerses himself with a reptile in his hand." It is obvious that

this metaphor for a non-genuine repentance has also been understood in a literal way, as a non-effective purity ritual. This is a rare example of the *mashal* and the *nimshal* both deriving from the religious realm, a phenomenon occurring more frequently in legal (halakhic) parables. However, it is not easy to determine when the dictum is intended metaphorically and when it is used literally. The metaphorical use seems to emphasize the importance of the right intention in performing a ritual, although one cannot rule out the possibility of it emphasizing the proper ritual as such.

Eric Ottenheijm deals with a curious metaphor, first detected in Ben Sira, of the sage as a filled treasure. This wisdom saying forms the basis for parables as well as a non-canonical saying of Jesus (“be shrewd moneychangers”). He argues that this metaphor is rhetorically indebted to the material culture of storage rooms and coins. The exchange of money in which precious gold is traded in for small change denotes the “exchange” of divine revelation for human interpretation. This exchange underlies both the rabbinic and synoptic parables, such as the Matthean dictum that a scribe (*grammateus*) brings out of his storeroom treasures new and old (Matt 13:52). Here the treasure refers metaphorically to God’s wisdom or, even more specifically, to the Torah as embodied by the scribe. This trope likewise occurs in rabbinic parables that compare a sage’s activity to the sorting out of food or coins.

Justin Strong focusses on the parable’s relation with the Greek fables.<sup>38</sup> Addressing the problems surrounding the rendering “parable” as a translation of the Greek *παραβολή* and the Hebrew *משל* (*mashal*), he proposes to use the term “fable.” The fable not only features stories about slaves; Aesop, the earliest and most important narrator of fables in Greece, was himself a slave. His biography reveals much about the importance of slavery in narrative contexts. This explains the surprising juxtaposition of Aesop, Jesus and the rabbinic storyteller Bar Kappara. Strong makes a point of assessing the Jewish parable as a variant of the fable, and both Jesus and the rabbis as fable tellers. Clearly, the debate ignited by Jülicher is far from settled yet.

The second part, *Parables and Application*, offers studies that relate the parable’s alleged realism to the application (*nimshal*), as well as the classical divide in their origins as hailing either from the academy or from the traditions of the common folk.

Nuancing Yonah Fraenkel’s theoretical distinction between literary (i.e., elite) and rhetorical (i.e., folk) parables, Tal Ilan shows how both dimensions

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38 For the difference with Ottenheijm’s approach to the Jewish parable as a regional genre, see Eric Ottenheijm and Marcel Poorthuis, “Parables in Changing Contexts: A Retrospect: the Issue of Genre,” in Ottenheijm and Poorthuis, *Parables in Changing Contexts*, 302–304.

can be detected in rabbinic parables. An important aspect is the shared rhetorical effect of the parable, the fable, and the joke: jokes have the same sudden twist caused by a change of perspective not anticipated by the hearer.<sup>39</sup> This sudden change of perspective constitutes the power of the narrative. Hence, the genre of parables should be defined as originally folk narrative, cognate to the joke as well as the fable. Important in this respect is the interplay with cognate genres such as sayings, folk stories, and prayer, giving a voice to socially marginal characters such as women or Samaritans. The rabbis did not shun these forms of folklore in their study houses. Characteristically, Ilan quotes a rabbinic fable that obviously derived from Aesop but was provided with a specific religious application to the destruction of the Second Temple.

Lieve Teugels points to the prolonged absence of the master in parables, which can be interpreted as a metaphor for the *condition humaine* before God: human freedom appealing to responsibility in view of the final eschatological account. As in Ottenheijm's contribution, money, a treasure, or an entrusted good symbolizes the Torah entrusted to Israel. This treasure is not meant to be hidden in the ground, but should be expanded, increased, and made fruitful, in accordance with the rabbinic dictum "Whoever does not increase diminishes" (m. Avot 1:13). Teugels grapples with the well-known parable in the Gospel of the Nazarenes, quoted by Jerome, in which the one who hides the money in the ground is not punished at all. Teugels's solution differs from that of Marcel Poorthuis: drawing on rabbinic texts, she proposes that hiding valuables in the ground is a positive action, whereas Poorthuis in his contribution argues that this reworking of the parable of the Talents demonstrates that the shocking element of punishment for hiding the money was no longer understood. Although the rabbinic and the New Testament parables both clearly reflect their respective identities (i.e., studying Torah vs. preparing for the kingdom of heaven), their interconnectedness is obvious. In addition, the puzzle of the money hidden in the ground is a clear demonstration of the power of parables to evoke highly contradictory responses.

Marcel Poorthuis deals with parallel versions of two sets of rabbinic parables, all telling of tenants who work on an infertile field (Avot de Rabbi Nathan). While not all elements in the parables may be realistic, the real element of shock or surprise occurs in the *nimshal*, which is an exposition on the evil inclination (*yezer hara*) or, in the other set of parables, a debate about

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39 For the similarity between jokes, riddles, and parables, see also Galit Hasan-Rokem and David Shulman, *Untying the Knot: On Riddles and Other Enigmatic Modes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

disciples attending sages. With their depiction of tenants forced to till a field with a meagre yield, the parables illustrate the frailty of the human condition. Nonetheless, it is precisely their theological applications that suggest that the narratives serve the labourers as an excuse to the demanding landlord for the meagre harvest. With “pious intrepidity,” the parable argues that humankind should be excused for meagre ethical results due to the evil inclination created by God Himself or due to the limits of the human condition in acquiring Torah.

In their comparison of rabbinic and synoptic parables on fathers, sons, and daughters, Annette Merz and Albertina Oegema set their readings against the background of social behaviour between parents and children in Jewish and Graeco-Roman society. Taking account of the diversity of applications, they focus on the degrees of agency reserved for or taken by either of the characters in the parables, showing also how they comply with these patterns or resist them. Agency theory opens the eyes for the interdependency between the interaction partners and thus for the oft-neglected power of the weaker party to influence the behaviour of the stronger party (father, God). The result is a nuanced picture of these parables as deployed in (functionally) similar terms. Social reality is present within the parable but addressed by the parable as well, and the parables hold up a mirror to their audiences to reflect on their own stance towards human or divine authority and concomitant behaviour.

Tamar Kadari’s contribution on the fatherhood of God is an apt illustration of how the application (*nimshal*) of parables is able to transform profane reality into a religious dimension, in the case of fatherhood often by analogy. Here we need to know, however, what was considered characteristic for fatherhood in antiquity. Fatherhood in antiquity seems to have conveyed a blend of love and fear, which makes it a suitable metaphor, according to the parables connected to the Song of Songs, to express God’s attitude to His people. In addition, these exegetical parables function as an intertextual connection between the Song of Songs and verses from the Torah, weaving together revelation and love unto death. The resultant of parable and *nimshal* carries Torah values as articulated by the rabbinic elites, but also bonding them with the folk.

Ronit Nikolsky draws the attention to a question never discussed earlier: why do parables not quote biblical verses? Engaging with the literary approaches to parables as serving rabbinic midrash, as espoused by Yonah Fraenkel and Daniel Boyarin, she suggests a cognitive approach that may provide an answer. Going over the grounds of the cultural cognitive theory known as the Decoupling Theory, she argues that parables serve as a bridge from the embodied and known reality of the rabbis and their audience to the new information provided by the reading of the canonical biblical text. This counterintuitive



approach, which labels the biblical text as a new cognitive impulse that must be put on par with extant cultural knowledge, explains the parable as a rhetorical tool to bridge the gaps and tensions created by this encounter.

The tension between the *marshal* and its exegetical function comes to the fore in many contexts. Arnon Atzmon points to the curious fact that the parable's metaphorical part, the *marshal*, often does not seem to fit neatly with the application, the *nimshal*. But on closer scrutiny, as Atzmon argues, the parable turns out not only to explain a given verse but also to add an unexpected depth to it. This point is demonstrated with a parable from Midrash on Psalms, which tells of a king who wanted to kill his son. Although one might be inclined to see the *via negativa* as its interpretive key, the *via analogia* actually proves to be the better option, as the parable appears to allude to God's stated wish to destroy the Israelites after the sin of the golden calf. Moses intercedes, however, and God is grateful to him, just like a king will in hindsight be grateful for having been prevented from killing his son. The parable leads to an eulogy of Moses in which he is exalted as "father of angels," and perhaps even as embodying the divine.

The third part, Parables and Social Reality, again deals with the issue of realism, now focussing in particular on the social and religious reality which parables and their constitutive metaphors imbue or reflect.

Petra von Gemünden offers a thorough methodological reflection upon the unique power of parables to evoke religious meaning and instil a shared way of perceiving reality. The *Bildfeld* theory allows a broad approach to the metaphorical aspect of the parable by rooting it in the metaphorical character of language as such. Metaphorical language tends to attach itself to other metaphors, such as coins to treasure, but also to deposit, trust, and bargain. It explains why parables can overlap and be transformed from an obligation to work with an entrusted sum to hiding it untouched in the ground. The fable of the Oak (cedar) and the Reed may stress the importance of being flexible vis-à-vis the powerful, but apparently Jesus recognized a positive intransigence in John the Baptist who was by no means "a reed moved by the wind" (Matt 11:7).<sup>40</sup> The *Bildfeld* theory is of help for assessing the dynamic character and interconnectedness of metaphors, which cannot just be pinned down to a single, unambiguous meaning.

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40 Cf. how the cedar/reed contrast is further developed in Islamic parables in Marcel Poorthuis, "Parabolic Themes in Islamic Transformation," *NTT* 71 (2017): 193–195. In b. Ta'an. 20b, which is obviously also based upon the Aesopic fable, the metaphor continues to broaden: the reed is praised because a pen can be made from it for the writing of Torah, Tefillin, and Mezuzot.

Ruben Zimmermann unlocks the social rhetoric of parables of growth in the synoptic corpus, and traces its relevance for understanding nascent “Christian” communal forms. His chapter adduces scholarship on identity formation, and discusses parables in the Synoptic Gospels and in John as imbuing or reflecting alternative modes of marginal communal identity formation. It becomes clear that the dichotomy between the kingdom of God and social reality, so deeply felt in nineteenth-century Christian theology but even pervading Charles Dodd’s famous study on parables of the kingdom, should be challenged. The networks of disciples and “converts” as a social as well as political corollary is simultaneously felt as a presence of the apocalyptic kingdom of God, and as an alternative for common religious and traditional household belongings.

Reuven Kiperwasser avoids the dilemma of rabbinic parables being too late to be of use for understanding New Testament parables. Tracing the motif of “dogs” in rabbinic parables (Midr. Ps. 4:11 and 25:9) and sayings as well as meal parables in Matthew, he argues for a *Vorlage* in which rabbinic parables are close to those of the New Testament, including a shared eschatological outlook, which has often been denied to rabbinic parables. His analysis offers the added advantage that some of the bewildering and anomalous elements in parables regain their significance in an earlier stratum. The identification of dogs with gentiles, albeit not expressly derogatory, is a common trait between New Testament and rabbinic parables.

Catherine Hezser discusses realism and pseudo-realism in light of their application by analysing slavery in the New Testament and in rabbinic literature. Parables are “fictional constructs that play with and subvert reality for ideological purposes.” Like art, they represent reality, to convey meaning which cannot be conveyed in other forms. The parable of the Vineyard (Matt 21:33–45//Mark 12:1–12//Luke 20:9–19) involves the absent master, tenants, his slaves, and his son, where the tenants have to hand over part of the harvest. The application in Matt 21:43 (“Therefore I say to you: the kingdom shall be taken from you and be given to an *ethnos* that brings forth these fruits”) remains a puzzle, but Hezser follows the scholars who interpret it as a claim of a later editor on a new Christian ethnicity, and as a motif auguring Christian supersessionist theology.<sup>41</sup> Discussing the *peculium* in the parable of the Talents (Matt 25:14–30) and its version in the Gospel of the Hebrews, Hezser argues that this parable originally commented the harsh fate of slaves

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41 However, the question remains as to who is being addressed in this saying, and why Matt 21:45 would state that the people considered Jesus a prophet? An alternative reading of this verse in light of the spatial rhetoric of the vineyard is offered in the combined contribution from Eric Ottenheijm and Boaz Zissu.

and poor people, gradually yielding to new meanings in post-Eastern and Byzantine-Christian contexts. The motif of safekeeping a *peculium* recurs in rabbinic parables, where it stresses study of the Torah. It is in the transgression of social reality that the impact of these parables becomes manifest.

Anders Martinsen, who likewise addresses slavery, explicitly challenges the idea of parables as a realistic picture of social reality, and his contribution reminds us of the ongoing debate on this matter. He gives an overview of the parable studies in which the supposed realism of the Jesus parables was positively contrasted with the “capriciousness” of rabbinic parables. His conclusion is that the emphasis upon the supposed realism of the parables has obscured their real message, which reaches beyond realism. Martinsen shows how the debate on the parable’s realism remains informed by theological assumptions about the canonicity and unicity of Jesus’s parables and their alleged superiority over their rabbinic counterparts. Consequently, the parable’s application is the only reality that is relevant in discussing the parables of Jesus, and this, so Martinsen argues, points to a different religious perception of social reality.

Slavery recurs again in the enigmatic *Shepherd of Hermas*, an early Christian document that contains some parables that have seldom been studied in the perspective of rabbinic and New Testament parables. Still, there is an undeniable affinity in terms of motifs. Martijn Stoutjesdijk provides an elaborate overview of the motif of the absent landlord (*absente ero*), both in parables and in real life. In addition, there is the motif of the vineyard, the making of a fence, the pulling out of the weeds, and, lest one forget, the happy ending, characteristic of many parables, in which the slave becomes co-heir with the landlord’s son. The parable shows a remarkable resemblance with a rabbinic parable (Sifre Deut. 8). While these motifs betray an agricultural background, one should not exclude the possible literary influence of earlier parables from the New Testament or from a broader Jewish background.

Finally, Constanza Cordoni has collected a plethora of rabbinic parables dealing with the Land. The advantage of such a broad overview is that it enables one to detect transitions and tendencies more easily than by the study of a single parable alone. Parables serve as one of the literary strategies to cope with political and religious loss. Incidentally, Cordoni’s study also evokes the parable of the Slave Improving the Field Entrusted to Him, which is also central in the contributions of Stoutjesdijk and Poorthuis. Cordoni points out how parables about the land reflect and imbue the identity of diaspora Judaism. Striking is the emphasis upon the ownership of the land: the land does not belong to Israel but to God. The parables not only come to console and comfort, but also to offer new forms of Jewish diasporic belonging under Byzantine Christian regimes. The figure of Moses subtly protesting divine ordinances

illustrates the parable's strategy of bridging biblical characters and narrative with lived reality.

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**PART 1**

*Parables and Realism*







# Genres of Parables: A Cognitive Approach

*Gerd Theissen*

The traditional typology of form history knows three genres of parabolic speech in the Jesus tradition: example stories, similitudes, and parables.<sup>1</sup> We distinguish them from two other figurative forms of communication, namely, allegorical speech and symbolic acts. We find allegorical speech in the traditions ascribed to Jesus in the form of secondary allegorical interpretations of some growth parables. We encounter symbolic acts in the narratives about Jesus from his baptism to his last supper. This typology belongs to the standard knowledge in exegesis. However, in scholarship we must call such knowledge into question again and again. The criticism of the classical genus typology is due to two observations: first, we cannot clearly assign some texts to a certain genus; second, the New Testament itself summarizes all genera as *parabolai*, without distinguishing subgenera. I try to do justice to both observations by using the Greek word *parabolē/parabolai* for the genus as a whole. Furthermore, I draw a distinction between the “genus typology” of form history, which goes back to Adolf Jülicher’s seminal work on *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* (1899),<sup>2</sup> and a “genus syncretism,” which denies clear-cut subgenera of the *parabolai*, as is done by Ruben Zimmermann in the *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu* (2007).<sup>3</sup>

This contribution suggests a synthesis of the old “genus typology” and the new “genus syncretism.” The classical form history is the thesis, genus syncretism the antithesis. We need a synthesis. I suggest as a basis for such a synthesis

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1 The contribution presented here owes many suggestions to the “Power of Parables Conference: Narrative and Religious Identity in Late Antiquity” conference held in Utrecht, June 24–26, 2019. I am very much indebted to Dr Brian McNeil and Albert Gootjes for correcting my English.

2 This typology of Adolf Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1910) was accepted by Rudolf Bultmann, *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition*, 5th ed., FRLANT 12 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1961), 179–222.

3 Ruben Zimmermann et al., *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2007), 3–28; Ruben Zimmermann, “Parabeln—sonst nichts! Gattungsbestimmung jenseits der Klassifikation in ‘Bildwort,’ ‘Gleichnis,’ ‘Parabel,’ und ‘Beispielierzählung,’” in *Hermeneutik der Gleichnisse Jesu: Methodische Neuansätze zum Verstehen urchristlicher Parabeltexte*, ed. Ruben Zimmermann, WUNT 231 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 383–419.

the “cognitive approach” in exegesis.<sup>4</sup> This approach presupposes some universal forms of our thoughts, even if they exist only in cultural variations. We create order in our mind by two contrary cognitive acts, by separating on the one hand and connecting on the other hand. In exegesis, we create order first by separating differently structured texts as different forms. This justifies the traditional “genus typology.” On the other hand, we create connections between these different forms by crossing the boundaries that we find in such a typology of structures; this justifies the “genus syncretism.” An interpretation of the *parabolai* of Jesus can, in my opinion, do neither without the separations of the traditional *genus typology* nor without consideration of the syncretism of *mixed forms* in many texts. Both belong together. Our mental activity in the production and reception of texts includes both drawing clear boundaries and transgressing such boundaries. With regard to the relationship between the genus typology and the mixed forms in our texts, we suggest the following interpretation:<sup>5</sup> The structures of the texts are *deep structures* of a genus within the *langue* or the literary competence of an author. Their blending in the *surface structures* of our texts belongs to the *parole* or the performance. If there are no longer any clear boundaries in our deep structures, there is also no transcending of boundaries in the surface texts. Both together explain the miracle of human creativity in the production and reception of texts.

In what follows, the first part will offer a short sketch of the cognitive approach. The second part justifies the classical genus typology, and the third part justifies its antithesis (i.e., the form-syncretism) and also proposes a new synthesis. I try to interpret the relationship between the typology of the *parabolai* and their realizations in texts as a relationship between literary *langue* and performative *parole*. Some exemplary interpretations of parables will demonstrate that we recognize the *pointe* of these parables much better if we discover how the performative *parole* of these transgresses the borders of the genres within the literary *langue*. Thus, I want to show that the cognitive approach contributes not only to the definition of genres of the *parabolai*, but also to the interpretation of individual examples of *parabolai*. At the end, we conclude with some remarks on the significance of the cognitive approach not only for

4 Ronit Nikolsky, István Czachesz, Frederick S. Tappenden, and Tamás Biró, *Language, Cognition, and Biblical Exegesis: Interpreting Minds* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), especially István Czachesz and Gerd Theissen, “Cognitive Science and Biblical Exegesis,” 13–39; cf. also the contribution of Ronit Nikolsky in this volume.

5 See also István Czachesz and Gerd Theissen, “Kognitive Ansätze in der Exegese. Ihr Beitrag zur methodischen Erforschung der Bibel,” in *Kontraintuitivität und Paradoxie. Zur kognitiven Analyse des urchristlichen Glaubens*, ed. Gerd Theissen, Lung Pun Chan, and István Czachesz, BVB 29 (Münster: LIT, 2017), 31–65.

insights into the transmission and reception of parables, but also for the production and creation of parables.

## 1 The Cognitive Approach

The cognitive approach is not well known in German New Testament scholarship, whereas in Scandinavia, there exists a network of “cognitive friends” in exegesis. Together with other scholars, the Hungarian István Czachesz has developed this approach in contact with this network in Groningen and Heidelberg, and represents it today in Tromsø in Norway. He has written a very informative introduction to this approach.<sup>6</sup> I will confine myself to two basic ideas of this approach that are important for our question.

The first basic idea goes back to Pascal Boyer.<sup>7</sup> He says that religious ideas and practices spread when we can optimally memorize them due to their memorability. Optimal memorability is a combination of minimal counterintuitive features and a network of intuitively plausible ideas. Counterintuitive are concepts that contradict the expectations of our everyday ontology, in which we distinguish five domains of being: inanimate things and artefacts on the one hand, and plants, animals, and persons on the other. In antiquity, most people would have added divine beings as a sixth realm. In our time, most people and even many theologians would say that divine beings do not belong to our “natural” ontology.

Today, we can find the everyday ontology very early in infancy; it is also cross-culturally widespread. There is a universal knowledge that tells us a plant is bound to a place, an animal is moving, and persons have consciousness. Religious ideas violate such expectations: a virgin gives birth to a child, the risen Christ walks through walls, and water turns into wine. Such counterintuitive ideas attract attention. People transmit them sustainably if these ideas are embedded in intuitively plausible ideas. If there is, for example, a connection of the virgin birth with a high estimation of sexual virginity, or with an awareness that gender is also a prison from which only a few ascetics free themselves, there is a good chance that the idea of a virgin birth will be accepted into our cultural memory. Furthermore, we should distinguish paradoxical ideas from counterintuitive ideas. It is only paradoxical, for example, if a woman has

6 István Czachesz, *Cognitive Science and the New Testament: A New Approach to Early Christian Research* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

7 Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

twenty children. This is unlikely, but it does not violate any rule of our everyday ontology. Paradoxical traits are also more memorable than normal traits; their transmission often transforms them into counterintuitive ideas.

When we apply this to the genres of *parabolai*, we can now make the following distinctions: Example stories remain within the same domain of being; they tell something about human persons. The audience should imitate their behaviour or reject it. Everybody ought to behave like the Samaritan! Nobody should behave like the rich corn farmer. The figures in the stories and the addressees belong to the same domain of reality.

In contrast, similitudes and parables transcend the boundaries of the domains of being. In similitudes and parables, the growing of plants or the behaviour of people becomes an image of God's action. They are always counterintuitive as a whole, crossing boundaries in the transition from image to the imagined matter, that is: from matter, artefacts, plants, animals, and human beings in this world to God beyond this world. This is true for both similitudes and parables. Nevertheless, we can also distinguish between them.

Similitudes, as a rule, use pictures from a familiar everyday world. What happens is happening repeatedly. These pictures correspond to our semantic memory. Parables, on the contrary, contain paradoxical features within their pictures. What they relate to is unlikely. They correspond to our episodic memory. Nevertheless, the images of parables likewise remain within the realm of the possible. It is true that it is unlikely that an administrator will reduce his master's debts (Luke 16:1–8). However, nothing happens there that goes beyond the rules of our everyday world. These paradoxical (or extravagant) traits are image signals that point to God, that is, to a completely different domain of being. In this respect, paradoxical traits within the images support the counterintuitive character of similitudes and parables as a whole: they point beyond a fundamental boundary between this world and God.

Both similitudes and parables differ clearly from allegories, where we encounter counterintuitive features already in their pictures. If a dragon has seven heads (Rev 12:3), this offends our categorical expectations concerning animals. Allegories differ from *parabolai* in that there is something in their imagery that violates our everyday ontology. In sum, it is true that the combination of the counterintuitive, the paradoxical, and the intuitive gives all the genres of Jesus's *parabolai* a great memorability.

The second basic idea, which Harvey Whitehouse has applied to rituals, is a distinction between semantic and episodic memory, a distinction I have already used.<sup>8</sup> Semantic is a memory of the typical that recurs repeatedly. Thus, the

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<sup>8</sup> See Harvey Whitehouse, *Modes of Religiosity: A Cognitive Theory of Religious Transmission* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2004). On the difference between episodic and semantic

liturgy has a typical sequence. We have stored the liturgy in our memory, but cannot distinguish between individual divine services. However, extraordinary incidents we remember very well, for example, the service in which a drunken preacher ended his sermon with “Cheers.” We memorize something like this in our episodic memory, that is, we also keep in our memory the time, the place of worship, and perhaps the proper name of the preacher. Psychological research has demonstrated the distinction between semantic and episodic memory. With this distinction, Whitehouse classified two forms of religious rites: on the one side, rites that happen only rarely and cause a great emotional arousal, which we memorize; and, on the other side, repetitive rites, which exert a *taedium* effect because we repeat them very often. They become boring. He called these the “imagistic” and “doctrinal modes” of religiosity.

We encounter ritual elements in the symbolic acts of Jesus, which we can compare with the *parabolai*. Among the symbolic acts, we may distinguish the recurring guest banquets with tax collectors and sinners on the one hand, and unique events such as the temple cleansing on the other hand. These two types of symbolic actions correspond in the texts to similitudes representing typical events and parables representing unique events. If one distinguishes symbolic actions from such *parabolai*, one may adopt the following “concept of a symbol” as a basis (among many variants of symbol concepts):<sup>9</sup> a symbol is a real event or object, which at the same time has a pictorial meaning. Roses are real plants. If a man gives roses to a woman, they may become a symbol of love. We must therefore take symbols literally, but in addition, give them a second meaning. The cross is a central symbol of early Christianity. It is a cruel, hard reality. However, at the same time, the cross has an additional meaning within the history between human beings and God. Either it is a substitute death for the reconciliation of God and human beings, that is, a *hilastérion* (Rom 3:25), or almost the opposite: a provocative action of God, a *skándalon* (1 Cor 1:23), that does not reconcile but instead destroys false harmony. The cross is a symbol with both a literal and many different pictorial meanings. Metaphors, on the contrary, unlike such symbols, must not be taken literally. When one metaphorically speaks of God as a father, one does not mean that God has begotten children (with a woman). All religious language is open for different interpretations, but above all metaphors and parables. Poly-semantic pictures in language allow more pluralism in life.

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memory, see Philip G. Zimbardo, *Psychologie*, ed. Siegfried Hoppe-Graff, 6th ed. (Berlin: Springer, 1995), 327–332.

9 See Petra von Gemünden, *Vegetationsmetaphorik im Neuen Testament und seiner Umwelt: Eine Bildfelduntersuchung*, ΝΤΟΑ 18 (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), 1–49. This systematic presentation of different forms of pictorial texts corresponds to the mainstream of literary criticism and is a good basis for further research.

## 2 The Classical Typology of Genres

The two basic ideas of the cognitive approach outlined above are sufficient to justify the classic typology of *parabolai*. We make distinctions in this typology according to two criteria. Firstly, according to the criterion of an increasing pictorial distance, by which I mean the distance *between* the picture and that to which the picture points. Secondly, according to the criterion of increasing image deviation, by which I mean a deviation already *within* the picture from familiar pictures.

Let us deal first with the growing pictorial distance. The distance is very small within exemplary stories, but it does exist there too. Exemplary stories depict exemplary and reprehensible behaviour; they encourage imitation in the case of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30–37) or warn against imitation by means of the fate of the rich corn farmer (Luke 12:16–21). A role model is also a picture, but the picture and what the picture means remain in the same realm of being: persons become role models for other persons. A human person in example stories does not depict God. Rather, example stories speak of God either explicitly (cf. Luke 12:20; 18:11–13) or implicitly, as in the parable of the Samaritan by speaking of priests and Levites as his servants (Luke 10:31f.) or in the story of Lazarus by speaking of Moses and the prophets as the mediators of God's word (Luke 16:29). However, none of the actors within the example stories is an image for God. Each one is an image of human beings. Here, too, there is a certain distance between the picture and the thing depicted. A role model is something other than an "after-image" (which imitates the role model), but both remain in the same realm of being.

Similitudes and parables, however, increase this distance by crossing the border between different domains of being: They make events in this world an image for the action of God, who stands beyond this world and intervenes in it. People in similitudes and parables thereby become the image of God. Therefore, what they mean does not remain within the domain of this world, but points to something completely different from the world: to God. While example stories speak without images directly or implicitly of God, similitudes and parables speak figuratively of God using images. It is only in their framework, in their introductions (cf. Mark 4:26–30), and secondary applications (Mark 12:11) that we encounter the word "God."

Both similitudes and parables contain pictorial representations of God. Nevertheless, there is one difference between them. In parables, the image distance (as the distance between the image and the object) is associated with an image deviation within the image, a deviation from familiar images or even a disturbance in these images. Parables depict unusual events such as the equal

payment of workers for different working hours (Matt 20:1–16). On the contrary, similitudes depict normal, recurring events such as the growth of seeds. This difference has its base in our mental structures. On the one hand, we can assign similitudes to our semantic memory. They represent repetitive typical processes. Parables, on the other hand, can be assigned to episodic memory, in which paradoxes or extravagances ensure that we remember them as a singular event with place, time, and proper names. Of course, there are transitions. For a young person, the first kisses are something that one memorizes in one's episodic memory. For adults, they are much more part of their semantic memory.

Allegories increase the extraordinary once again: The same payment may be unusual and paradoxical, but it does not violate what is conceivable among humans. However, the animal with the seven horns violates our categorical expectations of animals. Therefore, we notice immediately that the horns have a secret meaning. Probably, they mean seven emperors. It is not the picture as a whole that is significant, but individual parts within the picture. The boundaries of domains of being are crossed; animals that offend natural laws become images for political rulers. It is only through a code that the listener or reader can decode the sense of the horns.

If we start from the categories of the cognitive approach, then the classical genre typology corresponds largely to some universal cognitive structures of our thinking. I will summarize the most important distinctions once again: Example stories remain in the same realm of being, in all other *parabolai* the relation between the “significant” and the “significat” crosses the border to another realm of being. Allegories, on the other hand, incorporate counterintuitive traits that violate our everyday ontology already within the “significant.” An animal with seven horns disrupts our categories of thinking. Among the *parabolai*, we can assign the similitudes on the one hand to our *semantic memory* that contains recurrent and typical events, and the parables on the other hand to our *episodic memory*, because they tell of extraordinary events with paradoxical traits. In both cases, the texts as a whole point to another realm of being: to God. They do not violate in their pictorial half the rules of our human world, but only when referring to God as a whole. Then they become counterintuitive, because God is not a sowing farmer, not an employer, not a property owner.

The fact that the *parabolai* of Jesus in all their subgenera have so successfully impressed themselves on our cultural memory is explained within the cognitive approach by their memorability, that is, through a combination of unusual and familiar traits. This is why the *parabolai* imprint themselves lastingly on our memory. That is why this approach is also important for today's Jesus research, because this Jesus research is a search for the “remembered



Jesus.”<sup>10</sup> The memory approach belongs to the cognitive approaches that say: “History, as a discipline of knowledge, is not what happened in the past, it is an accounting of how the past was remembered and why,” and: “The more significant a memory is, the more interpreted it will become.”<sup>11</sup>

So far, I have defended the classical form typology. However, the cognitive approach justifies not only this typology, but also the violation of this typology by what I call a “genus syncretism.” One problem of the traditional genre typology is indeed the fact that at least nine *parabolai* are classified as parables by Adolf Jülicher, whereas Rudolf Bultmann interprets them as *similitudes*, as is shown in the following table:<sup>12</sup>

TABLE 1 Difference in classification of New Testament parables by Adolf Jülicher and Rudolf Bultmann

Text		Jülicher	Bultmann
<i>Parabolai of Growth</i>			
Mark 4:26–29	Growing seed	parable	similitude
Mark 4:30–32//Matt 13:31ff.// Luke 13:18ff.	Mustard seed	parable	similitude
Matt 13:33//Luke 13:20	Yeast	parable	similitude
<i>Parabolai of a Loss</i>			
Matt 18:11–14//Luke 15:3–7	Lost sheep	parable	similitude
Luke 15:8–10	Lost coin	parable	similitude
<i>Parabolai of a Find</i>			
Matt 13:44	Treasure in a field	parable	similitude
Matt 13:45ff.	Pearl of great value	parable	similitude
<i>Parabolai of a Contrast</i>			
Matt 7:24–27//Luke 6:47–49	House on rock	parable	similitude
Matt 13:47–50	Fishnet	parable	similitude

10 See Jens Schröter, “Der ‘erinnerte Jesus’: Erinnerung als geschichtshermeneutisches Paradigma der Jesusforschung,” in *Jesus Handbuch*, ed. Jens Schröter, Lena Nogosseck, and Christine Jacobi (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 112–124.

11 Anthony Le Donne, *Historical Jesus: What Can We Know and How Can We Know It?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 35–36.

12 See Jülicher, *Gleichnisreden*, 2:7–8; Bultmann, *Synoptische Tradition*, 184–192. Zimmermann, “Parabeln—sonst nichts!,” 400, has a table of seven *parabolai*. He combines the parable of the Treasure and the Pearl. The *parabolē* of the Yeast is missing. On the other hand, he adds, perhaps erroneously (?), the *parabolē* of the Playing Children (Luke 7:31–35//Matt 11:16–19). Both Jülicher and Bultmann classify this *parabolē* as a similitude.

We can add some further examples of *parabolai* that we can classify both as similitudes and as parables. Martin Dibelius differentiates not only between “similitudes” with usual and “parables” with extraordinary events, but also identifies four stages in this regard: similitudes with (1) recurrent and (2) typical events on the one side, and parables (3) with extraordinary and (4) constructed events on the other side.<sup>13</sup> With regard to one *parabolē* he deviates from Jülicher and Bultmann:

TABLE 2 The Parable of The Sower as categorized by Jülicher, Bultmann and Dibelius

Text		Jülicher/Bultmann	Dibelius
Mark 4:3–8	The sower	parable: an extraordinary event	similitude: a typical event

According to Jülicher, the Jesus tradition has preserved fifty-three “Gleichnisse” (*parabolai*). Must we revise his classification because Bultmann classifies ca. twenty percent of these *parabolai* in a different way? Must we avoid classifying the *parabolai* in subgenera? Is a “type syncretism” more adequate?

### 3 Type Syncretism

In my eyes, type syncretism is not an alternative to the classical genre typology, but presupposes it. According to the cognitive approach, human thinking not only distinguishes between the five realms of being (things, artefacts, plants, animals, persons), it also crosses the borders between them. Generally, it is precisely by crossing such borders that we become creative. This crossing of borders is typical of poetry, religion, science, and psychosis.<sup>14</sup>

1. Poetry transcends these boundaries: poetic metaphors transfer statements from one realm of being to another. When Jesus sends his disciples like sheep among the wolves (Matt 10:16//Luke 10:3), animals become images for persons.

13 Martin Dibelius, *Die Formgeschichte des Evangeliums*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1933), 252. Likewise, Bultmann, *Synoptische Tradition*, 188, reckons with transitional forms between similitudes and parables: “Ist der prinzipielle Unterschied ... auch klar, so ist doch im Einzelnen der Übergang fließend.”

14 See Ilkka Pyysiäinen, *How Religion Works: Towards a New Cognitive Science of Religion*, CC 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 217–225.

2. Religious imagination likewise crosses boundaries. It is even more radical, because it summarizes all five domains of being as creation and crosses the border between being and not-being in the concept of God as creator.
3. Science crosses such borders. Our everyday ontology knows that life arises only from life, plants from plants, and animals from animals. However, natural science teaches us that all life has its origin in matter.
4. Psychoses lead people to make cross-border statements. What is, on the one hand, a characteristic of great poetic creativity and scientific ingenuity is encountered here as a pathological phenomenon. Psychotics suddenly see a demon in a familiar human being, where we see only a human being.

In the cognitive approach, such cross-border phenomena (e.g., in the metaphor) are comprehended by the “blending theory.”<sup>15</sup> This theory describes and analyzes connections and mixtures between our concepts of different realms of being. This also applies to our texts: Here, we encounter different genres of *parabolai* very often mixed in concrete texts. It is precisely this transgressing of genres that allows the recognition of their intention. In all communication, we use the strategy of deviation from traditions and even of violating them in order to transmit a new or important message. Because we are familiar with some biblical *parabolai*, we overhear the hidden provocative message in them. Even the parable of the Lost Sheep that creates joy in heaven (Luke 15:3–7) creates some real problems on earth: for the ninety-nine sheep in the desert, it is the parable of a Lost Shepherd. Is this *parabolē* a parable that describes an extraordinary event (Jülicher), or a similitude (Bultmann), or, alternatively, both? Looking for the lost sheep is the usual task of a shepherd fitting to a similitude, caring for outsiders among human beings is the extraordinary challenge and demands a parable.

In between the two forms of *parabolai* that we call similitudes and parables, we discover four groups. In these groups, the distance between their imagery and their intended meaning increases. On the one side, the similitudes of growth discover within everyday events something very unusual. On the other side, the similitudes of a surprising find of a treasure or a pearl are images of an extraordinary event, but they transmit the message that such a fund is

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15 Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner differentiate between two “input-spaces” and a third “generic space” that selects elements from the input spaces and creates a fourth “blended space”; see Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, *The Way we Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities* (New York: Basic Books, 2003). A good introduction to the “blending theory” with an application to rabbinical parables is Albertina Oegema, “Negotiating Paternal Authority and Filial Agency: Fathers and Sons in Early Rabbinic Parables,” Q1 30 (PhD diss., Utrecht University, 2021), 74–85.

the ordinary experience of those who follow Jesus. In between these, we must place the *parabolai* of a loss: although a lost sheep or coin is a rare occurrence, it is part of our everyday world. In the two *parabolai* with a contrasting end, everyday actions such as fishing or building a house become transparent to the last judgement at the end of the world, to salvation and condemnation.

### 3.1 *The Parabolai of Growth*

All “similitudes” of growth, including the parable of the Sower, tell of an everyday event that occurs repeatedly. However, these similitudes want the listeners to discover, with the help of these everyday stories, something extraordinary that happens rarely. The similitude of the Sower (Mark 4:3–8) demonstrates this: The usual sower risks losing much seed. This is inevitable. Nevertheless, he is very successful. The similitude opens our eyes to the astonishing success of a sowing man, despite huge losses.<sup>16</sup> The “similitude” of the Growing Seed (Mark 4:26–29) shows the hard labour of a peasant and discloses that the decisive event happens by itself without his intervention. If we interpret the peasant as an image of God, the similitude contains the message that God trusts the earth and the seed to produce fruit by itself. The earth is the people. God’s seed activates them. God trusts that they will produce voluntary good deeds.<sup>17</sup> The “similitude” of the Mustard Seed (Mark 4:30–32//Matt 13:31ff.//Luke 13:18ff.) teaches us that the growth of mustard is at the same time an everyday event and a miracle: the smallest seed is the origin of a plant similar to a tree. What seems today to be very small and without significance may very soon be great and important. That is also true of the kingdom of God.

### 3.2 *The Parabolai of a Find*

The *parabolai* chapter, Matt 13, describes the growth of the community of the kingdom. It begins with the sowing man (Matt 13:3–9) as an image of its origin. Much of the seed falls on soil outside the community. The seed is not limited to its interior. The community is open to the outside. In the parable of the Tares among the Wheat, on the contrary, an internal border is the topic: the community is a *corpus permixtum* (Matt 13:24–30) of different groups and must secure the internal tolerance between these groups. After the interpretation of this parable, two short *parabolai* follow, first the parable of the Treasure in the Field

16 Von Gemünden, *Vegetationsmetaphorik im Neuen Testament*, 209–234, esp. 211f.

17 See Gerd Theissen, “Die Bilderwelt des Gottesreichs. Familien- und Pflanzenmetaphorik bei Johannes dem Täufer und Jesus von Nazareth,” in *Sprachbilder und Bildsprache: Studien zur Kontextualisierung biblischer Texte*, ed. Markus Lau, Karl Matthias Schmidt, and Thomas Schumacher, NTOA 121 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2019), 173–199.

(Matt 13:44), then the parable of the Pearl (Matt 13:45–46). Both are formally as short as similitudes, but in terms of content, they both relate such extraordinary things that, in this regard, they are parables. You do not find a treasure in the field or a precious pearl every day. The fact that Matthew tells both parables in the past tense, albeit mixed with the present tense in the first parable, supports this. There is no doubt that this is a fusion of a parable and a similitude.<sup>18</sup> However, it is precisely through this fusion that the parable expresses something very important: it speaks of a quite extraordinary step, the step into following Jesus, as if it were a recurring normal event. Becoming a follower of Jesus requires a radical decision from the average Christian. Ordinary people must behave like heroes. The “main point” of the parable is that every Christian experiences something as wonderful as finding a treasure in the field. Everyone acquires something like a precious pearl on becoming a follower of Jesus. The extraordinary becomes an ordinary event in the life of all who convert to Jesus.

### 3.3 *The Parabolai of the Lost*

The composition of the three *parabolai* of the Lost in Luke 15 is also very meaningful. The first two *parabolai*, the search for the lost sheep and the lost penny, are similitudes in the present tense. They depict the search for the lost as a normal, recurring act of God. However, it is also true that a sheep does not get lost every day. It is not every day that one loses a penny. For God, it is normal to look for a lost person, but for the lost person, it is the crucial event in their life. God alone is active in the two parables—first as a man who looks for his sheep as a shepherd, then as a woman who looks for her lost penny. The sheep and the penny remain passive. There is no talk of their conversion.

The following parable of the Prodigal Son corrects this. Here, the conversion of the human being is the great theme. In the parable, we should take the returning son as a positive role model after he has represented a negative role in the past, but the rejecting older son as somebody who plays in the present time a negative role but with the challenge and chance to convert into a positive model.<sup>19</sup> We should both repent and accept those who are repentant. The parable comes very close to an exemplary story. The fact that the father becomes transparent to God (as in parables) is not an argument against this observation. The prodigal son expressly says that he has sinned against

18 Ulrich Luz calls them both “Gleichnisse” and “Parabeln”; Ulrich Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus (Mt 8–17)*, EKKNT 1/2 (Zürich: Benziger Verlag; Neukirchen Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1990), 348–356.

19 Albertina Oegema and Annette Merz, “Kinder als handelnde Subjekte in neutestamentlichen und rabbinischen Gleichnissen,” *ZNT* 48 (2021): 27–43.

Heaven and against him. This very direct statement shows that the father is a real father in the parable. There is a distance between him and God (i.e., “the heaven”). Thus, the father remains in the realm of human beings. God is distinguished from him. This tells us a great deal: the reader and listener are to take this earthly father as an example and accept, like the father, people who have gone astray. The parable of the Prodigal Son is both an exemplary story with human models that all should imitate—and a parable that makes the father transparent to God’s infinite grace.

In addition, this third *parabolē* has a retroactive effect on the understanding of the first two parables: all should take part in the search for the lost. All should play the role of the good shepherd and the woman who seeks the penny. The message of the three parables is then underlined once more by the fact that Jesus tells these parables in a frame that refers to a symbolic act of Jesus. Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners. Pharisees and scribes take offence at this (Luke 15:1ff.). Jesus represents all three figures in these parables: the shepherd, the woman, and the father. Nevertheless, the listener is not only the addressee of his actions: the listener himself should imitate Jesus’s behaviour, namely, the search for the lost. The mixture of different subgenera of the *parabolai* is a part of the message.

These examples may demonstrate that in the concrete texts a blending of genres transfers a significant message. We can recognize the concrete intention of the *parabolai* of Jesus only when we see clearly distinguishable structures, on the one hand, and the mixture of these structures, on the other hand.

#### 4 The Relationship between Genus Types and Their Realization in Texts

Our main result is that we must distinguish between two levels of structures. We can describe the relation between them according to the model of depth structure and surface structure. The structures of a genre belong to the depth structures. They are part of the literary competence of narrators and transmitters of the stories. The concrete realizations of the stories, on the other hand, are part of the surface structure, in which the narrator may mix and blend depth structures. In these surface texts, the stories therefore cross boundaries between depth structures. If we deny the difference between boundaries in depth, we cannot discover any blending between them on the surface. The blending of well-differentiated depth structures within the surface texts is the key to the parabolic creativity of the Jesus tradition. However, this relationship between deep structures and surface realizations is not a relationship between

timeless structures and concrete realizations in time. Both the structures and their realizations change over the course of time. The surface texts change every time a narrator repeats them or an author adapts them for a new literary context. The depth structures of a genre change only in the long run.

Those who seek knowledge only in clearly differentiated structures will be disappointed when they try to differentiate the literary genres of the *parabolai* of Jesus. But those who discover human creativity in breaking through order and in the mixing of structures will appreciate such a disorder as an access to the actual intention of an author: the *parabolai* of Jesus have a great punchline; they open our eyes to the miracle in everyday life and to the normal when it is broken through. God becomes visible in the everyday; the everyday becomes transparent to him.

I conclude with a reflection on the significance of this cognitive approach for the interpretation of orally transmitted texts. The cognitive approach explains above all the memorability of a tradition. It explains why the parables were successful in the tradition.<sup>20</sup> The *parabolai* of Jesus were a success because of their mixture of counterintuitive and intuitive features. They thus became the most famous and well-known part of the Jesus tradition. The cognitive approach can help to explain this. Because the cognitive approach concentrates on the reception and transmission of texts, one may think that this approach contributes to the “death of the author” (Roland Barthes). Does the author disappear behind the transmitters and redactors? A sceptical position says that in the search for the author, we cannot go beyond what has survived in the memory of the transmitting followers of Jesus in Judaism. However, in my opinion the cognitive approach does not imply such a scepticism. Why not? There are not only successful transmitters of traditions who know how we can successfully implement something in the tradition. The rules for a successful transmission are also rules for the successful production of texts. What the cognitive approach has recognized, we know from media logic. People accept a message above all if it deviates from the usual, on the one hand—either as a small scandal or as an original thought—and if it is, at the same time, embedded in many thoughts by which the listeners feel confirmed. Everyone who creates texts knows this. I suppose that the possible author Jesus as a poet and

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20 The rabbinic parables have been very successful as a genre in creating new parables in order to interpret biblical texts. But in quite another way, the parables of Jesus were also very successful. It is true that they did not inspire the creation of new parables as means of interpretation, but they were interpreted again and again within the Christian worship by sermons: about 25 percent of the texts in the oldest order of the pericopes were parables or contained parables.

preacher formed his message as a combination of paradoxical or counterintuitive statements and plausible thoughts. Provocative statements like the eschatological message of the kingdom of God and God's judgement, on the one hand, and very familiar wisdom statements like the universally plausible golden rule, on the other hand, belong together in his teaching. The details of what he said may remain an open question. I believe, however, that we can recognize even today the basic structures of his parables. He was one of the great Jewish parable creators comparable with the parable poets in rabbinical literature in antiquity, but also comparable with Franz Kafka in our modern times.

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## A Parable of the Lost Temple? Archaeology, Intertextuality, and Rhetoric in Matt 21:33–46

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Realism and its rhetorical function remain a core issue in parable research. In his discussion of the parables of Jesus, Adolf Jülicher writes: “Nicht gedeutet will das Parabelbild werden, sondern angewendet ....”<sup>1</sup> In his perception, the parable story provides a lucid and naturalistic pattern, perfectly illustrating the lesson to be grasped, and it does so without further comment or explanation. The huge impact of Jülicher’s approach notwithstanding, Gregory Lanier comes to a remarkable conclusion in his recent assessment of scholarship on the parable of the Bad Tenants (Matt 21:33–46//Mark 12:1–12//Luke 20:9–19//Gos. Thom. 65): whereas the majority of scholars express their allegiance to Jülicher’s proposal to read parables as realistic tales, this parable being a litmus test for this new approach, they still keep searching for allegorical elements. In explaining the motif of the vineyard, or the identity of the tenants, servants, or son, they look for a theological message, referring to the fate of Jesus and the concomitant fates of the “church” and the Jewish people.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, while recent scholarship has characterized the parable’s basic tale of a landowner-tenants confrontation as “realistic fiction,” in the assessment of the legal backgrounds, the ramifications of this characterization in terms of the parable’s rhetoric remain a matter of debate.<sup>3</sup> This study seeks to assess the archaeological realism of the vineyard as well as the way this reality “translates” into a religious

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- 1 Adolf Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, vol. 1, *Gleichnisreden Jesu im Allgemeinen*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1910; repr., Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1976), 87.
  - 2 Gregory R. Lanier, “Mapping the Vineyard: Main Lines of Investigation Regarding the Parable of the Tenants in the Synoptics and Thomas,” *CBR* 15 (2016): 110. Joachim Jeremias, *Die Gleichnisse Jesu*, 6th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962), 68, voices a *communis opinio* that Mark (and Matthew even more so) presents an allegory, with the owner as God, the vineyard as Israel, the tenants as its leaders, the slaves as the prophets, and the son as Christ himself! The “other people” (Matt 21:43) is the church of the gentiles.
  - 3 The term “realistic fiction” is suggested in John S. Kloppenborg, *The Tenants in the Vineyard: Ideology, Economics, and Agrarian Conflict in Jewish Palestine*, WUNT 195 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 106; cf. Lanier “Mapping the Vineyard,” 80; Ernest van Eck, *The Parables of Jesus the Galilean: Stories of a Social Prophet*, Matrix 9 (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2016), 191, offers a fine overview of the debate on the parable as “realistic narrative” and focusses on the motif

message in Matthew, in particular through the intertextuality with Isa 5:1–6. Why did Matthew—following Mark, but unlike Luke—depict the planting of the vineyard in more detail? Would the intended audience have perceived this detailed opening of a spatial reality, depicted visually, as it were? We will focus on the material culture of the elements presented in the opening of the parable: “There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower” (Matt 21:33).<sup>4</sup>

In the following, we will first briefly discuss contemporary theory of metaphor (1) to show that metaphors merge and fuse different realities. A second section reviews the archaeological data, focussing on the three elements mentioned in the parable: the press (2.1), the field walls (2.2), and the tower (2.3). It then discusses the social setting (2.4). These findings will then be compared to extant readings of Isa 5:2 in early Judaism, and located in the performative setting of Matthew’s Gospel (3). In our conclusions (4), we will suggest that the vineyard metaphor is an intertextual as well as archaeological landscape commenting on the visual reality of the temple and, pressingly, its absence for Matthew’s readership.

## 1 Realism and Metaphor

Clearly, social realism is not the prime aim of parables. The lurking social conflict between landowners and tenants serves metaphorical operations and rhetorical strategies, addressing pressing issues of identity and belonging in the environment of the parable performer, whether we locate the roots of this performance in the life of the historical Jesus or, following the basic insights of both form criticism and redaction criticism, see it as a reflection of the social reality of the gospel editor. So, without falling into the trap of reading a parable’s metaphor as allegory, alleged “allegorising” elements should rather be

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of the violence in Gos. Thom. 65. However, not all parables are, by necessity of their genre, to be understood as realistic performances.

4 Unless noted otherwise, Bible translations follow the NRSV. Matthew features a householder (*anthropos oikodespotes*), in departure from Mark 12:1, which reads *anthropos*. We assume this parable to have been performed in a Judean cultural context, and with Judean material realities in mind. The spatial location—the temple—is as important as it is in Mark and Luke, but its ramifications differ from Mark; where Mark situates Jesus in the temple amidst the developing conflict with the temple leadership, Matthew broadens the conflict to address communal issues. Indeed, Matthew connects story and application with the transfer signal “therefore,” διὰ τοῦτο. This strengthens a *Sitz im Leben* of this parable as reflective of scribal culture. See on this Ruben Zimmermann et al., *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2007), 388.

assessed as referential possibilities of metaphors deployed in the parable's narrative and realized in oral or textual performance.<sup>5</sup> Current theory on metaphor stresses its lingering indebtedness to social, cultural, economic, legal, or historical reality. Crucial in these theories is the understanding that echoes of underlying realities never cease to have their impact on a metaphor's rhetorical meaning and rhetorical effectiveness. Harald Weinrich's *Bildfeld* theory assesses a metaphor as combining a *Bildspendende Bereich*, which refers to cultural or material realities, with a *Bildempfangende Bereich*, the linguistic target domain, and it is only in the combination of both dimensions that a metaphor receives its meaning. The recognizability of a metaphor as embedded in such a shared cultural reservoir of traditional meanings hinges on the presence of more or less standardized combinations.<sup>6</sup> Whereas this *Bildfeld* theory focusses on language as a system (*langue*) which becomes tangible only in realized speech (*parole*), Conceptual Blending Theory, as advanced by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, takes its departure in cognitive processes of the human mind. Cognitive processes are the source not only for our conceptualization of reality but also for metaphorical operations, as different mental input fields are continuously combined and reconfigured by the human mind in metaphors.<sup>7</sup> This approach proposes that elements of the input space, such as material reality, economy, or social reality, while being merged with other input fields, nonetheless continue to inform the metaphorical value, and

5 See a similar observation in David Stern, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 11–12. A different approach traces the continuities of the parable, the stage of allegorising individual elements in editorial stages of gospel (and rabbinic, as Stern notices) documents, and the theologically wrought allegory of church teachers; see Hans-Josef Klauck, *Allegorie und Allegorese in synoptischen Gleichnistexten*, 2nd ed., NTAbh 13 (Münster: Aschendorff, 1978).

6 This “Bildfeldtradition” is a treasury of meanings accessible to the average public; see Petra von Gemünden, *Vegetationsmetaphorik im Neuen Testament und seiner Umwelt: Eine Bildfelduntersuchung*, NTOA 18 (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), as well as her contribution to this volume. Catherine Hezser offers an analysis of vineyard “Bildfelder” in rabbinic sources and compares these with the synoptic parable of the Workers in the Vineyard; see Catherine Hezser, *Lohnmetaphorik und Arbeitswelt in Mt 20,1–16: Das Gleichnis von den Arbeitern im Weinberg im Rahmen rabbinischer Lohngleichnisse*, NTOA 15 (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990). In our contribution, we focus on the material culture rhetoric as part of the performance.

7 Blake E. Wassell and Stephen R. Llewelyn, “Fishers of Humans,’ the Contemporary Theory of Metaphor, and Conceptual Blending Theory,” *JBL* 133 (2014): 628, “Here distinct mental spaces (input spaces) are blended to create a new mental space (the blend) where conceptual integration (a) selectively projects and compresses elements and relations from the input spaces and then (b) develops the emergent structure of the blend through composition, completion, and elaboration.”

subsequently, the parable and its application as well. Concomitantly, a parable, approached as extended metaphor, remains indebted to the input of material realities and to cultural or intertextual input in order to be rhetorically effective.<sup>8</sup> This explains, theoretically, why the parable of the Bad Tenants is not a mere “realistic fiction” of a social conflict of vineyard owners and tenants, but a tale to comment on the implied reader’s religious reality as well. Indeed, any discussion on the degree of Matthew’s “allegorising” should be evaluated within the performative context of the parable. This performance includes its indebtedness to the Song of the Vineyard in Isa 5 (LXX) and traditional readings of this passage, some of which also show a degree of “allegorising.” These insights nuance the opposition between realism and allegorical meaning: the vineyard is both a visual reality and a stock metaphor, steeped in intertextuality and in subtle allusiveness to the reader’s spatially perceived realism.<sup>9</sup> Decisive is the way the blend of the metaphor of the vineyard appeals to the audience or reader’s social location and imagination within the performance at hand.<sup>10</sup>

## 2 The Parable’s Vineyard: Archaeological Data and Debates

It would appear indeed that the addition of technical details in the parable under discussion is intended to add some rural flavour, a realistic dimension, to enhance its credibility within its spatial performance. The reader of the parable in antiquity, whether a rural dweller or a city resident, would certainly have been familiar with the agricultural reality of those days. Buildings, installations, and facilities connected to the wine industry, as agricultural estates, complete with wine-presses, stone walls, and protective towers of one form or another, were part of the common reality in the land of Israel’s countryside during the Roman period.<sup>11</sup> Wine indeed proves to be a prime commodity in

8 Wassell and Llewelyn, “Fishers of Humans,” 645: “The source domain of an effective metaphor must be tangible, because it is chosen specifically in order to elucidate a less familiar concept in a certain way. Familiarity and relevance are basic criteria in the selection. More than simply decorating language, the metaphor structures a new idea(s) and experience(s). Without intuitive, and even intimate, knowledge of the source domain, the intended structure of the target domain is elusive and the metaphor can be unsuccessful.”

9 George J. Brooke, “4Q500 1 and the Use of Scripture in the Parable of the Vineyard,” *DSD* 2 (1995): 294, concludes that “the allegorical character should not be downplayed as secondary and insignificant.”

10 Cf. Lanier, “Mapping the Vineyard,” 90.

11 Boaz Zissu, “Rural Settlement in the Judean Hills and Foothills from the Late Second Temple Period to the Bar Kokhba Revolt” (PhD diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2001), 249–270 (Hebrew).

the economic and social reality of late antique Judea and Galilee.<sup>12</sup> Harvesting and processing vineyard crops was an event surrounded by social and religious anxieties, and demanded physical labour and precautionary measures. During the vintage season (August–September), the farmers transferred the clusters of grapes they had gathered to the winery/winepress. From the Bronze Age to the Byzantine period, most wineries in the land of Israel were hewn in the bedrock (fig. 1). The production of wine consisted of three phases:<sup>13</sup> 1) treading; 2) pressing the grape skins (optional phase); and 3) fermentation. The grapes were first trodden on a treading-floor—usually square in shape, sloping towards the collecting vat; the must flowed with the force of gravity into the collecting vat. Most of the wine production process took place in this installation, without the need for additional features. The majority of scholars agree that the liquid produced in this way remained covered in the collecting vat for several days, until the end of the initial fermentation of the must and its transformation into wine. Yet Yehoshua Dray disagrees, claiming that the initial fermentation took place on the treading-floor, and that it was only then that the wine flowed into the collecting vat.<sup>14</sup> Either way, the wine was transferred from the winery to a jar, kept in the adjacent farm under relatively constant temperature

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- 12 Wine, along with olive oil and bread, were the Mediterranean staples in antiquity. It is estimated that an adult male drank an average of between 0.7 and 1 litre of wine per day (Magen Broshi, “The Diet of Palestine in the Roman Period,” *Cathedra* 43 [1987]: 21–23). Wine accounted for about a quarter of caloric intake and about a third of the average man’s iron intake. It has been proposed that women drank about half of what men did, and children even less (Ze’ev Safrai, *The Economy of Roman Palestine* [London: Routledge, 1994], 128–136). In antiquity wine was usually mixed with water and consumed daily. Under reasonable conditions, wine could be stored for several years, thanks to its alcohol content. In times of scarcity, wine was a substitute for water or was added to water in order to improve its taste (cf. Michael Decker, “Water into Wine: Trade and Technology in Late Antiquity,” in *Technology in Transition AD 300–650*, ed. Luke Lavan, Enrico Zanini, and Alexander Sarantis, *LAA* 4 [Leiden: Brill, 2008], 121–148; Nizar Ali Turshan and Mathew Cox, “Ya’amun Main Wine Press from Roman to the End of Umayyad and Early Abbasid Periods in Northern Jordan,” *MAA* 15 [2015]: 131–139). Wine had various medicinal uses and was considered a remedy for many diseases (Jacques Jouanna, “Wine and Medicine in Ancient Greece,” in *Greek Medicine from Hippocrates to Galen: Selected Papers*, ed. Jacques Jouanna and Philip van der Eijk, trans. Neil Allies, *SAM* 40 [Leiden: Brill, 2012], 173–193).
- 13 For the following, see Rafael Frankel, “Presses for Oil and Wine in the Southern Levant in the Byzantine Period,” *DOP* 51 (1997): 73–75; Rafael Frankel, *Wine and Oil Production in Antiquity in Israel and Other Mediterranean Countries* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 2–28.
- 14 Yehoshua Dray, “The Wine Making Process in the Improved Byzantine Wine Press,” in *Olive Oil and Wine Production in Eastern Mediterranean During Antiquity*, ed. Adnan Diler, Ahmet Kaan Şenol, and Ümit Aydınoglu (İzmir: Ege Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi Yayınları, 2015), 191–198.



FIGURE 1 Simple winery (winepress) at H. Bet Shana, northern Judean Foothills  
PHOTOGRAPH: B. ZISSU

conditions for continued fermentation lasting several weeks. A more advanced type of press also had an intermediate settling or sieving vat, located between the treading-floor and the collecting vat, whose purpose was to filter the must (fig. 2). These advanced wineries were first hewn in the late Iron Age, but they were particularly common from the Hellenistic period to the Byzantine period.<sup>15</sup> Another technological advancement that appeared in the late Iron Age was the introduction of a beam with weights, for secondary extraction of must. The most advanced wineries, of the Roman and Byzantine periods, also had a true press located in the centre of the treading-floor and sometimes additional, smaller treading-floors and compartments around the treading-floor.<sup>16</sup>

15 Vladimir Wolff Avrutis, *Wine Presses at the Neshet-Ramla Quarry: A Thousand Years of Winemaking*, ed. Etan Ayalon (Jerusalem: Printiv, 2015).

16 Frankel, "Presses for Oil," 73–76; Frankel, *Wine and Oil Production*; Rafael Frankel, "Introduction," in *Oil and Wine Presses in Israel from the Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine Periods*, ed. Etan Ayalon, Rafael Frankel, and Amos Kloner (Oxford: ArchoPress, 2009), 1–16.



FIGURE 2 Winery located between two ancient farms at Soreq Ridge, Judean Hills. Treading floor (1), intermediate settling vat (2), collecting vat (3). In a later stage, the winepress was converted into an olive press (op).

PHOTOGRAPH: B. ZISSU

### 2.1 *The Winepress*

The above process is evoked in the parable by the term “winepress.” This basic winery (which in the archaeological literature is also labelled a “winepress”) is identified with the biblical Hebrew גַּת or יֵקֶב. A textual examination shows that the גַּת (*gat*) is chiefly the treading-floor, while the יֵקֶב (*yekev*) refers to the collecting vat. In the Septuagint, both terms are commonly translated as ληνός.<sup>17</sup> In Isa 5:2, however, יֵקֶב is translated as προλήνιον, “in front of the winery,” and in the parable under discussion as λήνιον (Matt 21:33), or ὑπολήνιον, “below the winepress” (Mark 12:1).<sup>18</sup> These winepresses are found in large numbers in the countryside outside ancient settlement sites, demonstrating that they were a common feature of the vineyards (Isa 5:1–2, Matt 21:33, and Mark 12:1). Relatively few installations were integrated into farms and agricultural estates.

17 Philip Mayerson, “The Meaning and Function of ληνός and Related Features in the Production of Wine,” *ZPE* 131 (2000): 161–165.

18 We would like to suggest that Mark’s awkward choice of terms, ὑπολήνιον instead of the more common ληνός, supports this concept. Since the Septuagint employs the uncommon term προλήνιον, the author(s) of our parable in Mark used ὑπολήνιον instead, strengthening the shared knowledge of material realism behind the production processes and thus intending to be clearer than the Septuagint, with its common ληνός, followed here by Matthew.





FIGURE 3 Aerial view of a traditional farming compound surrounded by a field wall north of H. Burgin, Judean Foothills; it includes a tower, some buildings, and a cistern.  
PHOTOGRAPH: B. ZISSU

Most wineries were small and were used by the owner of a nearby vineyard. Wineries were usually found near or inside the vineyards due to the grapes' sensitivity to transportation, pressure, shaking, or other ways of processing.<sup>19</sup> Many rock-hewn presses were used for generations by the farmers who lived nearby, as the technology remained unchanged for thousands of years. Grape syrup production in ancient wine presses was still documented in the 1970s in the Hebron area.<sup>20</sup>

However, from the parable under discussion the exact type of winery cannot be determined, nor its degree of sophistication. What is clear is that the compound was surrounded by a wall (φραγμὸν) and that it included a tower (πύργον). What does our author have in mind? What type of walled compound is he referring to? In our opinion, there are two main options: 1) a walled vineyard compound with a field tower; and 2) a farm, consisting of a more

19 Avrutis, *Wine Presses*, 4, fig. 1.4; Carey Walsh, *The Fruit of the Vine: Viticulture in Ancient Israel*, HSM 90 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000).

20 Frankel, *Oil and Wine Presses*, 8–9; Avrutis, *Wine Presses*, 55–78.

substantial building, protected by a true tower, with a vineyard and winery nearby. Remarkably, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars and visitors to the Holy Land were already impressed by traditional vineyards, surrounded by walls and protected by towers (fig. 3), and intuitively identified them with the description in Isaiah.<sup>21</sup> In the next section, we shall see that the situation is not so simple and that there are other identification possibilities. Crucial here is our understanding of the character of the tower and the wall mentioned in Mark's and Matthew's version of the parable.

## 2.2 *Field Walls*

In archaeological research there is some confusion and ambiguity regarding field walls, terraces, etc. One type is the agricultural terrace, common throughout the mountainous parts of the country. The purpose of a terrace is to hold and support the earth fill behind it, and in fact to create a level surface, suitable for agriculture, on a hill or mountain slope.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, there are various systems of stone walls and fences, which cross the countryside, divide it, and demarcate plots of various sizes and shapes.<sup>23</sup> The agricultural landscapes were always adapted to the topography and local conditions; in the mountainous parts of Judea, Samaria, and the Galilee, for example, significant terrace construction along the slope is required to enable agriculture. On a level area or plateau, such as the Golan Heights and certain parts of Judea and Samaria, the agricultural plots are more or less flat. Yet other issues impeded the owners engaged in dry land farming, including stone excess, drainage, ownership, thieves, the neighbour's goats, etc. In these areas, one encounters systems of stone walls and fences meant to solve these problems by defining ownership, demarcating areas and roads, and sometimes preventing in or out passage. The field walls also hold excess stone cleared from the fields, allowing for ploughing

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- 21 See, e.g., Philip J. Baldensperger, *The Immovable East: Studies of the People and Customs of Palestine*, PEFQS (London, 1913), 293: "The vineyards are always surrounded by a dry stone wall (jedur), and a kasr built in it. On the top of this loose-stone building they put a hut, which in summer only is covered by branches. Here the family lives, and from this elevated place the guardian can survey the vineyard, which, though fenced all around with thorn bushes laid on the walls, is often visited by foxes, badgers, jackals, and sometimes thieves. Similar proceedings are referred to in Isaiah 5, 2.;" see Philip J. Baldensperger, *The Immovable East: Studies of the People and Customs of Palestine*, PEFQS (London, 1913), 293.
- 22 Zvi Ron, "Agricultural Terraces in the Judaeen Mountains," *IEJ* 16 (1966): 34–35; Shimon Gibson and Rafael R. Lewis, "The Origins of Terracing in the Southern Levant and Patch Cultivation/Box Fields," *JLE* 10 (2017): 258–260. For Galilee, compare Avrutis *Wine Presses*, 209–2020 and various sites presented in Ayalon, *Oil Presses*.
- 23 Shimon Gibson, "Landscape Archaeology and Ancient Agricultural Field Systems in Palestine" (PhD diss., University of London, 1995), 59–143.

and farming. This phenomenon has been studied as part of the discipline of “landscape archaeology,” in various parts of Israel.<sup>24</sup>

The field systems are first and foremost functional, and as such analysis of the system’s layout, location, type of land, and other features sheds light on their original use and the identification of crops. Sometimes the relative location, size, and shape of the plot may indicate connection to a certain settlement site. The distance from the locality is a critical factor: the closer the cultivated area is to the settlement, the more developed and sophisticated the field systems are. Within a range of five to six kilometres, the farmer can access his land in the morning and return at the end of the working day, while still having enough time to farm his plot. The social component is also reflected in the layout and location of field systems: for example, more distant systems, large and planned compounds on difficult terrain, or fringe areas all require leadership, cooperation, and a certain level of security, administration, and communication.<sup>25</sup>

24 Land of Israel: Shimon Gibson and Claudine Dauphin, “Landscape Archaeology at er-Ramthaniyye in the Golan Heights,” in *Archéologie et Espaces*, ed. Sander van der Leeuw and Jean-Luc Fiches (Antibes: Actes des Xe Rencontres Internationales d’Archéologie et d’Histoire d’Antibes, 1990), 435–465; Shimon Gibson, “From Wildscape to Landscape: Landscape Archaeology in the Southern Levant—Methods and Practice,” in *The Rural Landscape of Ancient Israel*, ed. Aren M. Maeir, Shimon Dar, and Ze’ev Safrai, BAR 1121 (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2003), 1–26; and abroad, e.g., in England, Derrick N. Riley, *Early Landscape from the Air: Studies of Crop Marks in South Yorkshire and North Nottinghamshire* (Sheffield: University of Sheffield, 1980), 25–26. Dating the field systems or parts thereof is problematic; these can be dated relatively and indirectly, by examining the stratigraphic relationship between them and dated elements in the landscape. Is the system early or late for a particular settlement site that is short-lived? What is the relationship of the wall system to a Roman road or a particular, dated facility? Sometimes it is possible to date the systems directly by collecting potsherds from them and attempting to excavate certain components (e.g., Steve Ford, Mark Bowden, Geoff Mees, and Vince Gaffney, “The Date of the ‘Celtic’ Field-Systems on the Berkshire Downs,” *Britannia* 19 [1988]: 401–404). More recently, the OSL technique has been employed with mixed results (Uri Davidovich et al., “Archaeological Investigations and OSL Dating of Terraces at Ramat Rahel, Israel,” *JFA* 37 [2012]: 192–208; Yuval Gadot et al., “The Formation of a Mediterranean Terraced Landscape: Mount Eitan, Judean Highlands, Israel,” *JASR* 6 [2016]: 397–417).

25 Gibson, “Landscape Archaeology,” 59–143. We should also keep in mind that the geopolitical circumstances of a certain period and region or climate changes are significant. A central and sought-after area may be transformed into an abandoned fringe area, or areas that at one time were considered marginal became central in other circumstances. These changes enabled the preservation of ancient field systems in certain areas, like the Negev desert or Western Samaria; see Shimon Dar, *Landscape and Pattern: An Archaeological Survey of Samaria 800 BCE–636 CE*, BARIS 308 (Oxford: BAR, 1986); Eli Ashkenazi, Yoav Avni, and Gideon Avni, “A Comprehensive Characterization of Ancient Desert Agricultural Systems in the Negev Highlands of Israel,” *JAE* 86 (2012): 55–64; Yoav Avni, Gideon Avni, and Naomi Porat, “A Review of the Rise and Fall of Ancient Runoff

### 2.3 Towers

Field towers are an integral part of these field systems. An agricultural field tower (Heb.: מגדל שומרה) is a structure used to watch the agricultural plot in the harvest season, often located in vineyards (fig. 4). Field towers were built from antiquity to modern times in various shapes and architectural plans.<sup>26</sup> A full-fledged field tower usually has two floors and thick walls made of field-stones, cleared from the neighbouring plot (fig. 5). The lower floor is used for the storage of grapes and the upper floor serves as a guard hut, for watching over the vineyard and the harvested agricultural produce. Thanks to the thick walls of the lower floor, which are up to one metre in thickness, the temperature in the field tower remains relatively low, and the harvested grapes, which under normal conditions ferment quickly, are kept fresh. During the vintage season, it was sometimes customary for the workers, or even the owner's family, to live in the tower temporarily until all the fruit had been harvested and



FIGURE 4 Qasr Mansura, Hellenistic–Early Roman (?) field tower explored by S. Dar in western Samaria.

PHOTOGRAPH: D. RAVIV

Agriculture in the Negev Highlands—A Model of the Southern Levant Deserts,” *JAE* 163 (2019): 127–137.

26 Zvi Ron, “Stone Huts as an Expression of Terrace Agriculture in the Judean and Samarian Hills” (PhD diss., Tel Aviv University, 1977), 401–531 (Hebrew).





FIGURE 5 Well preserved traditional field tower near Ba'al Hazor, eastern Samaria  
PHOTOGRAPH: D. RAVIV

processed (transformed into wine, raisins, or syrup), rather than return home each day.<sup>27</sup> In the hilly areas of the land of Israel, many well-preserved field towers are still visible where remnants of ancient agriculture have survived destruction and modern development. Remains of field towers from various periods are commonly found in archaeological surveys and excavations.<sup>28</sup>

#### 2.4 *Social Setting: Judean Farms and Rural Settlement Types*

According to our parable, the owner of the vineyard compound rented the place to the tenants. We assume they lived on the spot for a certain period, felt “at home,” and developed self-confidence, leading to their criminal behaviour. The simpler setting of a walled compound with a field tower and winery does not provide the basic living facilities required by the tenants. More sophisticated

<sup>27</sup> Dar, *Landscape and Pattern*, 64–72.

<sup>28</sup> For some recently excavated examples, see a Byzantine tower at Benei Deqalim in the Judean Shephelah (Vladik Lifshits, “Benei Deqalim: Final Report,” *HA* 129 [2017], [http://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/report\\_detail\\_eng.aspx?id=25301&mag\\_id=125](http://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/report_detail_eng.aspx?id=25301&mag_id=125)); an Ottoman period tower in a terraced compound including a winery at ‘En Kerem, west of Jerusalem (Igal Radashkovsky, “Jerusalem, En Kerem: Final Report,” *HA* 130 [2018], [https://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/report\\_detail\\_eng.aspx?id=25407&mag\\_id=126](https://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/report_detail_eng.aspx?id=25407&mag_id=126)); and an undated field tower on a slope, with two wineries, a Byzantine tomb, and additional features nearby, at Nahal Gillo, south of Jerusalem (Meidad Shor, “Jerusalem, Nahal Gillo: Final Report,” *HA* 131 [2019], [https://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/report\\_detail\\_eng.aspx?id=25562&mag\\_id=127](https://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/report_detail_eng.aspx?id=25562&mag_id=127)).

field towers with adjacent rooms and facilities are much rarer (fig. 6a and 6b). Therefore, we might assume that the compound which they rented provided more than just the basic facilities of wine production. Perhaps it was a rural settlement with a protective tower of one type or another. Accordingly, we need to present and examine the various types of rural settlements in order to try to understand the setting.

During the late Second Temple period, various types of settlements could be found in Judea. Several settlement types are mentioned in contemporary sources, but the terminology in them is not consistent.<sup>29</sup> Despite extensive research on rural settlements, there is still no scholarly consensus regarding the terms in the early sources and their correspondence to the archaeological data. Josephus and the New Testament distinguish between a city (πόλις) and a village (κώμη). Josephus also mentions the πολίχθιον, a settlement that, based on its size, importance, and institutions, must be ranked somewhere between a village and a city. For example, Josephus refers to “En Gedi” once as a πολίχθιον and once as a πόλις. Mark 1:38 uses another term—κωμοπόλεις—to denote cities with the legal status of villages. The Mishnah, too, draws a distinction between *kerakh*, *ir*, and *kefar*.<sup>30</sup> At the top of the settlement hierarchy were big cities, corresponding to the non-Jewish πόλις. In the Talmudic sources, the term used to refer to these cities is *kerakhim* (sing. *kerakh*). They controlled a number of large localities, known in the Talmudic sources as *ayarot* (sing. *ir*). Judean *ayarot* had organized community services, as discussed in a *baraita* in tractate Sanhedrin (b. Sanh. 17b). Our present interest goes out to the physical form of much smaller types of rural settlements, following a previous study which proposed the following classification of rural settlement patterns:<sup>31</sup>

- 1a. Ordinary farmhouses: farmhouses with no tower
- 1b. Protected farmhouses: farmhouses with an unfortified corner tower
2. Manor houses (local versions of the Roman villa)
  - 2a. Manor houses lacking fortifications
  - 2b. Fortified courtyard manor houses (fortified villas or roadside fortresses?)
3. Villages
4. Fortified settlements built on earlier sites

29 For a discussion of this typology, see Zissu, “Rural Settlement,” 249–270; Safrai, *The Economy of Roman Palestine*, 17–99.

30 m. Meg. 1:1, 2:3; m. Ket. 13:10; m. Qidd. 2:3; m. B. Met. 4:6, 8:6; m. Arak. 6:5, 9:3; m. Kelim 1:7.

31 On this proposal, see Zissu, “Rural Settlement,” 249–270.



FIGURE 6A Field tower at Kh. esh Sherkiyeh, Refaim Valley, Judean Hills. The tower is part of a protected compound which includes rooms and additional facilities.

PHOTOGRAPH: B. ZISSU

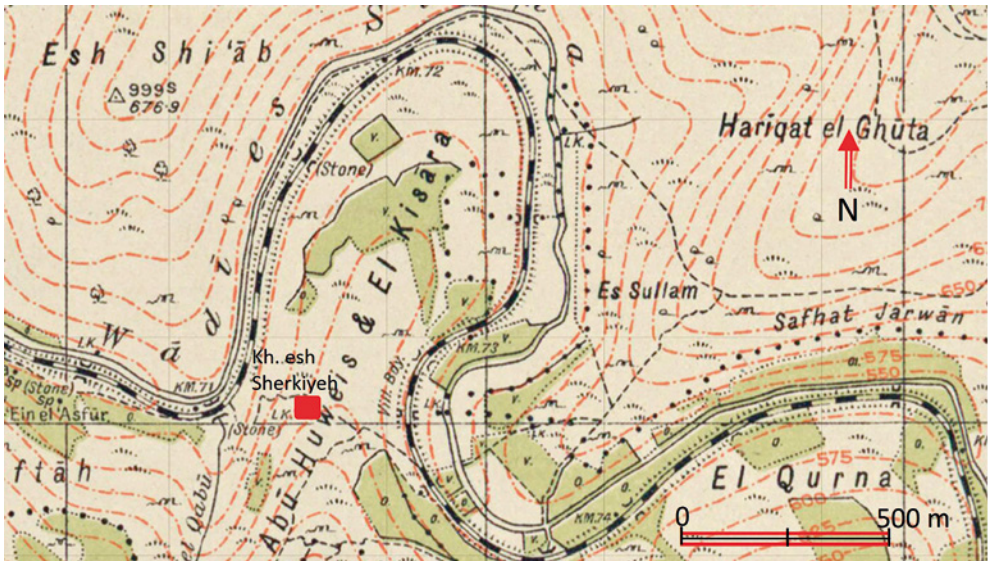


FIGURE 6B Map (1:20000; 1932): the surrounding farming areas are enclosed by field walls and included vineyards (v) and olive orchards (o).



We will describe types 1 and 2, which are relevant to the present discussion. Due to their size and social complexity, we assume that types 3 and 4 are not relevant to the present discussion.

#### 2.4.1 Farmhouses

The farmhouse was a closed compound on agricultural land in which farm workers lived and performed some of their work. It was essentially a small, no-frills agricultural production unit situated by itself in the agricultural landscape. The farmhouse was primarily residential; the farm owner and his family lived there, as did labourers, tenant farmers, and/or slaves. Farmhouses also contained storerooms, water cisterns, and facilities for processing agricultural produce such as a winery, olive-press, columbaria for manure, etc. Farmhouses were common in the rural landscape of the land of Israel from the Iron Age on. Farmhouses varied widely in terms of their layout and size, depending on specific geographic characteristics and the needs and means of the owners. The topography, too, might dictate the plan of the farm buildings. Sometimes the layout of the farm was influenced by the presence of earlier buildings that could be utilized. In an earlier study we distinguished between “ordinary” farmhouses, with no special defence facilities (like the farms at Soreq Ridge, fig. 7), and “protected” farmhouses, which had a tower in one corner or along one of the walls (fig. 8a).<sup>32</sup> When we examine designs of settlements that



FIGURE 7 Aerial view of two farmhouses at Soreq Ridge. The winery shown in fig. 2 is located between them. Five additional winepresses were documented nearby.  
PHOTOGRAPH: B. ZISSU

32 Zissu, “Rural Settlement,” 249–263.





FIGURE 8A Protected farmhouse at H. Qasra, Judean foothills, with a tower along the northern wall.  
PHOTOGRAPH: B. ZISSU



FIGURE 8B Proteichisma surrounds the base of the tower at H. Qasra.  
PHOTOGRAPH: B. ZISSU

include towers, we should distinguish between fortified and unfortified towers. The fortifications consisted of a *proteichisma*, that is, an outwork, sometimes sloped, surrounding the base of the tower (fig. 8b). Although “protected”

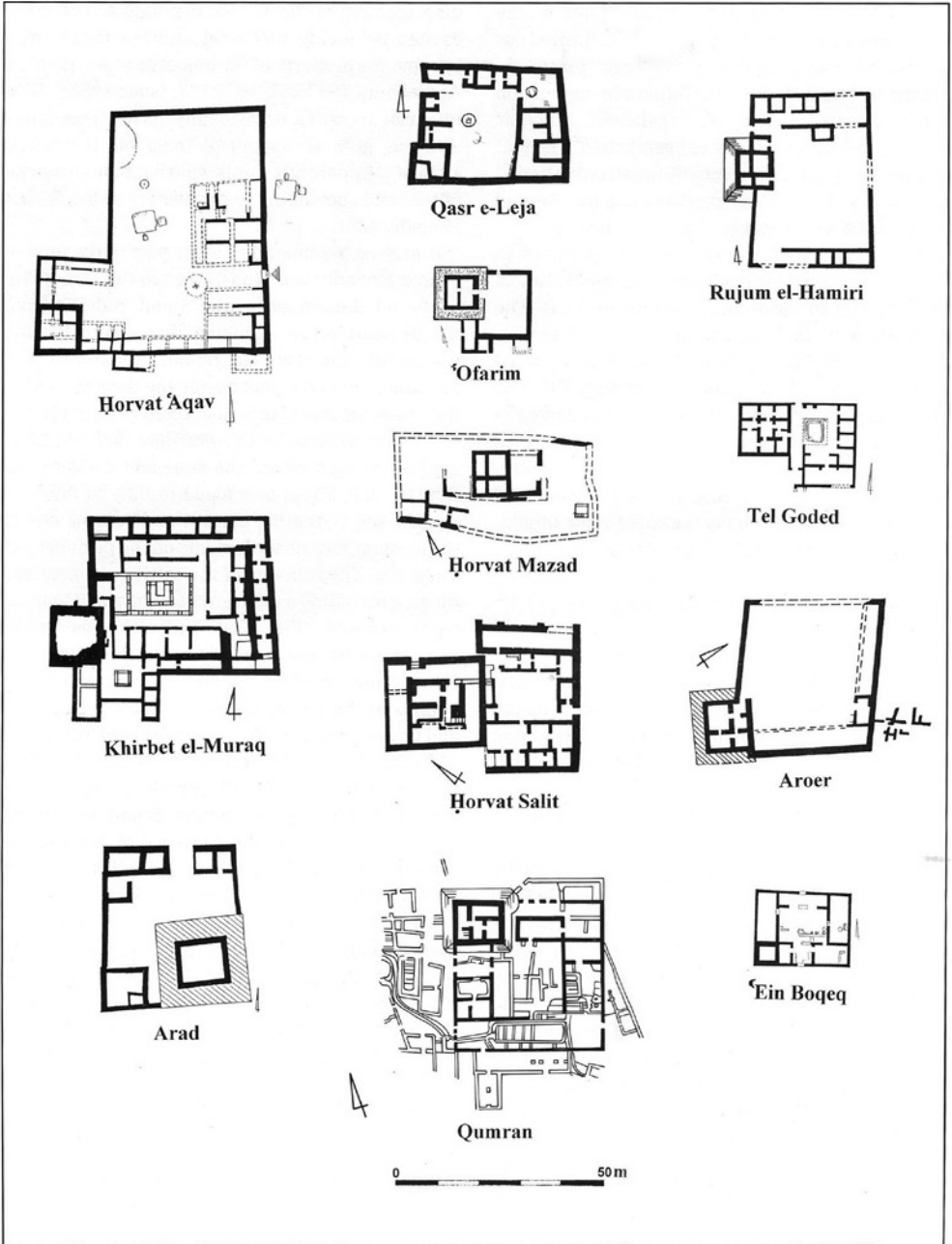


FIGURE 9 Judean manor houses with protective towers, after Hirschfeld 2000: 719, pl. 40.

farmhouses could have various layouts, they all had an unfortified corner tower. The protected farmhouse was built in the centre of the property, usually in a dominant location. This was probably the “*ir* having a single owner” mentioned in the Mishnah.<sup>33</sup> In the centre of the farmhouse was a courtyard surrounded by residential rooms, storerooms, workrooms, industrial facilities, ritual baths, cisterns, and other facilities.<sup>34</sup> The tower in one corner of the compound was stronger than the rest of the structures; it was used as the farm owner’s residence, as an observation point from which the surrounding agricultural plots could be seen, and as a “security house,” when necessary, for protection against bandits. Yizhar Hirschfeld used the term “fortified estates,” or manor houses, to refer to a diverse group of field buildings that includes farmhouses protected by unfortified towers and those protected by fortified towers. His table underscores the difference between the two categories (fig. 9). In our opinion, the unfortified group represents a separate settlement pattern.<sup>35</sup>

#### 2.4.2 Manor Houses as Local Versions of the Roman Villa

According to Ze’ev Safrai, the manor house in Palestine was a structure similar to the Roman villa. Villas were located in the centre of agricultural estates in prominent, convenient locations. The owner lived in the city and had a manager to take care of his estate. The owner also had quarters in a fancier building on the estate—the *oikos*—for when he came to visit. Dozens, or even hundreds, of slaves, labourers, and tenant farmers worked on the estate, depending on its size.<sup>36</sup> The manor house is referred to in the Talmudic literature as *יר*, *ir*. The Mishnah (m. Eruv. 5:6) mentions an *ir shel yahid* (an *ir* having a single owner), which could become an *ir shel rabbim* (an *ir* having many owners) and vice versa. The physical components of the *ir* that are mentioned in the Mishnah (m. B. Bat. 4:7) have been identified, either fully or partially, in sites investigated by archaeologists. According to this Mishnah, “If a man sold an *ir*, he has sold also the houses, cisterns, trenches, vaults, bathhouses, dovecotes, olive presses, and irrigated fields, but not the movable property.” Another

33 m. Eruv. 5:6; see also y. Yevam. 8 (8d).

34 As described in m. B. Bat. 4:7; see also below.

35 Yizhar Hirschfeld, “Jewish Rural Settlement in Judaea in the Early Roman Period,” in *The Early Roman Empire in the East*, ed. Susan E. Alcock, OMO 95 (Oxford: Oxbow, 1997), 72–85; Yizhar Hirschfeld, “Early Roman Manor Houses in Judea and the Site of Khirbet Qumran,” *JNES* 57 (1998): 161–189; Yizhar Hirschfeld, “General Discussion: Ramat Hanadiv in Context,” in *Ramat Hanadiv Excavations: Final Report of the 1984–1998 Excavations*, ed. Yizhar Hirschfeld (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2000), 679–735. The table can be found in Yizhar Hirschfeld, ed., *Ramat Hanadiv Excavations: Final Report of the 1984–1998 Excavations* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2000), 719, pl. 40.

36 Safrai, *The Economy of Roman Palestine*, 17–99.

term that may have described manor houses in the centre of large agricultural estates is בִּירָה, *bira* (or *birta* in Aramaic), which gave rise to the Greek word βίρις. Although Roman villas were common in the western part of the Empire and have been studied thoroughly, they were rare in the eastern part of the Empire, including Palestine. Their form and function varied widely in terms of their facilities, ornaments, and sophistication. Manor houses in Palestine were not always fancy buildings, but to be considered villas, they must have signs of Roman influence.

A few rural sites from the early Roman period, including Kh. el-Muraq, Tel Goded, Artas, Duweimeh, and Horbat 'Alef, are known to have contained certain luxuries and conveniences according to the standards of the Roman world. It is clear that these buildings were planned meticulously, and the standard of construction is better than at other sites. The manor houses sometimes have mosaic floors or architectural ornamentation, whether carved, moulded, or painted. In the centre of the residential unit are a peristyle and various luxuries and conveniences such as a bathhouse or even swimming pools. These features qualify the buildings as local versions of the Roman villa.<sup>37</sup> The design of the villas and even their architectural details are comparable to features known from Herod's palaces.

#### 2.4.3 Fortified Courtyard Manor Houses: Fortified Villas or Roadside Fortresses?

Sites of this type constitute a distinct settlement pattern with a unique architectural element: the fortified tower. Among the sites in this group are Rujm el-Hamiri, Rujm ed-Deir, and Kh. el-Qasr, all located in the Hebron Hills and H. Qasra in the Judean Shephelah. The fortified tower sites are approximately rectangular, planned compounds with rooms arranged around a central courtyard. The tower is built in the outer wall of the compound. The elements of the tower are fortified with an outwork made of large stones (i.e., the *proteichisma*), a type of fortification that came into use in the Hellenistic period in order to seal tunnels dug into the building by the enemy and to keep battering rams away from the walls.<sup>38</sup>

It is not at all clear whether the fortified sites started out as rural settlements in which agricultural produce was grown and processed. Their location

37 Shimon Dar, "The Roman Villa in the Land of Israel," *JEI* 12/13 (2020): 245–270.

38 It should be recalled that there is no *proteichisma* in the simple towers of "protected farmhouses." Furthermore, the towers of the protected farmhouses are flush with the building as a whole. In contrast, the fortified towers protrude both inward and outward from the line of the rooms.

in places that dominate their surroundings and control roads has led scholars to view them as roadside or other fortresses. The similarity among these buildings may indicate an initiative by the central government to improve security on the roads. Although fortified towers provide some security against robbers, they cannot withstand a siege by an army. If the enemy tried to break in, the tower was supposed to protect the inhabitants' lives and enable them to hold out for a few hours until help arrived. Hirschfeld maintained that all these structures were agricultural buildings, but it is hard to decide whether they were roadside fortresses or fortified agricultural estates. The argument that they were fortified agricultural estates is supported by some fortified sites at which flimsier buildings that look like village structures were constructed around the reinforced, closed compound (e.g., the Horbat Zalit, 'Aro'er, and Nahal Yattir sites). Unfortunately, the excavations have focussed on the prominent tower and have not yet uncovered the humble village buildings. We therefore do not have sufficient information to understand the relationship between the "village" buildings and the fortified structure in the centre. In any case, it is more likely for a village of tenant farmers to have grown up around the lord's house than around a roadside fortress.

To conclude this part of our discussion, it seems that as long as the settlement site includes a walled compound, a (true) tower, a tower-like structure (a second-storey building), or one or more field-towers, and a winery, it could represent the settlement type described by the author of our parable. If we can agree that the tenants in the parable live on location, we should also expect to find some residential facilities.

### 3 Realism, Intertextuality, and Rhetoric

How do these landscapes "blend" in the vineyard metaphor? Our discussion has not only shown how the three motifs mentioned by Matthew indeed reflect a visually distinct reality, but also suggest how a vineyard could be associated with human dwellings such as towns or fortified manor houses. Of course, textual signals should alert us to the performative effects of these elements within Matthew. We will begin by looking at Matthew's textual performance, after which we will assess the biblical echoes of the three motifs (wall, winepress, tower). Matthew's parable of the Tenants is the second in a line of three, all elicited by the question of the "High Priests and the Elders of the people (*tou laou*)" regarding Jesus's authority (Matt 21:23). Spatially situated in the temple (*eis to hieron*, Matt 21:23), this clash between Jesus and the temple authorities the last stage before his arrest and subsequent execution.

The issue of the current and future caretaker of the “vineyard” links the parable to this frame, and the sequence of three parables shows the editor’s focus on this evolving crisis. Taking away and giving the vineyard to others reiterates the conclusion voiced by the elders in their response to the parable: “They said to him, ‘He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the appointed time.’” (Matt 21:41 NRSV [adapted]). With this answer to Jesus’s rhetorical question in Matt 21:40, the “elders of the people” (21:23) utter the verdict over themselves.<sup>39</sup> With the *nimshal* or application of 21:43, Matthew completes his performance of the parable by directing his reader’s attention to the fate of the vineyard again, which now becomes a metaphor for the kingdom of heaven, the core of Jesus’s preaching in this Gospel.

Scholars agree on the parable’s indebtedness to the Song of the Vineyard (Isa 5:1–15). However, Matthew, like Mark, does not quote Isa 5:2 (LXX), but merely assumes his readers to be knowledgeable of the Isaian vineyard as a stock metaphor. This is noticeable as well in Matthew’s protracted allusions to Isa 5:1–7 (LXX) in the rhetorical question (Matt 21:40), and in the answer from the “chief priests and the elders of the people” (see 21:23) in Matt 21:41.<sup>40</sup> Matthew does not aim at exegesis, and the allusions to Isa 5 serve a different role. Previously, scholars assessed this intertextuality as well as Matthew’s additions to the parable as the reflection of a conflict between church and synagogue. Recently, scholars have argued that Matthew took part in a protracted sectarian conflict between Christian-Jewish scribal elites and Pharisaic-rabbinic elites after the demise of the Second Temple in 70 CE.<sup>41</sup> Crucial in this debate is the referential potential of the vineyard itself. Both in MT and in LXX, the vineyard of Isa 5:1–6 symbolizes the fate of Israel as a covenantal people (Matt 5:7), but Matthew’s “parable” first and foremost criticizes temple

39 Wim J.C. Weren, “The Use of Isaiah 5,1–7 in the Parable of the Tenants (Mark 12,1–12; Matthew 21,33–46),” *Bib* 79 (1998): 19, suggests that *κακούς κακῶς ἀπολέσει αὐτούς* shows Matthew interpreting a Hebrew word play in Isa 5:7.

40 Weren, “The Use of Isaiah,” 18. Matthew retains the Markan “inverted quotation” of Isa 5:2. Matthew’s dealing with the LXX shows either knowledge of lost versions and/or patterns of creative adaptation; see Maarten J.J. Menken, *Matthew’s Bible: The Old Testament Text of the Evangelist*, BETL 173 (Leuven: Peeters, 2004).

41 See the discussion of this parable in Graham Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993); see also recent proposals in Anders Runesson, “Rethinking Early Jewish-Christian Relations: Matthean Community History as Pharisaic intra-Group Conflict,” *JBL* 127 (2008): 95–132; Eric Ottenheim, “Matthew and Yavne: Religious Authority in the Making?” in *Jews and Christians in the First and Second Centuries: The Interbellum (70–132 CE)*, ed. Joshua J. Schwartz and Peter J. Tomson, CRINT 15 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 378–400.

leadership. Matthew 21:44–45 offers the response to the three parables Jesus has told of the “chief priests and the Pharisees,” the latter category clearly alluding to non-temple elites in the surroundings of Matthew’s community. It is at this point that our discussion of the landscape realities of vineyards contributes to the debate. The elements mentioned—i.e., wall, press, and tower—serve a visual realism which is highly recognizable, but due to this ubiquity it easily allows for blending with religious notions. The blend realizes a metaphor denoting not only physical reality, but also inherent functions. As we saw, vineyards featured surrounding walls, fortified towers, residential space, as well as production installations (winepress). Matthew’s architectural features of the vineyard reference the visual elements of the physical temple, including the surrounding walls, its buildings (*stoa*, towers), and, of course, the altar. The Second Temple compound, as testified by Josephus (*J.W.* 5.184–247; *Ant.* 15.380–425) and the rabbis (in particular m. Tamid), hosted and facilitated religious services (e.g., cultic offerings), economic activities (e.g., banking), and temporary residence for actors.<sup>42</sup> This metaphorical reference is buttressed by readings of Isa 5:2 in early Jewish sources, where we indeed encounter elements of the vineyard in Isa 5:2 as referring to architectural features of the Jerusalem Temple.<sup>43</sup> Qumran fragment 4Q500 1 offers a triple allusion to Isa 5:1–7 (line 2 mentions a “winepress,” line 6 “your vineyard,” and line 4 has “planting”), but its reference seems to be the temple. The “High Gate” mentioned here is either the heavenly gate or a Jerusalem-based gate imagery, in any case an allusion to Ps 102:20.<sup>44</sup> Targum Jonathan on Isa retains the ethnic imagery of the vineyard, but also interprets the “tower in its midst” (Isa 5:2) as “I built My sanctuary amidst of them,” and explains the winepress as the altar. Here the semantic proximity between the Hebrew “blood” and “juice of the grapes” may have played a role. These readings became a trope, as this focus on the temple’s layout also recurs in a rabbinic midrash of the early to mid-second-century R. Jose, in a discussion of the temple water installations:

42 E.g., officiating priests, m. Tamid 1:1; cf. Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 2.108f. Josephus’s descriptions are suggestive of the temple’s ongoing importance after 70 CE; see Jan-Willem van Henten, “Josephus on the Temple from a Post-70 Perspective,” in *Jews and Christians in the First and Second Centuries: The Interbellum 70–132 CE*, ed. Joshua J. Schwartz and Peter J. Tomson, CRINT 15 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 357–377.

43 Scholars agree that our parable was modelled after Isa 5:2; see Klyne R. Snodgrass, “Recent Research on the Parable of the Wicked Tenants: An Assessment,” *BBR* 8 (1998): 187–216; Weren, “The Use of Isaiah,” 1–26.

44 Brooke, “4Q500 1 and the Use of Scripture,” 270.



[It goes down into the pit and cleans it<sup>45</sup> and is absorbed into it, as it is said: “In the Holy place you shall pour out a drink offering” (Num 28:7): for one has made the place (so) that it may be absorbed in holiness.<sup>46</sup>

R. Jose says: The cavity of the pits descended into the abyss, as it is said: “Let me sing a song of my well beloved, a song of my beloved touching his vineyard. My well-beloved had a vineyard on a very fruitful hill. And he dug it out and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vine and built a tower in the midst of it and also hewed out a vat therein” (Isa 5:1–2):]

“And he built a tower in the midst of it”: this is the sanctuary (זה היכל);

“And he hewed out a vat therein”: this is the altar (זה מזבח);

“And he *also* (גם) hewed out a vat therein”: this is the pit (זה השית).<sup>47</sup>

T. Sukkah 3:15 [MS Vienna]<sup>48</sup>

The midrash interprets “tower” in Isa 5:2 as the “Sanctuary” (*Heikhal*), and the winepress, or vat, as the altar, similar to what we saw in the Targum and possibly alluded to in the Qumran fragment as well. R. Jose adds his interpretation of the Hebrew “also” (*gam*), in “and *also* the winepress,” as an allusion to something extra beyond the altar, which must be the pit,<sup>49</sup> draining water and wine of the cultic libations (m. Sukkah 4:9).<sup>50</sup> R. Jose expands an exegetical tradition

45 Saul Lieberman, *Tosefta ki-fshutah: A Comprehensive Commentary on the Tosefta* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1955), 880 (Hebrew): MS Erfurt and Yerushalmi read “cleans it”; MS Leiden lacks this word; and printed editions correct it to “breaks through it” (followed by Neusner: “and splits it”).

46 See the discussion of variants in Lieberman, *Tosefta*, 880.

47 Cf. t. Meil. 1:16; y. Sukkah 4:7 (54d); b. Sukkah 49a offers a deviating exegesis, adapting the innovation of R. Jose: vineyard = temple, tower = altar, winepress = pits, but Lieberman, *Tosefta*, 880, judges our reading to be the correct one.

48 Translation follows Jacob Neusner and Richard S. Sarason, ed., *The Tosefta*, vol. 1 (New York: Ktav, 1977), 577 (adapted).

49 Tosefta Sukkah discusses the issue of the water pit below the altar, commenting on the mishnaic description of wine and water libations (m. Sukkah 4:9) on a spot near the altar, and the rabbis want to show how the water installations in the temple, especially the cavities used to drain the water and the wine, called “pits,” were in accordance with the biblical prescription for libations to take place in the sanctuary, and how no water or wine would leave the precincts but rather be absorbed by the depth below it.

50 This midrash follows the hermeneutical principle of R. Akiva that there are no superfluous words in the Torah. The opening of the Tosefta offers rabbinic knowledge on architectural techniques for draining the water and the wine after the libations, by means of two vessel-like structures located near the altar (m. Sukkah 4:9). The texts depict the water channel installations as being in accordance with divine law. Lurking behind these readings may be memories of innovations of water channels in the Herodian Temple, which



TABLE 1 Architectural elements Isa 5:2

Isa 5:2 (MT)	Isa 5:2 (LXX)	4Q500 1	Tg. Jonathan Isa. 5:2	t. Sukkah 3:15	Mark 12:1// Matt 21:33
	wall				X
tower	tower	?	X	X	X
winepress	winepress	X	X	X	X

which is in its core elements—tower = temple;<sup>51</sup> winepress = altar—reflected in Qumran and the Targum. These readings blend Isaiah with architectural elements and cultic installations and material realities. Matthew very probably knew this exegetical tradition, blending Isa 5:2 with Temple architecture.<sup>52</sup>

The blend of the “realistic” dimensions of vineyards with religious notions as offered by readings of Isa 5 offers a sense of pending crisis, or of a memory of a building lost due to a past crisis, as the reader “sees” these elements as absent in his days. Moreover, the fate of the vineyard/temple is also the fate of its governing elite, and here the prophetic rhetoric of Isaiah comes to the fore again. Matthew locates Jesus’s eschatological as well as polemic teachings (Matt 21:23–23:39), albeit with a change of audience (Matt 23:1), within the temple compound, and this stage of performance allows us to explain the tower and the wall as visually evoking the impressive walls and buildings surrounding and inside the Herodian Temple.<sup>53</sup> The altar recurs in the polemical motif of the “killing of the prophets” in the temple (Matt 23:35–38), and in connection with the foretelling of the temple’s demise.<sup>54</sup> Matt 24:15–16 shows Jesus warning his disciples that they will see the “abomination” erected in the

may be alluded to in the foregoing t. Sukkah 3:14: “for through them would the water flow into the channel which the one who built the Sanctuary built” (Neusner 577).

51 Brooke, “4Q500 1,” 272, mentions 1 En. 89:50 as an early attestation for this association.

52 Johannes C. De Moor, “The Targumic Backgrounds of Mark 12:1–12: The Parable of the Wicked Tenants,” *JSJ* 29 (1998): 63–80; Brooke, “4Q500 1,” 268–294; partly as a possibility in Ulrich Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus*, vol. 3, *Mt 18–25*, EKKNT 1/3 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag; Zurich: Benziger, 1997), 222 (referring to 1 En. 89:50, 54, 56, 67f., 73); David Roger Aus, *The Wicked Tenants and Gethsemane. Isaiah in the Wicked Tenant’s Vineyard and Moses and the High Priest in Gethsemane. Judaic Traditions in Mark 14:12:1–9 and Mark 14:32–42*, ISFCJ 4 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996); Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 330.

53 There may be more continuity here with LXX Isa 5:2–3, which underlines visual architecture, whereas MT Isa 5:2–3 elaborates the owner’s toil in preparing the soil.

54 This passage again ends by quoting Ps 117 (LXX), referencing temple-related imagery.

temple, inaugurating the apocalyptic crisis.<sup>55</sup> The spatial setting and the subtle temple references in the speeches inculcate a social dimension of Matthew's rhetoric: the temple as a locus of identity is rather a locus of pending crisis. Its function will, after its fall, be replaced by the Jesus community, the *ekklesia*.<sup>56</sup> This interpretation finds confirmation in the ensuing dialogue between Jesus and his pupils, after exiting the temple:

As Jesus came out of the temple and was going away, his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. Then he asked them, "You see all these, do you not? Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

Matt 24:1–2

Referencing the physical space of the temple likewise occurs in early Christian traditions on Jesus's fate in Jerusalem: both Matthew (21:39) and Luke expand this spatial rhetoric of the temple in their version of the parable's narrative, adding that the son is being thrown out of the vineyard before he is killed.<sup>57</sup>

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55 This warning, inspired by, e.g., Dan 8:13, is not satisfactorily explained; see the extensive discussion of this passage in Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Social-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 573–583. Possibly the passage echoes the crisis before the war of 66–70 CE, or the crisis revolving around Caligula in 40 CE.

56 Functionally, this claim is not so different from those of the rabbis who criticize the violence on the temple, sectarianism, or corruption as a cause for its downfall; see Shaye J.D. Cohen, "The Significance of Yavneh: Pharisees, Rabbis, and the End of Jewish Sectarianism," *HUCA* 55 (1984): 27–53. Initially, the Christian response to the destruction of the temple in 70 CE was limited; see James Carleton Paget, "Jewish Revolts and Jewish-Christian Relations," in *Jews and Christians in the First and Second Centuries*, ed. Schwartz and Tomson, 286–287. However, some Christian voices expected the restitution of the temple as a result of their piety (!); see David Levine, "70 CE or 135 CE—Where was the Watershed? Ancient and Modern Perspectives," in *Jews and Christians in the First and Second Centuries*, ed. Schwartz and Tomson, 171–172. In the wake of the Bar Kokhba War (e.g., Justin), the anti-Jewish rhetoric would gain ground (Paget, "Jewish Revolts," 276–306). Our findings hint at a somewhat different strategy for Matthew: his parable buttresses a new communal ethos as a response to the crisis. This, together with christological beliefs, replaces the temple.

57 Also note how the "stone" that was rejected by the builders (!), a quote from LXX Ps 117:22f., in Matt 21:42 figures as application of the parable and as an allusion to the fate of Jesus. On the text critical and tradition critical issues here, see Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus*, 217–218. The quote as well as the addition operates with *paranomasia* stone (*eveni*) and son (*beni*), overlooked by the builders but becoming the corner or capstone. The stone probably marked the final stage of the building process, and may have been placed in a visible, high place on a wall or fortified tower, as a coping stone; Michael Cahill, "Not a Cornerstone! Translating Ps 118,22 in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures," *RB* 106 (1999):

This motif, according to most scholars, alludes to the fate of Jesus who was killed outside the Temple Mount and outside Jerusalem, and it is echoed in Heb 13:12–13. The killing of the “tenants,” as expressed in the self-condemnatory verse of Matt 21:41, reiterates Isa 5:7 and alludes to the demise of the temple leadership. Finally, the motif of the vineyard as the son’s inheritance, which the tenants seek to grab in the parable narrative, may subtly allude to the temple as well. The first-century BCE collection Pss. Sol. 7:2 shows the temple as a divine inheritance, belonging to the people of Israel but now left to the gentiles: “For you have rejected them, o God; let their feet not trample the inheritance of your sanctuary (κληρονομίαν ἀγιάσματός σου).”<sup>58</sup> Matthew’s performance thus realizes three dimensions of the vineyard’s metaphorical potential: the vineyard as a location of production, economy, and residence; the vineyard as an intertextually triggered religious reality of the Temple; and the vineyard as a stage for social religious conflict.

#### 4 Conclusions: Realism, Metaphor, and Rhetoric of the Vineyard

Matthew’s vineyard is a blend of Isa 5, read as alluding to the temple, with known landscape features of rural or residential vineyards. As we suggest, the mention of the wall as well as the tower and the vat evokes the imagery of a vineyard within the compounds of an elaborate settlement such as a fortified courtyard manor house, or another type of fortified residence with an embedded winepress facility. The ramifications of this assessment for the metaphorical blend are huge. In performing a vineyard parable within the compounds of the temple, intertextual readings and material realism buttress the vineyard as a combination of crucial economic activities as well as diverse forms of human habitation operating the facilities. The transfer of such a vineyard to “another nation” (Matt 21:43) indeed has implications for those operating it, and the metaphorical blend must have deep impact on the audience of the parable. Our findings gain relief in light of the narrative context of the parable in Matthew’s Gospel, especially with regard to its fate (Matt 24:2) and the fate of its leadership (Matt 21:44). The vineyard parable subtly addresses the crisis

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345–357. In a secondary application, Matt 21:44 adds the imagery of being crushed by this stone, inspired by Dan 2:44 and Isa 8:14. Again, the metaphor blends the fate of Jesus with the memory of the temple. The stone, or “topstone,” of Ps 118:22 (LXX Ps 117:22) received a lot of attention in rabbinic lore, identifying the stone with, e.g., David or the Messiah; cf. Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus*, 225; Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 515.

58 Cf. Aus, *Wicked Tentants*, 35–36, who counters the “realistic” reading in Van Eck, *Parables of Jesus*, 190.

evolving around Jesus as a crisis of the temple itself, and here we may have been offered a look into the oldest stage of the parable. However, the vineyard, due to its ubiquity in rural as well as village or even urban settings, also offered an appealing metaphor to comment on the temple building itself. Its absence for Matthew's readers, like we saw in the rabbinic reading of Isa 5, served to address new religious realities and reflect social realities responding to the demise of the temple.<sup>59</sup> It is in this intersection of material, textual, as well as intertextual dimensions that we see the opening verse realising its sublime rhetorical effectiveness. The realism of the vineyard metaphor evokes the lingering presence of a lost temple, whose heritage is fiercely contested among competing new elites.

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59 This may clarify why, as scholars have noted, Matthew hints at the Temple while simultaneously redirecting the vineyard metaphor to comment on social realities as well; see Weren, "The Use of Isaiah 5,1–7 in the Parable of the Tenants," 22; Brooke, "4Q500 1," 279.

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## Whom Do You Invite to the Table? Connections between the Dropsical Guest and the Meal Parables in Luke 14:1–24

*Bart J. Koet*

Long ago Gerhard Sellin argued that it is important to assess the parables within the context of the macro-narrative.<sup>1</sup> In Luke 14:1–21, meal parables are told during a meal. This invites the reader to look for connections between context (a meal) and message (about meals). Therefore, in this article I will assess the—in scientific literature often neglected—connection between Luke 14:1–6 and 14:7–24. This will, hopefully, be another example of the way parables can connect with their context.<sup>2</sup>

Before we discuss a number of scholarly opinions on this relationship, it is worth assessing the fact that the Lucan Jesus explicitly calls what he relates in Luke 14:8–12 a “parable.” However, this narrative does not fall into the form-critical category of a parable. On the other hand, the Lucan Jesus does *not* typify the verses 14:16–24 as a parable, although this story *does* have all the features of such a genre. This phenomenon fits in with what Ruben Zimmermann has noted in his discussion of parables.<sup>3</sup> He argues that a terminological difference cannot be established in the New Testament between similitudes in the narrow sense and parables. With his use of the genre typification “parable” in 14:7, Luke introduces not only 14:7–11, but also verses 12–14 and 16–24.<sup>4</sup> It is furthermore important to note that Luke has Jesus tell a parable in other places in his gospel without explicitly characterizing the story in question as a parable (e.g., Luke 15:11–32 and 16:1–13). Just as in Luke 14:7, at the beginning of this section

1 See Gerhard Sellin, “Lukas als Gleichniserzähler: die Erzählung vom barmherzigen Samariter (Lk 10,25–37),” *ZNW* 65 (1974): 166–189; 66 (1975) 19–60.

2 Willi Braun, *Feasting and Social Rhetoric in Luke 14*, *SNTSMS* 85 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 2.

3 Ruben Zimmermann, “Die Gleichnisse Jesu,” in *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu*, ed. Ruben Zimmermann et al. (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2007), 3–44.

4 Cf. Thomas Popp, “Ehre und Schande bei Tisch (Von Rangordnung und Auswahl der Gäste), Lk 14,7–11[12–14],” in *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu*, ed. Ruben Zimmermann et al. (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2007), 587.

(15:3) Luke refers to Jesus's first story as a parable, so that the subsequent stories can also be qualified as such.

In his commentary, Joseph Fitzmyer suggests regarding the unity of Luke 14:1–24 that “the dinner-table sayings of Jesus [i.e., Luke 14:7–11 and 14:12–14] are ... loosely joined in the preceding and following episodes.”<sup>5</sup> Although Dennis Smith in his article on meal conventions in the ancient world argues that chapter 14 is a highly structured literary unit, he does not assess the relationship between Luke 14:1–6 and the following collection of sayings.<sup>6</sup> According to Smith, “this chapter is made up of a collection of sayings of Jesus about banquets, including the parable of the Places at the Table (14:7–11), the parable of the Banquet Invitations (14:12–14), and the parable of the Great Banquet (14:15–24).”<sup>7</sup> This is in line with quite a lot of other scholarly literature, which in most cases devotes the majority of its attention to the relationship between the three “parables” and the possibility of a common theme.

Thomas Popp seems to be an exception when he argues that, while Luke 14:7–11 (12–14) is carefully embedded in the context, the healing of a person with dropsy on a Sabbath within the framework of a festive meal has programmatic significance.<sup>8</sup> In spite of his insistence on this programmatic significance, Popp himself does not assess the specific relationship between Luke 14:1–6 and the following verses in greater detail. Braun, on the other hand, does study this relationship in more detail than other authors do.<sup>9</sup> He pleads for attention to the question of how the meal situation as outlined in 14:1–6 fits in with the rest of the story.<sup>10</sup> Luke's Gospel is replete with meals.<sup>11</sup>

5 Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke x–xxiv*, AB 28 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1981), 1044.

6 Dennis E. Smith, “Table Fellowship as a Literary Motif in the Gospel of Luke,” *JBL* 106 (1987): 621. A revised version of this article has been published as: Dennis E. Smith, “The Philosophical Banquet: Meal Symbolism in Luke,” in *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 253–272.

7 Smith, “The Philosophical Banquet,” 257.

8 Popp, “Ehre und Schande bei Tisch,” 587: “Die Heilung eines Wassersüchtigen am Sabbat im Rahmen eines Festmahls (14:1–6) hat programmatische Bedeutung. Jesus definiert die Regeln, die im Reich Gottes gelten. Das Verhalten der Gäste (14:7) fungiert als Auftakt zu einer an sie (14:8–11) und den Gastgeber (14:12–14) gerichteten Jesusrede. Wer auf Gottes Gästeliste steht, zeigt die Parabel vom großen Festmahl (14:15–24).”

9 For the unity of Luke 14:1–24, see Braun, *Feasting and Social Rhetoric*, 17–21.

10 Braun, *Feasting and Social Rhetoric*, 5, argues that an interpretation of Luke 14:1–24 “would need to account for the narrative setting (dinner party), the selection, literary characteristics and sequence of all the episode's constituent periods (including the scene of healing a dropsy, an apparently odd formal and thematic ‘wild card’ in the dinner episode).”

11 Smith, “Table Fellowship as a Literary Motif,” 614. See Raymond F. Collins, “The Man Who Came to Dinner,” in *Luke and His Readers: Festschrift A. Denaux*, ed. Gilbert van

He shares a number of them with the other Synoptics, such as Levi's vocation (Luke 5:27–32; cf. Mark 2:13–17, Matt 9:9–13) and Jesus's visit to the home of Simon (Luke 7:36–50; cf. Matt 26:6–13; Mark 14:3–9).<sup>12</sup>

We also find a “dining Jesus” in Lucan *Sondergut*. For example, he has three meals featuring Jesus as the guest of a Pharisee (Luke 7:36–50, 11:37–54, 14:1–24). The structure of Luke 7:36–50 and 14:1–24 in particular is quite similar: the host is a Pharisee, there is food and an uninvited guest who becomes the reason for Jesus to act as a teacher, and Jesus uses a story or parable in his teaching to make his point (Luke 7:41–42 and 14:7–10[–11], 16–23[–24]). Some significant differences occur as well. For example, while in Luke 7:36–50 the story is told *during* Jesus's engagement with the uninvited guest, in Luke 14:1–24 the parables are told *after* he deals with the uninvited guest (14:7–24).

An important element for the interpretation of Luke 14:1–24 is that this meal, just like other meal situations, represents the framework for Jesus's acting as *a teacher*. The thesis of this article is that Jesus's performance as a teacher is a common theme throughout the whole of Luke 14:1–24, and that it is especially important to look for the connection between Luke 14:1–6 and the following verses.<sup>13</sup>

As we will see below, Luke 14:1–6 is often characterized as a conflict about the Sabbath. A key to understanding the relationship between this pericope and the following verses is that Jesus's encounter with the person with dropsy is probably not—or not only—such a conflict, but is also, and probably even more so, a story about Jesus teaching his audience about eating together on a Sabbath day: being a law-abiding host on a Sabbath day involves welcoming an initially uninvited guest at the table.

In the following, we will outline the most important themes in Luke 14:7–24. After establishing that it is about inviting, sitting at the table, and inviting the poor, we will return to see whether these themes can be found in Luke 14:1–6.

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Belle, Joseph Verheyden and Reimund Bieringer, *BETL* 182 (Leuven: Peeters, 2005), 151–172. Cf. François Bovon, *Lk 9:51–14:35*, vol. 2 of *Das Evangelium nach Lukas*, *EKKNT* 3/2 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1996), 465.

12 Collins (“The Man Who Came to Dinner,” 152) argues that “[t]he reader who compares Luke's narrative account with the earlier accounts of Mark and Matthew will surely note that Luke highlights Jesus' commensality much more than do the other Synoptists.” Compare Luke 5:29 with Mark 2:15 (“a great banquet” instead of “to recline”), and Luke 5:30 with Mark 2:16 (Luke adds “to drink” to the question, thereby making the dinner more complete).

13 Braun, *Feasting and Social Rhetoric*, 3–5, also assesses the relationship between the parable and the larger narrative.

## 1 Inviting the Poor to the Table; Step One: Luke 14:7–15

In the *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu*, Luke 14:7–11 and 14:16b–24 are treated separately. There is, however, a very clear thematic link between them, which will be outlined below. What is the theme of the first parable? The point Jesus makes is that when you are called, you must be careful not to choose the place of honour, which is best left to the host to bestow upon the person of his choosing. If you take that first (πρωτο-) reclining place (κλισία; πρωτοκλισία is, of course, the first and most honourable place to recline for eating and drinking), you could end up embarrassing yourself.<sup>14</sup> It is better for the person who invited (or, literally, “called”) you to the party to tell you that you can move up the ladder.

Given this broad line, it comes as no surprise that Popp, like many other authors, emphasizes the importance of the theme of honour in this passage.<sup>15</sup> Popp seems to be influenced in this by certain German translations, which render πρωτοκλισία as *Ehrenplatz* (“place of honour”; see, e.g., *Einheitsübersetzung* and *Gute Nachricht Bibel*). The notion of “honour” is at best implicit in the Greek term πρωτοκλισία.<sup>16</sup> Of course, we do find the word “honour” in Luke 14:10, and the opposite notion of “disgrace” in Luke 14:9. The image of high and low seems to be a further elaboration on the notion of honour and shame. However, it is one specific aspect of the related themes of honour and shame that is elaborated on in a rather radical way in this passage. A table arrangement involves the distribution of places of honour, but also the choice of who may or may not be invited.<sup>17</sup>

There is actually a kind of unexpected twist regarding the table arrangements to the story. Jesus shifts the image of good and bad places and the host’s right to assign them to the invited guests to the question of *whom* a host should

14 For a negative evaluation of this longing for places of honour, see also Matt 23:6, Mark 12:39, and Luke 20:46.

15 The importance of the theme of “honour and shame” in the Graeco-Roman world often becomes a presupposition in contextualizing New Testament texts, and thus the world of Luke-Acts is seen as an “Honour and Shame” society; see, for example, Jerome H. Neyrey, ed., *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991). However, the extent to which the Jewish-Hellenistic world in which Luke-Acts originated adopted this characteristic of the Graeco-Roman world must be assessed for every passage. It may well be that the theme of “honour” is less important in Luke 14:7–12 than Popp supposes. In any case, I will try to show that the theme of inviting and calling someone to the table also plays a role in the present passage.

16 E.g., “Als er bemerkte wie sich die Gäste *Ehrenplätze* aussuchte” (Revised Luther Bible, 1984).

17 Popp, “Ehre und Schande bei Tisch,” 587.

invite (Luke 14:12). In the story, Jesus challenges the host of the wedding feast to call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind (κάλει πτωχούς, ἀναπίρους, χωλούς, τυφλούς) for his next dinner or supper (Luke 14:13).<sup>18</sup>

The fact that precisely these four categories are repeated in the same order, albeit this time very explicitly with the connecting word “καί” (καί τούς πτωχούς καί ἀναπίρους καί τυφλούς καί χωλούς; “and the poor and the crippled and the blind and the lame” [my translation]) in Luke 14:21, shows that there is a content-related link between the two “parables.” This connection becomes even clearer when we consider the frequent use of the verb καλέω (translated as “to call” or “to invite”) in both passages.<sup>19</sup>

## 2 Inviting the Poor to the Table; Step Two: Luke 14:16–24

The parable in Luke 14:16–24 has received a lot of attention in the literature, if only due to the existence of different versions.<sup>20</sup> When these versions are studied, scholars normally focus more on the versions of the parable as such and less on their place in the context. Even when the parable is studied purely in its Lucan context,<sup>21</sup> there has been little attention for that context. Different authors focus on different perspectives. Thus, the title of Ernest van Eck’s overview article shows his focus to be on the host.<sup>22</sup> Braun likewise takes that perspective when he typifies the parable of the Feast as the conversion of a wealthy householder.<sup>23</sup> One of his arguments is his reading of Luke 14:24 as

18 Of course, this will also be an important lesson for Jesus’s own host, the host of the Sabbath meal.

19 The fact that these passages are connected by the use of this verb is rightly stressed by Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 306 (twelve times καλέω in Luke 14:7–24, including ἀντικαλέω, Luke 14:12).

20 See, e.g., Luise Schottroff, “Von der Schwierigkeit zu teilen (Das große Abendmahl) Lk 14,12–14 (EvThom 64),” in *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu*, ed. Ruben Zimmermann et al. (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2007), 593–603. Cf. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 299–323.

21 For an assessment of whether and/or to what extent Luke 14:16–24 can be described as an example of the classical, aristocratic symposium, see Braun, *Feasting and Social Rhetoric*, 136–144. He argues that one can see relations between Luke 14:1–24 and the Graeco-Roman symposium in broad terms, but that the literary and ideological matrix for this passage is not constituted by the classical symposia of Plato and Xenophon.

22 Ernest van Eck, “When Patrons are Patrons: A Social-Scientific and Realistic Reading of the Parable of the Feast (Lk 14:16b–23),” *HTS* 69 (2013), 1–14.

23 Braun, *Feasting and Social Rhetoric*, 98–131.

a pronouncement from the householder.<sup>24</sup> Luise Schottroff chose to call her contribution to the *Kompendium* “Von der Schwierigkeit zu teilen” (“Of the Difficulty of Sharing”), thereby doing greater justice to the message that the poor and the blind should join the table. The parable talks about invitations to a large meal, a grand dinner. When the guests are told that the special meal is ready, they all give an excuse for not coming. There are several motifs that appear in this parable. For example, Schottroff points out that its indirect theme is the messianic meal.<sup>25</sup> Yet she adds that the parable speaks very concretely about poor people (and that they are not a metaphor).<sup>26</sup> However, she does not understand the host’s invitation as a good work, but as an attempt to annoy his guests. Accordingly, the parable must be compared to Jesus’s perspective on poor praxis as outlined in Luke 14:12–14.

The separate treatment of the two parables probably explains why there has been less attention for the shared motif of inviting.<sup>27</sup> Precisely because the theme of inviting the poor occurs in both parables (Luke 14:13–21), it is important to ask whether it also plays a role in Luke 14:1–6.

### 3 Inviting the Poor to the Table; Step Three: Luke 14:1–6—the Role of the Dropsical Guest

Luke 14:1 is the introduction to a table discussion dominated by Jesus. The pericope runs until 14:24, as the introduction of new characters makes clear that the following verse begins a new one. Eating bread/having meals is one of the most significant issues in Luke 14:1–24. As earlier in the same gospel, Jesus is the guest of a Pharisee.<sup>28</sup> This time, however, the Pharisee is an important one. This could be a connection to another rich man, mentioned in Luke 14:16. The purpose of the visit is “to eat bread.” This is a very simple way to describe a meal.<sup>29</sup> Since Luke points out that it is on Sabbath, the reader may well think that this must have been a festive and special meal.

24 Braun, *Feasting and Social Rhetoric*, 121–128.

25 Schottroff, “Von der Schwierigkeit zu teilen,” 601.

26 Schottroff, “Von der Schwierigkeit zu teilen,” 599: “Die *ptochoi* bezeichnen menschen die nicht genug zu essen haben.”

27 Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 20. Καλέω is here a *terminus technicus* for inviting; see, e.g., Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 23, 229.

28 Surely this is an indication that Jesus was accepted in Pharisaic circles (and vice versa).

29 Already in the Torah and the Prophets, the expression “eating bread” was a sign of an (important) meal: see, e.g., Gen 31:54 (לֶחֶם לֶחֶם), Gen 37:25, Exod 18:12, and especially Ezek 44:3 and Dan 5:1. Thus, the expression “to eat bread” can be used metonymically (for

Luke 14:1–6 is usually seen as a Sabbath conflict.<sup>30</sup> Most Sabbath conflicts consist of a dialogue between Jesus and possible opponents (see, e.g., Luke 13:10–17). A closer look at the way in which the present text unfolds shows that it is a less obvious Sabbath conflict. There is no open dispute, let alone a fierce controversy. From the outset, Jesus is the protagonist, and the other guests are hardly obvious and explicit opponents.<sup>31</sup>

Luke describes their attitude in this way: “καὶ αὐτοὶ ἦσαν παρατηρούμενοι αὐτόν.” While these words are often explained as if to suggest that these were opponents of Jesus who were out to catch him,<sup>32</sup> they can also be given a more nuanced explanation. Popp’s argument that while Jesus is the subject and protagonist in Luke 14:7–24, he is in Luke 14:1–6 the object of the critical observation of the guests, is probably informed by his understanding that the encounter between Jesus and his audience represents a severe conflict over Sabbath *halakhah*. However, given the fact that Jesus continues to speak and the spectators remain silent, he is in Luke 14:1–6 the only acting subject and, therefore, the lord of the scene.<sup>33</sup> Besides, so Popp points out, it is not necessary to read παρατηρέω in a negative sense,<sup>34</sup> since it could also describe them waiting to see what would happen (e.g., KJV: “they watched him”). The same verb is also used in Luke 6:7, but since it is combined there with the explicitly negative intention of specific opponents to monitor Jesus and to see whether he would commit a Sabbath transgression, it is more clearly a description of a negative attitude. The verb likewise occurs in Luke 20:20, in a context of lurking so as to be able to catch Jesus in something. In both instances, the opponents—οἱ γραμματεῖς καὶ οἱ Φαρισαῖοι (the teachers and the Pharisees; Luke 6:7),<sup>35</sup> and οἱ

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“having dinner”). However, “to eat the bread” in Luke 14:1 corresponds with “eating the bread” in Luke 14:15, and this connection is important for the unity of this passage.

30 For the relationship between Luke 14:1–6 and Mark 3:1–6 and between Luke 14:1–6 (esp. 14:3) and Matt 12:9–14 (esp. 12:11), see Lutz Doering, *Sabbat: Sabbathalacha und -praxis im antiken Judentum und Urchristentum*, TSAJ 78 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), 462–463. Matt 12:9–14 and Mark 3:1–6 are more closely related and have more elements of a Sabbath conflict.

31 I think that Luke 14:1–6 is, in the most formal sense, not a Sabbath healing. In his chapter on “Sabbath Conflicts of Healing,” Doering likewise—albeit from a different perspective—points to the possibility of Luke 14:1–6 not being one such conflict. See Doering, *Sabbat*, 463: “Es ist möglich, daß die unmittelbare, argumentativ nicht abgestützte Anwendung des Logions einen gewissen Abstand von der Sabbathpraxis und von der Aktualität der Sabbatkonflikte andeutet.”

32 See Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 545.

33 Popp, “Ehre und Schande bei Tisch,” 587.

34 Ibidem.

35 It is not so easy to translate the term γραμματεὺς. The traditional rendering “scribe” does not communicate much to the modern reader. The extent to which the people referred

γραμματεῖς καὶ οἱ ἀρχιερεῖς (the teachers and the chief priests; Luke 20:19–20), or in some manuscripts οἱ γραμματεῖς καὶ οἱ Φαρισαῖοι (the teachers and the Pharisees)—are explicitly mentioned as audience.<sup>36</sup>

Whereas in Luke 6:9 and 20:19–20 men from the Jewish elite of those days clearly seek conflict with Jesus in a public place, in Luke 14:1–24 it is Jesus himself who, during a Sabbath meal, challenges his host (14:1) and the latter's other "esteemed" guests (14:3) to an exchange of ideas about the purpose of the Sabbath and, probably, especially about the purpose of a Sabbath meal! However, Jesus takes the initiative only after the meal is interrupted by an unexpected guest, characterized as a man with dropsy.<sup>37</sup> Before taking a closer look at what dropsy is, we will first go into some of the other details from the passage.

With his use of καὶ ἰδοὺ ("and see"), a formula known from the Greek translations of the Old Testament, Luke makes it clear that something unexpected, special, or perhaps even shocking will happen. The unanticipated event is that *a certain person appears before him*. First, the man is described as ἄνθρωπός τις (Luke 14:2). Given its use elsewhere in Luke, the occurrence of this phrase here is somewhat unexpected. In the Gospels, the combination appears only in the Lucan two-volume work, and almost always in a parable's introduction (Luke 10:30, 12:16, 15:11, 16:1–19; 19:12, 20:9). There are two exceptions: Luke 14:2 and Acts 9:33. In Luke 14:2 it functions at least as a link with Luke 14:16, where the combination also occurs. This seems to confirm the importance of looking for the unity of Luke 14:1–24.

But what is the antecedent in the phrase "before *him*"? Does the pronoun refer to Jesus or to the host? Whatever the case may be, the text makes clear that it is Jesus who reacts to the man, since his reaction to the person with dropsy has the form of an answer (ἀποκριθεῖς, Luke 14:3).<sup>38</sup> Thus, we can interpret this person's appearance as a request or question. Jesus reacts ("answers") to the situation by putting a question to the experts in the Mosaic Law and to the Pharisees, who are present at the meal: ἔξεστιν τῷ σαββάτῳ θεραπεύσαι ἢ οὐ

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to here were recognized experts in the law of Moses is subject to debate. In my view, the translation "teacher" represents a good compromise.

36 It is in Luke 14:3 that we hear about them explicitly: ὁ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν πρὸς τοὺς νομικοὺς καὶ Φαρισαίους λέγων.

37 Gk. ὕδρωπικός. The Vulgate does not translate the word, but simply transliterates the Greek term as *hydropicus*. The English word "dropsy" is derived from the Greek/Latin.

38 It might be argued that the participle ἀποκριθεῖς suggests that the conversation was initiated by another party. However, the verb can also be used for an answer to an *action*, which seems to be the case here. Another possibility is that Jesus responds to their "watching him."



(Is it allowed to take care on the sabbath day? [my translation]). What function does this question have here? In an article on the asking of questions in the Gospel of Luke, Müller claims that Luke 14:3 is an example of a question which can only be answered with a yes or a no.<sup>39</sup> Many exegetes assume that this is yet another Sabbath conflict, accordingly, understanding the question to be whether it is lawful to heal on Sabbath. Is that a yes-or-no question?<sup>40</sup>

Braun argues that it is not necessary to see the question as a question about Sabbath *halakhah*. He points out that there is a clear parallel with Luke 6:9, which includes a similar question (εἰ ἔξεστιν τῷ σαββάτῳ ἀγαθοποιῆσαι ἢ κακοποιῆσαι, ψυχὴν σῶσαι ἢ ἀπολέσαι; Is it allowed on the sabbath day to do good, or to do evil, to save life, or to destroy it?), which nevertheless seems to be mainly about the purpose of the Sabbath. Surely this is more about doing good and saving life than about doing evil and destroying the soul.<sup>41</sup> Jesus's question in Luke 14:3 can therefore be read as a rhetorical question: "Is it allowed to take care of people on Sabbath?" The answer would then be: "Given the intention of the Sabbath, of course it is!"

The translation "to take care of" may not be the usual one, but it is certainly a possibility. After all, the verb θεραπεύω also means something like "to serve for" (hence the LXX describes Moses as ὁ θεράπων in Num 12:7; see also Acts 17:25), from which the meaning "to take care of" develops. The Vulgate does not translate with *sanare* (cf. Luke 9:2, *sanare infirmos*), but renders the Greek verb as *curare*, which can indeed be translated as "to cure" or "to heal," although its first meaning is "to take care of."<sup>42</sup>

If one looks at the following verses the answer to Jesus's question could be such an obvious "yes" that it is not an open question, but a question that forces

39 C.G. Müller, "Leserorientierte Fragen im Erzählwerk des Lukas," *TGl* 93 (2003): 30.

40 There in fact appear to be two important, mutually exclusive variants in the manuscripts: εἰ ἔξεστιν τῷ σαββάτῳ θεραπεύσαι and ἔξεστιν τῷ σαββάτῳ θεραπεύσαι ἢ οὐ (f<sup>1</sup>13 and 579 are the only manuscript witnesses to have both εἰ at the beginning and ἢ οὐ at the end). The first variant is more or less identical with Matt 12:10 and is lacking in some very early witnesses, so that it can be explained as harmonization with Matthew. The first variant is a simple yes-or-no question (May it?), the second a twofold question (May it or may it not? See also Luke 20:22 and Matt 22:17). Regarding Matt 22:17, see Douglas Estes, *Questions and Rhetoric in the Greek New Testament: An Essential Reference Resource for Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 114. Estes argues that this question is an alternative question which is constructed so close in form to a polar question that it really represents a push to a decision! As such, this variant seems to stress that Jesus is the one in charge here!

41 Braun, *Feasting and Social Rhetoric*, 26.

42 Braun, *Feasting and Social Rhetoric*, makes some sense of the fact that this story is not necessarily a miracle. He notes that "this passage recounts a healing miracle, although it is not a formally a miracle story" (22). He argues that it is a practical and therapeutic action.

the hearers to follow Jesus.<sup>43</sup> It is Jesus who asks the question, so that it falls into the category of questions that Douglas Estes calls a “first-turn question.”<sup>44</sup> A first-turn question is one asked by the first speaker as the first speech act in a dialogue. In Luke 14:3 it is therefore Jesus who opens the dialogue.<sup>45</sup> That Jesus’s question does not really need or possibly even tolerate an answer is shown in what transpires next. Thus, the question can be typified as a rhetorical question.<sup>46</sup>

There is one more element deserving of attention. Luke specifically identifies the interlocutors as ἄρχοντες and Φαρισαῖοι, two classes of people with authority. As such, Jesus asks whether it is lawful to take care, but those to whom he addresses this question are the people whose specific charge is the interpretation of the law. It is more than mere opinion, it is their legal opinion which is being slightly challenged—in public, no less! The Lucan Jesus is creating a scenario where the “law scholars” (τοὺς νομικοὺς, Luke 14:2) must feel like they should give a formal or measured response. The question may create a mild or stronger bias discouraging the lawyers and Pharisees from speaking: the people sitting at the table stay calm (Luke 14:4a)!<sup>47</sup> Because it is not merely yes or no, they are being pushed to agree to an agenda, whichever way they choose. Since Jesus’s question is a first-turn question, it is going to act like a governing question for the entire conversation. And, in fact, it governs the words and actions of Luke 14:4b–6, since these two and a half verses together form a reply to the silence of the lawyers and Pharisees in “response” to Jesus’s

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43 This question is formulated as an alternative question, but there is actually more going on here than merely a “yes” or “no.” An alternative question pits two competing ideas against each other. We could say that Jesus is asking: “Is it allowed to heal on the Sabbath, or is it not allowed to heal on the sabbath?” This gives the question a highly rhetorical appearance, which is best supported by the truncated Greek: Jesus elides the second clause and replaces it with “ἢ οὐ.” Since it is not merely a yes-or-no question, the host and his guests are being pushed to agree to an agenda, whichever way they choose.

44 Estes, *Questions and Rhetoric*, 275–287.

45 See footnote 37 above.

46 The category of the rhetorical question is quite broad and therefore less meaningful in the modern era, and as such its application to the ancient world is anachronistic. The categorization does not appear to have been accepted or understood by ancient writers. Estes (*Questions and Rhetoric*, 69 and 333) even argues that the category of the rhetorical question does not exist as such, since all questions in fact have a rhetorical element to them. There is something to be said for this criticism, although we cannot discuss it in detail for the present purposes and have chosen to use the term “rhetorical question” as it is usually understood. Estes argues that Matt 22:17 is a dilemma question, which allows the questioner to ask his audience to choose between two difficult options (224).

47 This is the basic meaning of the Greek word ἡσυχασαν used here. Often the Greek term is translated, following the Vulgate, as “to be silent!”

question. The agenda in question is explained in the following: Jesus's dealing with the "dropsy" (14:4b).

We have seen that the dropsical guest is positioned in front of (ἔμπροσθεν) Jesus who, as we may assume, is at the table. What is Jesus's first act towards the man? Jesus takes (ἐπιλαμβάνει) the man with him. But what exactly does that mean? Could it be that he takes him to the table (cf. Luke 9:47 and Acts 9:27; see Luke 19:5, where a rich man finally understands what he can do with his money, namely to share a dinner)? Could it be that Jesus takes care of him by inviting him to the table? In order to answer that question, we have to assess what "dropsy" (ὕδρωπιός) is.

It may well be that the common assumption that this passage concerns a Sabbath conflict has concealed the more important, overall theme of Luke 14:1–24, which is about eating together and inviting people who really need it to eat together.

The role of the person with dropsy is a key to the interpretation that this passage is not about specific Sabbath *halakhah* rules (i.e., what is and what is not allowed?), but rather a lesson about the possible intention behind the *halakhah* of the Sabbath. There are three things in Luke 14:1 that deserve our attention: 1) What is a person with dropsy? 2) How can such a person be healed/cured? And 3) What are the possible translations of ἀπολύω, and which of them fits best here?

#### 4 The Role of the Person with Dropsy

In some more or less recent scholarship on Luke 14:1–6, it has been pointed out that there has been too little attention for the fact that the uninvited guest is dropsical.<sup>48</sup> In the exegetical literature on the miracles in the Gospel of John, it is quite common to draw a link between the direct context and the miracle. When Jesus says that he is the light of the world, the person healed is, not surprisingly, blind (John 9:5), and at the raising of Lazarus, Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25). There has, however, been less attention for the way Luke makes similar connections. Our thesis is that there is a connection between the fact that the whole of Luke 14:1–24 is about eating (especially eating bread) and inviting people to dinner and the fact that a *dropsical* person suddenly appears in front of Jesus.

<sup>48</sup> Some of what follows comes from my Dutch article on rich and poor in Luke's Gospel; see Bart J. Koet, "Arm en rijk volgens Lucas. Iedereen uitgenodigd voor het koninklijke bruiloftsmaal," *Coll* 48 (2018): 243–258.

There are two interesting, diametrically opposed views on his part in this story, both of which stress the special role played in the passage by the theme of rich and poor. The question here is what “dropsical” stands for.<sup>49</sup> The word ὑδρωπικός is derived from (τό) ὕδωρ, indicating it concerns a disease in which a person’s water management is compromised. The characterization “dropsical” is not a precise diagnosis, but probably points to a condition in which water accumulates in the human body, for example in a severely swollen belly. But how does this water accumulation come about? An old explanation which has recently been revived sees “dropsy” as a sign of excessive lust, gluttony. In his comment on Luke 14:3, Cornelius à Lapide offered a number of references to church fathers who had made this claim,<sup>50</sup> and in recent years Chad Hartsock has elaborated on this idea as well.<sup>51</sup> However, nearly twenty years earlier, Braun had already discussed the relationship between Luke 14:1–6 and the rest of the chapter in an even more detailed and methodical way. He also used more texts from the Cynic-Stoic sphere to show that dropsy stands for gluttony and greed.<sup>52</sup> Both Braun and Hartsock are right in stating that the paucity of attention for the meaning of the disease in this story is striking. They argue that Luke 16:1–6 has mainly been studied from the perspective of (or perhaps obsession with) a Sabbath conflict, or else as an example of the well-known topos of the meal stories in the Graeco-Roman world. Hartsock argues that when the pericope is approached exclusively from this perspective, it makes no difference whether the person in question is lame, blind, or deaf.<sup>53</sup>

Braun and Hartsock believe that the very fact that the person is dropsical is the key to understanding this story, because dropsy was a metaphor for greed and opulence in the Graeco-Roman world.<sup>54</sup> Both then elaborate a

49 It is remarkable that Van Eck, “When Patrons are Patrons,” 4, suggests that the dropsy means uncleanness, without mentioning the kind of (im-)purity that would be at stake here. Van Eck seems to be too caught up in a schematic image of Jesus violating Jewish purity laws on the Sabbath. For the way the Lucan Jesus turns out to be quite sensitive to the avoidance of uncleanness, see Bart J. Koet, “Purity and Impurity of the Body in Luke-Acts,” in *Dreams and Scripture in Luke-Acts: Collected Essays*, ed. Bart J. Koet, CBET 42 (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 81–95.

50 Cornelius à Lapide, *Commentarii in scripturam sacram*, 10 vols. (Lyon-Paris: Pelagaud, 1864), 7:785–786. Cornelius à Lapide (1567–1637) wrote commentaries on every book of the Scriptures, except Job and the Psalms. In his comments he frequently quotes the interpretations of the church fathers.

51 Chad Hartsock, “The Healing of the Man with Dropsy (Luke 14:1-6) and the Lukan Landscape,” *BibInt* 21 (2013): 341–354. Hartsock refers only to English literature. His interpretation is comparable to the one presented by Bovon, *Lukas 9,51–14,35*, 471–472.

52 Braun, *Feasting and Social Rhetoric*, 22–41 (esp. 30–38).

53 Hartsock, *The Man with Dropsy*, 342.

54 Braun, *Feasting and Social Rhetoric*, 22–42; Hartsock, *The Man with Dropsy*, 352–354.

number of examples from the Graeco-Roman world. Braun presents the following example:

Diogenes compared money-lovers to dropsies: as dropsies though filled with fluid crave drink, so money-lovers, though loaded with money crave more of it, yet both to their demise. For their desires increase the more they acquire the objects of their cravings.<sup>55</sup>

STOBAEUS, *Flor.* 3.10.45

Citing this and other examples, Braun and Hartsock argue that the dropsy stands for greed and avarice.<sup>56</sup> This raises a number of questions: How would Jesus heal such a dropsy? Will the man then be cured of the symptoms of his excessive appetite and avarice? Does a distended belly (suddenly) disappear? Or another symptom of a greedy dropsy? And what happens to his character problem? Can he be cured of that too? Or is he only cured of his character and not of his “obese” body? In my estimation, both writers all too easily assume that the topos of greed and avarice, whose existence as such cannot be challenged, indeed plays a role here.

An alternative answer to the question about the role of the dropsy was given by Ben Hemelsoet.<sup>57</sup> Since his article on Luke 14:1–6 was written in Dutch, it has gone largely unnoticed in scholarly literature. Like Braun and Hartsock, Hemelsoet argues that there has been too little attention for the illness of “dropsy” as a key to the interpretation of this pericope. While Hartsock and Braun assume that the dropsical person was too rich and greedy, Hemelsoet proposes that he was sick due to the *hunger* he had suffered for some time, and then suggests that Jesus secured his presence at the table as the beginning of

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55 As quoted in Braun, *Feasting and Social Rhetoric*, 34 and by Hartsock, *The Man with Dropsy*, 349. In the fifth century, Joannes Stobaeus, from Stobi in Macedonia, compiled a valuable series of extracts from Greek authors. In the second volume of his work, one can find this anecdote about Diogenes. Braun (*Feasting and Social Rhetoric*, 34) argues that Diogenes was the first Cynic to use dropsy and its symptoms as an analogy for insatiable greed.

56 Braun, *Feasting and Social Rhetoric*, 41, suggests that Luke is insinuating that the guests’ illness is to be identified with the Pharisaic character. He assumes that the other guests are Pharisees and lawyers, and that they have a “dropsical” character. This seems to be yet another example of a game that a lot of scholars like to play when they all too easily blame the Pharisees. Hartsock’s argument (*The Man with Dropsy*, 353) about the Lucan tendency to condemn all rich people is in my eyes too superficial, since he takes little account of the way Luke discusses different attitudes of the rich towards the poor (see only Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1–10).

57 Ben Hemelsoet, “Gezegend hij die komt, de koning, in de naam des Heren’: Rondom Lucas 14,1–6,” *ACEBT* 1 (1980): 85–95.

the healing process. The possibility of a dropsy standing for a hungry person has consequences for our understanding of the rest of the story.

It is a pity that Hemelsoet failed to offer sources for his suggestion that the dropsy is a person suffering from hunger, since it makes it seem weaker than the interpretation proposed by Braun and Hartsock.<sup>58</sup> Like à Lapide, Braun and Hartsock mainly collected sources showing that dropsy people stand for greed and avarice. But the fact of the matter is that this is only one of the ways in which dropsy has been discussed in history. Hippocrates, for example, in his writings offers medical reviews of this disorder, yet without any hint of a moral judgement whatsoever. Similarly, Diogenes Laertius recounts an interesting story about the famous philosopher Heraclitus, who became a misanthrope and fled to the mountains, where he only ate grass and herbs. That diet gave him dropsy, and when he returned to the people, he sat down in a dung heap and died (Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae* 9.1.3).

Yet another example of dropsy due to hunger comes from Flavius Josephus, who is closer in time and cultural context to the Gospel of Luke than some of the sources mentioned by Braun and Hartsock. In his *Jewish War*, Josephus relates how Titus came to Jerusalem and besieged the city. Josephus himself had already defected to the Romans, and even gave a speech in which he tried to convince the rebels in Jerusalem to defect as well (Josephus, *J.W.* 5.375–419). In the next section, he describes how hunger reigned in Jerusalem, continuing to urge the city's inhabitants to give up the battle even after he had been struck on the head by a stone (Josephus, *J.W.* 5.541). Some succeeded in fleeing the city, with Josephus describing the situation of these hungry people (Josephus, *J.W.* 5.548–549).

They were puffed up by the famine,      παρεγίνοντο μὲν γὰρ ἀπὸ τῆς ἐνδείας  
and they were like dropsies.<sup>59</sup>      πεφυσημένοι καὶ ὡσπερ ὑδρωπιῶντες

Josephus is thus a witness to the possibility of dropsy occurring as a result of hunger. Dropsy—and this can be found in the medical manuals—is not to be traced back to a single cause.

58 However, the form of dropsy most often seen in the news today is dropsy due to hunger: children with swollen bellies, who suffer from famine.

59 Josephus does not use the noun, but a participial form of the verb. In Josephus, *J.W.* 1.656, the same Greek verb is used to describe a similar disorder, which can nevertheless be attributed to a different cause.

It is interesting to note that a derivation of the Greek word (*hydrocan*)<sup>60</sup> occurs in the Babylonian Talmud, which includes a discussion of the possible causes of dropsy:

R. Oshaia said: He who devotes himself to sin, wounds and bruises break out over him, as it is said, stripes and wounds are for him that devotes himself to evil. Moreover, he is punished with dropsy, for it is said, and strokes reach the innermost parts of the belly. R. Nahman b. Isaac said: Dropsy is a sign of sin.

Our Rabbis taught: There are three kinds of dropsy: that [which is a punishment] of sin is thick; that caused by hunger is swollen; and that caused by magic is thin. Samuel the Little suffered through it. “Sovereign of the Universe!” he cried out, “who will cast lots?” [Thereupon] he recovered. Abaye suffered from it. Said Raba, I know of Nahman [the nickname for Abaye] that he practises hunger. Raba suffered from it. But was it not Raba himself who said, More numerous are those slain by delayed calls of nature than the victims of starvation? Raba was different, because the scholars compelled him [to practise restraint] at the set times [for lectures].

b. Shab. 33a [trans. Soncino]

The link between not eating and becoming dropsied can thus also be found in this later Jewish source.<sup>61</sup> In the context of this article, these examples suffice to show that there are alternative interpretations of dropsy. Dropsy can stand for someone who is hungry, which actually suits the context much better.

One final element to be discussed here is that the thesis that Jesus “takes hold of (*ἐπιλαβόμενος*)” the dropsical person and thus probably wants to have the hungry at the table is contradicted by the rendering in many translations, according to which Jesus “sent [him] away”.<sup>62</sup> However, the verb *ἀπολύω*, which is often translated as “to send away” here,<sup>63</sup> is elsewhere rendered as “to

60 The Hebrew term is connected to *ὕδρωπικός*.

61 In Lev. Rab. 15:2, a connection is drawn between having dropsy (*אִירופִּיקוּס*) and sin. See also Samuel Krauss, *Griechische und Lateinische Lehnwörter in Talmud, Midrasch und Targum*, 2 vols. (Berlin: Calvary, 1899), 2:31.

62 Fitzmyer, *Luke X–XXIV*, 1041, argues that the verb implies that the man was sent away; Braun (*Feasting and Social Rhetoric*, 41 n56) disagrees and refers to other possible translations, like “dismissal” or release from “illness.”

63 The rendering “sent away” possibly derives from the Vulgate, which reads *dimisit*.

liberate, to make free,” which actually fits the present situation better.<sup>64</sup> The liberation of a dropsy may mean he no longer needs to go hungry since he can be invited to a table.

Jesus then asks another question: Which one of you, if you have a son or an ox that has fallen into the pit, will not immediately pull it out, even on the Sabbath day (Luke 14:5)? This seems to be a rhetorical question. Since the answer is already clear, the listeners cannot (and do not!) have anything to “answer.”<sup>65</sup> The question is rather part of a lesson that Jesus gives his dinner companions on the occasion of the unexpected arrival of a needy “guest.” This lesson is explained in the remainder of this passage, where Jesus says that when you give a feast, you must invite the poor, the cripple, the lame, and the blind (Luke 14:13–21). The hungry are missing from this list, but the listener already knows that they have to be invited since the person with dropsy was restored, as one of the most obvious examples of a hungry person (Luke 14:2–4).

## 5 Conclusion

The conclusion of this article is that Jesus’s reaction to the person with dropsy is very fitting in Luke 14:1–24, since his dealing with that person is an example of table manners, in this case an invitation to a hungry person to join the table. A dropsical guest can be understood as a hungry person and the only appropriate answer to such a live issue calling for attention is to invite him to the table. As such, the Sabbath meal becomes a therapeutical meal.<sup>66</sup>

If this interpretation is correct, then Luke 14:1–6 is an apt introduction to what follows in the later parables in that these opening verses summarize Luke’s view on the relationship between rich and poor. In the realm of God (his “Kingdom”), the person with dropsy is implicitly invited to the table, and the person who so badly wants to sit at the front is shown his place (Luke 14:7–11). If you are going to invite (=call) people for a meal, do not invite those who do not need it, but invite the hungry (like a person with dropsy; see 14:13–21). Jesus

64 Hemelsoet, “Gezegend hij die komt,” 94, argues that “to send away” is not really a common translation for ἀπολύω. He prefers to translate “set free,” as elsewhere in Luke (see, e.g., Luke 13:12, where the verb is often translated with a variation on “set free, liberate”).

65 Luke uses an interesting, rare Greek word to describe the response to Jesus’s question: ἀνταποκρίνομαι. That means something like “to answer against, to answer in turn.” In fact, this Greek word (see also Job 16:2) suggests that Jesus did not ask a question but gave an answer.

66 For therapeutical meals in Matthew, see Eric Ottenheijm, “The Shared Meal—a Therapeutical Device: The Function and Meaning of Hos 6:6 in Matt 9:10–13,” *NT* 53 (2011): 1–21.



himself is one who can and is willing to be a guest at such a meal, over and over again. He is not a propagandist of asceticism (as John the Baptist is; cf. Luke 7:18–35, esp. 7:33).<sup>67</sup> It has often been said that Jesus shows a preference for the poor. The reality turns out to be more nuanced in Luke's gospel. For he also invites the rich to a new life—not only the host of Luke 14:1–12, but also, of course, the rich host of the parable in Luke 14:16. They too are given opportunities to foster table fellowship, and it is not without reason that elsewhere in this gospel Jesus is often found sitting at the table with wealthy people. He apparently not only has something to say to the poor, but his lessons—often a combination of practice and narrative theory—are also aimed at the rich.

One who becomes a dropsy due to hunger is certainly among the poor to be invited to the feast (Luke 14:13–21), and this makes Luke 14:1–6 a practical example of what the following parables discuss theoretically (Luke 14:7–24).<sup>68</sup> When meals are shared, what is said by someone sitting at the table becomes true: “Blessed is he (or she) who will eat bread in the kingdom of God” (14:15). Eating (bread) together was precisely that which Jesus was invited to do on that Sabbath (14:1).<sup>69</sup>

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67 See Bart J. Koet, “A Tale of Two Teachers: Jesus about Jesus and John the Baptist (Luke 7:18–35),” in *Multiple Teachers in Biblical Texts*, ed. Bart J. Koet and Archibald L.H.M. van Wieringen, CBET 88 (Leuven: Peeters, 2017), 147–168.

68 This is in line with Braun, *Feasting and Social Rhetoric*, 26, who argues that Luke 14:3 is not about Sabbath *halakhah*, but about a more general moral question. Braun typifies Luke 14:1–6 as a *chreia*, which has to make a didactic point. My proposal to read the chapter as a unity and to see the dropsy as *nimshal* of the sayings and parables in the chapter to a certain extent bolsters the findings of Lutz Doering, “Sabbath Laws in the New Testament Gospels,” in *The New Testament and Rabbinic Literature*, ed. Reimund Bieringer, Florentino García Martínez, Didier Pollefeyt, and Peter J. Tomson, JSJSup 136 (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 238: “It may be considered to read Luke 14:5, with its emphasis on loss and rescue, in the context of ch. 15, reflecting God’s salvific attention to the ‘lost ones’ of Israel.”

69 I am indebted to Dr Margaret Daly-Denton for correcting my English text. The research for this article was completed prior to the parable conference in June 2019 (Utrecht). Related to this article, I have published two more articles about relations between parables and asking questions: Bart J. Koet, “Counter-questions in the Gospel of Luke. An Assessment,” in *Asking Questions in Biblical Texts*, ed. Bart J. Koet and Archibald L.H.M. van Wieringen, CBET 114 (Leuven: Peeters 2022), and Bart J. Koet, “An Uncomfortable Story from the New Testament: About Making Friends with the Mammon (Luke 16:1–13),” in *Troubling Texts in the New Testament: Essays in Honour of Rob van Houwelingen*, ed. Myriam Klinker-De Klerck, Arco den Heijer, Jermo van Nes, CBET 113 (Leuven: Peeters, 2022).

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# Parable and Ritual in Changing Contexts

*Adiel Kadari*

This article will consider the evolution of the parable of “one who immerses with a reptile in his hand,” which appears throughout rabbinic literature. I chose to study this parable because the oral-performative context in which it was spoken has been preserved; this context is generally regarded as the original context for parables as a genre.<sup>1</sup> By studying the various versions of this parable, I seek to demonstrate the versatility of the parable as a genre, the possibility of transferring parables by adapting them to new contexts, and the attendant changes in meaning and message.

## 1 The Parable in the Context of the Fasting Ceremony

The parable of “one who immerses with a reptile in his hand” appears in t. Ta’an. 1:8 as part of the description of the ritual of fasting in time of drought.<sup>2</sup> Fast day rituals were organized in situations of extreme drought and other catastrophes. The ritual included fasting, prayer, and other expressions of mourning and self-affliction. As part of the ritual the “eldest among them” would “make a speech of admonition”<sup>3</sup> which included this parable:

1 See David Flusser, *Jewish Sources in Early Christianity: Studies and Essays* (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Po’alim, 1979), 209 (Hebrew); David Stern, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 6; Eric Ottenheijm, “On the Rhetoric of ‘Inheritance’ in Synoptic and Rabbinic Parables,” in *Parables in Changing Contexts: Essays on the Study of Parables in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism*, ed. Eric Ottenheijm and Marcel Poorthuis, JCP 35 (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 20–22.

2 For a discussion of fast ceremonies in rabbinic literature, see David Levine, *Communal Fasts and Rabbinic Sermons: Theory and Practice in the Talmudic Period* (Tel Aviv: Hakibutz Hameuchad, 2001). For a discussion of fast ceremonies during the Second Temple period, see Noah Hacham, “Public Fasts During the Second Temple Period.” (PhD diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1995).

3 On the term “speech of admonition” (Heb. *divrei kibushin*), see Levine, *Communal Fasts*, 97–102; Isaac Wartski, *Studies in the Language of the Midrashim* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1970), 79–96 (Hebrew).

The manner of fasting: How [was it done]? They bring forth the ark into the street of the town and put wood-ashes on the ark ... The eldest among them makes a speech of admonition: "My children, let a person be ashamed before his fellow, but let a person not be ashamed on account of what he has done" ... And so it says: "Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it" (Isa 58:3)? What does [Scripture] answer them? "Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight, and to hit with wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day for a man to humble himself?" (Isa 58:4–5). But what is the fast which I want? "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke" (Isa 58:6). Now if there was a dead creeping thing in someone's hand, even if he immersed himself in a fountain or in all of the waters of creation, he will never, ever be clean. [But if] he tossed the dead creeping thing from his hand, then he gains the benefit of immersion in [only] forty *seahs* of water. And so it says: "[He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper,] but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy" (Prov 28:13). And it says, "Let us lift up our hearts and hands to God in heaven" (Lam 3:41).

T. Ta'an. 1:8<sup>4</sup>

סדר תעניות כיצד? מוציאים את התיבה לרחובה של עיר ונותנים עליה אפר מקלה ... זקן שבהם אומר לפניהם דברי כיבוד ... שין: "בני יתבייש אדם מחבירו ואל יתבייש אדם ממעשיו" ... וכן הוא אומר "למה צמנו ולא ראית" (ישעיהו נח ג) תדע מהו משיבן "הן ביום צומכם [תמצאו חפץ וכל עצביכם תנגושו] הן לריב ומצה תצומו [ולהכות באגרוף רשע] ... הכזה יהיה צום אבחרהו יום ענות אדם [נפשו]" (שם, ג-ה). אלא אי זהו צום שאני רוצה בו? "פתח חרצובות רשע" (שם, ו). אם היה שרץ בידו של אחד אפילו טובל בשילוח ובכל מימי בראשית אינו טוהיר לעולם. השליך שרץ מידו עלתה לו טבילה בארבעים סאה וכן הוא אומר: "ומודה ועוזב ירוחם" (משלי כח, יג) ואומר "נשא לבבינו אל כפים [אל אל בשמים]" (איכה ג, מא).

4 Translation from Jacob Neusner, *The Tosefta: Translated from the Hebrew*, SFSHJ 10 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 121–122.

As part of his sermon, the elder compares the individual who takes part in the fasting ritual while failing to mend his ways to a person who immerses to cleanse himself from his impurity while holding a reptile in his hand. According to Lev 11, there are various types of reptiles that render impure anyone who comes into contact with their carcasses. In order to rid oneself of impurity, the individual must immerse in a ritual bath. But the person described in this parable seeks to cleanse himself while still holding on to the reptile that caused his impurity in the first place. The moral of the parable is not stated explicitly, but those who hear the sermon are supposed to understand it from the context. A Tannaitic source quoted in the Babylonian Talmud references the parable and makes the analogy explicit:

One who has sinned and confesses his sin but does not repent may be compared to a man holding a dead reptile in his hand, for although he may immerse himself in all the waters of the world his immersion is of no avail unto him; but if he throws it away from his hand then as soon as he immerses himself in forty *se'ahs* of water, immediately his immersion becomes effective, as it is said [Prov 28:13], "But who confesses and forsakes them shall obtain mercy." And it is further said [Lam 3:41], "Let us lift up our heart with our hands unto God in the heavens."

B. Ta'an. 16a<sup>5</sup>

אדם שיש בידו עבירה ומתודה ואינו חוזר  
בה למה הוא דומה? לאדם שתופס שרץ  
בידו שאפילו טובל בכל מימות שבעולם  
לא עלתה לו טבילה זרקו מידו כיון שטבל  
בארבעים סאה מיד עלתה לו טבילה שנאמר  
"ומודה ועוזב ירוחם" (משלי כח, יג) ואומר  
"נשא לבבינו אל כפים אל אל בשמים"  
(איכה ג, מא).

This parable is not typical of rabbinic parables. It is concise, it is not very sophisticated literarily, and it is not presented in an exegetical context,<sup>6</sup> like the majority of parables in rabbinic literature are.<sup>7</sup> Yonah Fraenkel refers to

5 Translation from the Soncino Babylonian Talmud: Joseph Rabbinowitz and Isidore Epstein, *Hebrew-English Edition of the Babylonian Talmud: Ta'anith* (London: Soncino, 1984).

6 The verses from Proverbs and Lamentations function here as a rhetorical tool to strengthen the call to correct the deeds.

7 The majority of parables in rabbinic literature appear in exegetical contexts as part of a midrash. See Stern, *Parables in Midrash*, 7. David Flusser distinguished between what he viewed as the original *Sitz im Leben* of parables that were spoken in the context of public instruction, like the majority of Jesus's parables, and exegetical parables, which he regarded

such parables as “pictorial parables.”<sup>8</sup> He uses this term to refer to parables that describe an ordinary event, even a daily occurrence, and that lack the drama of more plotted parables. He argues that these parables belong to an earlier stage of rabbinic literature. In his book on parables in midrash, David Stern studies the history of the terms “*mashal*” and “parable” and notes that the ancient rhetoricians such as Aristotle used the Greek term *parabole* to refer to the brief comparisons, generally fictitious, which orators would invent to prove or demonstrate their points.<sup>9</sup> Stern adds that in Aristotle’s work these “parables” are closer to similes than to genuine stories.<sup>10</sup> This is also true of our parable about the reptile. Perhaps the confluence of a terse and pithy wording and the rhetorical context of a sermon delivered before an audience, serve to provide us with a window into a relatively early stage of the development of the genre of parables in rabbinic literature.

What is the role of the parable in the context of the fasting ritual? The parable serves as a rhetorical tool for the orator, who wishes to demonstrate the appropriate relationship between ritual behaviour and moral-religious conduct. The preacher quotes the prophet Isaiah to establish that the appropriate fast is one that “unlocks the fetters of wickedness,” that is, a fast accompanied by a mending of one’s ways on the interpersonal level. As the prophet says, “No, this is the fast that I choose, to unlock the fetters of wickedness” (Isa 58:6). The elder demonstrates this principle by invoking the laws of purity and impurity: a person who wishes to get rid of his impurity must first relinquish the reptile, which is the source of his impurity, and only then will his immersion be effective in purifying him.

One role of the parable, as various scholars have suggested, is to serve as an illustrative parallel, whose purpose is to demonstrate an abstract concept by means of a concrete narrative example.<sup>11</sup> But in the case of our parable, it is difficult to see how the example of the individual who immerses with a

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as a later development. See Flusser, *Jewish Sources in Early Christianity*, 202–205. For a discussion of the range of positions among various scholars with regard to this issue, see Lieve M. Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhiltot: An Annotated Edition and Translation of the Parables in Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael and Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai*, TSAJ 176 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 7–9; see also 20–64 for a clear overview of the scholarship to date on parables in rabbinic literature.

8 Yonah Fraenkel, *Darkhei ha-aggadah vehamidrash* (Givatayim: Yad Latalmud, 1991), 373 (Hebrew).

9 Stern, *Parables in Midrash*, 10.

10 Stern, *Parables in Midrash*, 10.

11 See Marsh H. McCall, *Ancient Rhetorical Theories of Simile and Comparison* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 27–28. Fraenkel also noted the centrality of the explicatory role of the parable. He defined the parable as a “short fictional narrative that serves to explicate another matter.” See Fraenkel, *Darkhei ha-aggadah*, 323.

reptile in his hand—which requires a knowledge and understanding of the laws of purity and impurity—is clearer or simpler to grasp than the religious notion that the preacher seeks to convey, namely that ritual on its own is meaningless and must be accompanied by repentance. What, then, is the rhetorical function of the parable in this sermon? It seems that its role is more to persuade than to clarify. The contradiction depicted in the parable between immersion in water and continuing to grasp the reptile which has rendered one impure is more concrete and unambiguous than the contradiction between participating in a fasting ritual while failing fully to mend one's ways. One could imagine a fasting ritual in which the people appeal to God's mercy and ask for rain without righting all the wrongs in their society. This would not necessarily seem illogical to those looking on from the sidelines. It seems that the purpose of invoking the parable is to serve as a persuasive rhetorical device that is intended to sharpen and strengthen the sense of paradox and contradiction as the audience's attention shifts from the parable to the moral, that is, from the context of the laws of purity and impurity to the context of repentance and fasting.

We can demonstrate this point by comparing our parable to a similar but not entirely identical simile, which appears in the book of Ben Sira, a text that predates the Tosefta by several centuries.<sup>12</sup> Ben Sira writes:

If a person again touches a corpse after he has bathed  
 What did he gain by the purification?  
 So with a person who fasts for his sins,  
 But then goes and commits them again:  
 Who will hear his prayer,  
 And what has he gained by his mortification?

BEN SIRA 34, 30–31<sup>13</sup>

This simile does not speak about a person holding a reptile while immersing, but rather about a person who immerses himself due to the impurity contracted from a corpse and is then purified, only to touch a corpse once again. Admittedly, the incident described in the parabolic saying or simile of Ben Sira

<sup>12</sup> The book of Ben Sira is dated to the second century BCE; see Patrick W. Skehan, ed. and trans., *The Wisdom of Ben Sira: Introduction and Commentary by Alexander A. di Lella*, AB 39 (New York: Doubleday, 1987), 8–18; The compilation of the Tosefta is dated to the third century CE; see Abraham Goldberg, “The Tosefta—Companion to the Mishna,” in *The Literature of the Sages*, vol. 1, *Oral Tora, Halakha, Mishna, Tosefta, Talmud External Tractates*, ed. Shmuel Safrai and Peter J. Tomson, CRINT 2.3a (Assen: Van Gorcum; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 283–284.

<sup>13</sup> Skehan, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 411.



is more plausible than the one described in the Tosefta, but it lacks the same sense of paradox and internal contradiction between the acts of immersing and grasping the reptile. In light of the resemblance between the saying in Ben Sira and in the Tosefta, it seems possible that the Tosefta was familiar with the earlier saying and adapted it, as a parable, to suit its own rhetorical needs.

In the Tosefta, the incorporation of the elder's sermon into the framework of the fast day ritual results in an interesting and perhaps surprising amalgamation of anti-ritualism within a ritual context. After all, the elder proclaims that there is no value to fasting on its own or to the accompanying ceremony, unless the people mend their ways; and yet he makes this proclamation at the height of the ritual and as part of the ceremony. This is perhaps even more evident in the "words of admonition" included in the Mishnah:

The elder among them addresses them with words of admonition: Thus, our brethren, Scripture does not say of the people of Nineveh, "And God saw their sackcloth and their fasting," but, [Jonah 3:10] "And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way"; and in the Prophets it is said [Joel 2:13] "And rend your heart and not your garments."

M. Ta'an. 2:1

הזקן שבהן אומר לפניו דברי כבושין: אחינו לא נאמר באנשי נינוה וירא אלהים את שקם ואת תעניתם אלא "וירא אלהים את מעשיהם כי שבו מדרכם הרעה" (יונה ג, י). ובקבלה הוא אומר: "וקרעו לבבכם ואל בגדיכם" (יואל ב, יג).

David Levine regards the elder's words of admonition in the Mishnah as the articulation of an approach according to which "the fast day prohibitions and the fasting ritual in the open space of the town are not what is truly important. The most important factor, without which everything else is irrelevant, is the repentance of the heart and mending of one's ways."<sup>14</sup> He goes on to note that "the content of the homily explicitly conflicts with all that revolves around it and negates the efficacy of these external means."<sup>15</sup>

This interpretation can account for the Mishnah, but it is important to note that in the Tosefta, the dichotomy between internal and external and between ritual and repentance is less stark. First, rather surprisingly, in the context of a sermon that seeks to proclaim that ritual is not everything, the parable that is invoked to make this argument is in fact based on another ritual—the ritual of immersion! Second, there is the halakhic aspect of the parable, which states

<sup>14</sup> Levine, *Communal Fasts*, 79.

<sup>15</sup> Levine, *Communal Fasts*, 80.

that after the one who immerses tosses the reptile from his hand, his immersion is effective in forty *seahs* of water—meaning that he will become purified, even if he immerses in a ritual bath with only the minimum amount of water. The moral correspondingly states that the fasting ritual as enshrined in rabbinic sources does have significance, and it will be effective as long as it is accompanied by repentance. This is also the message that emerges from the verses cited in the Tosefta: “He who confesses and gives them up [i.e., his transgressions] will find mercy” (Prov 28:13), and “Let us lift up our heart with our hands to God in heaven” (Lam 3:41). That is, the sinner needs to forsake his sin and cleanse his hands while also turning to God in prayer. It is not either-or, but both-and.

In this context, we should note that while the fasting ritual is ineffective in the absence of the religious-moral act of repentance, the efficacy of the immersion ritual in the parable is not conditional on any inner spiritual transformation, but only on the rules of the ritual itself. The one who is immersing needs only to let go of the reptile which renders impure and to immerse in a “kosher” ritual bath with at least forty *seahs* of water. He need not repent in order to become purified.

To further hone this point, let us consider this excerpt from Josephus’s description of John the Baptist:

For Herod had put him to death, though he was a good man and had exhorted the Jews to lead righteous lives, to practise justice towards their fellows and piety towards God. And in so doing to join baptism. In his view this was a necessary preliminary if baptism was to be acceptable to God. They must not employ it to gain pardon for whatever sins they committed, but as a consecration of the body implying that the soul was already thoroughly cleansed by right behaviour.

JOSEPHUS, *Ant.* 18.117<sup>16</sup>

According to Josephus, John the Baptist maintained that good deeds were a necessary prerequisite if baptism were to be effective. We can note both points of commonality and divergence between the approach Josephus attributes to John the Baptist and the approach expressed in the Tosefta’s parable. On the one hand, the two sources are similar in that both refer to the purity of the body, and both maintain the distinction between the ritual plane involving purification and the ethical-social plane involving the demand of mending one’s ways. On the other hand, John the Baptist regards good deeds as a

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<sup>16</sup> Translation from Louis H. Feldman, ed. and trans., *Josephus: Jewish Antiquities, Volume 1X: Book 20*, LCL 456 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), 81–83.

prerequisite for the efficacy of immersion, such that it is only after the soul has become purified by good deeds that the immersion that purifies that body will be accepted;<sup>17</sup> whereas in the Tosefta, the efficacy of immersion is not conditional—it purifies regardless of whether or not it is accompanied by repentance. This seems to me to be an expression of the rabbinic nature of the Tosefta's parable. In the Tosefta, the efficacy of immersion is dependent on halakhic rules alone, and immersion and repentance—the parable and its moral—remain distinct from one another.

## 2 The Parable in New Contexts

I shall now turn to the development of the parable in later sources in an effort to demonstrate how this parable is employed in new contexts and becomes imbued with additional significance. The Jerusalem Talmud tells of two sages who undertook a fast, in the context of which one of them delivered a homily similar to the one that appears in the Tosefta:

Rabbi Ba bar Zavda, Rabbi Tanchum bar Illai, and Rabbi Yoshiyah went out [to the prayer services] on a fast day. Rabbi Ba bar Zavda expounded: “Let us lift our hearts to our hands [to God in Heaven].” (Lam 3:41)—Is this possible? Can a person take his heart and place it in his hands? Rather, what is “Let us lift”? Let us apply [the attention of] our hearts toward our hands, and then “to God in heaven.” So, if a reptile is in a person's hand, even if he immerses himself in the waters of the Shiloach spring or in the waters of Creation, he will never become pure. But once he casts it from his hand, he will immediately become pure.

Y. Ta'an. 2:1 [65a]

רבי בא בר זבדא ורבי תנחום בר עילאי ורבי יאשיה נפקון לתעניתא. דרש רבי בא בר זבדא: “נשא לבבינו אל כפים (איכה ג, מא) ואיפשר כן אית בר נש דנסב ליביה ויהיב גו ידיה? אלא מהו “נישא” נשוי ליבינן לכף ידינן ואחר כך “אל אל בשמים”. כך אם יהיה השרץ בידו של אדם אפילו טובל במי שילוח או במי בראשית אין לו טהרה עולמית. השליכו מידו מיד טהר.

17 My concern here is with the way in which Josephus depicts John the Baptist's approach to immersion. For other views on John the Baptist's approach, see Yair Furstenberg, *Purity and Community in Antiquity: Traditions of the Law from Second Temple Judaism to the Mishnah* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2016), 70–73 (Hebrew); Joan E. Taylor, *The Immerser: John the Baptist within Second Temple Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 64–100.

In terms of content, this parable is more or less identical to the parable in the Tosefta, except that here Rav Ba's words are presented as a homily on the verse "Let us lift our hearts to our hands." Rabbi Ba offers an exegesis on this verse, which is presented in the Tosefta at the conclusion of the passage. He asks a rhetorical question based on a literal reading of the image in the verse:<sup>18</sup> Is it possible for someone to take his heart and place it in his hands? Of course not, and thus the implication is that we must regard our hands as we regard our hearts, that is, we must focus on mending our ways, and only then should we entreat God to heed our prayers. This story preserves the rhetorical context of a sermon offered as part of a fasting ceremony. But this is less apparent when we turn to the Babylonian Talmud.

In the Babylonian Talmud, the focus is on the "words of admonition" spoken by the elder as they appear in the Mishnah. The Talmudic *sugya* quotes from the Tannaitic source I presented above:

One who has sinned and confesses his sin but does not repent may be compared to a man holding a dead reptile in his hand, for although he may immerse himself in all the waters of the world his immersion is of no avail unto him; but if he throws it away from his hand then as soon as he immerses himself in forty *se'ahs* of water, immediately his immersion becomes effective, as it is said (Prov 28:13), "But who confesses and forsakes them shall obtain mercy."

B. Ta'an. 16a

This quote appears in the Talmudic *sugya* in the context of public fasts in the wake of drought. But if we ignore the context and focus only on the text of the parable and its moral, we note that it does not reference the fasting ceremony, but refers rather to a person who confesses without repenting. Invoking this source enabled later sages to disassociate the parable from the fasting ceremony, and to apply it to other contexts. Some mediaeval sages understood this parable as relating to the laws of Yom Kippur, where a tremendous emphasis is placed on confession.<sup>19</sup> Other sages invoked this parable in the context of a theoretical or halakhic discussion of the laws of repentance more generally. Perhaps the mediaeval sages were searching for a way of applying the parable

18 The verse apparently relates to an upward prayer gesture with the hands.

19 See, for instance, Yitzhak Refael, ed., *Sefer Hamanhig* [of Rabbi Abraham ben Nathan from the twelfth-thirteenth centuries], 2 vols. (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1978), 1:335; *Kad HaKemah* [of Bahya ben Asher from the thirteenth-fourteenth centuries];; Haim Dov Chavel, ed., *The Writings of Rabbeinu Behaye*, 3 vols. (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1969), 163.

more broadly or more “effectively” rather than merely limiting it to the context of fasting in time of drought.<sup>20</sup>

I will offer two examples of the use of this parable in the context of discussions of repentance. In his book *The Duties of the Heart* (eleventh-century Spain), Bahya ibn Paquda offered an interpretation of this parable in his discussion of the various impediments to repentance:

Another detriment to repentance is repenting for some of your sins and persisting in others: refraining from sinning against God and repenting for those sins, but continuing to sin against your fellow man ... And as our sages said, “If you sin and confess, but you do not repent for it, it is as if you were holding a reptile in your hand.”<sup>21</sup>

ועוד ממפסידי התשובה שיהא השב שב  
ממקצת עברותיו וממשיך במקצתן כגון  
שפירש מכל העברות שבינו לבין ה' ושב  
מהן ולא פירש ממה שבינו לבין בני אדם ...  
ואמרו קדמוננו בענין הזה אדם שיש בידו  
עברה ומתודה ואינו חוזר בה למה הוא  
דומה למי שתופש שרץ בידו.

Bahya expresses a unique stance. He demands that the repentant sinner must repent of all his sins. His words suggest that every sin a person continues to commit constitutes a “reptile” that impedes his purification, and thus, even if a person repents of some of his sins but persists in committing others, his repentance is insufficient. Bahya seems to be stretching the limits of the image of the sin as a reptile. True, on the level of the parable, so long as a person is in contact with something impurifying, no matter how small, immersion will be ineffective. But the sense of paradox conveyed by the parable in the Tosefta is weakened in Bahya’s statement. It does not seem implausible for a person to be embraced as a penitent and his repentance to be deemed acceptable even if aspects of his behaviour remain in need of correction.

Like Bahya, Maimonides in the twelfth century also invokes this parable in his discussion of repentance. He features it at the heart of his discussion of the laws of repentance, where it is cited alongside his definition of repentance:

20 Another aspect worthy of examination in its own right is the use of the image in this parable in the context of halakhic discussions of purity and impurity. See Solomon Buber, ed., *Midrash Lekah Tov* [of Rabbi Tobias ben Eliezer from the eleventh–twelfth centuries] (Vilna, 1880–1884), 64. I am grateful to Marcel Poorthuis for bringing this source to my attention. See also Refael, *Sefer Hamanhig*, 2:427.

21 Bahya ibn Paquda, *The Duties of the Heart*, trans. Yaakov Feldman (Northvale: Aronson, 1996), 332.

What is repentance? It consists of this, that the sinner will abandon his sin, remove it from his thoughts, and resolve in his heart never to repeat ... that he regret the past ... that he call Him who knows all secrets to witness that he will never return to this sin again ... It is also necessary that he will make verbal confession and utter the resolutions which he made in his heart.

He who confesses in words and has not in his heart resolved to forsake his sin is like one who immerses himself and keeps in his hand a reptile. Unless he casts it away, his immersion is useless. And thus it is said, "He who confesses and gives them up will find mercy" (Prov 28:13). Moreover, it is necessary to specify the sin, as it is said, "Alas, this people is guilty of a great sin in making for themselves a god of gold" (Exod 32:31).

MAIMONIDES, *Mishneh Torah*, vol. 1, *Sefer Ha-Maddah* [The Book of Knowledge], *Hil. Tesh.* 2:2–3

ומה היא התשובה הוא שיעזוב החוטא חטאו ויסירו ממחשבתו ויגמור בלבו שלא יעשהו עוד ... וכן יתנחם על שעבר ... ויעיד עליו יודע תעלומות שלא ישוב לזה החטא לעולם ... וצריך להתודות בשפתיו ולומר עניינות אלו שגמר בלבו. כל המתודה בדברים ולא גמר בלבו לעזוב הרי זה דומה לטובל ושרץ בידו שאין הטבילה מועלת לו עד שיש ליך השרץ וכן הוא אומר "ומודה ועוזב ירוחם" (משלי כח, יג) וצריך לפרוט את החטא שנאמר "אנא חטא העם הזה חטאה גדולה ויעשו להם אלהי זהב" (שמות לב, לא).

Maimonides presents confession as a literal articulation of the sinner's repentant thoughts. The penitent must "make *verbal* confession and utter the resolutions which he made in his *heart*." The relationship between repentance and confession is the relationship between thought and speech. Maimonides returns to this distinction when he presents the parable: "He who confesses in *words* and has not in his *heart* resolved to forsake his sin is like one who immerses himself and keeps in his hand a reptile."

The notion that speech is an expression of thought is a cornerstone of Maimonides's theory of language.<sup>22</sup> As he sees it, words that are not accompanied by thought are empty, hollow, and devoid of meaning.

22 On the Maimonidean theory of language, see Josef Stern, "Maimonides on Language and the Science of Language," in *Maimonides and the Sciences*, ed. Robert S. Cohen and Hillel Levine, BSPTS 211 (Dordrecht: Springer, 2000), 173–226. For an examination of the relationship between the Maimonidean theory of language, as a philosophical theory,

The emphasis on the conceptual distinction between thought and speech, and the dichotomy constructed between oral speech and thoughts of the heart, have a basis in the Talmudic text, though Maimonides imbues it with much more rhetorical force and conceptual clarity. Elsewhere, I have demonstrated that this conceptual clarity has halakhic ramifications, and that the normative rule that appears in his next statement about specifying one's sin is a product of this conceptual distinction.<sup>23</sup> According to Maimonides, the hand of the individual who immerses while holding a reptile represents not the actions of the penitent, but rather his thoughts.

### 3 Conclusion

In conclusion, we can start to trace the development of the use of this parable in rabbinic literature. It begins with the Tosefta, where the parable is adduced in the context of the fasting ceremony and is understood as a demand to mend one's ways on the ethical and social planes. Later the parable "migrates" to other contexts, such as the Yom Kippur confession, where it shifts from a public context to a more personal and private one. Finally, we find instances in which the parable is used in the context of discussions of repentance, where the hand that relinquishes the reptile corresponds to the heart of the penitent who has resolved to mend his ways. There is an evolution from the public to the personal, and from the context of mending social ills in the Tosefta to a more spiritual context in Maimonides, and from the use of the parable in a performative-oral context in the Tosefta to the use of the parable as a literary text in mediaeval sources. While in the Tosefta the purpose of the parable is to persuade and motivate the audience to mend their ways, in Maimonides the parable serves as an illustration of a philosophical and religious viewpoint on the appropriate relationship between speech and thought, and between verbal confession and thoughts of repentance. In light of these conclusions, it seems that the various versions of the reptile parable reflect not just a rabbinic affinity for invoking parables and the versatility of the parable as a genre. These versions also testify of the evolution and transformations that rabbinic Judaism has undergone throughout the generations.

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and the linguistic theory that emerges from his halakhic writings, see Aviram Ravitsky, "Maimonides' Theory of Language: Philosophy and Halakhah," *Tarbiz* 76 (2007), 185–231 (Hebrew).

23 See Adiel Kadari, *Studies in Repentance: Law, Philosophy and Educational Thought in Maimonides' Hilkhot Tesuvah* (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2010), 52–56 (Hebrew).

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# Sorting out “New and Old” (Matt 13:52) as Changing Money: Rabbinic and Synoptic Parables on Scriptural Knowledge

*Eric Ottenheijm*

A uniquely attested Matthean parable addresses the ideal scribal sage: “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old” (Matt 13:52 NRSV).<sup>1</sup> In this article I trace the embeddedness of this parable to textual and material culture, focusing especially on sayings and parables on the sage as a “treasure” and on the sage as “money changer” in Christian and rabbinic contexts. This case study actually may help us as well in understanding how these parables organically developed from late biblical wisdom sayings and attest to the early Jewish parable as a regional genre or “ecotype.” I will start discussing the notions of ecotype and social field (1) and assess the debate on the cradle of the parable (2). Following this, I will trace the metaphor of the sage as a “treasure/storage house” in Ben Sira (3), its deployment in Matthew and Rabbinic Judaism (4), and discuss a saying on “changing money” in early Christianity (5) and its appearance in rabbinic parables (6). The resulting textual input dimensions of “treasure” and “changing money” (7), combined with material culture (8), shed light on the expression “new and old” in Matthew.

## 1 Parable as “Ecotype”

From a folkloristic perspective, parables may be approached as an ecotype. An ecotype is a tale type that is typical for and reflective of a cultural and geographical context, presupposing an already existing literary type made fit to

1 Patrick Schreiner, *Matthew, Disciple and Scribe: The First Gospel and Its Portrait of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 7–36, argues for the translation “discipled scribe” rather than “scribe trained” as it is rendered in the RSV. This difference flows from his understanding of the implied author Matthew (10) showing himself as a disciple and not simply a “trained scribe.” My analysis here is, however, not locating the *author* Matthew as heir of Israel’s biblical history, but to gauge the cultural rhetoric of the parable metaphors in culturally coded metaphors.

suit local or regional needs. An ecotype preserves the fluidity of tradition and serves a sense of identity for its bearers.<sup>2</sup> Seen in this perspective, both the parables of Jesus and those of the rabbis reflect an early Jewish subdomain of the type of the parables of which the Greek fable is another representation.<sup>3</sup> When we apply the notion to include the social locations of the actual or intended storyteller and hearers, this ecotype of the early Jewish parable, as I prefer to label the parables of both Jesus and the rabbis, functions within a designated social realm, a social field consisting of religious elites and their intended or actual audiences.<sup>4</sup> The effectiveness of the parable as performative language depends on its ability to assure this audience of the justification of its social position, and in doing so confirms the authority of the parable teller.<sup>5</sup> If the form reflects an ecotype, the social field within which a parable operates is its

2 The term “ecotype” was coined in the work of the Finnish folklore scholar Carl von Sydow (1878–1952). On the functionalist applications of this term, detecting interactions between story bearers, hearers, and their (changed) cultural environment, see Galit Hasan-Rokem, “Ecotypes: Theory of the Lived and Narrated Experience,” *NC* 3 (2016): 111–113.

3 Hasan-Rokem, “Ecotype,” 113–114: “The ecotype as an analytical tool addresses probably the most central issue raised in all theories of folk narrative research, namely, the dialectics between stability and change. Although not necessarily designed so by its creator, the concept of ecotype has largely been understood to presuppose the type as a normative configuration from which certain local or particular formations deviate. Its formulation tends to reflect a relationship between type and ecotype in which the type is primary and the ecotype secondary, derived from the type.”

4 Terry Rey, *Bourdieu on Religion: Imposing Faith and Legitimacy* (London: Routledge, 2007), 41f.: “A Field is a competitive arena of social relations wherein variously positioned agents and institutions struggle over the production, acquisition and control of forms of capital particular to the field in question.”

5 Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 111–113: “The specificity of the discourse of authority (e.g., a lecture, sermon etc.) consists in the fact that it is not enough for it to be understood (in certain cases it may even fail to be understood without losing its power), and that it exercises its specific effect only when it is recognized as such ... it must be uttered by the person legitimately licensed to do so, the holder of the *skeptron*, known and recognized as being able and enabled to produce this particular class of discourse ... it must be uttered in a legitimate situation ... finally, it must be enunciated according to legitimate forms (syntactic, phonetic, etc.)” This observation on liturgical language seems apt to hold for any genre, cf. Sam Whimster and Scott Lash, ed. *Max Weber. Rationality and Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1987; repr. 2014), 124: “The religious message that will be most capable of satisfying a group’s religious demand, and therefore of exercising its properly symbolic function of mobilization upon that group, will be the one that provides it with a quasi-systematic set of justifications for its existence as the occupant of a determinate social location.” Cf. Eric Ottenheim, “Bourdieu und die Exegese. Eine exemplarische Rezeption Pierre Bourdieus am Beispiel der Gleichnisauslegung,” in *Religion und soziale Distinktion. Resonanzen Pierre Bourdieus in der Theologie*, ed. Ansgar Kreuzer et al., QD 295 (Basel: Herder, 2018), 48–69; Eric Ottenheim, “On the Rhetoric of ‘Inheritance’ in Synoptic and Rabbinic Parables,” in *Parables in Changing Contexts: Essays on the Study of Parables in*

“regional ecosystem.” Taken out of their prime context, parables, like plants, remain discernible, but will have to adapt to the new circumstances in order to function properly.<sup>6</sup> This applies to their specific form as well: a saying may morph into a parable to address new audiences more captive to short narratives than to abstract sayings. Sayings in their turn address an inner circle of newly established elites.

## 2 The Cradle of the Parable

This ecological approach may actually also help us in discerning the cradle of the parable: the genre not only functions in, but most probably also developed from its entanglements with existing genres.<sup>7</sup> A steadily growing consensus of scholars locates the parables of Jesus and the rabbis within an existing genre, and its metaphors as belonging to a *langue* informing the variants in Christian and rabbinic Jewish tradition alike. However, the roots of this genre still remain elusive.<sup>8</sup> One approach draws attention to the similarities between parables, as short, fictive narratives with an educational goal, and the fables of Aesop or the similitudes of Epictetus, and assumes that the parables have their origins in external, Greek influence.<sup>9</sup> Greek rhetoric, with its theoretical

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*Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism*, ed. Eric Ottenheijm and Marcel Poorthuis, JCP 35 (Brill: Leiden, 2020), 15–36.

- 6 Such a transition takes place already in the move from orality to text, but this change still takes place within a similar culture.
- 7 This “genre consciousness” (Ruben Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables of Jesus: Methods and Interpretation* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015], 116) was noticed in Adolf Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, vol. 1, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu im Allgemeinen*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1910; repr. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1976), 31–33, but his argument seeks to unravel the authentic parable form of Jesus from their gospel embedding. As to the anachronism in locating rabbinic forms in pre-rabbinic times, Jacob Neusner, “Parable (Mashal),” in *Encyclopedia of Midrash: Biblical Interpretation in Formative Judaism*, ed. Jacob Neusner and Alan J. Avery-Peck, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 2:612, and emphasising specific form and rhetoric: Arnold Goldberg, “Das Schriftauslegende Gleichnis im Midrasch,” *FJB* 9 (1981): 1–90.
- 8 In a forthcoming book on the history of the early Jewish parable I detect, by means of several case studies, some of the early traces of the parable in Christian and rabbinic sources. As I will argue there, aside from the wisdom parable, the legal parable is reflective of this early stage.
- 9 Semitic origins of fables are suggested by Ben E. Perry in the preface of his edition of the fables of Babrius and Phaedrus, see Ben E. Perry, *Babrius and Phaedrus: Fables*, LCL 436 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965). Cf. David Daube, *Ancient Hebrew Fables: The Inaugural Lecture for the Oxford Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973); the fable of R. Akiva (b. Ber. 61b) shows parallels with a tale in

cases (*progymnasmata*) and similes, has similarly been argued to have had an impact on rabbinic legal discourse.<sup>10</sup> However, whereas some literary knowledge of Greek fables is detectable in rabbinic parables, only scattered motifs appear in the Synoptic Gospels.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the impact of biblical lore like Nathan's "parable" (2 Sam 12:1–4), the fable of Jotham (Judg 9:8ff.), the "Song of the Vineyard" (Isa 5:1–7), or Ezekiel's allegorising similes (Ezek 17:2–10) should not be overlooked either.<sup>12</sup> Rabbinic and synoptic parables likewise drew from these biblical precursors, and even may even have derived their didactic authority from these "canonical" forms.<sup>13</sup> This observation does not negate Greek influence, but suggests looking closer for a bridge of the cultural interaction between these biblical precursors and Greek fables. Such a bridge, in my view, should supply some of the motifs and metaphors that belong to the ecotype of the New Testament and the rabbinic parable, feature Greek elements, and should be located in Second Temple Judaism. Moreover, it should already be reflective of social contexts close to public teaching, dispute, or homily, all of which are part of the regional ecosystem of parables in both synoptic and rabbinic contexts.<sup>14</sup>

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Herodotus and with Greek fables, see Haim Schwarzbaum, "The Vision of Eternal Peace in the Animal Kingdom. (Aa-Th 62)," *Fabula* 10 (1969): 110–113. Greek influence is argued in David Flusser, *Die rabbinischen Gleichnisse und der Gleichniserzähler Jesus*, vol. 1, *Das Wesen der Gleichnisse*, JudChr 4 (Bern: Lang, 1981); David Flusser, "Aesop's Miser and the Parable of the Talents," in *Parable and Story in Judaism and Christianity*, ed. Clemens Thoma and Michael Wyschogrod (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 9–25.

- 10 Yonah Fraenkel questions rabbinic knowledge of classical rhetoric, see Yonah Fraenkel, *Darkhei ha-aggadah vehamidrash* (Givatayim: Yad Latalmud, 1991), 327 (Hebrew); cf. Richard Hidary, *Rabbis and Classical Rhetoric: Sophistic Education and Oratory in the Talmud and Midrash* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). Daniel Boyarin detects influence from Menippean satire on absurd tales in the Bavli, see Daniel Boyarin, *Socrates and the Fat Rabbis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).
- 11 On Aesop and Aesopic traditions in relation to synoptic and rabbinic parables, see the contributions of Justin Strong and Tal Ilan in this volume. On motifs in synoptic parables, see Mary-Ann Beavis, "Parable and Fable," *CBQ* 52 (1990): 473–498.
- 12 Cf. Jülicher, *Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 1:32: "Woher nun konnten die Jünger solche Lehrweise kennen als aus der Erfahrung ihres Lebens oder aus dem A.T.?"
- 13 Gary Porton, "The Parable in the Hebrew Bible and Rabbinic Literature," in *The Historical Jesus in Context*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine, Dale C. Allison, and John Dominic Crossan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 206–221.
- 14 Flusser, *Rabbinischen Gleichnisse*, 300–301, notes how some of Jesus' parables are operative in dialogues. This occurs in rabbinic sources as well, e.g., Fraenkel, *Darkei ha-aggadah*, 347–349.

Remarkably, and in spite of certain parabolic speech in Philo’s allegorical Bible interpretations, parables as such cannot be detected in his work.<sup>15</sup> Neither do we find it in Qumran, or in apocalyptic literature (e.g., 4 Ezra 4:13–18) such as the “Parables of Enoch.”<sup>16</sup> The semi-parabolic forms found in these texts do display some formal elements of the parable, such as the introductory “like” in Philo, or the use of metaphor, but they do not feature homiletical discourse, or the sage-disciple or sage-sage interactions typical of synoptic and rabbinic sources. Neither do they constitute a distinct genre, labelled as such, within the respective works in which they appear. A suitable candidate for bridging the gap between biblical and Greek tradition may instead be found in the Second Temple wisdom tradition. The book of Ben Sira, mediating Greek philosophy and Semitic wisdom, provides motifs and similes that, as we will see, are realized in (narrative) parables.<sup>17</sup> While this point has as such been already made, its importance has not been given due attention in comparative research of rabbinic and synoptic parables.<sup>18</sup> Wisdom portrays the exchange of religious wisdom and knowledge between “father and son,” referring to teachers and disciples, and this social context (whether literary or historical) underlies many parables as well. Like wisdom sayings, parables are keen on transmitting religious knowledge in the guise of metaphors that are embedded in daily life experiences, and this shows in Greek as well as Hebrew.<sup>19</sup> Scholars have noted the close similarity between sayings and parables, reflected in the

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- 15 Admittedly, some allegorical explanations prelude the *masal* in using the technical opening “like” and in applying metaphors to comment on the biblical text: see e.g., Philo, *Opif.* 78.4 (I owe this reference to my former PhD students Albertina Oegema and Martijn Stoutjesdijk). The Greek form here, however, mimics the famous Homeric simile in style and aesthetics.
- 16 Compare 4Q302, frag. 2:2, a simile might be located in between a wisdom saying with its introductory form, and a parable. Philo, *Abr.* 105ff. offers a more compelling example, but cf. Jülicher, *Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 2:206; Flusser, *Rabbinischen Gleichnisse*, 146–147.
- 17 Compare e.g., Sir 11:18–19 and Luke 12:16–21.
- 18 Jülicher, *Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 1:42, had already suggested this, but he mistakenly dissociated the “Hellenistic” (read: universal Jewish) Ben Sira from rabbinic (read: particularistic Jewish) tradition.
- 19 Three notions buttress this connection: Antigonos ben Sokho’s saying in m. Avot 1:3, which Flusser identifies as the first instance of an early Jewish parable, must rather be categorised as a wisdom saying in parabolic form. Its short narrative on slaves serving their master either or not keen on receiving their daily sustenance, *peras*, nonetheless marks it as the threshold of the narrative parable. Secondly, the exchange of knowledge in the dialogical dress of a teacher-father instructing his “son,” which represents the literary setting of Qoheleth and Proverbs, provides the rhetoric appealing to sages and disciples. Third, the agricultural wisdom metaphor of working in vineyards, as it is present in Prov 24:30–34, is a less apparent but still clearly operative background for vineyard parables in synoptic and rabbinic tradition.

homonyms *parabolè* and *mashal/mathla* as the term the sources use to designate (wisdom) sayings and parables in Greek and in Hebrew/Aramaic. Others have suggested an organic development from the simple sayings and similes to narrative parable as well.<sup>20</sup> Underlying this development of genre may actually be a change of social setting. A different social field requires concomitant rhetorical techniques, and parables, adding localised narrative to metaphor, may fulfil these better than abstract sayings which serve formal “school” settings. However, even then sayings and parables feature side by side.<sup>21</sup> Is the parable, as a preferred genre for homiletic or public teaching, reflective of a Galilean setting? While scholars may be divided on whether the reference to a “school” in Sir 51:23 is historical in nature or represents a wisdom topos, they do associate Sirach with a city setting of Jerusalem.<sup>22</sup> Parables, on the contrary, operate in informal settings of teachers and their disciples, occasional audiences, or in homiletical contexts.<sup>23</sup> Narrative may be more appealing for occasional

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- 20 Rudolf Bultmann, *Die Geschichte der Synoptischen Tradition*, 4th ed., FRLANT 29 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1958), 184: “Als eigentliche Vergleiche bezeichne ich zunächst solche Bildungen, die sich von einem Vergleich oder Bildwort nur durch die Ausführlichkeit, mit der das Bild gestaltet ist, unterscheiden, und zwar kann ein Gleichnis bald aus einem Bildwort, bald aus einem Vergleich entwickelt sein” (italics are mine); e.g., Luke 14:28–33, 15:4–10; Matt 18:12–14.
- 21 It is no coincidence that synoptic tradition added sayings to the parables of Jesus: see Charles H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, rev. ed. (London: Fontana Books, 1961; repr. Glasgow: Collins Fount Paperbacks, 1978), 21–22. For the rabbinic side: Yonah Fraenkel, in a discussion of m. Avot 2:15, argues that some parabolic sayings that he labels as “chain parables” lack a plot so as to stress the synchronicity of events. See Fraenkel, *Darkhei ha-aggadah*, 378.
- 22 On the social location of *paideia* in Ben Sira, see Friedrich V. Reiterer, “Ein unkonventioneller Umgang mit der biblischen Autorität: Siras Art in hellenistischer Umgebung aus seiner Bibel zu denken und zu sprechen,” in *Scriptural Authority in Early Judaism and Ancient Christianity*, ed. Géza G. Xeravits, Tobias Nicklas, and Isaac Kalimi, DCLS 16 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 129–166. Siegfried Kreuzer argues for a Jerusalem context for Ben Sira and highlights the Greek elements of *paideia*, see Siegfried Kreuzer, “Der soziokulturelle Hintergrund des Sirachbuches,” in *Texts and Contexts of the Book of Sirach/Texte und Kontexte des Sirachbuches*, ed. Gerhard Kärer, Frank Ueberschaer, and Burkard M. Zapff, SCS 66. (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017), 33–52.
- 23 On Jewish-Christians, their sages and the Pharisaic and rabbinic sages, see Roland Deines, “Religious Practices and Religious Movements in Galilee: 100 BCE–200 CE,” in *Galilee in the Late Second Temple and Mishnaic Periods*, vol. 1, *Life, Culture and Society*, ed. David A. Fiensy and James Riley Strange (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 78–111; arguing diversity and competition with social identity theory, see Anders Runesson, “Rethinking Early Jewish-Christian Relations: Matthean Community History as Pharisaic intra-Group Conflict,” *JBL* 127 (2008): 95–132; on the grounds of material culture, see Jody Magness, “Sectarianism before and after 70 CE,” in *Was 70 CE a Watershed in Jewish History? On Jews and Judaism before and after the Destruction of the Second Temple*, ed. Daniel R. Schwartz

listeners in non-institutionalized settings, as reflective of their daily life, or as buoyantly grasping their imagination. In this regard, the ecotype of the early Jewish parable guarantees continuity with wisdom tradition but at the same time also transmits new types of religious knowledge.

### 3 The Sage as Treasure

An early example of this ecotype is the “sage as a treasure” parable, and in particular the ways this parable morphs, in rabbinic and Christian sources alike, the “treasure” motif with the motif of “sorting out money.” Its social rhetoric is manifest in buttressing canonicity and the authority of emerging religious elites. The cradle of this ecotype can be detected in the second part of a saying of Ben Sira, in its Greek recension: “In the treasuries of wisdom are sayings of understanding” (ἐν θησαυροῖς σοφίας παραβολαὶ ἐπιστήμης, Sir 1:25a NRSV [adapted]). This verse is not rendered in the Hebrew fragments, but given Sirach’s near canonical status in rabbinic tradition, as well as its complex textual history, it is not implausible to imagine that there was also a Hebrew version of this saying.<sup>24</sup> While the Hebrew term *chochma* or the Greek *sophia* suggests that the saying depicts universal wisdom as a treasure of wise sayings, potentially available to true seekers, the verse itself actually addresses the wisdom acquired by the sage: “Its explanation here is not the upper wisdom, but the teaching and the tradition of a sage who leads a man on the good ways.”<sup>25</sup> This embodied quality of wisdom indeed emerges from the immediately preceding saying in Sir 1:24, which speaks about a patient man who withholds

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and Zeev Weiss, AJEC 78 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 69–89; and, arguing from textual and material culture, see Eric Ottenheijm, “Matthew and Yavne. Religious Authority in the Making?” in *Jews and Christians in the First and Second Centuries: The Interbellum (70–132 CE)*, ed. Joshua Schwartz and Peter J. Tomson, CRINT 15 (Leiden, Brill, 2018), 378–400.

24 The metaphor is widespread in Hebrew wisdom tradition, compare the wisdom as sought for treasure in Prov 2:4. Rabbinic appreciation for Ben Sira can be seen, for example, in their admiration for Shimon the High Priest, see Vered Noam, “Ben Sira: A Rabbinic Perspective,” in *Discovering, Deciphering, and Dissenting: Ben Sira Manuscripts after 120 Years*, ed. James K. Aitken, Renate Egger-Wenzel, and Stefan C. Reif (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 201–217. For the rabbinic use of bipartite, didactic sayings, chains of biblical generations (m. Avot 5; Sir 44–50) on the shared focus on death, and on isolated quotations from Ben Sira, see Amram Tropper, *Wisdom, Politics, and Historiography: Tractate Avot in the Context of the Graeco-Roman Near East* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2004), 58–59, 68.

25 Moshe H. Segal, *Sefer Ben Sira ha-shalem* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1958), 10 (Hebrew). The text is not rendered in the extant Hebrew fragments published in Pancratius C. Beentjes, ed., *The Book of Ben Sira in Hebrew: A Text Edition of All Extant Hebrew Manuscripts and a Synopsis of All Parallel Hebrew Ben Sira Texts*, VTSup 68 (Leiden: Brill, 1997).



his speech until the right moment, and is buttressed by other occurrences of “treasure/storehouse” in Sirach, most of which connote character.<sup>26</sup> The saying bridges Greek philosophy with rabbinic culture in its insistence on embodied Torah as acquired wisdom.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the ambiguity of the Greek *thesaurós* as either denoting a “treasure,” filled with gold and silver coins for example, or a “storage room,” filled with foodstuff, is present in Christian and in rabbinic parables and parabolic sayings on the activity of the Sage.

#### 4 Matt 13:52: “New and Old”

Closing his teaching on the kingdom of God with a series of parables, Jesus offers a striking parabolic saying on the nature of the sage:

<p>Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.</p>	<p>διὰ τοῦτο πᾶς γραμματεὺς μαθητευθεὶς τῇ βασιλείᾳ τῶν οὐρανῶν ὅμοιός ἐστιν ἀνθρώπῳ οἰκοδεσπότῃ, ὅστις ἐκβάλλει ἐκ τοῦ θησαυροῦ αὐτοῦ καινὰ καὶ παλαιά</p>
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Matt 13:52

Remarkable here is the word “scribe,” *grammateús*. Usually, Matthew uses the term in a critical sense, as a reference to Jesus’s opponents.<sup>28</sup> In Matthew, however, it also refers to Jesus’s disciples, and, on the editorial level, to qualify the ideal Matthean sage, the *didaskalos* (teacher) who is not to be called “rabbi” (Matt 23:8), but who likewise acts as the scripturally trained community leader.<sup>29</sup> The parable recalls the Ben Sira saying of the sage as a treasure, but it

26 Sir 1:25, 6:14, 20:30, 29:11; 12; 41:12 all adduce “treasure” to depict a personal quality. Sir 40:18 mentions a treasure literally, and Sir 43:13(–14) refers to the “treasures” of heaven. Cf. Sir 51:28.

27 The rabbis understood themselves and their Torah-centred theology as heirs to Ben Sira, see Ishay Rosen-Zvi, “The Wisdom Tradition in Rabbinic Literature and Mishnah Avot,” in *Tracing Sapiential Traditions in Ancient Judaism*, ed. Hindy Najman, JSJSup 174 (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 172–190.

28 Cf. Matt 8:18, 9:3, 15:1, 20:18, 21:15, and the diatribes against “scribes and the Pharisees” in Matt 23.

29 The Matthean scribe is addressed as well in Matt 5:17–20. The parallel saying of Luke 6:45 addresses a different, religio-ethical rhetoric. Note also the scribe (*grammateus*) mentioned as a would-be disciple in Matt 8:19. See on this issue also Ottenheijm, “Matthew and Yavne,” 394–397, and the literature cited there.

also adds action in having the sage bring out “new and old.”<sup>30</sup> This expansion evokes the question of what “new and old” may actually be. First, and given the cultural validation of “old” over “new,” a late antique reader would expect the more common phrase “old and new.”<sup>31</sup> However, the formula “new and old” was not altogether unknown in antiquity, judging from a sparse occurrence in Herodotus, where he recounts how the Greeks were preparing for the battle of Plataea (479 BCE) between the assembled Greek city states and against the Persian army. To gain a place of honour next to the Spartans, who represent the core battle force, the Athenians and the Tygeans boast about their acts of heroism. Herodotus then narrates:

Here, in the marshalling of the nations, a fierce battle of words arose between the Athenians and the Tegeans, both of whom claimed to have one of the wings assigned to them. On each side were brought forward the deeds which they had done, whether in new or in older times (καὶ καινὰ καὶ παλαιὰ παραφέροντες ἔργα).

HERODOTUS, *Hist.* 9.26<sup>32</sup>

The rhetoric advanced by both parties bolsters the understanding that the new are equally important as the old and deserving of similar treatment. Indeed, Matthew may allude to new traditions as actually of a similar value as the old ones. This explanation gains weight if we gauge the biblical ring in the expression as well: the odd phrase “new and old” may constitute an allusion to Song 7:14, even though the Greek text of the LXX does use a somewhat different expression than Matthew: “The mandrakes give forth fragrance, and over our doors are all choice fruits, *new as well as old*, which I have laid up for you, O my beloved” (Song 7:11–13 NRSV).<sup>33</sup> Motifs from Song of Songs can be detected in the parable of the Ten Maiden (Matt 25:1–13), possibly presenting us with another example.<sup>34</sup> The rabbis, in a curious twist based on reading

30 Peter Philips, “Casting out the Treasure: A New Reading of Matthew 13:52,” *JSNT* 31 (2008): 3–24, argues that ἐκβάλλει as “throwing out,” “expel,” but admits that the parable already acquires a nuanced meaning in Matthew’s editorial use.

31 Compare the tension between “old” and “new” in the Q-tradition in Matt 9:16–17.

32 See also Philips, “Casting out the Treasure,” 19.

33 “The mandrakes give forth fragrance, and over our doors are all choice fruits, *new as well as old* (מַנְדְּרָקִים וְעַל דְּרָגוֹתֵינוּ פְּרִי בְּחֹרֵן, which I have laid up for you, O my beloved.” (Song 7:11–13 NRSV) LXX Song 7:14 reads νέα πρὸς παλαιά, but Matthew could adapt the LXX version at times, see Maarten Menken, *Matthew’s Bible: The Old Testament Text of the Evangelist* (Leuven: Peeters, 2004).

34 Peter J. Tomson, “Parables, Fiction, and Midrash: the Ten Maidens and the Bridegroom (Matt 25:1–13),” in *Parables in Changing Contexts: Essays on the Study of Parables in*

Hebrew *tsafanti* (צִפַּנְתִּי), in the clause “I have them in store for you,” as “*tsofen ani lachem*,” “I have looked at you,” understand the verse as expressive of the intimate relation between God and Israel:

<p>“I have them in store for you” (Song 7:14). Said R. Aba bar Kahana: The Holy One blessed be He says to Israel: you look (<i>tsofnim</i>) at Me and I look at you (<i>tsofen lachem</i>): you look by means of commandments and good deeds, and I look at you by means of treasures even more full than all good things of the world.</p>	<p>דודי צפנתי לך א"ר אבא בר כהנא אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא לישראל אתם צופנים לי ואני צופן לכם אתם צופנים במצות ומעשים טובים ואני צופן לכם באוצרות מלאים יותר מכל הטובות שבעולם</p>
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Wilna ed. 7:14

The odd intrusion of the treasure reminds us of our parable, but the combination with the expression “new and old” is even more telling, and may be suggestive of a known trope. Moreover, in the beginning of this verse the treasures (*otsarot*) mentioned here govern the now following explanation of the biblical expression “choice fruits,” where the rabbis present two parables: one reading it as a reference to ripened figs, the other as referring to money, and both appear to be connected to the treasures mentioned:

<p>It may be compared to a virtuous woman to whom her husband left only a few articles and little money for her expenses; yet when he returned she was able to say to him: “See what you left me and what I have saved up for you!”</p>	<p>לאשה כשרה שהניח לה בעלה מעט חפצים ומעט יציאות כיון שבא בעלה אמרה לו ראה מה הנחת לי ומה סגלתי לך וגם הוספתי לך עליהם</p>
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Wilna ed. 7:14, 1 [trans. Soncino]

The rabbis seem to have understood this verse to refer to the sage-scribe in particular. The continuation of this parable applies the imagery of the fruits and the orchard to the older and younger (“new and old”) generations of sages and rabbinic scholars. In a functionally similar rhetoric, Matthew applies the parabolic saying to the elite of his community, i.e., the scribe who has become

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*Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism*, ed. Eric Ottenheim and Marcel Poorthuis, JCP 35 (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 226–235.

a “disciple of the kingdom.” Crucial here is the fact that, unlike the motif of food, the motif of “treasure” as well as the motif of “money” in the parable is not provided by Song of Songs, and its appearance both in the midrash and in Matthew suggests an exegetical tradition underlying both sources, and in connection with the biblical expression “new and old.” The midrash employs it to denote the innovative hermeneutical work of the sages, in Matthew, “new as well as old” has to do with the newness as well as the continuity of the kingdom in light of the old, which is “Moses and the Prophets.”<sup>35</sup>

What did Matthew convey with the motif of the *thesaurós*, usually translated as “treasure”? Two preceding parables, the Treasure (!) in the Field (Matt 13:44) and Purchasing a Precious Pearl (Matt 13:45–46) focus on monetary value, but another preceding parable is the parable of the Fishnet, and it focuses on food.<sup>36</sup> Foodstuff is again the main topic in the parable of

35 Ulrich Luz considers it to develop a traditional saying of Jesus, based on the curious change of the address from “disciples” (v. 36ff.) to “sages” (v. 52), and suggests a context of the separation of Matthew’s community from the community of Israel. See Ulrich Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus (Mt 8–17)*, EKKNT 1/2 (Neukirchen Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2007), 362, 366. However, Peter Müller argues it to be editorial: Peter Müller, “Neues und Altes aus dem Schatz des Hausherrn (Vom rechten Schriftgelehrten). Mt 13,52,” in *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu*, ed. Ruben Zimmermann et al. (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2007), 435. Philips (“Casting out the Treasure,” 22) even distinguishes three (!) stages, with the original parable as a call to radically “expel” (ἐξβάλλει) both the new and the old teachings in order to make way for the kingdom. Philips argues over the ground of the same verb in the parabolic saying connects Matt 12:35 (cf. Matt 12:20) but his argument that the “new” should be expelled as well, given the rhetorical ring of the kingdom itself as representing a new reality, remains unconvincing given the exegetical concerns all over the Gospel, e.g., in the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew’s concern to anchor Jesus’ teaching of the kingdom in Moses, moreover, differs from patristic interpretations and their struggle against Marcion and gnostic depreciations of Hebrew Scriptures (see also Luz, *Matthäus*, 364n24), but “new and old” may not only qualify the author-editor of the Gospel but the ideal disciple-scribe in his community as well. Schreiner alludes to the famous Augustinian trope in concluding that for Matthew “the new interprets the old, and the old reveals the new” (*Matthew: Disciple and Scribe*, 103). There may be more apologetic tension at stake here, however, and also for Matthew continuity of the preaching of Jesus with the biblical was a concern in the crisis following the demise of the Temple. On this anxiety in Jewish and Christian sources, see Jonathan Klawans, *Heresy, Forgery, Novelty: Condemning, Denying, and Asserting Innovation in Ancient Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). Remarkably, a similar tension underlies the twofold image of R. Akiva in rabbinic sources, see below.

36 On the parable of the Treasure in the Field, see the article of Catherine Hezser in this volume. On the rhetoric of a pearl as representing unlimited monetary value, see Eric Ottenheim, “Finding Pearls. Matthew 13:45–46 and Rabbinic Literature,” in *Hebrew Texts in Jewish, Christian and Muslim Surroundings*, ed. Klaas Spronk and Eveline van Staaldoune-Sulman, SSN 69 (Leiden, Brill, 2018), 231–251.

the Sower (Matt 13:1–9) followed by the parable of the Wheat and the Tares (Matt 13:24–30). However, whereas the motif of growth and harvest might suit a wisdom context, a reading of the saying in Matt 13:52 as taking out old *food-stuff* can hardly be a fitting image for bolstering scriptural authority. Moreover, the term *thesaurós* in Matthew is always associated with “silver and gold,” see for example the parable of the Treasure in the foregoing Matt 13:44, not with food, and a more appropriate image would be the taking out of “new and old” coins.<sup>37</sup> This reading references the scriptural interpretation of the scribe, and deploys a known imagery.

In the following, we will buttress this interpretation by assessing the entanglement of textual and material culture. First, we will review material culture and argue the rhetoric of monetary distinction as referencing scriptural scrutiny. This will be accompanied by two textual strands: an early Christian *agraphon* on “money changing” as an exegetical activity and, finally, both dimensions of the metaphor “treasure” recurring in rabbinic parables on the idealized sage.

## 5      **Sorting Our Coins: Material Dimensions and Cultural Rhetoric**

Sorting out coins was a common practice in the late antique world both of Matthew and of the rabbis. Palestinian coins findings of the late Second Temple and early Roman times show an increasing variety of sorts and values, including Italian coins from Imperial mints and coins from Eastern provincial mints.<sup>38</sup> In late Roman and Byzantine times some cities in the region were allowed local mints that issued lower value bronze and copper currencies.<sup>39</sup> Old Hellenistic coins from the Hasmonean period also continued to be used. Thus, markets featured a mixture of coins, due to the circulation of coins of different age and provenance. Coins transcended borders, and changing money came to connote social mobility.<sup>40</sup> Among the many bronze coins one could

37 As already proposed by John D.M. Derrett, *Studies in the New Testament*, vol. 3, *Midrash, Haggadah, and the Character of the Community* (Leiden: Brill, 1982), albeit but without supporting argumentation.

38 Lawrence E. McKinney, “Coins and the New Testament: From Ancient Palestine to the Modern Pulpit,” *RevExp* 106 (2009): 467–489.

39 McKinney, “Coins and the New Testament,” 477; for the Byzantine era, see Peter Guest, “The Production, Supply and Use of Late Roman and Early Byzantine Copper Coinage in the Eastern Empire,” *NumC* 172 (2012): 105–131.

40 McKinney, “Coins and the New Testament,” 477: “No matter what money one started with when making purchases in Caesarea Philippi, the change received would have left the

find the very common Greek *lepton* and Hebrew *peruta*, which were used from Hasmonean times but continued to be in use in the following centuries, and had an unclear value.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, silver coins in particular were subject to wear through usage and hand frapping, resulting in loss in weight and the effacing of diagnostic surface features, all of which severely diminished their value and usability. Coins of bad quality, or coins produced with two different dies (so called hybrid coins) also necessitated an intensive and localized system of money changing.<sup>42</sup> Establishing the local value of coins thus was the moneychanger's main task, it was part of an act of merchandise, involving change and exchange of underlying value in the form of goods. Important for the rhetoric of the saying, assessing the value was done by critically looking at the images, by reading the textual markings, and by determining weight and quality.<sup>43</sup> This visual rhetoric can be found in the saying of Matthew on the disciple of the kingdom “bringing forth new and old,” i.e., in public, and according to local needs. It is clearly reflected in some Christian and rabbinic sayings and parables on the “sage as money changer.”

## 6 “Be Approved Money Changers!”

The material culture rhetoric of critically scrutinising the quality of coins by looking and reading indeed recurs in the *agraphon* “Be Approved Money Changers” (γίνεσθε τραπεζίται δόκιμοι, [Resch 1906, logion 43]). This is a non-canonical saying attributed to Jesus, widely known and quoted from the second century CE onwards. It mainly features within the fierce debates of proto-orthodox teachers with Marcionite and gnostic circles who denied the revelatory character of the Hebrew Bible. This indeed suggests the saying to be

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consumer with a purse containing coins as eclectic in both language and imagery as the city itself with its cosmopolitan population.”

41 McKinney, “Coins and the New Testament,” 475, 479.

42 Ya'akov Meshorer, *A Treasury of Jewish Coins from the Persian Period to Bar Kokhba* (Jerusalem: Yad ben-Zvi, 2001), 33: As the renowned expert on Jewish coins notices, “the exchange of silver coins for bronze coins was carried out according to an assessment of the value of the transaction at the time of implementation, as if it involved merchandise and not money, in accordance with the locality, time, needs, or demand. It should be added that the state of preservation of the coins was also of significance with regard to their value, especially in the case of silver pieces.”

43 Whether the act of changing was prompted to evade the use of pagan symbols and Imperial propaganda is a subject of debate. Outside the temple precincts and apart from the revolts that witnessed specifically Jewish mints, Jews regularly used several coins on the daily market, see McKinney, “Coins and the New Testament,” 478.

of somewhat later origin, but it may have been unknown in the gospel given the editor's biased views on moneychangers.<sup>44</sup> Be this as it may, the logion, in different Christian quarters of the second century onwards, is "always deployed analogically in relation to the practice and skill of discernment—how one determines a given text, teaching, or even leader to be authorised or approved, just as the money changer tests the authenticity of coins to avoid counterfeits."<sup>45</sup> Its main application is defending the sacred and revealed nature of the Hebrew Bible by promoting Christian teachers to discern between those scriptural traditions and characters that warrant divine authority or not.<sup>46</sup> This rhetoric of assessing individual texts can be seen for example in the third century CE *Clementine Homilies*, a Greek version of the Clementine novels which probably originated in Syria, and is reflective of a Christian milieu at once close and hostile to nascent rabbinic Judaism: "Thus, if some of the Scriptures are true, while others are false, rightly our teacher said: Be good moneychangers, because some sayings in the Scriptures are good, while others are unworthy."<sup>47</sup> In short, while Christian sources deploy the saying in their debates on the canonicity of the Hebrew Bible, it may be that it also originated in this specific theological context, and unrelated to the expression in the parable of Matthew. Remarkably, however, Origen explains Matthew's phrase "new and old" in a similar vein as buttressing the validity of the Hebrew Bible by means of correct

44 Moneychangers do occur in the synoptic tradition and in the Gospel of John, but since they have a bad reputation as the object of Jesus' wrath when he cleansed the temple precincts (Mark 11:15–17; Matt 21:12–13; Luke 19:45–46; John 2:13–17), this could explain the saying's absence in earlier sources.

45 The logion is also attributed to Paul, but it is not mentioned in any canonical or pseudo-Pauline source. Cf. Curtis Hutt, "Be Ye Approved Money Changers! Reexamining the Social Contexts of the Saying and Its Interpretation," *JBL* 131 (2012): 590. We do not seek to test the authenticity of the saying, as argued by Hutt, but see it as a floating logion known in Christian quarters, and as a variant on R. Eliezer's saying discussed below. On the early Christian role of the logion, see Giovanni Bazzana, "Be Good Moneychangers' The Role of An Agraphon in a Discursive Fight for the Canon of Scripture," in *Invention, Rewriting, Usurpation. Discursive Fights over Religious Traditions in Antiquity*, ed. David Brakke, Anders-Christian Jacobsen, and Jörg Ulrich, *ECCA* 11 (Bern: Lang, 2012), 297–311.

46 Clement of Alexandria quotes the saying in emphasizing the need to differentiate between permissible and immoral acts. Although the saying is also adduced by the gnostic teacher Appelles, suggesting a wide and flexible usage, it is predominantly used by proponents of the Hebrew Scriptures, who, however, seek to differentiate between good and bad characters in the Hebrew Bible. Origen aptly chastises those who do not take out both the new and the old as those who do not validate Moses and the prophets: "... οὐ μόνον τὰ καινὰ τῶν εὐαγγελίων καὶ τῶν ἀποστόλων καὶ τῆς ἀποκαλύψεως αὐτῶν λόγια, ἀλλὰ καὶ παλαιὰ τοῦ σκιαν ἔχοντος τῶν μελλόντων ἀγαθῶν νόμου καὶ τῶν ἀκολούθως αὐτοῖς προφητευσάντων προφητῶν" (Origen, *Comm. Matt.* 10–11). Origen also offers an allegorical explanation.

47 Ps.-Clementines, *Hom.* 2.51.1, quoted in Bazzana, "Be Good Moneychangers," 299.

exegetical interpretation. This understanding of Matthew, however, may be assessed as reflective of Origen’s hermeneutics, in which he reads Matthew as a defence of the Hebrew scriptures, and buttresses the sacredness of the Hebrew Bible by allegorical explanation to reveal its true value. Nonetheless, “changing coins” as the implied action underlying Matthew’s saying “bringing out new and old,” qualifies the scribe who has become a disciple of the kingdom as someone being able to correctly interpret Scripture, the old, in light of the new, the preaching of the kingdom.

## 7      Sorting Out Coins as Hermeneutics

We may not be able to settle this question on the grounds of the Christian expression alone, but it is telling that “money changing” is a metaphor for hermeneutical activity in rabbinic quarters as well. In the death scene of R. Eliezer, Rabbi Akiva compares his beloved teacher to a moneychanger: “He opened his eulogy and said: My father, my father, chariot of Israel and its horsemen! I have coins but no moneychanger (*shulhani*) to sort them out (מעוֹת יֵשׁ לִי וְאֵין לִי שׁוֹלְחָנִי לְרִצּוֹתֵן)” (Avot R. Nath. A 25, MS Oxford Opp 95).<sup>48</sup> Akiva’s cry “My father, my father, chariot of Israel and its horsemen” is a quote taken from 2 Kgs 2:12 and depicts R. Eliezer as Elia, and thus R. Akiva as Elisha, his disciple. The phrase “I have coins but no moneychanger to sort them out” is reflective of Akiva’s needs. Akiva’s saying denotes the legal questions he has, now with no one to answer them. R. Eliezer was teaching halakhot on his deathbed, differentiating between pure and impure, and this act of differentiation is expressed using the image of a money changer. The context of R. Eliezer’s death scene is telling, since this teacher was banned, and Akiva’s saying grants Eliezer canonical authority in spite of that ban. The motif of the moneychanger may have Akivan backgrounds, as it occurs in Tannaitic parables attributed to pupils of R. Akiva. One of these parables is found in a discussion between R. Josi and a certain Arius, on the difference between wisdom and knowledge. Its immediate context appears in an exegetical discussion on the verse “Select from each of your tribes persons who are wise and discerning, and experienced, and I will appoint them as your heads.” (Deut 1:3):

48      Text according to Hans Jürgen Becker, *Avot de-Rabbi Natan: Synoptische Edition beider Versionen* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 204. Menahem Kister notes this to be the correct version: the “corrupt” reading שלחם / שלוחים, harmonises the text with the *editio princeps*, see Menahem Kister, *Studies in Avot de-Rabbi Nathan: Text, Redaction and Interpretation* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1998), 242 (Hebrew).



He said to him: has it not already said “discerning,” so what is the difference between “discerning” and “wise”? A wise man is like a rich money changer: when he is brought (coins), he examines them. When he is not brought (coins), he takes out his own and examines them. The discerning person is like a poor money changer: when he is brought to examine, he examines, when he is not brought, he sits and looks around.

Sifre Deut. 13 [FINKELSTEIN 22]<sup>49</sup>

א"ל כבר נאמר נבונים מה בין חכם לנבון  
 חכם דומה לשולחני עשיר כשמביאים לו  
 לראות רואה וכשאינ מביאים לו לראות  
 מוציא משלו ורואה  
 נבון דומה לשולחני עני כשמביאים לו לראות  
 רואה כשאינ מביאין לו לראות ויתוהה

The parable thus compares a wise man to someone who checks coins other people bring to him, by putting them on the table and examining them carefully.<sup>50</sup> The *mashal* of R. Josi qualifies wisdom as being able to realize (*meqayem*) his acquired knowledge (*talmudo*). The difference between the poor and the rich moneychanger is that the former examines and assesses the value of other people's coins only, which is necessary for his sustenance, while the latter also checks his one's own coins.<sup>51</sup> The wise man is able both to teach others and to digest his own acquired knowledge, thus occupying himself with Torah also when he is not being consulted.<sup>52</sup> Here, Sirach's motif of the sage as a filled treasure harnesses the rabbinic understanding of the sage as a Jewish version of the Greek philosopher, immersed in his knowledge, and eager to pass it on

49 My translation is close to Fraade's, who follows MS Vatican, Ebr. 32.2, which is also the version of Midrash ha-Gadol. The versions in MS Berlin, Yalqut Simoni MS Oxford (Neubauer 2637), the version in Midrash Chachamim, and the first Venice printing offer different descriptions for the actions of the rich and the poor (or “strange”) money changer, but see Fraade, *Tradition*, 101m134, and literature cited there. The textual variants may reflect different views on the hierarchy of discerning knowledge and wisdom, as they emerged in the discussion triggered by Arius.

50 For this section cf. Steven D. Fraade, *From Tradition to Commentary: Torah and Its Interpretation in the Midrash Sifre to Deuteronomy* (Albany: State University of New York Publishers, 1991), 101–201.

51 Fraade, *Tradition*, 102: “But the difference between the two is that the former preoccupies himself with the examination and evaluation of his wealth of acquired rules and traditions whether or not his services are sought. In other words, he spends his time absorbed in study *for its own sake*, and not, like the *nabon* (poor money changer), only when his expertise is sought for a practical application.”

52 Fraade, *Tradition*, 101.

to others when asked. Lurking behind the image of the “leaders of the people” in the parable’s application is the self-image of the rabbis, as a self-proclaimed scriptural elite. Against the background of this motif of sorting out coins both for oneself and for others, the scribe who takes out new and old from his treasure in Matt 13:52 is remarkably close to the image of people who bring forward their own coins. The Matthean scribe, like the rich money changer, displays his knowledge and teaches others.

## 8 Filling the Storage House

Hebrew *otsar* and Greek *thesaurós* either relate to a food storehouse or to a money container. This polysemy triggers a conceptual blend which might lie hidden beneath the surface of the elusive saying in Matthew, but is definitely manifest in manuscript versions of a rabbinic parable on Rabbi Akiva.<sup>53</sup> Conceptual blending occurs when related input domains blend into a single metaphorical manner of speech.<sup>54</sup> In some cases, a blend can solve tensions between domains. In our case, the two input domains of food and money morph together, since both are perceived to be denoting scriptural wisdom. The rabbinic parable develops a saying (!) that likens R. Akiva to a mixed storehouse (or treasure), filled with different kinds. It equates R. Akiva with a person who goes out with his basket to fill it with wheat, barley, beans, and lentils, and afterwards fills his storehouse (*otsar*) with his gain. The application then introduces the motif of sorting out: “Thus R. Akiva did and he arranged all of the Torah into טבעות טבעות, *taba’ot taba’ot*, rings.”<sup>55</sup> As such, it evokes a technique of depositing food in conic circles in the store room of a late antique household. A store room was meant to stabilize food products and protect them from spoiling due to light or moisture. Unchangeability is articulated in Vitruvius’s account of how and where to build store rooms:

53 On the related motif of finding a treasure, see Catherine Hezser’s contribution in this volume.

54 Blake E. Wassell and Stephen R. Llewelyn, “Fishers of Humans,’ the Contemporary Theory of Metaphor, and Conceptual Blending Theory,” *JBL* 133 (2014): 628, 645. A good example is the expression “fisher of man,” found in a Jesus’ saying, where the two separate domains of economy and religion, in this case, being real fishermen and being disciples who gather people, become mingled in a single expression.

55 Following the *editio princeps*, ed. Becker, *Avot*, 176. Cf. Pierre Lehnhardt and Peter von der Osten-Sacken, *Rabbi Akiva. Texte und Interpretationen zum rabbinischen Judentum und Neuen Testament*, ANTZ 1 (Berlin: Institut Kirche und Judentum, 1987), 275: “So tat R. Akiva und ordnete die ganze Tora in Ringen an.”

For in wine stores no one takes light from the south or west but from the north, because that quarter at no time admits changes, but is continuously fixed and unchangeable. So also those granaries which look towards the sun's course quickly change their goodness; and fish and fruit which are not placed in that quarter which is turned away from the sun's course do not keep long.

VITRUVIUS, *Arch.* 1.4.2–3<sup>56</sup>

In gathering wisdom in his storehouse or treasure, the sage protects it from decay or loss. Storehouses were a reality in the Land of Israel, also serving as deposits for tithes, suggesting that these spaces fulfilled both legal and religious functions.<sup>57</sup> The *nimshal* then applies this image in our *mashal* to the storing of the Oral Torah. Saul Lieberman explains the curious image of “rings” in line with Greek *kykloi* of Christian Latin *catenae*, standardized and organized traditions that follow logical principles. According to Lieberman, the *nimshal* refers to the editing of the Mishnah, which is the paramount rabbinic document of Oral Torah and is based to a large extent on the work of R. Akiva and his pupils. However, some manuscripts supply the reading מטבעות, מטבעות, *matbe'ot matbe'ot*, “coins,” resulting in a different application for the simile: “Thus R. Akiva did and he and sorted out all of the Torah in coins.”<sup>58</sup> Whereas R. Akiva in the first version organizes Oral Torah topically, the second version focuses on hermeneutical quality, again deploying the activity of

56 “Ideo etiam et granaria quae ad solis cursum spectant, bonitatem cito mutant, obsoniaque et poma, quae non in ea parte caeli ponuntur, quae est aversa a solis cursu, non diu servantur.” Translation by Frank Granger, *On Architecture*, vol. 1, *Books 1–V*, LCL 251 (London: Heinemann, 1970), 280.

57 Vaulted store rooms found in the Herodian may be the *otsar* mentioned in the Murabba'at lease contract (Mur 24), stipulating that the tithes be weighed on its roof: col. 2, line 19: [מוֹדֵד עַל גַּב] אוֹצֵר בַּה־רוּדִים] col. 3, line 17: עַל גַּב אוֹצֵרָה col. 6, line 14: [מוֹדֵד עַל גַּב] אוֹצֵר בַּה־רוּדִים]. Text taken from Ada Yardeni, *Textbook of Aramaic, Hebrew and Nabataean Documentary Texts from the Judaean Desert and Related Material*, 2 vols. (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 2000), 1107. I thank prof. Boaz Zissu for providing these data and for permission to use his pictures when I presented an earlier draft of this chapter in Utrecht, June 2019.

58 The manuscripts are: MS New York Rabinowitz 25, ed. Becker, *Avot*, 176–177, and T-S NS 313.1 and a “different reading” (*nusach acher*) mentioned in MS Oxford Opp 247: מטביעות טביעות. It is followed by Shmuel Safrai, “Halakha,” in *The Literature of the Sages*, vol. 1, *Oral Tora, Halakha, Mishna, Tosefta, Talmud, External Tractates*, ed. Shmuel Safrai and Peter J. Tomson, CRINT 2.3a (Assen: Van Gorcum; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 200–201: “Thus did R. Akiva, and he made the entire Tora into coins and sorted out separately,” and see note 383.

money changing to address exegetical activity.<sup>59</sup> According to this second version, R. Akiva embodies wisdom in the way of dynamic hermeneutics, in sorting out how the Oral Torah is in line with scriptural verses.<sup>60</sup> This version offers a narratological friction between *mashal* and *nimshal*, since sorting coins does not align with gathering food. However, lurking beneath the surface of this version is the motif of the sage as money changer, a metaphor that is realized in several parables attributed to pupils of Rabbi Akiva, and the image is reflective of his school of thought.<sup>61</sup> Rather than searching for the original, the polysemy of *otsar* as either store house, associated with food, or treasure, associated with money, caused a powerful if somewhat confusing blend of two input domains, which is storing and sorting out coins, and emerging from a general field of meaning: assessing value.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, when the parable is read

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- 59 Azzan Yadin discerns two imageries of R. Akiva's exegetical prowess: either conservatively as one who interprets Scripture as buttressing the views of Oral Torah, or, according to a later strand of tradition, as able to innovatively distil meanings even from the non-signifying crownlets and hooks of the Hebrew script (b. Menah. 29b). The motif of money changing in the variant reading of the parable may hint at the first type, Akiva as buttressing Oral Torah with Scripture. Like Matt 13:52, this serves a rhetoric of harmonising new teachings with Mosaic Scripture; see Azzan Yadin, *Scripture and Tradition: Rabbi Akiva and the Triumph of Midrash* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014); see also Azzan Yadin, "Rabbi Akiva's Youth," *JQR* 100 (2010): 573–597.
- 60 Safrai, "Halakha," 201n384 follows Rashi on b. Git. 77a: "He [R. Akiva] arranged midrash, Sifra and Sifrei, separately and taught them by themselves, and halakhot by themselves and aggadot by themselves." Cf. y. Sheq. 5:1 (48c) and t. Zav. 1:5.
- 61 The image of changing coins recurs in a parable of R. Meir, that addresses the memorising of Oral Torah in the context of the verse "May my teaching drop like the rain, my speech condense like the dew; like gentle rain on grass, like showers on new growth." (Deut 32:2 NRSV): "R. Yehuda (Mss: R. Meir) used to say: You should always gather the words of Torah together into general rules, for if you assemble them as individual details, they will weary you down. How can you know what to do? A parable: A man who went to Caesarea needed one hundred or two hundred *zuz* for expenses. If he took this sum in small change, it would weary him. (At first) he did not know what to do, but finally he converted the money into *selah*-coins, which he then changed (into smaller coins) and spent wherever it suited him." (Sifre Deut. 306 [Finkelstein, 338–339]). The parable comes in three variants, revealing the plasticity of applications. On the section characterising the sage, see Fraade, *Tradition*, 97.
- 62 In their discussion of the impact of blending on the fusion of different syntactic forms, Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner note: "Such constructions offer ready-made and powerful blending schemes. A tightly compressed frame and a corresponding syntactic form from one input can be recruited into a blended space linked to a diffuse input. Constructing a network based on that scheme for a particular case depends crucially on being able to construct a generic space that applies to the two inputs." See Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, "Conceptual Blending, Form and Meaning," *ReCo* 19 (2003): 79. It seems to me that the generic space in this case is the spatial function of the *otsar*/*thésaurus* as storehouse for food, or a treasure of coins, or both.

as Akiva sorting out coins, it morphs the known saying of the money changer into the wisdom metaphor of the sage as a filled treasure.<sup>63</sup> It is an additional example as to how sayings and parables feature side by side.

## 9 Conclusion

Despite the synchronic differences between rabbinic parables and the parables of Jesus in terms of their theological bearing on either the kingdom of God or the Torah, and despite the diachronic incongruencies of the respective sources, a comparative approach yields a shared “ecotype.” The polysemy of *otsar* in Sir 1:25 was detectable in both “Christian” and rabbinic sayings and parables, and the morphing of food and money is understandable from shared cognitive processes linking the input domain of sorting out coins with sorting out food to the generic space as represented by functions of a storehouse/treasure. Moreover, this “ecotype” of the early Jewish parable indeed functions in a similar social field, i.e., buttressing the authority of respective elites in their ability to read and interpret Scripture. We have traced out how both traditions develop a wisdom motif in two genres (sayings and parables) and two types of parabolic narrative: one that stresses the way the treasure is filled, and one that focuses on the dynamics of sorting out what was in it. Moreover, we saw how rabbinic parables and, quite probably, Matthew as well absorbed the motif of the sage as money changer, circulating as a saying in rabbinic and Christian quarters alike.

Our observations show how tradition can be both ruthlessly conservative as well as ingeniously innovative. The blend of two input spaces, money and food, results in narratological gaps and varieties in the manuscripts. This morphing is understandable from the cognitive process linking the input domain of sorting out coins with sorting out food to the generic space as represented by functions of a storehouse/treasure. This morphing is part of this parable’s “ecotype.” Moreover, similarities in rhetoric and their application to scribes and sages are revealing of a regional ecology for these parables on scriptural knowledge. Despite the differences in applications, these parables address the training of disciples and serve the interests of emerging elites: whether that of

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63 Fauconnier and Turner, “Conceptual Blending,” 60: “In Double-Scopes, essential frame and identity properties are brought in from both inputs. Double-Scope Blending can resolve clashes between inputs that differ fundamentally in content and topology. This is a powerful source of human creativity.”

“Christian” scribes or an emerging rabbinic elite. In both traditions, the parables on the sage as an embodied deposit of wisdom add the significant task of trustfully assessing the validity of scriptural verses for others as well. The parable in turn legitimates and authorizes this task in the social realm of the audience. Wisdom becomes embodied in hermeneutical activity, carried out by emerging elites, and buttressed by a new literary genre.

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## The Rabbinic *Mashal* and the Ancient Fable: Prospects for a Changing Perspective

*Justin David Strong*

In the first century,\* Aelius Theon defines the fable as “a fictitious story picturing truth ... and afterward we add the meaning of which it is a picture” (Theon, *Prog.* 4).<sup>1</sup> This definition is the starting point for a number of fable specialists today.<sup>2</sup> In modern terms, fables are brief, past-tense fictional narratives describing the actions of characters, told for the purpose of making a point external to the storyworld that is normally explicated by an *epimythium*.<sup>3</sup>

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- 1 μῦθος ἔστι λόγος ψευδῆς εἰκονίζων ἀλήθειαν ... μετὰ τὴν ἔκθεσιν ἐπιλέγομεν τὸν λόγον, ὅτου εἰκῶν ἔστιν, “a fable is a fictitious story picturing truth.” By “the meaning of which it is a picture,” Theon means fables have a “moral of the story” appended to them, called an *epimythium* or *epilogos*. Theon has carefully crafted his definition using polyvalent terms that are also important to the ancient fable tradition. Most relevant for us are the two technical terms for fable in antiquity that he references, μῦθος and λόγος. μῦθος is the term for a fable in verse, while λόγος is the term for a fable in prose, as Theon himself says further down the page. μῦθος is a term for speaking in verse as early as the Homeric works and should not be equated with the idea of “myth.” Thus, both terms, μῦθος and λόγος in Greek, and the Latin term *fabula* are all connected to lexemes for “word” and the act of speech. Theon’s dates have been challenged recently, but other authors of progymnasmata share his definition by the second century.
- 2 Ben Edwin Perry, arguably the most influential scholar of the Greek and Latin fable in the twentieth century, writes, “This is a perfect and complete definition provided we understand the range of what is included under the terms λόγος (story) and ἀλήθειαν (truth)” (*Babrius and Phaedrus: Fables*, LCL 436 [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965], xx). Gert-Jan van Dijk, the most prolific scholar of on the fable in recent decades, cites Perry’s development of Theon’s definition with approval, “This appears to be an ideal synthesis of ancient and modern fable theory,” though he defines the fable even more succinctly as a “fictitious, metaphorical narrative” (Gert-Jan van Dijk, *Ainoi, Logoi, Mythoi: Fables in Archaic, Classical, and Hellenistic Greek Literature*, MnemSup 166 [Leiden: Brill, 1997], 5 and 113 respectively). Niklas Holzberg, another influential fable scholar, likewise considers Theon’s definition to be the best, “There have been many attempts to find a definition of the genre that takes cognizance of this diversity, but the most convincing one is still the description found in the rhetors Theon and Aphthonius” (*The Ancient Fable: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002], 19–20).
- 3 From the hundreds of examples, the fables preserved in collections are remarkably consistent. Those embedded in meta-narrative contexts vary more, naturally, according to the

Until quite recently, classical scholars took little interest in the ancient fable, while scholars of the parables of Jesus and rabbinic *meshalim* have had still less exposure to the ancient fable tradition or the scholarship on it.<sup>4</sup> This is beginning to change and, in light of the ancient fable, is resulting in a new perspective on what have been traditionally called “parables.”<sup>5</sup> Here and elsewhere I argue that the fable is the operative background for “narrative parables”

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author’s proclivities, but remain easily recognizable. To the defining characteristics, some fable scholars would have no problem including the present tense, though normally one encounters just the “historical present.”

- 4 For those unacquainted, *meshalim* is the plural of *meshal*, the word used in rabbinic Hebrew for “parables.” The Aramaic term, *mathla*, is synonymous with the Hebrew term, *meshal*. I employ the term *meshal* here throughout for simplicity, but the discussion applies to the cognate in Aramaic literature as well.
- 5 The only monograph-length study to address this issue in detail is by present author: Justin David Strong, *The Fables of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke: A New Foundation for the Study of Parables*, SCCC 5 (Paderborn: Brill, 2021). Since this is the case, I regret that I must often refer to my own work in the course of this article. Prior to this, the most recent monograph-length study to investigate the matter is that of Adolf Jülicher from over a century ago (*Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 2 vols [Freiburg: Mohr Siebeck, 1899]). He and I have reached similar conclusions. After Jülicher, the fable did not feature in parable scholarship in any serious way for the better part of a century. David Flusser offered some thoughts on the parable as emerging from the fable in scattered passages of his *Die rabbinischen Gleichnisse und der Gleichniserzähler Jesus*, vol. 1, *Das Wesen der Gleichnisse* (Bern: Lang, 1981). To date, the most important article on the subject is by Mary Ann Beavis, who shows the synonymy of many parables and fables, concluding that many early Christians would understand “parables” just as fables, see Mary Ann Beavis, “Parable and Fable,” *CBQ* 52 (1990): 473–498. Shortly thereafter, François Vouga published several articles on this issue and he broadly follows Jülicher in his perspective that narrative parables are fables: François Vouga, “Zur form- und redaktionsgeschichtlichen Definition der Gattungen: Gleichnis, Parabel/Fabel, Beispielerzählungen,” in *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu 1899–1999: Beiträge zum Dialog mit Adolf Jülicher*, ed. Ulrich Mell, *BZNW* 103 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1999), 75–95; François Vouga, “Die Parabeln Jesu und die Fabeln Äsops. Ein Beitrag zur Gleichnisforschung und zur Problematik der Literalisierung der Erzählungen der Jesus-Tradition,” *WD* 26 (2001): 149–164; François Vouga, “Formgeschichtliche Überlegungen zu den Gleichnissen und zu den Fabeln der Jesus-Tradition auf dem Hintergrund der hellenistischen Literaturgeschichte,” in *The Four Gospels: Festschrift for Frans Neirynck*, ed. Frans van Segroec, Christopher M. Tuckett, Gilbert van Belle, and Joseph Verheyden, *BETL* 100 (Leuven: Peeters, 1992), 173–187. The past few (and forthcoming years) show an emerging interest in this question. Mikeal Parsons and Michael Martin have a chapter arguing that the parables are equivalent to what the gospel authors would have learned as the fable in their rhetorical training (*Ancient Rhetoric and the New Testament: The Influence of Elementary Greek Composition* [Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018], 45–70). Lieve Teugels has recently demonstrated that the category distinction of “parables” and “fables” on the basis of talking animals does not hold (“Talking Animals in Parables: A Contradictio in Terminis?” in *Parables in Changing Contexts: Essays on the Study of Parables in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism*, ed. Marcel Poorthuis and Eric Ottenheim, *JCP* 35 [Leiden: Brill, 2020], 129–148. Albertina Oegema, Jonathan Pater, and Martijn Stoutjesdijk, ed. *Overcoming Dichotomies: Parables, Fables, and Similes in the*

and that the attempts to distinguish parables from fables have their origin in centuries-old theological motivations and the general unfamiliarity of biblical and rabbinic scholars with the ancient fable tradition. In this brief chapter, I address a few facets of this growing recognition with relevance for rabbinic literature. I question the appropriateness of using the term “parable” for rabbinic *meshalim*. I suggest that “fable” is the appropriate term for *meshalim* in the rabbinic context. I identify the use of the fable by the elite for rhetoric and education as backgrounds for the rabbinic *mashal*. Apart from elite discourses, I then identify a facet of the rabbinic *mashal* that comes to light when one is familiar with the use of fable in popular folk discourses: the literary persona of the fable teller, which is shared with Aesop and certain rabbinic figures famed for telling *meshalim*, such as Bar Kappara.

## 1 A (Re)New(ed) Perspective on “Parables”

When it comes to “parables” and rabbinic *meshalim*, there are four components to a terminological quagmire: the mysterious origin of the parable, the application of the term *mashal* to both “parables” and “fables,” the English word “parable” itself, and, finally, the difference between a “parable” and a “fable.” To clear the air, I need to introduce why I believe these are problems and then offer the solution. Let us take these issues one at a time. In the biblical world, the term *mashal* has a broad meaning, encapsulating texts that most modern scholars would label with numerous more specific terms such as proverbs, maxims, riddles, allegories, taunts, and so on.<sup>6</sup> Granting this, as David Stern notes, in the Hebrew Bible, *mashal* “never, curiously enough, [refers] to the specific narrative forms that we call parables or fables. Only in rabbinic literature does the word *mashal* become a formal generic title for parables and fables.”<sup>7</sup>

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*Graeco-Roman World*, WUNT 483 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022) contains several articles addressing aspects of the question and makes a significant contribution to this area.

6 See, for example, the discussion in K.-M. Beyse, “משל,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, 15 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 9:64–67. He writes, “This survey raises the questions of how so many different literary forms have come to bear this collective designation *māšāl*, with which of these concepts the word was originally associated, and how they are related among themselves.”

7 David Stern, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 9–10. Yes, this includes even Nathan’s Ewe Lamb (2 Sam 12), which receives no genre label in the Hebrew Bible. Josephus is the first to ascribe a genre label to it (Josephus, *Ant.* 7.7.3 [147–151]) and he labels it a *λόγος*, the term for fables in prose. On the significance of this passage for the present issue, see my forthcoming study.

In rabbinic literature, it has both dropped the breadth of meaning from the Hebrew Bible and has become a genre label specifically for “parables” and “fables.” Parable scholars occasionally comment on this curious fact, such as Bernard Brandon Scott, who writes: “Jesus and the rabbis developed and employed a genre of *mashal* not evidenced in the Hebrew Bible.”<sup>8</sup>

Once the word *mashal* (Aramaic *mathla*) crystallized as a formal genre title in rabbinic literature, the second point to observe is that it covers not one but apparently two literary genres: “parables” and “fables.” Put another way, rabbinic literature and the Hebrew language do not offer us separate terms by which to distinguish “parables” and “fables,” rather *mashal* covers them both. It is one thing for there to be multiple overlapping terms for related concepts, but here we have just one term available. A “parable” of a rabbi is called a *mashal* and a “fable” of Aesop, for example, is also a *mashal*. Referring to these texts as two genres thus does not emerge from within rabbinic literature or the Hebrew language, but rather from modern convention.

The third issue is with the English term “parable” itself. If the Synoptic Gospels were never written, it never would have occurred to anyone that *mashal* in rabbinic literature should be rendered into English using this word “parable.” This basic fact needs to be digested. Indeed, without the Synoptic Gospels, the word “parable” never would have entered the English lexicon. The English term “parable” does not come from rabbinic literature nor does it derive from the Septuagint; παραβολή is usually never rendered as “parable” in English translations of the Septuagint because no “parables” appear (nor in the Hebrew *Vorlage* as we saw above). “Parable” also does not come from classical literature, where παραβολή is rendered appropriately in a very general way as “comparison,” or “illustration.”<sup>9</sup> There is no way around the fact that the word “parable” is derived from παραβολή as it is sometimes, but not always, used in the Synoptic Gospels.<sup>10</sup>

For most of history, “parables” were not critically defined, rather distinguished from other texts merely by their association with Jesus, their presence in the corpus of the Synoptic Gospels, and the theological messages that were read into them. “Parable” originates as a term inextricably linked to the

8 Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 8.

9 For many examples, see Strong, *Fables of Jesus*, 201–225.

10 The Gospels of John, Thomas, and apparently not even Q use the term παραβολή, even when they relate a passage paralleled to one using παραβολή in the Synoptic Gospels. I say “sometimes, but not always, used” because even in the Synoptics, the word παραβολή is often not translated as “parable” and it is often applied to texts that do not fit most definitions (e.g., Mark 13:28–29; Luke 4:23).

theological claims by Christians about Jesus of Nazareth and the uniqueness of his teaching. It has been the task of modern critical biblical scholars who have inherited the term “parable” to translate the ecclesiastic concept into a legitimate literary category, a genre, and to locate a historical setting for it. From this background alone, it is problematic to extrapolate this concept of “parable” to other texts, especially to translate *mashal* as “parable” in rabbinic literature.<sup>11</sup> Classical scholars, for example, do not translate the term παραβολή as “parable” because they are not working beneath the long shadow cast by these theological convictions. With the emergence of modern critical approaches, scholars of rabbinic literature adopted the vocabulary of biblical studies, including New Testament studies, and (too uncritically it seems to me) the English term “parable” along with it.

One reason that “parable” seems to have stuck is because there has not been any apparent alternative. No one in the last century has been able to locate, in the whole of ancient literature, another παραβολή of short fictional past-tense narratives making points external to their storyworld. There is apparently no one in recorded history telling “parables” before Jesus—the closest have been texts labelled *meshalim* centuries later in rabbinic literature.<sup>12</sup> This has been used to subsume rabbinic *meshalim* under this nebulous genre of Jesus, with predictable supersessionist effects on the one hand and Philo-Judaic Jewish exceptionalism on the other. For critically minded scholars, on historical and literary grounds, it is most implausible that Jesus is the first person in history to use a new genre called the “parable,” long before any rabbis. There is clearly a missing piece to the puzzle here. The missing piece is the fable. Stern seems to have partially recognized this, though not its implication, when he compares the rabbinic *mashal* to Aristotle’s rhetorical terms παραβολή and λόγος. He writes, “In Aristotle, these ‘parables’ [referring to παραβολή] are in fact closer to similes than to genuine stories; for the latter type, Aristotle in fact employs a separate rhetorical term, *logoi*, a word usually translated as ‘fables.’”<sup>13</sup> Without the Gospels, equating the rabbinic *mashal* with παραβολή would not have

11 While the term “parable” is innocuous in common parlance and few among the public are aware of its origin in the Gospels, for specialist studies such as ours, the terms we use should not be applied uncritically. The term is entrenched in Christian theological convictions and tacit supersessionism that holds Jesus to be the first parable teller, the best parable teller, and even the inventor of the genre, “parable.” Especially for rabbinic specialists who are less familiar with New Testament studies and Modern Hebrew speakers for whom English is not a native language, these facts may give pause for rendering *mashal* into English with “parable.”

12 This historical curiosity has been acknowledged by scholars of every stripe. See Strong, *Fables of Jesus*, 3–5.

13 Stern, *Parables in Midrash*, 10.

occurred. If the Synoptic Gospels were never written, *mashal* in rabbinic literature would be recognized as a continuation of λόγος and translated as “fable.”

That there are not two terms for “parables” and “fables” should have been a clue, but the final piece of the puzzle has been growing recognition that traditional distinctions between “parables” and “fables” leak like a sieve. As Eli Yassif writes, “The distinction between fable (narrative *mashal*) and parable in rabbinic literature, for all its fundamental importance, is not unequivocal, and it is sometimes difficult to tell the two forms apart.”<sup>14</sup> What Yassif has in mind for fundamental importance, he does not say, but among supposed divisions that one encounters are that parables are Semitic while fables are Hellenistic, that parables are realistic while fables are unrealistic, that parables teach theological lessons while fables teach mundane lessons, that parables are for adults while fables are for children, that parables are context dependent while fables are context independent, that parables are austere while fables are vulgar, that parables are for exegesis or particular points while fables are for general lessons, that parables are about humans while fables are about talking animals. None of these generalizations hold any water. In other words, there is no legitimate distinction between a “parable” and a “fable.”<sup>15</sup>

It is appropriate to describe this perspective not simply as a growing recognition, but as a re-emerging one. Foundational figures of critical biblical scholarship such as Adolf Jülicher, for example, wrote plainly: “The majority of Jesus’s παραβολαί that have a narrative form are fables, like those of Stesichorus and Aesop.”<sup>16</sup> Even at that time, Jülicher suggested that theological motivations were behind those who wished to deem “parables” something else.<sup>17</sup> Here is not the place to go point by point through the list of myths about ancient

14 Eli Yassif, *The Hebrew Folktale: History, Genre, Meaning* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 191.

15 For fable scholars without the same skin in the game, this is not so controversial. Van Dijk simply writes, for example, “A fundamental difference between fable and parable does not exist” (*Ainoi, Logoi, Mythoi*, 36). Parable scholars will often use language such as “true parable” or “narrative parable” when they wish to specify what most understand by the term “parable.” Richard Lischer explains, “What is sometimes called a ‘true parable’ is a freely invented short story with two or more characters whose action is cast into the past tense” (*Reading the Parables* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014], 33).

16 “Die Mehrzahl der παραβολαί Jesu, die erzählende Form tragen, sind Fabeln, wie die des Stesichoros und des Aesop” (Jülicher, *Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 1:98). Other foundational figures in critical biblical scholarship include Gottlob Christian Storr and Hugo Grotius, on whom see Strong, *The Fables of Jesus*, 236–241.

17 “Gefährlicher indess ist der Widerstand aus theologischen Motiven”; “More dangerous, however, is the resistance from theological motives” (Jülicher, *Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 1:100). At the time, the motivations included the need to assert the unique and unparalleled nature of Jesus’s teaching, the resistance to historical critical methodology, avoiding the

fables that continue to muddy the waters. For economy of space, it will suffice to demonstrate the point by offering a sample of ancient fables from one of the ancient fable collections, known as the Augustana.<sup>18</sup>

A fable of treasure in a field and a father teaching his sons:

A farmer who was about to die wanted his sons to be knowledgeable about the farm, so he summoned them and said, “My children, there is a treasure buried in one of my vineyards.” After he died, his sons took plows and mattocks and dug up the entire farm. They did not find any treasure, but the vineyard paid them back with a greatly increased harvest.

*Thus they learned that man’s greatest treasure consists in work.*

Perry 42; Chambry 83 [trans. Gibbs]<sup>19</sup>

A fable about a farmer:

A lion got into a farmer’s yard, and the farmer, wishing to catch him, shut the yard gate. At first, when he couldn’t get out, the lion killed the sheep, and then he turned to the cattle. The farmer began to worry about himself and opened the gate. After the lion was gone, the man’s wife found him groaning and said, “You got just what you deserved. Why did you want to shut in an animal you ought to have feared even at a distance?”

*So it is that men who annoy those more powerful than themselves pay the penalty for their bad judgment.*

(Perry 144; Chambry 197 [trans. Daly])<sup>20</sup>

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many stigmas associated with the fable genre, and a more current one in the philoJudaic interest in asserting the uniqueness of Judaism.

18 For an introduction to the ancient fable collections, see especially Holzberg, *Ancient Fable*.

19 Ἄνῆρ γεωργὸς μέλλων τελευτᾶν καὶ βουλόμενος τοὺς αὐτοῦ παῖδας ἐμπείρους εἶναι τῆς γεωργίας, μετακαλεσάμενος αὐτούς, ἔφη· ὦ τέκνιά, ἐν μιᾷ μου τῶν ἀμπελῶν θησαυρὸς ἀπόκειται. Οἱ δὲ μετὰ τὴν αὐτοῦ τελευτὴν ὕνας τε καὶ δικέλλας λαβόντες πᾶσαν αὐτῶν τὴν γεωργίαν ὤρουξαν. Καὶ τὸν μὲν θησαυρὸν οὐχ εὗρον, ἡ δὲ ἄμπελος πολλαπλασίαν τὴν φορὰν αὐτοῖς ἀπέδιδου. Τοῦτο μὲν ἔγνωσαν ὅτι ὁ κάματος θησαυρὸς ἐστὶ τοῖς ἀνθρώποις.

20 Λέων εἰς γεωργοῦ ἔπαυλιν εἰσῆλθεν. Ὁ δὲ συλλαβεῖν βουλόμενος τὴν αὐλείαν θύραν ἔκλεισε. Καὶ ὅς ἐξελθεῖν μὴ δυνάμενος πρῶτον μὲν τὰ ποίμνια διέφθειρεν, ἔπειτα δὲ καὶ ἐπὶ τοὺς βόας ἐτρέπη. Καὶ ὁ γεωργὸς φοβηθεὶς περὶ αὐτοῦ τὴν θύραν ἀνέωξε. Ἀπαλλαγέντος δὲ τοῦ λέοντος, ἡ γυνὴ θεασαμένη αὐτὸν στένοντα εἶπεν· “Ἄλλὰ σύ γε δίκαια πέπονθας· τί γὰρ τοῦτον συγκλείσαι ἐβούλου ὃν καὶ μακρόθεν σε ἔδει φεύγειν;” Οὕτως οἱ τοὺς ἰσχυροτέρους διερεθίζοντες εἰκότως τὰς ἐξ αὐτῶν πλημμελείας ὑπομένουσιν.

Like fishermen fables, shepherd fables, and so on, farmer fables are practically a sub-genre. In my fable and subject indexes, I have gathered an extensive list of fables for most subjects that would be relevant (see Strong, *The Fables of Jesus*, 585–595 and 621–629 respectively).



A fable teaching lessons about impiety and the watchful eye of God:

Two boys were buying meat together. When the butcher turned around, one of them quickly picked up a pig's foot and stuffed it in the other's shirt. The butcher turned again and looked around for it. He accused the boys, but the one who had taken it swore he didn't have it, and the one who had it swore he hadn't taken it. The butcher saw through their trick and said, "You may deceive me with your lies, but you won't deceive the gods."

*The fable shows that perjury is still a sin, even if it is cleverly done.*

Perry 66; Chambry 246 [trans. Daly]<sup>21</sup>

*The fable shows that even if lies escape the notice of people, they will not escape notice of God. (The moral to this fable in another manuscript).<sup>22</sup>*

I hope that this amuse-bouche of fables suffices to demonstrate the point and piques the interest of readers interested in following where it leads.

This new perspective on "parables" brings the solution to the aforementioned conundrums. The fable explains where the new genre of rabbinic *mashal* came from, why rabbinic literature does not use two terms for "parables" and "fables," why "parables" and "fables" are given the same definitions by their respective guild of scholars, and so on. From my perspective, it removes the need to deal with the word "parable" altogether. There is no need to split *mashal* into "parables" and "fables" because an ancient audience would recognize them all as fables. In Greek literature, παραβολή is a broadly construed and form-independent term meaning "comparison" and grants little support to a more specific genre called the "parable." Jesus did not invent a new genre or need to extrapolate from the Hebrew Bible.<sup>23</sup> The fable is the

21 Δύο νεανίσκοι ἐν ταύτῃ κρέας ἀνοῦντο. Καὶ δὴ τοῦ μαγείρου περισπασθέντος, ὁ ἕτερος ὑφελόμενος ἀκροκόλιον, εἰς τὸν τοῦ ἑτέρου κόλπον καθήκεν. Ἐπιστραφέντος δὲ αὐτοῦ καὶ ἐπιζητούντος, αἰτιωμένου τε ἐκείνου, ὁ μὲν εἰληφώς ὤμνυε μὴ ἔχειν, ὁ δὲ ἔχων μὴ εἰληφέναι. Καὶ ὁ μάγειρος αἰσθόμενος αὐτῶν τὴν κακοτεχνίαν, εἶπεν· Ἀλλὰ κὰν ἐμὲ λάθητε ἐπιορκούντες, θεοὺς μέντοι γε οὐ λήσετε. Ὁ λόγος δηλοῖ ὅτι ἡ αὐτὴ ἐστὶν ἡ ἀσέβεια τῆς ἐπιορκίας, κὰν αὐτὴν τις κατασφίζῃται.

22 Ὁ μῦθος δηλοῖ ὅτι, κὰν ἀνθρώπους ἐπιορκούντες λάθωμεν, ἀλλὰ τὸν γε θεὸν οὐ λήσομεν.

23 It is problematic to equate the fables of Jesus, as a character in the gospel narratives, with those of the historical Jesus. I do so here simply for convenience. One of the outcomes of recognizing the fable as the appropriate context is the removal of the primary pillar that supported uncritically assigning all fables of Jesus in the Gospels to the historical figure. The reason has been, namely, that no one else was telling "parables" and so no one else could have invented them and attributed them to Jesus. The ubiquity of the ancient fable demonstrates this assumption to be false.

missing Graeco-Semitic context that was sitting under our nose. This is not to say that Jewish fables do not have their own particular character; they certainly do, especially the focus on king protagonists, but variation among fables of different ethnicities was one of the genre's celebrated hallmarks in antiquity.<sup>24</sup> It is also not to say that people did not know the difference between a fable with animals and a fable with people, but these were simply called "animal fables" and "human fables,"<sup>25</sup> if they were divided at all. As Theon writes, "Those who say that some are composed about talking animals, while others human beings, that some are impossible, while others are possible, seem to me to make a silly distinction" (Theon, *Prog.* 4 [trans. mine]).<sup>26</sup> The idea that such human fables could be confused with another genre going by the term *παραβολή* occurred to no one, suggesting that we moderns have gotten it all wrong. The "narrative parable," the new kind of *mashal* that came to prominence during the days of Jesus and the rabbis, the genre of short fictional past-tense narrative that makes a point external to the storyworld is the fable.

The implications of this perspective are many and far reaching. Previous studies on rabbinic fables have essentially inherited the Christian legacy of dividing "parables" from "fables," stymieing the discussion until now. If "parables" and "fables" are the same, and the "parable" has a rather flimsy legitimacy as a genre, derived merely from the Synoptic Gospels, should we not simply jettison the term "parable" completely? Equating the rabbinic *mashal* with the fable moves us beyond a *status quaestionis* built on the assumption that

24 Theon gives such a list, for example, "Fables are called Aesopic [probably Aethiopic] and Libyan or Sybaritic, and Phrygian and Cilician and Carian, Egyptian, and Cyprian," *καλοῦνται δὲ Αἰσώπειοι καὶ Λιβυτικοὶ ἢ Συβαριτικοὶ τε καὶ Φρύγιοι καὶ Κιλίκιοι καὶ Καρικοὶ Αἰγύπτιοι καὶ Κύπριοι* (Theon, *Prog.* 4). We also have multiple ancient authors describe how some individual fable tellers and some people groups have preferences for the characters in their fables, whether human beings, animals, or a mix. Here is an example from Aphthonius the Sophist (fourth century CE): "It is called Sybaritic and Cilician and Cyprian, varying its names with its inventors, but calling it Aesopic has largely prevailed because Aesop composed fables best of all," *Καλεῖται δὲ Συβαριτικὸς καὶ Κίλιξ καὶ Κύπριος, πρὸς τοὺς εὐρόντας αὐτὸν μεταθεῖς τὰ ὀνόματα· νικᾷ δὲ μᾶλλον Αἰσώπειος λέγεσθαι τῷ τὸν Αἰσώπων ἄριστα πάντων συγγράψαι τοὺς μύθους* (Aphthonius, *Prog.* 1).

25 Continuing where Aphthonius left off from the previous footnote, "Some fables are rational, some ethical, some mixed: rational when a human being is imagined as doing something, ethical when representing the character of irrational animals, mixed when made up of both, irrational and rational," *Τοῦ δὲ μύθου τὸ μὲν ἐστὶ λογικόν, τὸ δὲ ἠθικόν, τὸ δὲ μικτόν· καὶ λογικόν μὲν, ἐν ᾧ τι ποιῶν ἄνθρωπος πέπλασται, ἠθικόν δὲ τὸ τῶν ἀλόγων ἦθος ἀπομιμούμενον, μικτόν δὲ τὸ ἐξ ἀμφοτέρων, ἀλόγου καὶ λογικοῦ* (Aphthonius, *Prog.* 1).

26 οἱ δὲ λέγοντες τοὺς μὲν ἐπὶ τοῖς ἀλόγοις ζώοις συγκειμένους τοιοῦσδε εἶναι, τοὺς δὲ ἐπ' ἀνθρώποις τοιοῦσδε, τοὺς μὲν ἀδυνάτους τοιοῦσδε, τοὺς δὲ δυνατῶν ἐχομένους τοιοῦσδε, εὐήθως μοι ὑπολαμβάνειν δοκοῦσιν.

“parable” material is unique and unparalleled, whether just to Jesus or Judaism more broadly. Equating the *mashal* with the fable situates these texts among one of the most ubiquitous genres in the ancient world. The ancient fable tradition is both incredibly ancient and rich. We have many hundreds of fables surviving from the days of Jesus and the rabbis, dozens of narratives depicting characters telling fables, numerous topoi associated with the fable tradition, stereotypical characterizations of fable tellers, abundant ancient theoretical discussions of the genre, and so on.

## 2 Rhetoric, Exegesis, and Education Using the *Mashal*/Fable

Once one recognizes the long-neglected fable genre as the operative literary context for the rabbinic *mashal*, many new doors open for comparing rabbinic *meshalim* to the numerous fable contexts. Aesop represents one end of the fable’s genre associations—the genre of the low, associated with slaves and the popular class—while the fable also has a long pedigree in elite discourses. Before the fable began to be recognized for its literary merits, the genre is best attested embedded within Greek writings where it is used for scoring points in rhetorical exchanges and legal disputations. The predominant function of *meshalim* embedded in rabbinic texts appears to be similar if not identical to this—winning rhetorical disputes and forensic exegesis. When one only compares the rabbinic *meshalim* to “parables” of Jesus and texts labelled *mashal* in the Hebrew Bible, it appears that this use of *mashal* is something peculiar to rabbinic Judaism. Bringing in the broader fable context suggests however that using the *mashal*, “fable,” as a tool to interpret and argue about legal minutia was commonplace and would have been a natural extension of the genre into rabbinic Judaism. While there have been recent studies comparing rabbinic methods and categories with their Greek rhetorical equivalents,<sup>27</sup> the misidentification with and limitation of the rabbinic *mashal* to παραβολή means that such a study remains wanting.

The use of the fable in education extends back to the examples from the Old Babylonian period. It is established in the Greek tradition by the time of Socrates (*Resp.* 2.376e–377a) and played a part of education in the Roman

27 See, for example, Richard Hidary, *Rabbis and Classical Rhetoric: Sophistic Education and Oratory in the Talmud and Midrash* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). See already Henry A. Fischel, ed., *Essays in Greco-Roman and Related Talmudic Literature* (New York: Ktav, 1977) and Catherine Hezser, “Die Verwendung Der Hellenistischen Gattung Chrie Im Frühen Christentum Und Judentum,” *JSJ* 27 (1996): 371–439.

Period from primary education through advanced training in constructing rhetorical arguments.<sup>28</sup> How might this well-established tradition of learning with the fable relate to Jewish education with *meshalim* in the Roman period? According to the Talmud, Rabbi Meir (fl. second century CE), for example, “would teach a third *halakha*, a third *agaddah*, and a third *mashal*.” And Rabbi Yohanan says, “There were three hundred *meshalim* of foxes attributed to Rabbi Meir, but we have none except three” (b. Sanh. 38b–39a).<sup>29</sup> Yohanan ben Zakkai (ca. 30–90 CE), the earliest named individual to whom a *mashal* is attributed in the rabbinic corpus, was likewise concerned with the study of “fables of fullers (משלות כובסין) [and] fables of foxes (משלות שועלים)” (b. Sukkah 28a).<sup>30</sup> The fable in the Graeco-Latin educational context also has much to offer our understanding of the theory behind the use of *mashal*, such as how the *mashal* and *nimshal* relate to one another. The fable, as we saw in the examples above, has the same form, with the *nimshal* equivalent to the fable *epilogos* or *epimythium*. We have many theoretical discussions from numerous ancient educators, from Theon to Quintilian, about how fables are constructed and how they relate to their lessons.<sup>31</sup>

### 3 *The Life of Aesop and the Rabbinic Fable Teller: Tabbai and Bar Kappara*

The constraints of space permit a brief examination of just one further unexplored facet of the ancient fable tradition that had an apparent influence upon rabbinic literature. This is the parallel between the literary persona of the fable

28 On the use of the fable in ancient education, see Strong, *The Fables of Jesus*, 131–172.

29 Like Bar Kappara, Rabbi Meir attests to a tradition of rabbis who know hundreds of fox fables—the number three hundred appearing in both cases. While three hundred may of course be conventional (so Stern, *Parables in Midrash*, 298), it is not necessarily so. From Babrius’s collection about two hundred fables survive, while the Augustana Collection numbers about 250.

30 On the ambiguous meaning of “fables of fullers (משלות כובסין)” and “fables of foxes (משלות שועלים)” see Strong, *The Fables of Jesus*, 175–179, and the literature cited there. It is conceivable that “fuller” fables refer to popular class fables. This use of them by ben Zakkai would then reflect the uptake of the popular fable form into elite discourse, which would mirror the same procedure in the Latin and Greek fable authors of the early Roman Imperial Period.

31 On the relationship between the fable text and framing devices like the *epimythium* and *nimshal*, see Justin David Strong, “How to Interpret Parables in Light of the Fable: The Promythium and Epimythium,” in *Overcoming Dichotomies*, 327–352; Strong, *The Fables of Jesus*, 382–448; Ben E. Perry, “The Origin of the Epimythium,” *TAPA* 71 (1940): 391–419.

teller and the characterization of certain rabbinic figures. From previous studies on fables in the rabbinic corpus, it is clear that rabbinic authors were well acquainted with their use.<sup>32</sup> Few have sought comparisons with the traditions of Aesop specifically or been concerned with more than establishing parallels between a particular *mashal* and a particular fable attested outside of rabbinic literature. Once again, this is presumably because the nebulous “parable” rather than the fable has dominated such efforts and led many down the garden path. If the traditions are not somehow independent of one another, then it is evident that some of the authors of the rabbinic period were not merely familiar with fables, but with the folk traditions about Aesop and *The Life of Aesop* specifically.

Among the many fable tellers of antiquity, the most widely known to the ancients was Aesop. In addition to the fables attributed to him, around the first century CE, a popular biography was written about Aesop. In *The Life (Vita Aesopi)*, Aesop spins fables to many ends, among them to solve riddles, teach lessons, explain the natural order, insult opponents, persuade audiences, and augur his unjust conviction, death, and the recompense that will be paid to the Delphians who kill him. Although he delivers a dozen or so fables in the course of the narrative (mostly about human characters), these are largely gathered in the final third of the story, once Aesop has won his freedom. The bulk of the biography, however, revolves around Aesop as a picaresque slave, who uses his folk wisdom to make fools of pretentious intellectuals, to get himself and others out of trouble, and to solve various riddles. Aesop is not formally educated, but relies instead on his natural wit throughout. Throughout the narrative, Aesop engages in battles of wits against all comers, especially intellectual elites whose rigid scholasticism is no match for the shrewd wisdom of the protagonist. He lampoons the pretensions of such intellectuals, has the perfect comeback to every heckler, and relishes in exposing false claims of wisdom. These scenes result in the frustration and humiliation of his interlocutors and a laugh for Aesop and the reader. Aesop’s main foil intellectual character is his master, Xanthus, who runs a philosophy school. In addition to this theme, there is the genuine good nature of Aesop, who performs many altruistic deeds. After

32 This is, of course, from the perspective that there are two separate things called “parables” and “fables”: e.g., Haim Schwarzbaum, “Talmudic-Midrashic Affinities of Some Aesopic Fables,” *Laographia* 22 (1965): 466–483; Haim Schwarzbaum, “The Fables of Aesop and the Parables of the Sages,” *Maḥanayim* 112 (1967): 112–117 (Hebrew); Joseph Jacobs, “Aesop’s Fables among the Jews,” in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, ed. Isidore Singer, 12 vols. (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1901–1906), 1:221–222; Galit Hasan-Rokem, “Fable” in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, ed. Fred Skolnik and Michael Berenbaum, 2nd ed., 22 vols (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 6:666–670.

showing kindness toward the disguised goddess, Isis, he also helps his masters solve riddles (e.g., *Vit. Aes.* 35–36 and 78–80), helps Xanthus to escape trouble (e.g., *Vit. Aes.* 69–74), and is hailed as a “true prophet” (*Vit. Aes.* 93). A substantial section of *The Life* (101–123) is pulled directly from the *Tale of Ahiqar* where Aesop adopts a more august self-presentation.<sup>33</sup> The conclusion of *The Life* picks up on the early traditions known about Aesop. In a series of events with clear biblical parallels,<sup>34</sup> he is framed and quickly convicted of being a blasphemer and temple thief. On his way to execution, Aesop tells a number of fables.

Since we will see parallels to these passages momentarily, it is worth offering a couple examples of Aesop’s brand of wisdom. While Aesop is still on the slave block, he begins the first battle of wits with his future master, Xanthus, who has brought his students with him to buy a slave. Xanthus says to his students, “Let us find out if he knows anything,” and initiates the first of many back-and-forths with Aesop that hang on Aesop’s use of word ambiguity. Approaching Aesop, Xanthus says:

“Good day to you.” Aesop: “And is there anything wrong with my day?”  
 The students: “Fair enough, by the Muses. What was wrong with his day?” They were impressed with his apt retort. And Xanthus said, “Where do you come from?” Aesop: “from the flesh.” Xanthus: “That’s not what I mean. Where were you born?” Aesop: “In my mother’s belly.” Xanthus: “The devil take him. That’s not what I’m asking you, but in what place where you born?” Aesop: “My mother didn’t tell me whether it was in the bedroom or the dining room.” Xanthus said, “Tell me what you are by nationality.” Aesop: “A Phrygian.” Xanthus, “What do you know how to do?” Aesop, “Nothing at all.” ... The students: Hey! He’s wonderful ... By Hera, this Aesop has done a neat job of muzzling the professor.

*Vit. Aes.* 25–26<sup>35</sup>

33 *The Life of Aesop* is, in fact, our best attestation of the lost Greek text of *The Tale of Ahiqar*. The dependence on *Ahiqar* is just one of several clear indications that the fable genre crossed fluidly between Hellenistic and Semitic milieus.

34 The inhabitants of the city hide a temple vessel in Aesop’s bag in order to accuse him of being a temple thief (cf. Gen 44). Aesop gets into this situation by insulting the people for considering themselves worthy of their ancestors. Initially, they enjoy his message, but they soon turn on him and kill him by throwing him from a cliff (cf. Luke 4:16–30).

35 προσελθών δὲ ὁ Ξάνθος τῷ Αἰσώπῳ φησὶν· “χαίρει.” Αἰσώπῳ· “τί γάρ; λυποῦμαι;” οἱ σχολαστικοί· “καλῶς, μὰ τὰς Μούσας. τί γάρ; ἔλυπέιτο;” <κατεπλάγησαν οὖν> τῷ εὐστόχῳ λόγῳ. καὶ φησιν αὐτῷ ὁ Ξάνθος· “ποταπὸς εἶ;” ὁ Αἰσώπῳ· “σάρκινος.” ὁ Ξάνθος· “οὐ τοῦτο λέγω, ἀλλὰ ποῦ ἐγεννήθης;” ὁ Αἰσώπῳ· “ἐν τῇ κοιλίᾳ τῆς μητρός μου.” ὁ Ξάνθος· “πάντα αὐτῷ κακά. οὐ τοῦτό σε ἔρωτῶ, ἀλλὰ ποῖω τόπῳ ἐγεννήθης;” ὁ Αἰσώπῳ· “τοῦτό μοι οὐκ εἶπεν ἡ μήτηρ μου, πότερον [ἦ]

Though he says so sarcastically, Xanthus's later admission, "Well, I didn't realise I had bought myself a master" (*Vit. Aes.* 28), is not a far cry from the truth. As part of this section of *The Life* involving Xanthus, Aesop engages in a particular habit that resonates with one of our later rabbinic fable tellers: sabotaging the master's banquet.

A substantial proportion of this Xanthus section in *The Life* revolves around the banquet table. Aesop uses his wits to ruin his master's banquets in order to prove a point. Here is one example:

Xanthus sent out invitations to the students who had entertained him at dinner and said to Aesop: "I've invited my friends to dinner; go cook the best, the finest thing imaginable." Aesop said to himself, "I'll show him not to order stupid things." He went to the butcher shop and bought the tongues of all the slaughtered pigs, then returned and prepared them. When Xanthus and his friends reclined at the table, after drinking, Xanthus said, "Give us something to eat." Aesop served each one a boiled tongue with a vinegar fish sauce. The students praised Xanthus and said, "Professor, your lunch is stuffed with philosophy, for first off you have given us tongues, by which the whole of philology is emitted, and best of all, cooked with water. For every tongue is set in liquid." And so they ate happily. After the drinking, Xanthus said, "Aesop, give us something to eat." He served each a tongue roasted with salt and pepper. The students said, "Wow, Professor," said the students once more, "roasted tongue, very appropriately, since every tongue is sharpened by fire, and best of all, with salt and pepper; for the saltiness harmonizes with the tartness and the spiciness when they are united." And again they ate happily. And after a short while Xanthus said, "Aesop, give us something to eat." He gave each a spiced tongue, and the students said to one another, "Our tongues are sick of eating tongues. Don't we have anything else to eat?" Again, Aesop served each a tongue soup. The students grew irritated and said, "How long will it be tongues? Phew, what a lunch!" So Xanthus became angry and said, "Aesop, don't you have anything else?" And he replied, "No." And Xanthus said, "Didn't I tell you, you abominable thing, to buy whatever was fine and good?" Aesop said, "I am grateful that you

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ἐν τῷ κοιτῶνι ἢ ἐν τῷ τρικλίνῳ." ὁ Ξάνθος λέγει: "γένει, λέγω, ποταπὸς εἶ;" ὁ Αἴσωπος: "Φρύξ," ὁ Ξάνθος: "τί οἶδας ποιεῖν;" ὁ Αἴσωπος: "ἐγὼ ὅλως οὐδέν." ... οἱ σχολαστικοί: "οὐά, μακάριος... οἱ σχολαστικοί: "καλῶς, μὰ τὴν" Ἡραν· ὁ Αἴσωπος ἀπεστομάτισεν τὸν καθηγητὴν."

Unless stated otherwise, quotations of *The Life of Aesop* are taken from the standard translation of the "G" text, found in Lloyd W. Daly, *Aesop without Morals: The Famous Fables and a Life of Aesop* (New York: Yoseloff, 1961).

are blaming me when men who are philosophers are present. You said whatever is fine and good. And what is better in life than the tongue? It is by the tongue that all philosophy and education have been established. It is by virtue of the tongue that there are givings and takings, greetings, purchases, opinions, songs, weddings; thanks to it cities are restored and cities are overturned. The tongue humbles a man and in turn elevates him. It is by virtue of the tongue that all life has its basis. So nothing is better than it." The students said, "Yes, well put, by the Muses. It was your mistake, professor." They went home, and all night long they suffered from seizures of diarrhea.

*Vit. Aes.* 51–53<sup>36</sup>

By the time Aesop wins his freedom from Xanthus, many banquets have been spoiled by comic and ingenious means. Through Aesop's *savoir faire* on this and the many other occasions, he proves that he is more than meets the eye.

36 τῆ ἐπαύριον καλέσας ὁ Ξάνθος τοὺς ἤδη καλέσαντας αὐτὸν σχολαστικούς λέγει· "Αἴσωπε, ἐπειδὴ φίλους κέλγηκα ἐπὶ δείπνον, ἀπελθὼν ὀψώνησον εἴ τι καλόν, εἴ τι χρηστὸν ἐν τῷ βίῳ." Αἴσωπος πρὸς αὐτὸν λέγει· "ἐγὼ αὐτῷ δεῖξω μωρὰ μὴ διατάττεσθαι." ἔλθων οὖν εἰς τὸν μάκελλον τῶν τεθυμένων χοιριδίων τὰς γλώσσας ἠγόρασεν, καὶ ἔλθων τὰς μὲν ἐκξεστάς, τὰς δὲ ὀπτάς, τὰς δὲ ἀρτυτάς, πάσας ἠτόιμασεν. καὶ τῆ τακτῆ ὥρα παραγίνονται οἱ κεκλημένοι. ὁ Ξάνθος λέγει· "Αἴσωπε, δὸς ἡμῖν τι φαγεῖν." Αἴσωπος φέρει ἐκάστῳ γλώσσαν γενομένην ἐκξεστὴν, καὶ ὀξύγαρον παρεθήκεν. οἱ σχολαστικοὶ εἶπον· "οὐὰ, Ξάνθε, καὶ τὸ δείπνόν σου φιλοσοφίας μεστόν· οὐδὲν γὰρ παρὰ σοὶ ἀφιλοπόνητον. εὐθέως γὰρ ἐν ἀρχῇ τοῦ δείπνου αἱ γλώσσαι παρετέθησαν." (52) καὶ μετὰ τὸ πεινᾶν αὐτοὺς δύο ἢ τρία ποτήρια ὁ Ξάνθος λέγει· "Αἴσωπε, δὸς ἡμῖν φαγεῖν." Αἴσωπος ἐκάστῳ πάλιν πρὸς γλώσσαν ὀπτήν καὶ ἀλοπέπερι παρεθήκεν. οἱ σχολαστικοὶ εἶπον· "θεῖως, καθηγητὰ, καλλίστως, μὰ τὰς Μούσας. ἐπεὶ πᾶσα γλώσσα πυρὶ ἠκόνηται, καὶ τὸ κρεῖττον, ὅτι δι' ἀλοπέπερος· τὸ γὰρ ἄλυκόν τῷ δριμυτέρῳ συγκέκραται τῆς γλώσσης ἵνα τὸ εὖστομον καὶ τὸ δάκνον ἐπιδείξῃ." ὁ Ξάνθος πάλιν μετὰ τὸ πεινᾶν αὐτοὺς τὸ τρίτον λέγει· "φέρε ἡμῖν φαγεῖν." Αἴσωπος ἐκάστῳ γλώσσαν ἀρτυτὴν φέρει. οἱ σχολαστικοὶ εἰς ἐνὶ ἔλεγον· "Δημόκριτε, ἐγὼ τὴν γλώσσαν ἐπόνεσα τὰς γλώσσας τρώγων." ἄλλος σχολαστικὸς εἶπεν· "οὐδὲν ἐστὶ φαγεῖν ἕτερον; ὅπου Αἴσωπος πονεῖ, ἐκεῖ οὐδὲν ἀγαθὸν ἐστὶ." οἱ σχολαστικοὶ φαγόντες τὰς ἀρτυτάς γλώσσας χολέρα [ἀσθένεια] ἐκρούσθησαν. ὁ Ξάνθος λέγει· "Αἴσωπε, δὸς ἡμῖν δειπνήσαι ἐκάστῳ λουπάδα." Αἴσωπος γλωσσόζῳμον παρεθήκεν. οἱ σχολαστικοὶ οὐκέτι ἐξέτεινον τὰς χεῖρας, λέγοντες "ἦδε καταστροφὴ ἀπὸ Αἰσώπου· γλώσσαις νενικήμεθα." ὁ Ξάνθος λέγει· "Αἴσωπε, ἔχομεν τι ἕτερον;" Αἴσωπος εἶπεν· "οὐδὲν ἄλλο ἔχομεν." (53) ὁ Ξάνθος λέγει· "οὐδὲν ἕτερον, κατάρτα; οὐκ εἰπὸν σοι ὅτι 'εἴ τι χρησίμων ἐστὶν ἐν τῷ βίῳ, εἴ τι δὲ ἡδύ, τοῦτο ἀγόρασον;" Αἴσωπος λέγει· "χάριν σοι ἔχω, ὅτι ἀνδρῶν φιλολόγων παρόντων μέμφη με. εἰπάς μοι ὅτι 'εἴ τι χρησίμων ἐστὶν ἐν τῷ βίῳ, εἴ τι ἡδύτερον ἢ μείζον, ἀγόρασον.' τί οὖν ἐστὶν ἐν τῷ βίῳ γλώσσης χρησιμώτερον ἢ μείζον; μάθε ὅτι διὰ γλώσσης πᾶσα φιλοσοφία καὶ πᾶσα παιδεία συνέστηκεν. χωρὶς γλώσσης οὐδὲν γίνεται, οὐδὲ δόσις, οὐ λήψις, οὐδὲ ἀγορασμός· ἀλλὰ διὰ γλώσσης πόλεις ἀνορθοῦνται, δόγματα καὶ νόμοι ὀρίζονται. εἰ οὖν διὰ γλώσσης πᾶς <ὁ> βίος συνέστηκεν, γλώσσης οὐδὲν ἐστὶ κρεῖττον." οἱ σχολαστικοὶ εἶπον· "ἢ τὰς Μούσας, καλὰ λέγει. σὺ ἡμαρτες, καθηγητὰ." οἱ σχολαστικοὶ ἀνεχώρησαν. δι' ὅλης τῆς νυκτὸς διαρροαίε ληφθέντες ἐδυσφόρουσαν.



Transitioning then to the rabbinic materials, the following passage should have a familiar ring:

R. Simeon b. Gamaliel said to Tabbai his servant: “Go and buy me good food in the market.” He went and bought him tongue. He said to him: “Go and buy me bad food in the market.” He went and bought him tongue. Said he to him: “What is this? When I told you to get good food you bought me tongue, and when I told you to get bad food you also bought me tongue!” He replied: “Good comes from it and bad comes from it. When the tongue is good there is nothing better, and when it is bad there is nothing worse.” Rabbi made a feast for his disciples and placed before them tender tongues and hard tongues. They began selecting the tender ones, leaving the hard ones alone. Said he to them: “Note what you are doing! As you select the tender and leave the hard, so let your tongues be tender to one another!” Accordingly Moses admonishes Israel by saying: “And if thou sell aught ... ye shall not wrong one another.”

Lev. Rab. 33:1 [trans. Soncino]<sup>37</sup>

Here Leviticus Rabbah appears to offer an adaptation of the passage from *The Life of Aesop* quoted above.<sup>38</sup> The clever slaves, Aesop and Tabbai, teach their masters a lesson by means of the tongue. Besides fable telling, what are today the lesser-known characteristics of Aesop in *The Life* described above and exemplified in this banquet find a very strong resonance with a particular tanna named Bar Kappara.

Bar Kappara (ca. 180–220 CE) was a Jewish Aesop it seems.<sup>39</sup> According to tradition, he was a student of Judah the Patriarch with whom he had a famous falling out. Bar Kappara was born in Caesarea, where he would later establish his own academy as a rival school to that of his master. Several stories are

37 אָמַר רַבִּי שְׁמַעוֹן בֶּן גַּמְלִיאֵל לְטַבִּי עַבְדִּי פּוֹק זְבִין לִי צִדּוֹ טָבָא מִן שׁוּקָא נֶפֶק זְבִין לִיה לֶשֶׁן, אָמַר לִיה פּוֹק זְבִין לִי צִדּוֹ בִּישָׂא מִן שׁוּקָא נֶפֶק זְבִין לִיה לֶשֶׁן. אָמַר לִיה מַהוּ דִּין דְּכַד אָנָּא אָמַר לְךָ צִדּוֹ טָבָא אֲתָּ זְבִין לִי לֶשֶׁן וְכַד אָנָּא אָמַר לְךָ צִדּוֹ בִּישָׂא אֲתָּ זְבִין לִי לֶשֶׁן. אָמַר לִיה מִינָּה טְבָתָא וּמִינָּה בִּישָׂתָא כִּד הוּוּ טַב לִית טְבָה מְנִיה וְכַד בִּיש לִית בִּיש מְנִיה. רַבִּי עֲשֵׂה סְעוּדָה לְתַלְמִידֵיךָ הֵבִיא לְפָנֶיהֶם לְשׁוֹנוֹת רַבִּים וּלְשׁוֹנוֹת קָשִׁים הִתְחִילוּ בּוֹרְרִין בְּרַבִּים וּמְנִיחִין הַקָּשִׁים אָמַר לְהֶם דְּעוּ מַה אַתֶּם עוֹשִׂין כְּשֶׁם שְׂאֲתֶם בּוֹרְרִין אֶת הַרְבִּין וּמְנִיחִין אֶת הַקָּשִׁים כִּד יְהִי לְשׁוֹנְכֶם רַד אֱלוֹ לְאֱלוֹ לְפִיכֶד מִשָּׂה מְזַהֵר אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל וְכִי תִמְכְּרוּ מִמְכָּר.

38 It is unlikely that the Aesopic and rabbinic episodes are independent. The rabbinic scene is prompted by a reference to a basket of figs that recalls a famous opening scene from *Vit. Aes.* 2–3.

39 To be clear, I am discussing his characterization in rabbinic narratives and do not wish to argue for anything specific about the historical figures that stand behind them.

transmitted about him that relate Bar Kappara's Aesopic brand of comic wisdom, such as the episodes in b. Ned. 50–51:

On the day when Rabbi (Judah the Patriarch) would laugh, calamity<sup>40</sup> would befall the world.<sup>41</sup> He said to bar Kappara, “Don't make me laugh and I'll give you forty measures of wheat.” Bar Kappara replied, “Master will see that any measure I want I will take.” He took a large palm basket, covered it with pitch,<sup>42</sup> flipped it upside down and put it on his head. He came out and said, “Master, give me forty measures of wheat that you owe me!” Rabbi (Judah the Patriarch) laughed and said to him, “I warned you, don't make me laugh!” Bar Kappara said, “I'm only taking from you the wheat you owe me.”

b. Ned. 50b–51a [trans. Soncino, adapted]<sup>43</sup>

In his first appearance in this tractate, we learn immediately of Bar Kappara's reputation for causing laughter. Like Xanthus, Judah the Patriarch is the founder of a school, takes himself too seriously, and is the perfect orthodox foil for the antics of a gadfly like Bar Kappara. Much like Aesop, Bar Kappara wreaks havoc and finds an ingenious way to win the battle of wits, exposing the pretensions of his master—the world did not end. Bar Kappara proves that the fate of the world does not depend on Judah the Patriarch. While humour in *The Life of Aesop* is often so ribald and over the top that it is hardly disputable, here it is perhaps more subtle but made explicit through the terminology. In this episode with Bar Kappara, the repetition of “laughter” provides the direct signal that the episode is intended to be comic. The scene thus creates a blend of wisdom and comedy that functions both at the narrative level and at the reader-level to contest the notion that austerity is to be equated with wisdom.

40 פורענותא from the Latin *perniciosus*.

41 The tradition refers to the belief that Judah the Patriarch's sufferings would atone for the sins of the Jewish people; this story plays with the inverse idea that his pleasure would destroy it.

42 Aside from the comedic appearance, there are a number of possible puns with the name Kappara, כפרא: with כופרא, “pitch,” also possibly with כפר as a verb, “wipe out,” “atone,” or כפרה the noun form, i.e., Bar Kappara can fill the basket with atonement/himself whenever he wants.

43 יומא דמחניד ביה רבי אתיא פורענותא לעלמא. אמר ליה לבר קפרא: לא תבדיחון ויהיבנא לך ארבעין גרין חיטי. אמר ליה: ליחזי מר דכל גריןא דבעינא שקילנא. שקל דיקולא רבה חפיה כופרא וסחפיה על רישיה ואזל ואמר ליה: ליכיל לי מר ארבעין גרין חיטי דרשינא בך. אחוד רבי. אמר ליה: לא אזהרתך דלא תבדיחון אמר ליה: חיטי דרשינא קא נסיבנא.

In addition to these antics, we find that Bar Kappara also loves to ruin his master's banquets. He accomplishes this by using techniques familiar from *The Life*, including plays on words and riddles:

Bar Kappara once said to Rabbi Judah the Patriarch's daughter: "Tomorrow I will drink wine to your father's dancing and your mother's croaking."<sup>44</sup> Ben Eleasha, Judah the Patriarch's son-in-law, was a very wealthy man. Judah the Patriarch invited ben Eleasha to the wedding of his son, Rabbi Simeon ben Rabbi. At the wedding Bar Kappara said to Judah the Patriarch, "What is meant by 'to'ebah' (תועבה cf. Lev 18:22)<sup>45</sup>?" Now, every explanation offered by Judah the Patriarch was refuted by Bar Kappara, so Judah the Patriarch said to him, "Explain it yourself." He replied, "Let your wife come and fill me a cup of wine." She came and did so, upon which he said to Judah the Patriarch, "Get up and dance for me so that I may tell you." This is what the Merciful One says, "to'ebah' means to'eh attah bah (תועה אתה בה, "you are straying after it")."<sup>46</sup> At his second cup, Bar Kappara asked Judah the Patriarch, "What is meant by tebel (תבל cf. Lev 18:23)<sup>47</sup>?" He answered as before (refuted each time by Bar Kappara). Bar Kappara said, "Perform for me, so that I may tell you." He did so and Bar Kappara said, "'tbel hu' means, 'teblin yesh bah (תבלין יש בה, "is there perfume in it?")"<sup>48</sup> Is this different such that going into it is better than anything else?" Then Judah the Patriarch said, "And what is zimmah (זימה cf. Lev 18:17)?"<sup>49</sup> Bar Kappara told him, "Do as before," and when he did, Bar Kappara said, "'zimmah' means 'zo mah hi (זו מה היא, "to him

44 The Soncino and other translations render the mother's act as "singing," though, according to Jastrow, קירקני here is nothing less than the croaking of a frog, a pun on קירקנות, "clappers" mentioned in a wedding ceremony and almost certainly intended as an insult.

45 Generally translated "abomination," here it refers to sexual intercourse between men.

46 תועה אתה בה, straying after it, but to what "it" refers is unclear. It can be an "atypical mate," or "male homosexual intercourse." Whether the second person singular address is simply demanded by Bar Kappara's explanation or is intended to insinuate something about Judah the Patriarch's sexual preferences is likewise unclear. The scandal of the latter seems to disincline interpreters from this option.

47 Generally translated something like "abominable confusion," referring to bestiality between an animal and a woman.

48 Again, there are a couple interpretive options for the laconic phrase, one vulgar and the other very vulgar. Specifically, the ambiguity concerns to what "in it" refers; namely, is there spice/perfume, i.e., attractiveness in the act of sex with the animal, or is there perfume inside the animal that makes intercourse with it appealing.

49 Usually translated "wickedness" or "depravity." The verse concerns sleeping with both a woman and her daughter or granddaughter.

what is she?")<sup>50</sup> Ben Eleasha could not endure anymore, so he and his wife left.

b. Ned. 51a [trans. Soncino, adapted]<sup>51</sup>

In the span of this short story, Bar Kappara accomplishes what Aesop required several banquets to do. Bar Kappara humiliates Rabbi's wife and his master by convincing him to dance on command at his son's wedding, presumably to the embarrassment of the other guests as well. The blush-inducing subject-matter of the riddles—homosexual intercourse, bestiality, and incest—is unlikely to be coincidental. These topics are both wildly inappropriate for a solemn occasion but especially effective topics to lampoon a wedding. In the sexual impropriety, there is a certain resemblance to one of Aesop's ruined banquets, which involved him exposing the master's wife's backside to the guests (*Vit. Aes.* 77a [W recension]). There is perhaps another jab at the pedantry of his fellow rabbis via Judah the Patriarch: Rabbi's obsession with resolving biblical minutia makes him oblivious that he is making a fool of himself, embarrassing the other guests by his actions, and discussing inappropriate subject-matter for a wedding. The story concludes with Judah the Patriarch's son-in-law and wife leaving the wedding in embarrassment. We are left to imagine how the bride and groom felt. Like Aesop, Bar Kappara is depicted outwitting the master using word games, demonstrating his superior wisdom by solving problems the master cannot, and showing the reliance of the master on his social inferior. By embarrassing their masters, they both depict a satisfying triumph of the lowly over the elite and communicate that obsession with wisdom can make one a fool.

That Bar Kappara is part of this literary typology of the fable teller associated with Aesop finds added confirmation by a second ruined banquet that ties this cunning wisdom together with fable telling. In this banquet, the narrative turns on both Aesopic behaviour and the telling of fables:

<sup>50</sup> That is, "is she his wife or his daughter?"

<sup>51</sup> אָמַר לֵה בַר קַפְרָא לְבַרְתִּיהָ דְרַבִּי: לְמַחַר שְׁתִּינָא חֲמַרָא בְרִיקוּדָא דְבַרְקוּדָא וּבְקִירְקִנִי דְאַמְרָא. בְּן אֲלַעְשָׁה חֲתֻנְיָה דְרַבִּי הוּא וְעִשִׂיר גְּדוּל הוּא. אֲזַמְנִיָּה לְבִי הִילּוּלָא דְרַבִּי שְׁמַעוֹן בְּרַבִּי אָמַר לֵיהָ בַר קַפְרָא לְרַבִּי: מַאי תוּעֵבָה כָּל דְאַמַּר לֵיהָ רַבִּי דְהִכִּין הוּא תוּעֵבָה פְּרָכָה בַר קַפְרָא. אָמַר לֵיהָ: פְּרִשְׂיָה אֲתָּ. אָמַר לֵיהָ: תִּיתִי דְבִיתְכִי תִירְמִי לִי נְטִילָא. אֲתָת רַמְיָא לֵיהָ. אָמַר לֵיהָ לְרַבִּי: קוּם רְקוּד לִי דְאִמַּר לְךָ: הֲכִי אָמַר רַחֲמֵנָא: תוּעֵבָה תוּעָה אֲתָה בְּהָ. לְכַסָּא אַחְרֵינָא אָמַר לֵיהָ: מַאי תִבֵּל אָמַר לֵיהָ בִּי עַנְיֵינָא קַדְמָאָה. אָמַר לֵיהָ: עֵיבִיד לִי דְאִוְמַר לְךָ. עֵבִיד. אָמַר לֵיהָ: תִבֵּל הוּא תִבֵּלִין יֵשׁ בְּהָ. מִי שְׁנֵינָא הָדָא בִּיאָה מִן כּוּלְהוֹן בִּיאוֹת. אָמַר לֵיהָ: וּמַאי זִמְּהָ. אָמַר לֵיהָ: עֵיבִיד בִּי עַנְיֵינָא קַדְמָאָה. עֵבִיד וְאָמַר לֵיהָ: זוּ מָה הִיא. לֹא יִכִּיל בְּן אֲלַעְשָׁה לְמִיסְבֵּל, קָם וּנְפַק הוּא וְאִינְתֵיהָ מִתְּמָן.

Rabbi (Judah the Patriarch) made a wedding feast for his son. He invited the rabbis, but forgot to extend an invitation to Bar Kappara. The latter went and wrote above the door [of the banquet hall] “After all your rejoicing is death, so what is the use of rejoicing?” Rabbi inquired, “Who has done this to us?” They said, “It was Bar Kappara whom you forgot to invite. He was concerned about himself.” He (Judah the Patriarch) thereupon arranged another banquet to which he invited all the rabbis including Bar Kappara. At every course which was placed before them Bar Kappara related three hundred fox fables,<sup>52</sup> which were so much enjoyed by the guests that they let the food become cold and did not taste it. Rabbi asked his waiters, “Why do our courses go in and out without the guests partaking of them?” They answered, “Because of an old man who sits there, and when a course is brought in he relates three hundred fox fables; and on that account the food becomes cold and they eat none of it.” Rabbi went up to him and said, “Why do you act in this manner? Let the guests eat!” He replied, “So that you should not think that I came for your dinner but because you did not invite me with my colleagues. Did not Solomon declare what profit hath a man of all his labor seeing that one generation passeth away and another generation cometh!”

Eccl. Rab. 1:3 [trans. Soncino]<sup>53</sup>

רבי עשה סעודת משתה בנו קרא רבי לכל רבגו ואינשי למקרי בר קפרא, אול וכתב על תרעא אחר כל שמחתך מות ומה יתרון לשמחתך. אמר מאן עבד לן הדא אמרו בר קפרא דאנשיתון למיקרי ליה לגרמיה חפיה הוא. אול ועבד אריסטון אוחרן וקרא לכל רבגו וקרא ליה לבר קפרא ועל כל תבשיל ותבשיל דהוה מניח קדמיהון הוה אמר עליה תלת מאה מתליון על הדין תעלה והוה עריב להון והות תבשילא צנין ולא טעמין ליה. והוה רבי אמר למשומשגוהי למה תבשיליון עולין ונפקין ולא טעמין מידי אמרין ליה בגין חד סב דיתב תמן וכיון דתבשילא עליל הוא אמר תלת מאה מתליון בהדיו תעלה, בגין כן תבשילא צנין ולא טעמין מידי סליק לגביה אמר ליה למה את עביד כן שביק אריסטון דיכלין. אמר לו לא תהא סבור דבגין מגיסך אתית אלא בגין דלא צווחת ליה עם חברי לא כן אמר שלמה: מה יתרון לאדם וגו' מאחר שדור הולך ודור בא.

52 The Aramaic expression here (תלת מאון דמתליון על הדין תעלה) is a rather roundabout way of saying the formulaic expression found elsewhere of simply “fox fables” (משלי) (שועלים).

53 This is a longer version of a much-abbreviated description of these events that takes place immediately before the episode of the tar drenched basked. A parallel version of this story is found in Lev. Rab. 28:2 ליה דאנשיתון למיקרי ליה בר קפרא דאנשיתון למיקרי ליה לגרמיה חפיה הוא. אול ועבד אריסטון אוחרן וקרא לכל רבגו וקרא ליה לבר קפרא ועל כל

Like the wedding feast before, Bar Kappara succeeds at sabotaging his master's ambitions through ingenuity. With the proverbial cold dishes, Bar Kappara gets his revenge against Judah the Patriarch for neglecting to invite him. In addition to the characteristically Aesopic banquet scenes, this episode firmly establishes Bar Kappara's ties to the Aesopic tradition in his ability to captivate an audience with hundreds of fox fables. If there was any doubt about how to render *mashal* in this case, the connection to the fox, the emblematic fable animal of the Aesopic tradition, ties the Jewish and Aesopic fables together.<sup>54</sup>

#### 4 Conclusion

Scholars of the Bible and rabbinic literature are generally unacquainted with the ancient fable materials and the scholarship on them. This is unsurprising given that professional classicists are rarely acquainted with these materials either. Even a cursory exploration such as this, shows that bringing the ancient fable materials into the scholarly discourse around “parables” and rabbinic *meshalim* carries with it the potential to reorient how we think about these texts.

I began with a very brief introduction to some fable materials and then surveyed the terminological quagmire that is the “parable,” particularly with respect to the rabbinic *mashal*. I gave a thumbnail sketch of how the ancient fable clarifies these major conundrums and fills in the many gaps in our knowledge that have left us to speculate until now. I pointed to the (re)emerging view that “narrative parables” are to be identified with “fables.” Given that the “parable” concept is derived from the Synoptic Gospels, has essentially no external evidence to support it as a discrete ancient genre, and is imbued with Christian theology, there is little to recommend using the term “parable” in discussions of rabbinic *meshalim*. The genre of brief fictitious narratives told in the past tense about the actions of certain characters, conveying some truth external to the story that is regularly summed up in a *nimshal* or *epimythium*—is the fable. I suggest that if one does not wish simply to use “*mashal*” when writing

תבשיל ותבשיל דהוה מניח קדמיהון הוה אמר עליה תלת מאה מתליו על הדיו תעלה והוה עריב להון והוה תבשילא צנין ולא טעמין ליה. והוה רבי אמר למשומשגוהי למה תבשיליגון עלליו ונפקיון ולא טעמין מידי אמרין ליה בגין חד סב דיתבי תמן וכיון דתבשילא עליל הוא אמר תלת מאה מתליו בהדיו תעלה בגין כן תבשילא צנין ולא טעמין מידי סליק לגביה אמר ליה למה את עביד כן שביק אריסטון דיקליון. אמר לו לא תהא סבור דבגין מגיסד אתית אלא בגין דלא צווחת לי עם חברי לא כן אמר שלמה: מה יתרון לאדם וגו' מאחר שדור הולך ודור בא.

54 The earliest visual depiction of Aesop appears on “The Aesop Cup.” It shows a fox conversing with (or teaching) Aesop and is dated between 460–430 BCE. For further details and an image, see Strong, *The Fables of Jesus*, 76.

in English, the literarily appropriate and theologically less problematic term to use is “fable.”

I then pointed to some contexts in which fables were widely used that bear a clear resemblance to the rabbinic *mashal*: rhetoric, especially legal argumentation, and education. The use of the *mashal* for these purposes, I suggest, is perfectly in keeping with the well-established uses of the fable from which the rabbis would have drawn. Although beyond the scope of a short paper, this concinnous use of *mashal* and fable in these elite discourses merits further study. Finally, I identified the presence of the other stream of fable tradition in rabbinic literature as well: the low-wisdom Aesopic character persona receding in rabbinic narratives. Here, I showed that the lore of the folk fable teller served as a paradigm for certain rabbinic spinners of *meshalim*, including apparent direct borrowings in narratives about Bar Kappara.

Far from a genre springing suddenly from a Jewish or Christian context, a new perspective on these Jewish fables sees them within the thriving fable-telling culture going on around them in the early centuries of the Common Era. This perspective provides a new way to read early Christian and Jewish fables together as part of a broader Mediterranean and Near Eastern phenomenon. Bringing rabbinic materials into the discussion of the ancient fable also provides much new material for fable scholarship, which has essentially ignored rabbinic materials. As many are encountering this genre for the first time, the ancient fable offers many opportunities for collaboration between scholars of Classics, the New Testament, and Rabbinics.

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**PART 2**

*Parables and Application*





## Parables between Folk and Elite

*Tal Ilan*

In this article, I will discuss questions of literacy and orality in the transmission of parables to, from, and within rabbinic literature. I will ask whether parables in rabbinic literature are manifestations of a folk tradition, or rather of a rabbinic bookish study-house milieu. In my investigation, I follow Yonah Fraenkel, who has already offered a method of distinguishing between folk-traditional and academically crafted parables, and have chosen a variety of parables with which to critique his method. Since Fraenkel argued that when rabbinic literature borrows from external cultures in the creation of parables, these are not examples of elite culture, but rather of folklore, and since I find that his method does not always work, I demonstrate my critique by bringing only examples of parables that have parallels in the ancient Greek fables of Aesop. In the first example, about the lean and hungry fox, I show how a story we know from Aesop, from Milne's *Winnie the Pooh*, and from rabbinic literature, indeed confirms Fraenkel's claim. My second example is from the Aesopic fable about the lion and the boar. I show how this fable, when told by the rabbis, actually contradicts Fraenkel's thesis; it answers all the criteria he requires for a parable to be a house-of-study composition. I then show how this fable was nevertheless understood by the Babylonian editors as a product of folk literature; I also briefly discuss the Babylonian approach to folk literature in general.

I begin and end, however, with two examples of how I see folk traditions transmitted in rabbinic literature and elsewhere. In the beginning, I present not a parable but a joke, found both in rabbinic literature and in modern secular Hebrew literature, and argue that the way this joke was transmitted is a model for thinking about the transmission of parables. I end with a parable, but with one that does not have an Aesopic parallel. The parallel I use is from another well-known folk-tradition (although perhaps from not such ancient times). This is another example of a clearly folkloristic tradition that fits Fraenkel's model of an elite parable.

## 1 A Joke

As promised, I shall begin with a joke. I have discussed this joke and the comments on it before,<sup>1</sup> but it will suit the purpose of this article perfectly. I read this joke in my teens in a Hebrew novel by the Israeli author Puchu (פּוּחֻ), whose books are a well-balanced mix of a serious plot with humorous, even hilarious moments. In this book, which is the third in a trilogy about a group of Israeli youths before, during, and after the War of Independence (1948) and goes by the name *Yosale, How did it Happen?* (יּוֹסָלָה אֵיךְ זֶה קָרָה?), we read the following episode:

The forest hill was his [Yosale's] domain. Every morning he came there with three other [*kibbutz*] members, and together they would work the earth of the forest ... In order to sunbathe, the foresters would remove their clothes and work in underwear. Yosale, for reasons of perfection and cleanliness, preferred to remove this piece of clothing too and did not seem to care that Naama, the shepherdess, would often pass by with the herd ... Things came to such a head that Naama stood up in the meeting and proclaimed: "Either Yosale wears underwear or I refuse to take the herd out." *Yosale sat at that meeting ... and nodded his head to acknowledge acceptance (of this request)*. On the following day he continued to work as he had before. [People said to him]: "Yosale, put on something." "What for?" [he asked]. "*Haven't we discussed this in the meeting and you agreed?*" [*they said to him. To this he responded:*] "*That is correct. In the meeting I agreed and there I will wear something.*"<sup>2</sup>

I remembered this text all these years because it was very funny. We tend to remember funny things. A scientific approach explains this as a result of some chemical substance that is emitted into our blood every time we laugh, and influences memory.<sup>3</sup> The joke came back to me in an encounter with a talmudic text, found in the Babylonian Talmud:

1 Tal Ilan, "The Joke in Rabbinic Literature: Home-born or Diaspora Humor?" in *Humor in Arabic Culture*, ed. Georges Tamer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), 64–67.

2 Puchu (Israel Wiessler), *Yosale, How did it Happen?* (Ramat-Gan: Masada, 1975), 56. Translation and emphasis are mine.

3 On short-term memory, see, e.g., "Episode 5: Laughter and Memory. How Laughter Can Improve Your Short-Term Memory," <https://lluh.org/patients-visitors/health-wellness/live-it/online-health-show/episode-5-laughter-and-memory>. On long-term memory, see, e.g., Sarah Henderson, "Laughter and Learning: Humor Boosts Retention," *Edutopia*, 31 March 2015, <https://www.edutopia.org/blog/laughter-learning-humor-boosts-retention-sarah-henderson>.

Rabbi Yohanan had *safдина*. He went to a matron to be healed. She healed him on Thursday and Friday. He said to her: What about tomorrow (i.e., Shabbat)? She said to him: It is unnecessary. And if it were to become necessary? [he asked]. She said to him: Swear to me that you will not tell. He swore to her, to the God of Israel, he will not tell. The next day he expounded [her secret] in the study session in the study house. But had he not sworn to her that he will not tell? He swore that to the God of Israel he will not tell. To the people of Israel, however, he will tell.

b. Avod. Zar. 28a

רבי יוחנן חש בצפדינא. אזל לגבה דההיא מטרוניתא. עבדה חמשא ומעלי שבתא. א"ל: למחר מאי? אמרה ליה: לא צריכת. אי צריכנא מאי? אמרה: אשתבע לי דלא מגלית. אישתבע לה לאלהא ישראל לא מגלינא. גלייה ליה למחר נפק דרשה בפירקא. והא אישתבע לה. לאלהא דישראל לא מגלינא אבל לעמיה ישראל מגלינא.

This story is not a Babylonian invention. It has a parallel in the Jerusalem Talmud and there it does not have a happy end. It ends with the woman finding out that her secret had been divulged and committing suicide.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the joke, presented at the end of the Babylonian version of the story, is actually a Babylonian addition, and could even be understood as comic relief.

For the purpose of our discussion here, it is important to note that one of the two texts I have presented here is a rabbinic composition, put together in the religious rabbinic academies of Babylonia. The other is a new, secular Zionist composition. Yet I think there is no doubt that they are telling the same joke. In both, someone is promising something to somebody in a certain context, and when he is asked why he does not fulfil his promise, he points to the different context in which he is not fulfilling it. Yosale had only promised not to go about naked in the general kibbutz assembly. Elsewhere he continues

4 Previously I had written about this story: "Here we have a thoroughly moral person, albeit an outsider—a doctor and a woman—who compromises her professional career in order to help someone, and on the other side we have the ultimate insider of rabbinic literature—the rabbi—behaving immorally. Furthermore, the moral person is punished for her moral behavior while the immoral rabbi comes out of the story unscathed. It is this moral dilemma that makes this story so powerful. No further comment is required in order to draw conclusions about the rights and wrongs of the story"; see Tal Ilan, "Stolen Water is Sweet': Women and their Stories between Bavli and Yerushalmi," in *The Talmud Yerushalmi and Graeco-Roman Culture*, vol. 3, ed. Peter Schäfer, TSAJ 93 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 193.

to walk about exposed. Rabbi Yohanan had only promised not to divulge the physician's secret to the God of Israel. He tells all its details to everybody else.

Is there a direct relationship between these two jokes? Or, in other words, is the joke in the Babylonian Talmud a source for Puchu's joke? There are several possible answers to this question. One is that Puchu, a "nice Jewish boy," may have studied some time in a *yeshiveh*. This is the wrong answer. He was born in Tel Aviv in 1930 and was raised in a secular Zionist-socialist environment. He only attended secular schools. Or perhaps he studied Jewish Studies at university? This too is the wrong answer. At university, he studied agriculture.<sup>5</sup> But then, of course, he may have had teachers who attended *yeshivot* or friends who knew some Talmud from home or wherever. If this is the case, we observe here a rabbinic tradition that has become part of folk tradition and is transported orally, no longer through the regular channels of learning. Since we cannot, however, determine whether Puchu heard this joke from some learned *yeshiveh-bocher* or else received it through some other channel, we cannot even assume that the source of the joke he heard and transmitted on comes from the Babylonian Talmud. It could have been transmitted orally, as a joke, over all these generations. We cannot even know whether the Babylonian rabbis, who told the same joke, were themselves not transmitting a folkloristic tradition they had heard orally somewhere.

## 2 Parables and Aesopic Fables

The previous observations might help us assess the relation between fables and parables. It is common knowledge that some of the parables told in rabbinic literature are also known as fables from elsewhere in the ancient world, especially the fables of Aesop.<sup>6</sup> The most famous is the fable of the Lion and the Egyptian Crane—or, as it is told in the Fables of Aesop, The Wolf and the Stork:

5 Wikipedia. "Puchu," <https://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D7%A4%D7%95%D7%A6%27%D7%95> (Hebrew).

6 I refer specifically to Aesop's fables; see, e.g., Yair Zakovich, "The Affinities between Some Biblical and Aesopic Fables," *Yeda-Am* 20 (1980): 3–9 (Hebrew); Haim Schwarzbaum, "Aesopic Fables in Talmudic Midrashim Literature," *Yeda-Am* 8 (1962): 54–56 (Hebrew). For a full catalogue, see also Shama Friedman, "The Talmudic Proverb in Its Cultural Setting," *JSIJ* 2 (2003): 73–82 (Hebrew).

A lion swallowed his kill and a bone stuck in his throat. He said: Whoever comes and takes it out will be rewarded. An Egyptian crane, whose beak is long, came, stuck his beak in and took it out. He said to him: Give me my reward. He said to him: Go and show off that you went into the mouth of the lion in peace and that you came out in peace.

Gen. Rab. 64:10<sup>7</sup>

אריה טרף טרף ועמד עצם בגרונו. אמר: כל דאתי מפק ליה, אנא יהיב ליה אגריה. אתא הדין קורה מצרייה דמקוריה אריך ויהיב מקורה ואפקיה. אמר ליה: הב לי אגרי. אמר ליה: אזיל תהוי מגלג ואמר דעלת לפור מיה דאריא בשלם ונפקת בשלם.

This story is told by the rabbis in Genesis Rabbah after the wicked kingdom (i.e., Rome) had promised to rebuild the temple and then went back on its word. When the Jews wished to rebel, Rabbi Yehoshua told them this fable, in order to quell their rebellious zeal. Its purpose was to explain why just managing to survive under Roman rule is reward enough. One should not expect anything more. Obviously in Genesis Rabbah, this fable is a case of rabbinic borrowing from the surrounding culture. What kind of borrowing was it? Did the bookish rabbis engage in reading non-Jewish literature, including the fables of Aesop, or did they hear this story in the marketplace and incorporate it into their own literary production? Are Aesop's tales in general folk or elite literature? This is the question that will be the focus of this article for all the examples I present.

## 2.1 *Yonah Fraenkel*

One of the scholars who devoted much space to the question of what is folkish and what is elitist about the parables of the rabbis is Yonah Fraenkel.<sup>8</sup> In his influential studies, he concluded that parables<sup>9</sup> were of course used in folk traditions and oral transmission, and that, obviously, like the case of the lion and the Egyptian crane just cited,<sup>10</sup> rabbinic literature preserved some of them. However, he also argued that the rabbis themselves invented parables, and that the parables they invented were distinctly different in literary form.

7 Unless noted otherwise, all translations are my own. On this parable, see, e.g., Gedaliah Alon, *The Jews in their Land in the Talmudic Age (70–640 CE)* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1984), 435–441.

8 See on a large scale Yonah Fraenkel, *Darkhei ha-aggadah vehamidrash*, 2 vols. (Givatayim: Yad Latalmud, 1991), 1:326–337. (Hebrew).

9 In Hebrew the word for “parable” and “fable” is the same (משל).

10 On this story, see Yonah Fraenkel, “The Parable,” in *Midrash and Aggadah*, 3 vols. (Tel Aviv: The Open University of Israel, 1996), 2:402–408.



He claimed that the rabbinic parable has one purpose only: to explain a specific religious problem and simplify it. Every component in the story has an exact equivalent in the religious conundrum presented. The example he offered to demonstrate such a rabbinic parable was taken from Mishnah Sukkah. In this *mashal*, the rabbis are concerned about rain during the festival of Sukkot, when Jews reside in booths and are exposed to the elements. In the Land of Israel, in September, this is usually no problem, but if it rains this is understood as God's displeasure. The rabbis express this with the following parable:

To what can this be likened? To a slave      משלו משל למה הדבר דומה? לעבד שביא  
 who comes to pour a glass [of wine?]      למזוג כוס לרבו ושפך לו קיתון על פניו.  
 to this master and the latter pours  
 sewage [water] in his face.

m. Sukkah 2:9<sup>11</sup>

Fraenkel explains that every single element in this short parable has an exact equivalent in the problematic situation of rain in Sukkot. The slave is the Israelite, whose master is God. Following the interpretation of this parable in the Bavli (b. Sukkah 27a), Fraenkel explains the cup he pours for his master as the Sukkah he has built as commanded. The filthy water he gets in his face is the rain that destroys the festival. Rain comes from God. The water in his face comes from the master. Fraenkel calls this sort of parable, in which every element has an exact equivalent, "a literary parable."<sup>12</sup>

Fraenkel compared this parable to the fable of the Lion and the Egyptian Crane, which is obviously not a rabbinic composition, and called this form of parable "a rhetorical fable." He argued that in this case not every element in the fable fits the situation it is supposed to describe in life. The lion is, of course, wicked Rome, and the message in the end is that, under the strong and wicked, one should be pleased just to survive, and one should not expect any reward like the (re-)building of the temple. All these are pertinent to the situation described, but the bone stuck in the lion's throat and the assistance he receives from the Egyptian crane are absent from the real situation the fable comes to represent. These, according to Fraenkel, are the rhetorical elements of this parable.<sup>13</sup>

11 Translations based on Chanoch Albeck, *Shisha Sidrei Mishna. Seder Mo'ed* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1952), 265 (Hebrew, with adaptation).

12 Fraenkel, *Darkhei ha-aggadah*, 409–411.

13 Fraenkel, *Darkhei ha-aggadah*, 411.

Obviously, according to Fraenkel, “rhetorical parables” belong to a big pool of folk literature that can be applied to different ensuing situations, while “literary parables” are invented for the specific situation they describe. The former is a folkish composition; the latter, one of the elite. It is no wonder, then, that the “literary parable” on the Sukkah is found in the Mishnah. There is no other composition in rabbinic literature that is less folkish. The term *meshal*, implying parable, appears in it only twice: here in m. Sukkah 2:9, and in m. Nid. 2:5, which I will address next. Some parables without this specific terminology are also present among its chapters (e.g., m. Shab. 13:7; m. Avot 4:16; 20; and perhaps also m. Nid. 9:5), but they are few and far between (and I will not discuss them here).

However, if Fraenkel was absolutely correct, we could expect the other *meshal* in the Mishnah to also be a literary one, in that it demonstrates a religious conundrum with the help of a simplifying picture or event. This is not the case. The second *meshal* in the Mishnah has a completely different purpose:

The sages likened (the woman's uterus) to a room, a corridor, and an upper-chamber. If there is blood in the room, it is impure. If in the corridor—there is doubt, because it may derive from the source.

משל משלו חכמים באשה: החדר והפרוזדור והעלייה. דם החדר טמא נמצא בפרוזדור ספקו טמא לפי שחזקתו מן המקור.

m. Nid. 2:5<sup>14</sup>

The *meshal* is used here as a euphemism. Like today, the use of certain words to describe sex and sexual organs embarrasses the speaker, who prefers to use images from elsewhere instead. Would Fraenkel argue that this *meshal* is scholarly since there is an exact correspondence between all of its components and the parable, even though there is no religious message contained in it? Or would he, for example, suggest that this is not really a parable at all, because nothing happens in it, and that it is merely a metaphor? The rabbis, in any case, were not interested in these modern literary-scholarly distinctions. For the editor of the Mishnah, both were *meshalim*. Thus, we should consider other possible distinctions.

14 Translation based on Albeck, *Seder Toharot*, 383. On this *meshal*, see Charlotte E. Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 48–56; Cynthia M. Baker, *Rebuilding the House of Israel: Architectures of Gender in Ancient Israel* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 52–53.

## 2.2 *Eli Yassif*

Another definition of folk parables is found in an article by Eli Yassif, in which he persistently argues that one way of identifying a folk composition in rabbinic literature is to discover a parallel for it in non-Jewish literature of the time.<sup>15</sup> When discussing parables, Yassif concentrates on Aesop's fables and states:

The connection between Aesop's fables and the literature of the ancient East is a familiar and, as yet, unresolved question, but more pertinent to our discussion is the allusion to these tales in rabbinic literature ... In these texts the connection between the Aesopian fable and rabbinic proverb cannot be attributed to coincidence.<sup>16</sup>

In other words, we can only truly identify a folk *meshal*, if we have a parallel for it outside the rabbinic corpus. I bring here two examples, which Yassif did not discuss in his article. My purpose is to demonstrate (like he did) how the fable is transformed into a parable by the rabbis. I also want to ask whether Fraenkel's a priori argument that Aesopic fables are rhetorical in nature because they were not created in a rabbinic environment can be substantiated through these examples.

## 2.3 *The Lean Fox*

For my first example, I refer to Alan A. Milne's classic *Winnie the Pooh*. In the second story of his first book, Milne tells of Pooh's visit to Rabbit's house, and of him getting stuck in the doorway after eating too greedily and having to fast in order to get out.<sup>17</sup> Milne must have taken the theme for this story from the Aesopic fable about a lean and hungry fox who finds food left by shepherds in the hollow of a tree, but after devouring it is unable to get out again because he has eaten so much. Another fox hears its cries of distress and advises him that he will have to remain there until he becomes as thin as before. This is the same story we find in *Winnie the Pooh*.

We can repeat the exercise we performed on Puchu here. Did Milne wittingly take an Aesopic fable and integrate it into his story? We cannot know. He did study in Cambridge, but not classics. He graduated in mathematics.<sup>18</sup> Or

15 Eli Yassif, "Folk Literature in Late Antiquity," in *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, vol. 4, *The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period*, ed. Steven T. Katz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 721–748.

16 Yassif, "Folk Literature," 736, 738.

17 There are countless editions of this classic. I have retrieved it in the National Library in Jerusalem, from Alan A. Milne, *Winnie the Pooh*, 214th ed. (New York: Dutton, 1958), 20–31.

18 "A.A. Milne," [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A.\\_A.\\_Milne](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A._A._Milne).

was the story of the lean fox (or teddy-bear, or any other animal) known to him from his surroundings, from his childhood,<sup>19</sup> from the fact that Aesop's fables were folk literature, even before they became part of a classics curriculum? If this is the argument, it is of course no wonder that the same "rhetorical parable"—to use Fraenkel's term—also found its way into a rabbinic midrash. In Qoheleth Rabbah, on the verse "As he came out of his mother's womb naked, so he will leave as he came" (Qoh 5:14), the following story is told:

Genivah said: [This is] like a fox who found a vineyard fenced on all sides. There was one gash in it, through which he tried to enter but could not. What did he do? He fasted for three days until he became thin and weak, and he entered through the gash. And he ate and grew fat. He wanted to go out and could not pass at all. He fasted again for three other days until he became thin and weak and returned to his original shape, and exited.

Qoh. Rab. 5:14

גניבא אמר: לשועל שמצא כרם והיה מסוייג מכל פנותיו. והיה שם נקב אחד ובקש להכנס בו ולא הוה יכיל. מה עבד? צם תלת יומין עד דכחיש ותשש ועאל בהדא נקובא ואכל ושמן. בעא למיפק ולא יכיל מעיבר כלום. חזר וצאים תלת יומין אוחרנין עד דכחיש ותשש וחזר היך מה דהוה ונפק.

In answer to Fraenkel's question as to whether this is a literary or rhetorical parable, I think we can safely say that it is the latter.<sup>20</sup> The parable demonstrates a verse claiming that a person exits this world just as he entered it: naked. The fit with the parable of the fox is not perfect, neither with the verse nor with the original Aesopic fable. In the Aesopic tale, the fox is lean to begin with. Here he first fasts. How this explains that a person enters this world naked, as in the Qoheleth verse, is unclear. Also, there is actually more than one Aesopic fable involved in this midrashic retelling; the fox who wishes to enter a well-guarded vineyard is from another fable about sour grapes.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the words of the fox at the end of this midrashic tradition are also a mix of the two fables:

19 Books with Aesop's fables were published in English since 1484; since the eighteenth century, the fables were adapted for children. See "Aesopica: Aesop's Fables in English, Latin, and Greek," <http://www.mythfolklore.net/aesopica>.

20 Fraenkel, *Darkhei ha-aggadah*, 368.

21 I owe this astute observation to my friend Reuven Kiperwasser.

When he went out, he turned his face and looked at it. He said: Vineyard, vineyard, how good you are and how good are the fruits in you. However, what profit is there from you? Just as a person enters you, so he exits. So also is this world.

Qoh. Rab. 5:14

כד נפק הוה אפיך אפוי ואיסתכל ביה. אמר: כרמא כרמא מה טב את ומה טבין אינון פירין דבגווד וכל מה דאית בד יאין ומשבחן. ברם מה הניה ממך? כמה דבר נש עליל לגווד כד הוא נפיק.

What I want to show in this example is that parallels to this sort of fable can be found in many unexpected places, including Winnie the Pooh and an exegesis of a verse from Qoheleth.

#### 2.4 *Two Dogs and a Wolf*

The next fable I shall discuss is known as the Lion and the Boar, and it goes as follows:

In summertime, when the heat makes everyone thirsty, a lion and a wild boar had come to drink from the same small spring. They began to argue about who was going to take the first drink, and their argument escalated into a duel to the death. When they momentarily paused to catch their breath, the lion and the boar saw that vultures were waiting to snatch and devour the one who was killed. At that point, the lion and the boar put their hatred aside and said, "It is better for us to befriend one another than to be eaten by vultures and ravens!"<sup>22</sup>

A version of this fable in the Babylonian Talmud is adduced as midrash on a verse in the biblical story of the gentile prophet Balaam, who was commissioned to curse Israel when they were on the verge of entering the promised land, but ended up blessing them instead. The verse, Num 22:7, describes the elders of Midian and Moab going to Balaam to solicit his services. At this point, the rabbis state: "But there had never been peace between Midian and Moab (b. Sanh. 105a)"; or in other words: why do they go together to Balaam to request his aid? This is then explained with a parable, which is a good reworking of the fable of the Lion and Boar:

22 I used the translation of the Aesopic fable of the Lion and the Boar at the Spring from the following online database: <http://mythfolklore.net/aesopica/oxford/61.htm>. The original translation is from Laura Gibbs, ed. *Aesop's Fables* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

A parable: Two dogs in a herd hated one another. A wolf came and attacked one of them. Said the other: If I do not help him, he will kill him today and me tomorrow. They went together and killed the wolf.

b. Sanh. 105a

משל לשני כלבים שהיו בעדר והיו צהובין זה לזה. בא זאב על האחד. אמר האחד: אם איני עוזרו היום הורג אותו ולמחר בא עלי. הלכו שניהם והרגו הזאב.

The differences between the parable and Aesop's fable are clear. There, the protagonists were a lion and a boar. Here, they are two dogs. There, they met by chance at a watering hole. Here, they live together, tending the same herd. There, their common enemies were vultures. Here, it is a wolf. Yet the message is the same in both: two enemies team up together against a common third, just like Moab and Midian had done against Israel.

#### 2.4.1 Intermission: Folk Sayings

To substantiate the message that this parable is supposed to convey, the Babylonian Talmud adds another comment: אמר רב פפא: היינו דאמרי אינשי: כרכושתא ושונרא עבדו הלולא מתרבא דביש גדא ("Said Rav Papa: This is like what people say: A rat and a cat made a feast of the fat of the ill-fated" [b. Sanh. 105a]). The words used by the Babylonian Talmud, here to preface this statement, are of great interest for the folklorist. "Like what people say" (כדאמרי) (אינשי) is a typical preface of some 140 sayings in the same composition,<sup>23</sup> which can in general be subsumed under "folk wisdom."<sup>24</sup> The Babylonians treat this kind of utterance with utmost respect. Sometimes they give it as much weight in their discussion as they do to a biblical text or to a rabbinic teaching. "People say"-proverbs constitute another genre of folk wisdom apart from the parable, which is also evident in rabbinic literature. I will briefly demonstrate how the rabbis appreciated wisdom sayings of this sort. In tractate Ta'anit, we read:

23 In a slightly different wording, also in Aramaic (ברייתא אמרין), we find in Land-of-Israel sources a similar approach. However, the term is used in two senses there, one as a report on gossip (y. Peah 11, 15a; y. Bava Qam. 10:10, 7c; y. Bava Mets. 2:7, 8c; Gen. Rab. 65:10), and another as here. We find only five examples of the latter (Gen. Rab. 14:9; Lev. Rab. 6:3; Song Rab. 4:5; Lam. Rab. 4:2; Eccl. Rab. 5:5).

24 I have not found a detailed discussion of these sayings. For a discussion of a selected few, see Fraenkel, *Darkhei ha-agadah*, 410–425. I have also had the occasion to look at this sort of text; see Tal Ilan, *Massekhet Ta'anit*, FCBT 2/9 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 193–194; Tal Ilan, "A Fable on Two Mosquitoes from the Babylonian Talmud: Observations on Genre and Gender," *Parables in Changing Contexts: Essays on the Study of Parables in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism*, ed. Eric Ottenheim and Marcel Poorthuis, JCP 35 (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 149–159, esp. 152.

Said Rav Yehudah bar Yitshaq: Morning clouds are not real (namely, they do not bring rain) as it is written: "What can I do for you, Ephraim, what can I do for you, Judah, when your goodness is like morning clouds?" (Hosea 6:4). Said Rav Pappa to Abbaye: But do not people say: When the gates are opened and it rains (in the morning), ass driver, lay down your sack and sleep?

b. Ta'an. 6b

דאמר רב יהודה בר יצחק: הני ענני דצפרא לית בהו מששא דכתיב: "מה אעשה לך אפרים מה אעשה לך יהודה וחסדכם כענן בקר וגו'" (הושע ו ד). אמר ליה רב פפא לאבבי: והא אמרי אינשי: במפתח בבי מיטרא בר חמרא מוך שקד וגני!

This folk saying, which suggests that workers should not go out to work when there are clouds in the morning because it will rain, seems to contradict a biblical verse, according to which morning clouds are of no consequence: they will certainly not bring rain. Instead of dismissing the folk saying as being of less value than the biblical verse, the Babylonian rabbis harmonize the two, as they often do when differences of opinion between sages arise and they do not wish to decide in favour of either one of them: "There is no contradiction. One [refers to a case where the skies are] covered with thick clouds and one [to where they are] covered with light clouds."

My second example is slightly different. It begins with a folk saying: אמרי ("People say: A bad palm tree goes to a crawling reed" [b. B. Qam. 92b]),<sup>25</sup> The meaning of this saying obviously is that "birds of a feather flock together," and even more so, "bad birds of a feather flock together." To show that this folk saying is a legitimate, indeed canonized, piece of wisdom, the amora Rabbah bar Mari demonstrates that the same idea is voiced in all three parts of the Bible (Torah, Prophets, and Writings) as well as in Tannaitic literature. In the Torah, he finds it in the verse: "So Esau went to Ishmael" (Gen 28:9). Both Esau, Isaac's first-born, and Ishmael, Abraham's first-born, were considered by the rabbis, even more so than by the Bible itself, as inherently bad.<sup>26</sup> That is why their teaming up together is understood as collaboration against Jacob, even though all the relevant verse says is that Esau married Ishmael's daughter.

25 On this saying, see Fraenkel, *Darkhei ha-aggadah*, 420–421.

26 For a discussion of the two and their mutual connection, see Carol Bakhos, *Ishmael on the Border: Rabbinic Portrayals of the First Arab* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006), 13–30, 54–64.

Rabbah bar Mari also finds the same idea in the Books of the Prophets: “Men of low character gathered about Jephthah” (Judg 11:3). The judge Jephthah was a son of a prostitute (Judg 10:1). What kind of people would join him? The rabbis interpret this social situation as generic. Because he is bad, he is joined by other bad people.

Rabbah bar Mari now wants to show that the same idea is also voiced in the third part of the Bible, the Writings, but he has difficulties finding a proof-text. He compromises by citing the non-canonical Ben Sira: “All fowl dwells with its kind, and people with those like them” (Sir 13:15).<sup>27</sup> This really is a paraphrase of “birds of a feather” (or vice versa?).

When turning to the Mishnah, Rabbah bar Mari uses a halakhic text, which actually serves as a metaphor: “All that is connected to the impure is impure; all that is connected to the pure is pure” (m. Kelim 12:2).

Finally, a *baraita* which we do not know from elsewhere outside the Babylonian Talmud states even more emphatically that bad birds flock together: *לא לחנם הלך זרזיר אצל עורב אלא מפני שהוא מינו* (“Not for nothing did the starling go to the raven, but because it is like him” b. B. Qam. 92b). This talmudic text has gone a very long way to make a mere folk saying part of the Jewish canon.

#### 2.4.2 Back to the Two Dogs and the Wolf

Armed with these insights, we can go back to the folk saying: “A rat and a cat made a feast of the fat of the ill-fated” (b. Sanh. 105a). This saying is supposed to fortify the Aesopic fable about the Lion and the Boar who become allies, which are replaced in the rabbinic parable by two dogs. The alliance between the embattled dogs brings about the defeat of their foe: the wolf. And indeed, in the present folk saying, two traditional enemies from the animal kingdom bond to create an unholy alliance: the cat and the rat. This folk saying suggests that when these two enemies get together, woe to those who oppose them. The folk saying, which probably originated in Babylonia, as were all other *אמרי אינשי* traditions, indeed reproduces the message of the Aesopic fable precisely.

We must now ask the question Fraenkel asked: is this a literary or a rhetorical parable? On the face of it, because it is an Aesopic fable, we would expect it to be rhetorical. If so, it should include much extra detail that is unnecessary for explaining the verse about the alliance between the elders of Moab and Midian pertaining to Balaam. However, it does not. In the present rabbinic midrash, there is not one unnecessary detail. Instead of two different

27 On the nearly canonical status of Ben Sira among the rabbis, see Jenny R. Labendz, “The Book of Ben Sira in Rabbinic Literature,” *AJSR* 30 (2006): 347–392.



animals, the rabbis turned Moab and Midian into two dogs; they are the same, but they hate each other. The herd that they tend together is obviously the land they share, coveted by Israel, who is the wolf attacking them. Their plot to get Balaam to curse Israel is obviously their banding together to kill the wolf. Of course, in the parable they do actually kill the wolf, while in the biblical story of Balaam their plot fails due to divine intervention. However, the parable's task is only to expound one verse, not the entire Balaam story.

### 3 Another (Non-Aesopic) Example: Stone Soup

Fraenkel's distinction between a "rhetorical" non-rabbinic adopted parable and a rabbinic "literary parable" did not work smoothly in the last example we saw. In one sense, however, he was correct. The parable in question is rhetorical because it is used not to solve a religious conundrum, but rather to interpret a biblical verse. The final example we will discuss here is an example of a rabbinic parable, which can be analyzed as a purely "literary parable" because it demonstrates a religious problem, and each component in it has its counterpart in the situation it describes. It has no parallel in the Aesopic corpus but, as I will argue, must derive from popular folk tradition. I begin by presenting the parable and exposing it to an analysis à la Fraenkel. The parable is found in Leviticus Rabbah:

It was taught by Rabbi Shimeon bar Yohai: Israel are so successful, for they know how to please their creator. Said Rabbi Yudan: Like the Kuthim [i.e., Samaritans]. The Samaritans are good traders. One of them went to a woman. He said to her: Do you happen to have an onion to give me? When she gave it to him, he said to her: Is there onion without bread? When she gave it to him, he said to her: Is there food without drink? Thus and thus, he ate and drank.

Lev. Rab. 5:8

תני ר' שמעון בן יוחי: מה נגדין הן ישראל שהן יודעין לרצות את בוראן. אמר ר' יודן: כאילין כותאי. אילין כותאי חכמין למסחרא. חד מנהון אזל לגבי איתתא. אמ' לה: אית לך חד בצל תיתנין לי? מן דיהבא ליה אמ' לה: אית בצל בלא פיתא? מן דיהבא ליה אמ' לה: אית מאכיל דלא משקה? מתוך כן אכיל ושתי.

This episode begins with a statement by the *tanna* Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai: "Israel are so successful, for they know how to please their creator." The

assumption behind this statement is, first, that Israel are successful, and, second, that they know how to appease their creator. In order to explain and simplify this premise, a parable is adduced. But before the parable, and in order to explain and simplify the parable itself, the text presents a statement by another *tanna*, Rabbi Yudan. According to this *tanna*, Israel are like the Samaritans in this, and the Samaritans are good traders. This is where the parable begins. There are two protagonists in the parable: “one of them,” and a woman. The relationship between them is that of a house-dweller and a wanderer, or between one of some means and a beggar. This is supposed to symbolize the relationship between God and Israel. Ironically, God is represented by the woman, and Israel is represented by “one of them.”<sup>28</sup> Since the parable follows Rabbi Yudan’s statement, one may assume that “one of them” is a Samaritan. In her discussion of this parable, Galit Hasan-Rokem was fascinated by the role played here by the Samaritan, and she stated that “paradoxically, the praise to the Israelites is articulated by comparing them to Samaritans.”<sup>29</sup> She went on to juxtapose this parable with the parable of the Good Samaritan in the Gospel of Luke (10:25–37), and inquired about the relationships between Jews and Samaritans in Roman Palestine, as articulated by the two parables.

I want to argue somewhat against this understanding of this parable, because I claim that the Samaritan is a secondary insertion. A much more subversive paradox in this text is the representation of God by a woman. Interestingly, the power-relations between Israel and God are maintained: the woman is the house-dweller, the person of means, and the person representing the Israelite is a smart but penniless beggar. The message of the parable is thus very clear: in a power-relationship of weak against strong, the weaker party, in order to persevere, must learn to negotiate. She or he must learn to use rhetorical skills to psychologically arouse compassion and sympathy in the stronger party. In the real world, which this parable comes to simplify, Israel must learn how to petition God persuasively so as to obtain their maintenance—their daily bread. And they do so by praying.

Is there any element in this parable that is superfluous or—in Fraenkel’s terminology—“rhetorical”? Is there something in this story that plays no role in the relationship between Israel and God that it comes to simplify? I think that if we remove the words of Rabbi Yudan about the Samaritans, we are left

28 I touched on this parable briefly in Tal Ilan, “The Women of the Q Community within Early Judaism,” in *Q in Context*, vol. 2, *Social Setting and Archaeological Background of the Sayings Source*, ed. Markus Tiwald, BBB 173 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht; Bonn: Bonn University Press, 2015), 206–208.

29 Galit Hasan-Rokem, *Tales of the Neighborhood: Jewish Narrative Dialogues in Late Antiquity*, TLLS 4 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 42–48.

with a perfect “literary parable” as Fraenkel would have it. The “one of them” is now not a Samaritan compared to an Israelite, but actually “one of them,” one of the Israelites. As such, all the elements are necessary. First, the situation that needs explaining: how are Israel successful, and how do they appease their maker? Second, the parable that explains it: Israel are penniless beggars. God is like a woman, because the rabbis consider women much more willing than men to dispense charity. This is also a topic I have discussed earlier. I wrote:

[The] rabbinic stereotype of women was that they dispensed charity ... In the *Yerushalmi*, a man who has lost his fortune is urged by his wife to give charity to the sages despite this (y. Hor. 3:7 48a). In the Bavli we find, for example, Abba Hilqiah exalting his wife as having constantly dispensed charity (b. Ta’an. 23b). Imma Shalom, Rabbi Eliezer’s wife, is also reputed as having given charity (b. B. Qam. 59b). In a story of Mar Uqba giving charity, we learn incidentally that his wife also engaged in such activities (b. Ket. 67b).<sup>30</sup>

Women are, therefore, according to this stereotype, better suited than men for representing a charitable God in a parable. She is a necessary component for the parable to truly represent the religious conundrum it seeks to explain. The arguments offered by the beggar perfectly represent how Israel appease their maker. First, he makes a humble request (for an onion)—obviously, this is not a difficult request to fulfil. Yet the onion contains very little calories and does not taste very good on its own. It is a sort of spice and certainly does not dispel hunger. It must be supplemented with bread in order to provide the necessary caloric intake. Yet even so, it cannot sustain a person. Even if food is plentiful, without liquids a person will perish. The beggar speaks logically, and the woman, who began by giving him something quite humble, now provides him with all his needs.

In the same way, the Israelites expect God to provide them with sustenance, and their prayers are formulated in such a way that little is asked, but that in the end God is required to supply them with all their elementary needs. In the Jerusalem Talmud, the formulation of such a prayer is found in the words which the high priest utters on Yom Kippur, when he enters the holy of holies:

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30 Tal Ilan, *Silencing the Queen: The Literary Histories of Shelamzion and Other Jewish Women*, TSAJ 115 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 165.

May it be thy will, Lord our God and the God of our forefathers, that we will not be in need, not this day and not this year ... may it be thy will, Lord our God and the God of our forefathers, that this year be a year of low prices, of plenty, of trade of rain and dry and dew.

y. Yom. 5:2 [42c]

יהי רצון מלפניך יי' אלהינו ואלהי אבותינו שלא יצא עלינו חסרון לא ביום הזה ולא בשנה הזאת ... יהי רצון מלפניך יי' אלהינו ואלהי אבותינו שתהא השנה הזאת שנת זול שנת שובע שנת משא ומתן שנת גשומה ושחונה וטלולה

This prayer begins by asking little: it asks God only to ensure that Israel not become needy. In the second part, however, there is a list of what is required not to be in need, and the list is not short: low prices, plenty to eat and yet a surplus, economic success, and the ingredient necessary for all this, which is rain in its season. This prayer could be compared to our beggar who needs the woman's goodwill, so that he begins with a humble request, but when it is granted, the list of items representing this humble request all of a sudden grows long:

Israel are so successful, for they know how to please their creator ... One of them went to a woman. He said to her: Do you happen to have an onion to give me? When she gave it to him, he said to her: Is there onion without bread? When she gave it to him, he said to her: Is there food without drink? Thus and thus, he ate and drank.

Lev. Rab. 5:8

All are necessary elements in the argument that Israel, when petitioning God, must persuade him that he has already given them something, but that this thing is useless without something else that goes with it. Not a word is superfluous. In other words, once the Samaritan is removed, this parable perfectly meets the conditions for Fraenkel's description of a literary parable, the production of the rabbis in their study house, an elite parable—not a folkish one. It should, however, be noted that aside from food and drink, the prayer in the Jerusalem Talmud adds that, in order not to be in need, "trade" (משא ומתן) is also necessary. One could suggest that the observation of Rabbi Yudan about the Samaritans was added to the original *mashal* and *nimshal* because it fits in well with this plea. The Samaritans are, after all, good traders. My suggestion that this parable actually alludes to (or comes to demonstrate) the prayer preserved in the Jerusalem Talmud is not completely farfetched.

Ironically, this parable does have a parallel in folk literature—not in Aesop’s fables, but in a celebrated story which we have all heard as children in different versions, and which I conveniently found on the internet under the title of “Stone Soup.”<sup>31</sup> In this story, a traveller comes to a small village, hungry and weary. In time, he finds the village square, lights a fire under the cauldron, fills it with water and drops in a stone. Whistling, he patiently stirs the pot. A villager stops and asks what he is doing, to which he replied: “I am making stone soup. Would you like to join me?” The villager’s eyes light up and he asks if carrots are good in stone soup. “They are delicious,” the traveller replies. In time, a crowd gathers, and every person offers an ingredient of their own: mushrooms, onions, cabbage, meat.

At the end of the story, the entire village feasts with the weary traveller on his excellent soup, and when they ask him how it was achieved, he gives them the stone as a gift, but tells them not to forget the other ingredients. On leaving the village, he picks up another stone and puts it in his pocket. For me, it is crystal-clear that this folk tale is the inspiration for our parable above (and certainly not vice versa).

#### 4 Conclusion

I therefore end this chapter with the observation that the difference between a folk parable and a rabbinic parable is much more elusive than Fraenkel would have us think. The need to account for each element in it is important and interesting, but it is not the only tool that helps us to distinguish between a rabbinic and a folkish composition. Obviously, when all the elements of the *mashal* fit the *nimshal*, this is proof that the rabbis paid more attention to detail in their interpretative endeavour. But it is clear that folk wisdom and folk traditions were highly appreciated by the rabbis. For this reason, it is logical to say that they considered the folk their teachers, alongside Scripture or the rabbis. They did not shun the use of folk parables and fables in their study-house, nor did they use them only as a last resort or for rhetorical decoration.

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<sup>31</sup> See D.L. Ashliman, ed. “Stone Soup: Folktales of Aarne-Thompson-Uther type 1548,” <https://sites.pitt.edu/~dash/type1548.html>. Cf. “Stone Soup,” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stone\\_Soup](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stone_Soup) where I read that this is a European folk tale with variants from Germany, Russia, Hungary, France, Portugal, and, ironically, also China. In light of our parable, I doubt if this is the complete list.

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# Money and Torah in Early Christian and Early Rabbinic Parables

*Lieve M. Teugels*

Many parables in the New Testament and other early Jewish-Christian<sup>1</sup> or rabbinic Jewish sources are built along a similar pattern, containing the following elements:

1. A master (needs to travel);
2. The master entrusts property with (an) overseer(s);
3. The overseer(s) deal(s) with the property in a certain way;
4. The master (returns and) settles accounts;
5. The master rewards and/or punishes the overseer(s) according to his/their behaviour in 3.<sup>2</sup>

The pattern is remarkably stable, yet the way the details are filled in differs among the individual parables. The variations are situated on various levels: the pattern itself (e.g., reversal of two stages), the relation between the stages, and the identity of the protagonists (including the property). From the beginning, it will be clear that pattern/form and content are often hard to distinguish; the pattern is not only a frame, it is a frame filled with a specific, yet variable, content. Not intrinsically related to the pattern, yet possibly influencing the choice of protagonists and other aspects of the pattern, are the parable's application, message, and (literary) setting.

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1 For this very topical subject, see Peter J. Tomson, *The Image of the Judaeo-Christians in Ancient Jewish and Christian Literature*, ed. Doris Lambers-Petry, WUNT 158 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003); Annette Yoshiko Reed, *Jewish-Christianity and the History of Judaism*, TSAJ 171 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018).

2 Apart from Matt 25:14–30 (Talents), Luke 19:12–27 (Minas), and Sifre Deut. 48 (Denars), which are discussed in this article, see also Mark 13:34–37; Matt 21:33–41 (Bad Tenants); Luke 16:1–9 (Bad Manager); Mekh. R. Shim. Yoh. Sanya to Exod 4:13 (Unwilling Overseer); Mekh. R. Ishm. Bachodesh 5 to Exod 20:2 (Two Overseers); Sifre Deut. 11 (Father Appoints Overseer over Son); Shepherd of Hermas, *Sim.* 55 [5.2] (The Slave and the Vineyard); Sem. R. Hiya 3; Pesiq. Rab Kah. 14:5 (Pharaoh Compared to Overseer for King), and many other rabbinic parables. The recurrence of this pattern in rabbinic sources led Ulrich Luz to conclude that the parable of the Talents may originally go back to Jesus. Cf. Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 249–250.



Three key “protagonists” can be discerned in all *meshalim* with the above pattern: the master, the overseer, and the property. Variation in the identity of the protagonists is one way in which the individual parables become stories, and not mere patterns. The master is often a king, but he can also be a *pater familias* or a rich landlord. In many cases, the master is explicitly said to be travelling abroad, but this is not necessary for the plot of the story.<sup>3</sup>

The overseer is often a slave,<sup>4</sup> but he<sup>5</sup> can also be identified as a manager (who could likewise have slave status), a tenant farmer, or a son. The overarching term that I will use is “overseer,” corresponding to the Greek word ἐπίτροπος (*epitropos*), which often occurs in rabbinic *meshalim* in its Hebraized form: אפֿיטרופוס (or an alternative spelling).<sup>6</sup> Often there is more than one overseer, and if two or more are present, they typically (but not always) display different behaviour towards the property they need to guard or manage, in which case they are also treated differently—i.e., rewarded or punished—in the last phase of the plot. For the message of the parable, the specific identities of the masters (king, father, landlord) and the overseers (slaves, sons, or managers) do not appear to be very relevant. Often, they vary in different versions of the same parable.<sup>7</sup>

3 Even when such a journey is not explicitly mentioned, it may be implied because a landlord usually did not live on his estate in the countryside but rather in the city. See the discussion of the parable of the Bad Tenants in Willy Schottroff, “Das Gleichnis von den bösen Weingärtnern (Mk. 12:1–9 par.): Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Bodenpacht in Palästina,” *ZDPV* 112 (1996): 18–48, esp. 33. See also the contribution of Marcel Poorthuis in this volume.

4 See the contribution of Martijn Stoutjesdijk in this volume, as well as his PhD dissertation: Martijn Stoutjesdijk, “Not Like the Rest of the Slaves? Slavery Parables in Early Rabbinic and Early Christian Literature” (PhD diss., Tilburg University, 2021). Chapter five (“When the master is away”) is particularly relevant for this article. Of note here is the theme of the *absente ero*, discussed by Stoutjesdijk, as it is a wide-spread topos in Hellenistic and Roman literature, including ancient novels and comedies such as Plautus’s *Menaechmi*; see Wolfgang de Melo, ed., *Plautus: Casina. The Casket Comedy. Curculio. Epidicus. The Two Menaechmuses*, LCL 61 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 967–985.

5 I have encountered no antique parables where the overseer, or the master for that matter, is specifically identified as female.

6 See Ignaz Ziegler, *Die Königsgleichnisse des Midrasch beleuchtet durch die römische Kaiserzeit* (Breslau: Schottlaender, 1903), 154–428 passim; Samuel Krauss, *Griechische und lateinische Lehnwörter im Talmud, Midrasch und Targum* (Berlin: Calvary, 1898), 103–105. The term is also attested in the New Testament (Matt 20:8; Luke 8:3; Gal 4:2). In Gal 4:2 it is used for a guardian of children, which is a meaning we also find in rabbinic parables, e.g., in Sifre Deut. 11.

7 In Luke’s parable of the Minas, the “nobleman” even becomes king. In Matthew’s Talents, the protagonist is a main “man.” In various versions of rabbinic parables, we see often that a “man” in one version is a “king” in another, without implying any changes for the meaning

The property is another variable “protagonist,” as can be expected, and the relationship between the overseer and the property is similarly variable. What is important for the parable’s message is not only how the overseer(s) manages the property (3), but also how this behaviour is valued as “good” or “bad” (4), and how the overseer is eventually rewarded or punished for this behaviour (5).

Finally, there are variations in the application, which is closely related to the message of parables built along this pattern. Often, the parables feature an explicit application or *nimshal*, sometimes an *epimythium*.<sup>8</sup> Yet even when the application is not explicit, it is always there, as a parable’s function is to broadcast a message by means of a fictive story.<sup>9</sup> It is not always evident from the text in which the parable is found what its exact application is, even with the presence of a *nimshal* or an *epimythium*. Some parables have been transmitted with multiple applications, and in others it is evident that a redactor has applied an application different from the one originally intended. In rabbinic parables, this is often due to the application of the *meshal* to a different biblical text. With respect to the parables of Jesus that have come to us in the Gospels, I try to consider their meaning as they must have been understood by the living Jesus and his audience—that is, a Jewish audience that did not see Jesus as the risen Lord but as a gifted teacher, possibly with messianic claims, and with conflicting interpretations of certain rules of the Torah and their implementation.<sup>10</sup>

In this article, I will focus on parables built along the above pattern that deal with the overseeing of money. I will demonstrate that, at least to a certain extent or in a certain phase of their development, their application is related to

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of the parable. The tendency to make the protagonists in parables “kings” is seen as a factor of “stereotyping” by David Stern, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 21–23.

8 Justin David Strong, “The Fables of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke: Their Form, Origins, and Implications” (PhD diss., University of Notre Dame, 2019), 395–458.

9 Cf. Lieve M. Teugels, “Talking Animals in Parables: A *Contradictio in Terminis*,” in *Parables in Changing Contexts: Essays on the Study of Parables in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism*, ed. Eric Ottenheijm and Marcel Poorthuis, JCP 35 (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 144; Lieve M. Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhiltot. An Annotated Edition and Translation of the Parables in Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael and Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai*, TSAJ 176 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 11.

10 Two commentaries that I consulted when writing this article, Luz, *Matthew 21–28* and François Bovon, *Luke 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 9:51–19:27*, ed. Helmut Koester, trans. Donald S. Deer, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), distinguish between diachronic analysis and commentary. They understand commentary as synchronic, that is, based on the text as it is embedded in its present literary context. In the diachronic analysis, they reckon with a “source” and/or an oral transmission phase and/or the parable as told by Jesus.

the topic of Torah. Torah is taken here in a broad sense and not restricted to the rabbinic view of it. Torah here applies to all of its aspects, including studying, keeping, and doing the Torah and its commandments. An important factor, as we will see, are multiple and conflicting interpretations of the meaning of Torah in general, or of specific commandments.

By focussing on the variations in pattern, protagonists as well as their mutual relations, and application, I also hope to demonstrate how the real value of the parable genre is located in its capacity to broadcast specific messages by the modification of details. The best parabolist or *memasheh*<sup>11</sup> is the one who creatively uses fixed, often old, patterns and motifs to bring a new message.

## 1 Talents, Minas, Denars: Variations on a “Traveling Master” Theme

I will discuss two parables from the New Testament Gospels, one from an apocryphal gospel, and one from an early rabbinic source, all of which display, apart from the common pattern, a very similar theme: individuals entrusted with a specific amount of money by a “master,” each of them dealing with that money in a different way. While the parables from the gospels are versions of the same parable, the rabbinic text is not.<sup>12</sup> Apart from the similarities, we will also consider some major differences in this rabbinic *mashal*, with respect to the protagonists, the plot, and the application.

### 1.1 *The Talents: Matt 25:14–30*

The first text in this category is the parable of the Talents in the Gospel of Matthew. The relevant points of the pattern in this parable are:

1. A master goes on a journey;
2. He entrusts three slaves with property in an unequal way; they receive five, two, and one talents, respectively;
3. The slaves deal in different ways with the property entrusted to them: those who received five and two talents invest them, the one who received one talent hides it;
4. The master returns and settles accounts;

11 This term is used by Yonah Fraenkel, “Ha-mashal,” in *Darkhei ha-aggadah vehamidrash* (Givatayim: Yad Lataalmud, 1991), 323–393 (Hebrew).

12 Apart from the three versions to be discussed in this paper (Matthew, Luke, and the Gospel of the Nazarenes), the parable of the Doorkeeper in Mark 13:34–37 is usually considered an elementary form of the same parable. A reference to Matt 25:26–27, 30 is found in Ps. Clementines, *Hom* 3.61. See François Bovon, *Luke 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 9:51–19:27*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 606.

5. He rewards those who invested their talents and let the money grow, and punishes the one who hid and saved his talent.

Some indications about the message of the parable can be found in the parable itself, such as the reaction of the master to those who in his opinion acted correctly: “Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much” (Matt 25:21, 23).<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, the slave who will eventually be punished is reproached as follows: “You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest” (Matt 25:26–27). The master’s negative self-characterization is remarkable, as is the harsh treatment of the slave who did not steal or lose the money but returned it to his master intact.<sup>14</sup> The *mashal* proper<sup>15</sup> comes to a conclusion in v. 28, where the master pronounces the slave’s punishment: “So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents.”

Thereafter, the text contains a so-called *epimythium* from which the reader can expect some clarification: “For to everyone who has, more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away” (Matt 25:29).<sup>16</sup> *Epimythia* such as these, containing wise lessons, are known from the Aesopian fables.<sup>17</sup> In certain parables in the New Testament, they have a function comparable to that of

13 For the English translation of the New Testament, I follow the ESV (2016).

14 The motifs of the severe master as well as the idea that multiplication of the entrusted property is what counts most is also found in the parable of the Inferior Field in Avot R. Nath. A 16 discussed by Marcel Poorthuis in this volume. Martijn Stoutjesdijk mentions this verse as an example of critique or protest against God in parables; see his contribution to this volume.

15 This is the terminology used in rabbinic studies, where a distinction is made between the “*mashal* proper” (the parable itself) and the “*nimshal*” (the application of the parable). As a rule, these two elements are not mixed up. The term “*nimshal*” has also found its way into the study of the parables in the Gospels; see, e.g., Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008). If the *mashal* continues after the *nimshal*, or if elements of the *mashal* are found in the *nimshal* or vice versa, this can be seen as a sign of a corruption in the transmission of the text or of redactional activity.

16 Mary Ann Beavis, “Parable and Fable,” *CBQ* 52 (1990): 23, also identifies this as an *epimythium*. The same saying is found in Matt 13:12, Mark 4:25, and Luke 8:18.

17 David Flusser, “Aesop’s Miser and the Parable of the Talents,” in *Parable and Story in Judaism and Christianity*, ed. Clemens Thoma and Michael Wyschogrod (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 15–16, compares this parable with Aesop’s fable “the Miser” (and with a rabbinic *mashal*; see note 31). He concludes that the “logion” in v. 29 fits this parable and that its use in other New Testament texts was borrowed from the context of this parable (cf. 23n15).

the rabbinic *nimshal*.<sup>18</sup> This also seems to be the case here. With its confusing message, the proverb makes for an excellent ending to the parable (in its broad sense, including the application), with its hard and shocking content. I believe this proverb to be a structural part of the parable in its present, redactional form in the gospels, the more so because exactly the same saying occurs in Luke's parable of the Minas (see below).<sup>19</sup>

After this, however, the *mashal* proper continues in v. 30, because the image of the slave is taken up again.<sup>20</sup> It is commonly accepted—unconvincingly, in my view—that v. 29 is part of the master's speech and thus part of the *mashal* proper.<sup>21</sup> I believe, as I will explain further, that v. 29 has a function similar to a *nimshal* and is thus not part of the *mashal* proper. Matthew 25:30 constitutes a second (or secondary) "ending" of the parable: "Throw out the worthless slave into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." This ending bears the redactional imprint of the Gospel of Matthew, who ends other parables in a similarly extravagant way, in contradistinction to the simpler versions in Luke and/or Mark.<sup>22</sup>

## 1.2 *The Minas: Luke 19:12–27*

A similar parable is included in the Gospel of Luke with an introduction indicating what the parable, according to the gospel author, was about: "because he was near Jerusalem, and they supposed that the kingdom of God was going

18 See Strong, "The Fables of Jesus"; cf. note 8. In some cases, the rabbinic parables also end with a lesson that resembles an *epimythium* more than a standard *nimshal*. This is, for example, the case in a *mashal* in Mekh. R. Ishm. Pischa 16, which concludes with the saying "So also do later troubles cause the former ones to be forgotten." See Lieve M. Teugels, "From the Lion to the Snake, from the Wolf to the Bear: Rescue and Punishment in Classical Fables and Rabbinic Meshalim," in *Overcoming Dichotomies: Parables, Fables, and Similes in the Graeco-Roman World*, ed. Albertina Oegema, Jonathan Pater, and Martijn Stoutjesdijk, WUNT 483 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022), 217–236.

19 The text of the parable in Q as reconstructed by Christian Münch, "Gewinnen und Verlieren," in *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu*, ed. Ruben Zimmermann et al. (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2007), 244–256, includes this saying and ends with it. Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, like "most exegetes," considers the logion "probably" to be a secondary addition because it is transmitted as an independent logion in several other cases: Luke 8:18; Matt 13:12; Mark 4:25; Gos. Thom. 41 (249). It is entirely possible, as we will see, that Jesus did not originally connect this message to this parable, since its message in a way actually contradicts the parable's message.

20 See note 15. Strong notes that *epimythia*, in the Gospels as in classical fables, "occasionally become entangled in the conclusion of a fable body," which is also what appears to be the case here. See Strong, "The Fables of Jesus," 395–399.

21 Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, typifies this parable and the parable of the Minas in Luke 19 as an "indirect narrative parable without a *nimshal*" (519).

22 Cf. Matt 8:12, 22:13. See also Matt 13:42 and 13:50.

to appear immediately” (Luke 19:11).<sup>23</sup> Overall, the parable of the Minas follows the same pattern as the parable of the Talents in Matthew:

1. A master goes on a journey to a distant country;
2. He entrusts ten slaves with property in an equal way; they all receive one mina;
3. Three slaves deal in different ways with the property entrusted to them: two invest the mina, and one hides it;
4. The master returns and settles accounts;
5. He rewards the two who invested their mina and let the money grow, and punishes the one who hid and saved it.

There are considerable differences between the parables in Matthew and Luke.<sup>24</sup> First, the text in Luke is more complex in that it contains a second storyline, about a king who goes out to acquire a kingdom (19:12c, 19:13b, 19:27).<sup>25</sup> A second difference is that the parables differ as to the monetary unit used: whereas Matthew uses the term *τάλαντα* (talents), Luke has *μνᾶς* (minas).<sup>26</sup> Third, Luke begins with ten slaves, whereas Matthew only has three. Fourth, in Luke the same amount is entrusted to all of the slaves (i.e., one mina), while each slave in Matthew receives a different amount. An additional complication is that, even though ten slaves are said to receive a mina in Luke 19:13, only three are mentioned when the king comes to settle accounts (19:16, 19:18, 19:20). Fifth, the slaves in Luke receive the explicit order “to do business” with their mina (19:13), while no such order can be found in Matthew. Sixth, whereas the slave who is punished in Matthew hid his talent in the ground, the slave in

23 In Matthew, this introduction is not found before the parable of the Talents, but a similar context can be assumed from the introduction of the preceding parable in Matt 25:1 as well as the content of Matt 24.

24 Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 225–231, discusses various possible relations between the two parables but also states that “[s]erious consideration must be given to the fact that these are two similar but independent parables.” (225). The question of the relationship is related to the question whether this is a Q text. Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 247–248, with reference to other scholars, doubts that this is the case. He does, however, consider them variants of a common “oral tradition.” See also the next note.

25 Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 248. Luz calls the motif “secondary” in Luke. Some reckon with a second source, even a second parable (Zerwick, Weinert). See Bovon, *Luke 2*, 607–612.

26 For the value of the amounts, see Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 528; Münch, “Gewinnen und Verlieren,” 248. Even one talent would have been an enormous amount, equalling the wages for twenty years of service for a day-labourer. A mina is a more realistic amount, but would still equal one hundred days’ wages for a common labourer. Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, assumes that the change from minas to talents was made by Matthew, who “loves such large sums of money” (248). So also Bovon, *Luke 2*, 608. The difference is not relevant, as coined gold and silver were used as currency.

Luke kept it in a cloth (19:20).<sup>27</sup> Due to the master's explicit command in Luke to do business with the entrusted mina, the third slave in this version disobeys his master's commandment.<sup>28</sup>

In the Lukan version, the master self-identifies as a "severe man" (Luke 19:22). He likewise reproaches the slave who simply hid his capital that he should have "put my money in the bank, and at my coming I might have collected it with interest." As in the (first) ending of the parable of the Talents in Matthew, the punishment levied upon the last slave is for his mina to be taken from him and given to the one who made ten minas (Luke 19:26). The parable closes with what I believe to be, as in Matthew, an *epimythium* and not a part of the master's speech: "I tell you that to everyone who has, more shall be given, but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away" (Luke 19:26).<sup>29</sup>

In both synoptic versions, profit is obviously valued most highly. It is also clear that such high profits cannot be made by depositing the money with a bank.<sup>30</sup> While both slaves who made a profit are praised in the same way, the one who made the greatest profit receives an extra reward, as the talent/mina of the third slave is given to him. Nevertheless, the third slave is not told that he should have done business with the money entrusted to him: rather, the master says he should have saved it in the bank where it could have earned him interest. This unevenness in the text may be an indication of an underlying parable model, of which the rabbinic *mashal* to be discussed next may be an exponent.

### 1.3 *The Denars: Sifre Deut. 48*

In the Tannaitic Midrash *Sifre to Deuteronomy*, we find a similarly structured parable that does not feature a traveling master and slaves, but rather two

27 Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, trans. Samuel H. Hooke, 2nd rev. ed. (London: SCM Press, 1972), 61n81, notes that burying money was regarded as a safe way to protect against theft, and refers to the rabbinic tradition in b. B. Mets. 42a. Conversely, wrapping money in a cloth was seen as irresponsible (see m. B. Mets. 3:10). Jeremias observes that both Matthew and Luke presuppose "Palestinian conditions." Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 248–249, sees this as a feature of the disobedience of the slave. He compares it with the insolent behaviour of the third slave in the Gospel of the Nazarenes (see further).

28 Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 248, concludes from this that the slave's remark that he was afraid sounds ironic.

29 See note 19. Strong, "The Fables of Jesus," 399, lists this verse as *epimythium*. He discusses the use of the formula "I tell you," which is found here and not in Matthew's Talents. He demonstrates that this formula was common in fables before the first century (405–412).

30 See Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 252.

brothers who inherit from their father.<sup>31</sup> The difference between inheriting, in which case the property becomes one's own, and guarding, in which case the property remains the master's, should be taken into account, although it is not absolute, since the first and second slaves in the synoptic parables are also "given" the profit they made.<sup>32</sup>

I quote the *mashal* with some of its surrounding context, namely the beginning of the midrash, in which the base verse (Deut 11:22) is quoted and, typically, contrasted with a preceding, nearly identical verse (Deut 11:13).

*For if you are careful to keep (שמר) all this commandment (Deut 11:22): Why was this said? Because of If you listen obediently to my commandments (Deut 11:13). I might assume that even if one has heard the words of Torah, he may remain idle and not study them again. Therefore Scripture says here, if you are careful to keep, indicating that just as one must be careful not to lose his money, so must he be careful not to lose his learning. ...*

R. Simeon ben Yohai says by way of a parable: "Two brothers inherit money from their father. One converts it into a denar and spends it, while the other converts it into a denar and puts it aside. He who has converted his denar and spent it now has nothing, whereas he who has converted

כי אם שמור תשמרון את כל המצוה הזאת למה נאמר לפי שנאמר והיה אם שמוע תשמעו אל מצותי. שומע אני כיון ששמע אדם דברי תורה ישב לו ולא ישנה. תלמוד לומר כי אם שמור תשמרון. מגיד שכשם שאדם צריך להזהר בסלעו שלא תאבד כך צריך להזהר בתלמודו שלא יאבד

...

רבי שמעון בן יוחי אומר משל לשני אחים שהיו מסגלים אחר אביהם. אחד מצרף דינר ואוכלו ואחד מצרף דינר ומניחו. זה שהיה מצרף דינר ואוכלו נמצא אין בידו כלום וזה שמצרף דינר ומניחו נמצא מעשיר לאחר זמן. כך תלמידי חכמים למד שנים שלשה דברים ביום שנים שלשה פרקים בשבת שנים שלש פרשיות בחדש נמצא מעשיר לאחר זמן ועליו הוא אומר וקובץ על יד ירבה [משלי יג א].

31 Flusser, "Aesop's Miser," 12, and note 9, gives a different rabbinic parallel, namely the *mashal* in S. Eli. Zut. 171, 1:19–28. On the basis of this parallel, Flusser concludes that "behind the tripartite structure of the Parable of the Talents there is a basic contrast between only two opposites." The parable of the Denars is a closer (and earlier) parallel, on the basis of which the same conclusion could be drawn. Sifre Deut. 48 is also not mentioned by Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 522; Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 250 (notes); Bovon, *Luke 2*, 610 (notes).

32 See Matt 25:28–29; Luke 19:24–26. Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 251, suggests that in the synoptic parables we have to do with a *peculium* entrusted to the slaves.



his denar and has put it aside eventually grows wealthy. Even so is it with the disciples of the wise: one who studies two or three things a day, two or three chapters in a week, two or three Scriptural lessons in a month, eventually becomes rich (in Torah), and of him it is said, *But he who gathers little by little increases*" (Prov 13:11). He who says, "Today I will study (only what I need now), tomorrow I will study (what I shall need then); today I will review (only what I need now), tomorrow I will review (what I shall need then), will have nothing, and of him it is said, *He who gathers in summer is a prudent son, but he who sleeps in harvest is a son who brings shame* (Prov 10:5).

Sifre Deut. 48<sup>33</sup>

וזה שאומר היום אני למד למחר אני למד היום אני שונה למחר אני שונה נמצא אין בידו כלום ועליו הוא אומר איגר בקיץ בן משכיל נרדם בקציר בן מביש [משלייה].<sup>34</sup>

The question on which the midrash draws concerns the difference between the two verses from Deut 11: why did the message have to be stated twice? The answer is that if one "hears" (Deut 11:13) a commandment, this does not necessarily imply that one will "keep" (Deut 11:22) it. This is why the latter verse needed to be added. An additional point echoing in the *mashal*, as we will see, is the double meaning of שמר, which can mean both "to save" and "to keep" (or "observe").

The recurring pattern is developed in this *mashal* in the following way:

1. A father dies;
2. Two brothers receive money in an equal way; one denar each;
3. The brothers deal in different ways with the property entrusted to them; one spends, and one saves;
4. Accounts are settled;
5. The one who has saved is rewarded with wealth, the one who has spent has nothing.

33 Translation Reuven Hammer, *Sifre: A Tannaitic Commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy*, xjs 24 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 101, with adapted translation of the biblical verses.

34 Hebrew text from Louis Finkelstein, ed., *Sifre ad Deuteronomium*, repr. 1969 (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1939), 108–109.

In this *mashal*, we encounter yet a third monetary unit: denars.<sup>35</sup> As in the parable of the Minas in Luke, the “trustees” receive an equal amount and they treat what has been entrusted to them differently: one puts it “aside,” which implies, as we can read in the next sentence, bringing it to the bank where it can grow, and the other spends it. The father obviously cannot return to settle accounts. However, the parable plainly states that the one who “kept” it in the bank rather than spending it is the one who is eventually better off.

Central to this *mashal* is a play on the various meanings of the verb שמר. Whereas the midrash deals with “not losing” (his learning), the *mashal* is about “putting aside” (a denar), and the *nimshal* about “accumulating” (Torah). The eventual message, displayed in the *nimshal*, is that one should multiply one’s Torah. The *mashal* already makes explicit that “putting aside” money means letting it grow, not “hiding” it in the ground or elsewhere. From this we can infer that what is meant here, as in the advice to the third slave in the New Testament parables, is depositing money with a bank or investing it.

The *nimshal* does not conclude by repeating the base verse, as one would expect, but by offering a series of prooftexts from Proverbs, the first being: “Wealth may dwindle to less than nothing, but he who gathers little by little increases it” (Prov 13:11).<sup>36</sup> The reason I quote the complete verse is that the midrash often renders only a selection of relevant words, while actually alluding to the context of the entire verse. Applied to the behaviour of the brothers in the *mashal*, this proverb implies that a person may even lose all his money if he does not multiply it steadily, by letting it grow slowly in the bank. In terms of the *nimshal*, it implies that one may lose or forget one’s Torah if one does not study and practise it regularly. The second prooftext contains the same contrast. Some more prooftexts follow but are not quoted here.

These proverbs recall the *epimythium* appended to the parables of the Talents and the Minas: “For to everyone who has, more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away” (Matt 25:29). The message of the proverbs from Proverbs, in spite of their similar two-ply structure, is the polar opposite of the proverb in Matthew. In comparison with the bewildering message of the synoptic parables, the *mashal* of the Denars, supported by the biblical proverbs, seems much more acceptable to the average, uninitiated audience.

The similar pattern and common motif of dealing with entrusted money, combined with the presence of similarly structured proverbs with opposing

35 This monetary unit is also found in Matt 18:28; 20:2–13; 22:19; Mark 6:37, 14:5; Luke 7:41, 10:35, and 20:24.

36 More prooftexts follow in the original text.

messages, warrants a further, comparative look at the parables in both sources. For now, however, I will first discuss another relevant text.

#### 1.4 *Another Version of the “Talents”: The Gospel of the Nazarenes*

The lost Jewish-Christian gospel mentioned by Eusebius in his *Theophany* may serve as a missing link between the rabbinic *mashal* of the Denars and the two New Testament parables.<sup>37</sup> This lost gospel, which, according to Eusebius, was transmitted in Hebrew script, is sometimes called “Gospel of the Hebrews,” but according to the latest insights can rather be identified with the Aramaic “Gospel of the Nazarenes.”<sup>38</sup> According to Eusebius, this gospel contained a parable about three slaves who each receive one talent: one hid the talent, one multiplied it, and one squandered it. This is Eusebius’s record:

But since the Gospel [written] in Hebrew characters which has come into our hands enters the threat not against the man who has hid [the talent], but against him who had lived dissolutely—for he [the master] had three slaves, one who squandered his master’s substance with harlots and flute-girls, one who multiplied the gain, and one who hid the talent; and accordingly one was accepted (with joy), another merely rebuked, but the other cast into prison—I wonder whether in Matthew the threat which is uttered after the word against the

Ἐπεὶ δὲ τὸ εἰς ἡμᾶς ἦκον Ἑβραϊκοῖς χαρακτηρῶσιν εὐαγγέλιον τὴν ἀπειλὴν οὐ κατὰ τοῦ ἀποκρύψαντος ἐπήγεν, ἀλλὰ κατὰ τοῦ ἀσώτως ἐζηκότος—τρῆς γὰρ δούλους περιεῖχε, τὸν μὲν καταφαρόντα τὴν ὑπαρξίν τοῦ δεσπότου μετὰ πορνῶν καὶ αὐλητρίδων, τὸν δὲ πολλαπλασιάσαντα τὴν ἐργασίαν, τὸν δὲ κατακρύψαντα τὸ τάλαντον. εἶτα τὸν μὲν ἀποδεχθῆναι, τὸν δὲ μεμφοθῆναι μόνον, τὸν δὲ συγκλεισθῆναι δεσμοτηρίῳ—ἐφίστημι, μήποτε κατὰ τὸν Μαθαῖον μετὰ τὴν συμπλήρωσιν τοῦ λόγου τοῦ κατὰ τοῦ μηδὲν ἐργασαμένου ἢ ἐξῆς ἐπιλεγομένη ἀπειλή οὐ περιὰυτοῦ, ἀλλὰ περὶ τοῦ προτέρου

37 No chronological claims are made here.

38 See Christoph Marksches, *Antike christliche Apokryphen in deutscher Übersetzung / Bd. 1, Evangelien und Verwandtes* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 578; Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 248–49. It needs to be mentioned that Eusebius’s authorship of the Greek fragment in which this text is found is disputed. Hugo Gressmann, *Eusebius Werke*, vol. 3.2, *Die Theophanie*, GCS 11.2 (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1904) omits the passage entirely from his edition. Klostermann (see note 40), having read Gressmann, adds two question marks after the reference: “EUSEB. THEOPH. ??”

man who did nothing may refer not to him, but by epanalepsis to the first who had feasted and drunk with the drunken.<sup>39</sup> κατ' ἐπανάληψιν λέλεκται, τοῦ ἐσθίου-  
ντος καὶ πίνοντος μετὰ τῶν μεθύοντων.<sup>40</sup>

EUSEBIUS, *Theoph.* 4.22

Eusebius considers this a variant on Matthew's Talents, but it seems closer to Luke's Minas, where each slave receives the same amount.<sup>41</sup> Yet there are considerable differences separating it from both canonical versions. In the version related by Eusebius, what counts is not the amount which the slaves manage to gain but what they do with the talent entrusted to them. They are judged against ethical rather than economical standards. One squanders it "with harlots and flute girls"—an obviously ethical disapproval, recalling the behaviour of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:13, and especially the judgement of the older son in Luke 15:30). In view of the condemnation of the one who thus squanders his talent, it is not evident how the one who "multiplies" it is judged. Since ethical standards are being used here, is multiplying good or bad behaviour? Does it refer to gambling or taking loans on interest, which is potentially immoral behaviour and even a contravention of biblical law and the prevailing halakhah?<sup>42</sup> Or should it rather be conceived as investing, which is potentially praiseworthy behaviour? This is not clear from the quote from Eusebius, since in the "accounting phase" of the parable he does not specify who is praised and who is rebuked, the text merely stating that "one" was rebuked, "one" praised, and "one" thrown into prison. Eusebius himself suggests that the accounting may not follow the order in which the behaviour of the three slaves is mentioned, such that the one cast into prison is the one who "squandered" the

39 Translation: Wilhelm Schneemelcher and Robert McLachlan Wilson, *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 1, *Gospels and Related Writings*, rev. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 161–162.

40 Greek text from Erich Klostermann, ed., *Apocrypha II. Evangelien*. Kleine Texte für Vorlesungen und Übungen 8. 3rd ed. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1929), 9 (no. 15) (p. 6 [no. 14] in the first edition from 1904). There is some confusion about the numbering of the fragment. Klostermann numbers it 14 and 15; Angelo Mai, ed., *Novae patrum bibliothecae tomus quartus* (Rome: Typis Sacri consilii propagando christiano nomini, 1847), 155, calls it fragment 22. I adopt the reference of the translators (see next note). I wish to express my thanks to my PThU colleague Jan Krans for advising me in regard to this text.

41 Cf. Alice Whealey, "The Greek Fragments Attributed to Eusebius of Caesarea's Theophania," *VC* 69 (2015): 22.

42 Cf. Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 253 and notes. See also note 41.

talent, and not the final figure, that is, the one who hid his talent. If “hiding”<sup>43</sup> was considered an acceptable way of keeping money by the author of this Hebrew Gospel, it is understandable that he would be offended by what in his eyes represents an unjust harsh punishment. But depending on the interpretation, there are still two options for the one who hid and the one who multiplied, since either one could be praised or rebuked.<sup>44</sup> If we assume that the one who hid the talent was rebuked, then the message is the same as it is in the Synoptic Gospels: he should have put it in the bank where it could multiply, which is also the message of the rabbinic parable, where the difference between “preserving/keeping” (שמר) and “multiplying” is in fact erased in that the one who “keeps” Torah and does not just “hear” it will “multiply” it.

### 1.5 *Talents, Minas, Denars: Same Pattern, Different Content and Application*

To recap, the four parables are constructed along the lines of the simple pattern outlined in the beginning. In all of them, the entrusted property has the form of money. What the overseers do with the money varies from hiding, to multiplying, to spending, or some forms thereof, such as investing or squandering. Furthermore, which behaviour is considered liable to reward or punishment seems to differ among the sources. In the following, I will focus on some important differences between the sources with respect to the pattern, the use of the motifs in the *mashal* proper, and the application (*nimshal*).

As to the pattern itself, there is a difference that is not visible in the above scheme. The rabbinic version is merely dual: there is “good” behaviour (saving/multiplying) which is rewarded, and “bad” behaviour (spending) which is subject to punishment or not rewarded. Both New Testament versions, as well as the Gospel of the Nazarenes, have a third category. In these three parables, the various behaviours and consequences can be placed on a scale running from “punished” through “punished a bit”<sup>45</sup> through “rewarded”<sup>46</sup> to “rewarded a lot.”

Second, on the level of the *mashal* proper, the use of the motifs “saving” or “hiding” and “spending,” and the way they correspond to the categories of

43 See above, note 27 (hiding is an accepted, good way of preserving) and note 31 (Flusser; originally two-ply structure).

44 Petri Luomanen, *Recovering Jewish-Christian Sects and Gospels*, VCSup 110 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 131, favours the first reading (the one who hides is praised) because it fits “Mediterranean anthropology” and biblical law against taking interest (Deut 23:19–20). Like Jeremias (see note 27 above), he refers to the rabbinic tradition in b. B. Mets. 42a, according to which burying money was seen as a valuable wise option.

45 So the Gospel of the Nazarenes.

46 So Matthew and Luke.

“reward” and “punishment,” differs among the various versions. From the perspective of the rabbinic parable, “saving” (שמר) is the same as “multiplying,” and opposed to “spending.” While hiding could be a way of saving, this path is not followed in the rabbinic parable.<sup>47</sup> In Matthew and Luke, hiding is opposed to multiplying. I already noted that, in the synoptic versions, the master does not reproach the third slave for failing to have done business with the money like his two companions, but rather charges that he should have brought it to the bank, which is the approved behaviour in the rabbinic parable. This may be an important clue in the comparison of the various versions.

The rabbinic *mashal* has the opposition “multiplying vs. spending,” whereas the New Testament Gospels use the opposition “multiplying vs. hiding.” In both sources, multiplying is the recommended behaviour. The Gospel of the Nazarenes contains three ways of dealing with the property, two of which overlap with either one of the other two sources: hiding, multiplying (cf. Talents and Minas), and multiplying and spending (cf. Denars)—with the nuance that the Gospel of the Nazarenes explicitly depicts spending as immoral behaviour. What is common in all three gospels, each of which features three slaves, is that one of the three is punished harshly by the master. In the synoptic versions, the punished slave is the one who hides, and in the Gospel of the Nazarenes, the one who squanders. In the rabbinic parable, which has only two categories, the son who spends his inherited denar is merely punished implicitly, in that he is left “with nothing.”

The third important level of difference concerns the application. In the Gospel of the Nazarenes, an application is not extant. Strictly speaking, only the rabbinic parable contains a *nimshal* (“Even so is it with the disciples of the wise ...”). Yet we have seen that both New Testament versions conclude with a saying whose function is similar to that of a *nimshal*. According to this saying, the one who has little will get even less, and the one who has more, shall receive even more. This ties in well with the *mashal* proper in Matthew, where the slave who received the smallest amount does not multiply but eventually even loses it, while the one who started out with most gains most. In Luke, where each slave receives the same amount, the application only fits the outcome, where the one who made the most profit gets even more, and the one

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47 See note 41 above. Pesiq. Rav Kah 14:5 (the second *mashal*, about Pharaoh), which is adduced as a parallel to the New Testament parables of the Talents and the Minas by Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 249n25, 250n30; Peter Dschulnigg, *Rabbinische Gleichnisse und das Neue Testament: Die Gleichnisse Der PesK im Vergleich mit den Gleichnissen Jesu und dem Neuen Testament*, JudChr 12 (Bern: Lang, 1988), 295–297, seems rather to focus on the importance of “saving” in the simple sense of preservation, without accumulation. I think, therefore, that the present parable of the Denars serves better for comparison with the Talents and the Minas.

who made no profit loses everything. The rabbinic parable similarly ends with a saying, taken from Prov 13:11. This proverb is suggestive of a message opposite to that in the New Testament Gospels, implying that the one who has a lot can lose it fast, but the one who has a little can/should slowly increase it. Despite the concluding saying in the Gospels, this message is in line with the master's rebuke of the third slave in the *mashal* proper, when he charges that he should have brought his money to the bank where it could (slowly) grow. Could this mean that in the end (or perhaps even originally), the message of the New Testament and the rabbinic parables is not so different after all?

## 2 The Torah-Money *Bildfeld*

Considering the great similarities in the scheme along which these parables are built as well as the topic of money, how can the different applications in the two New Testament versions, at least in their present form, be explained?<sup>48</sup> I believe that it is safe to say that the parable of the Denars is rather predictable from a rabbinic Jewish perspective, because its application is “Torah”: one who saves, studies, and invests in Torah does well, whereas one who neglects Torah may forget (lose) it the moment he stops learning. Rabbinic parables are rife with application to “Torah,” which is even a standard trope.<sup>49</sup> Torah is compared to almost everything in rabbinic *meshalim*, including treasures, money, silver, or gold.<sup>50</sup>

The combination of a special Torah focus and the use of financial metaphors for Torah is deserving of further attention. First, concern for Torah, both the study of Torah and observance of Torah commandments, can already be found in works from the Second Temple Period, such as Ben Sira, Jubilees, Proverbs,<sup>51</sup> Qoheleth,<sup>52</sup> some of the Dead Sea Scrolls,<sup>53</sup> and in several books of the New

48 The evaluation of the Gospel of the Nazarenes will follow later.

49 See Dschulnigg, *Rabbinische Gleichnisse*, 12–13. He sees a similar, unilateral focus in the New Testament parables in the *Basileia*, the kingdom of God. See also below.

50 In Song Rab. 1:1, 8 Torah is compared to a gold coin, which a king loses, and a parable to a candle, which the king then uses to find it. See also Song Rab. 1:1, 9. Cf. the “lost coin” in Luke 15:8–9, where a woman uses a candle to find a coin.

51 See Evert Tuinstra, “Torah in Spreuken,” *ACEBT* 31 (2017): 21–30.

52 Qoh 12:13–14. See Stuart Weeks, “‘Fear God and Keep his Commandments’: Could Qohelet have said this?” in *Wisdom and Torah: The Reception of ‘Torah’ in the Wisdom Literature of the Second Temple Period*, ed. Bernd Schipper and David Andrew Teeter, JSJSup 163 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 101–117.

53 Elisa Uusimäki, *Turning Proverbs towards Torah: An Analysis of 4Q525*, STDJ 117 (Leiden: Brill, 2016), argues that the author of 4Q525 seeks to demonstrate that true wisdom is found in the concept of Torah.

Testament, including the Gospel of Matthew, the Epistle of James, Hebrews, and Revelation.<sup>54</sup> Yet in the biblical and extra-biblical wisdom literature, it is rather wisdom (Chokhmah, Sophia) that represents, even personifies, the keeping of the biblical commandments, as does the Logos in Hellenistic Jewish literature, mainly in Philo.<sup>55</sup>

Second, silver and gold, familiar metaphors for wisdom in pre-rabbinic Judaism,<sup>56</sup> were applied to the Torah by the rabbinic sages.<sup>57</sup> The use of financial metaphors for Torah can be considered a *Bildfeld* in rabbinic literature.<sup>58</sup> Only the self-evident way in which metaphors of riches and money are used to denote wisdom and Torah can explain the use of verbs such as acquiring, stealing, wasting, spending, multiplying, and saving for Torah and wisdom, which can only be understood in a metaphorical sense.<sup>59</sup>

It is, therefore, safe to assume that in the time of Jesus, and for Jesus himself, “saving” (שמר) the Torah in the sense of studying and keeping its commandments was a standard Jewish ideal,<sup>60</sup> and the use of the *Bildfeld* “wisdom-silver” or “Torah-coins” was familiar.<sup>61</sup>

54 For the New Testament, see Michael Tait and Peter Oakes, *Torah in the New Testament: Papers Delivered at the Manchester-Lausanne Seminar of June 2008*, LNTS 401 (London: T&T Clark, 2009). For the Second Temple period in general, and most notably sources from Hellenistic Judaism, see Lawrence H. Schiffman, “Second Temple Period Rationales for the Torah’s Commandments,” *DI* 32 (2018): 55–76.

55 Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), esp. parts 2 and 3; Lieve M. Teugels, “Wijsheid als Tora in de Rabbijnse Interpretatie,” *ACEBT* 31 (2017): 31–39.

56 See, e.g., Prov. 2:4; 3:14–15; 1:9; 3:22; 4:9; 7:3; 8:10–11; 18–19, 21 (jewels); 14:24; Ben Sira 1:17, 25; 21:21; 51:28. For the Dead Sea Scrolls, see CT Levi ar, col.f: “the treasure of wisdom” (אוצר חוכמה) which can be “acquired” (קנה)—compare the chapter “*kinian torah*” in m. Avot 6); cf.; 4Q214a: “They cannot steal the treasure of wisdom” (cf. Martínez and Tigchelaar, *Dead Sea Scrolls*, 455); see also 4Q177: “The words of YHWH are pure words, silver ...” (Martínez and Tigchelaar, *Dead Sea Scrolls*, 365). Cf. Teugels, “Wijsheid als Tora”; Schipper and Teeter, *Wisdom and Torah*, 149.

57 Boyarin, *Border Lines*, 129: “transfer [of] all Logos and Sophia talk to the Torah alone.” See, e.g., Gen Rab. 2; Midr. Prov. 8.

58 Harald Weinrich, “Münze und Wort. Untersuchungen an einem Bildfeld,” in *Sprache in Texten*, ed. Harald Weinrich (Stuttgart: Klett, 1976), 276–290, takes the *Bildfeld* “Wortmünze” as an example. This comes very close to the *Bildfeld* “Torah-money” discussed here. The Hellenistic-Jewish *logos*-theory advanced by Philo, where the word “logos,” which means “word,” is often used instead of Torah, can be considered a bridge between the two *Bildfelds*.

59 See Teugels, “Wijsheid als Tora,” 31–39.

60 This has to be distinguished from developments in the early church after Jesus’s death, when certain strands of Christendom started to include non-Jews without requiring them to keep all the commandments of Torah.

61 Eric Ottenheim, “Finding Pearls: Matthew 13:45–46 and Rabbinic Literature,” in *Hebrew Texts in Jewish, Christian and Muslim Surroundings*, ed. Klaas Spronk and Eveline van



In the synoptic parables, the master's expectation with respect to the behaviour of the overseers shifts midway: he does not reproach the third slave that he should have multiplied the deposit ten- or fivefold, but tells him that he should have put it in the bank, where it could have grown slowly and steadily. This financial metaphor is exactly the same as the one used in the parable of the Denars, where it is explicitly applied to Torah: "He who gathers little by little increases" (Prov 13:11).

### 2.1 *Modifying and Repurposing the Bildfeld*

Could it be that the parables of the Talents and the Minas are also about Torah, albeit not in the same way as the rabbinic parable? That the opposition in the two synoptic parables is not between multiplying and spending, as in the rabbinic parable, but between multiplying and hiding, is a complexity indicating that the opposition between doing or studying Torah, and thus multiplying it, and neglecting and thus wasting it, is not the main focus here. The focus is rather on the fact that hiding is not the correct way.

Joachim Jeremias suggested that these parables may originally have referred to "Law,"<sup>62</sup> or "the Word of God," especially as it had been entrusted to the Pharisees and scribes as the contemporary authorities,<sup>63</sup> but received a secondary application in the respective Gospels where the Gospel editors placed them among the *parousia* parables.<sup>64</sup> It should be clear that I utterly disagree with Jeremias's conclusion that Jesus's audience would "have applied the figure to the Jewish people to whom so much had been entrusted but who had not made use of their trust."<sup>65</sup> Being Jews themselves, they could hardly have thought so.

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Staalduine-Sulman, ssn 69 (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 231–251, discusses a similar *Bildfeld*, namely that of pearls. In his study, he does not find conclusive evidence that pearls stood for Torah and commandments as early as the first century CE, but he does find clear references for the Amoraic period. The *Bildfeld* coins/silver as a reference to Torah is similar to that of pearls, but not the same. Pearls are typically meant to be preserved and cannot be multiplied. Due to the use of the silver/gold-Torah comparison in wisdom literature, as noted above, I do believe that this *Bildfeld* was known and active beneath the New Testament parables under discussion here.

62 Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, 61.

63 Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, 61–62.

64 Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, 56–62. Luz refers to the "Matthean interpretation of the parable," thus distinguishing it from the "original" parable (i.e., the parable as told and intended by Jesus), which merely referred to the "final judgement" (*Matthew 21–28*, 255 and passim).

65 Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, 61.

Yet we cannot deny that certain conflicts between religious groups in the first century are apparent in the New Testament, as they are in other Jewish sources of the time (Josephus, Dead Sea Scrolls). The parables of the Talents and the Minas may reflect a critique, either by Jesus himself or by the gospel author, of a certain way of interpreting the Torah and its commandments. This is in line with the presentation of Jesus, especially by Matthew, as someone who highlighted certain commandments and practices as part of his conflict over authority with groups that are repeatedly named in the Gospels, such as the Pharisees and the “rabbis.” The Gospels abound with examples of differences in the interpretation of rules, such as healing on shabbat (Mark 3:5–6// Matt 12:13–14// Luke 6:10–11) or divorce (Mark 10:2–12; Matt 19:3–9), and certain practices, such as the large *tefillin* worn by the Pharisees (Matt 23:5). Eric Ottenheim has demonstrated that the similarities between Jesus (as presented by Matthew) and competing Jewish religious leaders are often closer than the differences, but that the exaggeration of the differences in practices and language, the latter being relevant for the modification of the *Bildfeld* and the specific formulation of the parables, formed part of a struggle over influence and authority.<sup>66</sup> Despite the differences, a shared focus on Torah and commandments remains, and would be, specifically due to certain differences in interpretation, a likely topic for a teacher to address in his parables.

On the other hand, the suggestion that the parable of the Talents and Minas was in fact already meant by Jesus as a reference to the more or less imminent arrival of the kingdom of God, should not be discarded. Indeed, it is the most obvious understanding of the parables in Matthew and Luke. In the literary contexts of the Gospels, “investing” means being alert and prepared for the coming of the kingdom. “Hiding,” on the other hand, means not being ready for or delaying the kingdom. This message is also advanced in other New Testament kingdom parables, such as the Hidden Lamp (Matt 5:14–16; Mark 4:21; Luke 11:33) and the Leaven Hidden in the Dough (Matt 13:33; Luke 13:20–21).

Finally, what can we say about the version in the Gospel of the Nazarenes? Because of its fragmentary character, without a literary context or application, we miss the necessary tools to evaluate its message. As it stands, it seems less shocking, because it is more predictable in that the slave who displays

66 Eric Ottenheim, “Matthew and Yavne: Religious Authority in the Making?,” in *Jews and Christians in the First and Second Centuries: The Interbellum 70–132 CE*, ed. Joshua J. Schwartz and Peter J. Tomson, CRINT 15 (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 378–400, esp. 380, describes the relationship of Matthew and other religious authorities as one of “social competition,” whereby the practices of other groups are defined as “contrary or even hostile to one’s own practices or language, even if actual differences may appear to be rather limited or even negligible.”

obviously unethical behaviour is punished. Maybe this parable teller wanted to mitigate the harsh effect of the New Testament versions, possibly because he did not understand the *parousia* application. But it is more plausible that he deliberately treated it as a parable about Torah, possibly with an ethical take on what “keeping the commandments” means. The fact that this version of the Talents adds the third category of “spending” to the categories of “hiding” and “multiplying” in the Synoptic Gospels is indicative of a more standard Jewish reading, as also witnessed in the (later) parable of the Denars, which opposes “saving = multiplying” to “spending.”

### 3 Shock Effect

The three “Christian” versions of the parable contain several unexpected, even shocking, elements that draw the attention of the audience. Even without the application of the figure of the landlord to God, the presentation of the landlord as a capitalist only interested in profit, whatever the means, remains bewildering. This is in keeping with Jesus’s style in other parables, such as the Smart Manager (Luke 16:1–8) and the Judge and the Widow (Luke 18:1–7).<sup>67</sup> Most shocking is the harsh punishment levied on the one who has committed a relatively minor offence, if any, such as hiding a coin.

Significantly, such shock effect is not reserved for the parables of Jesus alone, nor do all Jesus’s parables have an equally strong shock effect. One of the key stages in Yonah Fraenkel’s analysis of the rabbinic *mashal* is the recognition of the “breaking of the pattern of the mashal.”<sup>68</sup> Fraenkel explains how, wherever a strange, unexpected, or exaggerated element shows up, there the theological message shines through, even in *meshalim* that are mostly exegetical. Clemens Thoma and Simon Lauer mean something similar when they refer to the *chiddush* that is essential to every good *mashal*.<sup>69</sup> Here too the sole *memashel* of the New Testament Gospels resembled his later Jewish colleagues.

67 Cf. Luz, *Matthew* 21–28, 250.

68 דגם פריצת דגם המשל See Fraenkel, *Darkhei ha-aggadah*, 330–337. The pattern itself he calls “basic pattern of the plot of the mashal” (דגם היסוד של עלילת המשל). In a similar way, Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, states that “such expressions break the boundaries of the story so that the intended reality shows through” (532).

69 See C. Thoma, S. Lauer, and H. Ernst, *Die Gleichnisse der Rabbinen. 1. Tl.: Pesiqtā deRav Kahanā (PesK): Einleitung, Übersetzung, Parallelen, Kommentar, Texte* (Bern: Lang, 1986), 22.

#### 4 Torah or *Parousia*?

Can we conclude that the parables of the Talents and the Minas are about Torah? My own conclusion is that they are *also* about Torah. They do have an eschatological message, but this message does not exclude Torah or obedience to the commandments. The “Torah” and the “Parousia” applications can be easily combined, for how else would one prepare for the coming of the kingdom than by living according to the Torah (as Jesus understood it).<sup>70</sup> On the contrary, a specific view on Torah, which may differ on certain points from the interpretations of the Torah given by the Pharisees and other contemporaries and possible opponents of Jesus, is part and parcel of the eschatological message.

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<sup>70</sup> Cf. Dschulnigg, *Rabbinische Gleichnisse*, 13–14: “Aber auch dieser tiefgreifende Differenz trennt die Gleichnisse der Rabbinen und Jesu nicht absolut, da sowohl Tora wie Reich Gottes die Totalität der Gotteserfahrung, Gottesbeziehung wie Verpflichtung gegenüber Gott zum Ausdruck bringen.”

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## On Fields, the Poor Human Condition, and the Advantage of One Teacher: Four Rabbinic Parables in Avot de Rabbi Nathan

*Marcel Poorthuis*

Students of the New Testament are well aware that many parables exist in more than one version. The attempt to reconstruct the “original version” has given way to an assessment of each version in its own context. Even when parables are quite similar, there may be considerable differences in their respective context in the gospel. More often, both wording and context show peculiarities of their own, such as the parable of the Talents in Matt 25 compared with the parable of the Pounds in Luke 19, the parable of the Meal in Luke 14 and Matt 22, and the parable of the Vineyard and the Wicked Tenants in all three Synoptic Gospels. Many rabbinic parables exist in more than one version, but there are nearly always vast differences in context.

The four rabbinic parables, in two pairs, that I want to discuss here are quite unique in their kind, because they stem from two highly synoptic texts: Avot de Rabbi Nathan version A (Avot R. Nath. A) and Avot de Rabbi Nathan version B (Avot R. Nath. B). Both are commentaries on the tractate Mishnah Avot, also called Pirkei Avot. The sequence of the wisdom sayings commented upon in Avot de Rabbi Nathan differs somewhat from the sequence in tractate Pirkei Avot as we know it from the Mishnah. Although the final redaction of Pirkei Avot was later than that of the rest of the Mishnah, the basic structure of Avot de Rabbi Nathan A and B betrays a structure of Avot from before 220 CE. In spite of this, much narrative material may have been added later on, in the course of the third to fifth centuries CE.<sup>1</sup>

Although the parallel between the two tractates is somewhat less than suggested by Schechter’s edition (in which certain chapters are rearranged to fit the synoptic presentation of the text), the overall similarity between Avot de

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1 Antony J. Saldarini, *Scholastic Rabbinism: A Literary Study of the Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan*, BJS 14 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982), 140–141. Menachem Kister (see footnote 3) even claims a post-Amoraic final redaction of Avot de Rabbi Nathan, but the difference between late additions and a late redaction must be kept in mind. In any case, none of our four parables seem to contain traces of a post-Amoraic redaction.

Rabbi Nathan A and B remains striking.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, mutual influence can hardly be proven, and it is more probable that the two had a common *Vorlage*. While several studies have tried to establish the relationship between versions A and B, these efforts have not yielded a satisfying conclusion.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, the many manuscripts containing the text of Avot de Rabbi Nathan A (eight) and Avot de Rabbi Nathan B (three) have not yet been arranged according to their stemmas. Our study will be limited to a synoptic comparison of the selected texts in the manuscripts, even enabling a reconstruction of a rabbinic parable in its integrity. Although we will not propose a causal relationship and chronological sequence between the manuscripts, our parables may offer important new insights into the relationship between them.

## 1 The First Pair of Parables: Two Versions of the Parable of the Inferior Field

The two parables about the inferior field featuring in Avot de Rabbi Nathan A and B deal with a striking paradoxical theme: the frailty or even wickedness of the human condition.<sup>4</sup> Both parables are told in the context of an exposition on the *yezer hara'*, the evil inclination.

### 1.1 *The First Version of the Parable of the Inferior Field: Avot R. Nath. A 16*

Let us first deal with the parable in Avot R. Nath. A 16. The *yezer hara'* is supposed to be present in each human being (but not in animals) from birth, "for

2 Hans-Jürgen Becker, *Avot de-Rabbi Natan: Synoptische Edition beider Versionen*, TSAJ 116 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), hereafter "Becker," offers all the manuscripts of both versions. He rightly states: "Die Fassungen stimmen längst nicht so weitgehend überein wie sich ihre synoptische Darstellung bei Schechter auf den ersten Blick vermuten lässt" (ix). Becker has devoted a separate edition to the Genizah fragments.

3 The most thorough study remains Menahem Kister, *Avot de Rabbi Nathan: Schechter Edition with References to Parallels in the Two Versions* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1997 [Hebrew]), and even more elaborate are his *Studies in Avot de-Rabbi Nathan: Text, Redaction and Interpretation* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1998 [Hebrew]). In spite of this, he has not succeeded in preparing a stemmatic analysis. Becker's edition offers a much more transparent overview, but he leaves out the quotations of Avot de Rabbi Nathan in later commentaries. Chaim Milikowsky has been rightly critical of synoptic editions without any attempt at a stemmatic analysis, but one should acknowledge the tremendous advantage which Becker's editions of the manuscripts of Avot de Rabbi Nathan A and B and of the Genizah fragments have over Schechter's edition, let alone over searching all kinds of "minor midrashim." See: Chaim Milikowsky, "Further on Editing Rabbinic texts," *JQR* 90 (1999): 137–149.

4 I thank the members of the Talmud study group at the Tilburg School of Theology (Esther van Eenennaam, Jan de Pagter, Jonathan Pater, Martijn Stoutjesdijk, and Zohar van Tijn) for discussing these parables with me.



the first drop a man puts into a woman is the *yezer hara'*, which truly lies at the opening of the heart," referring to Gen 4:7 (Avot R. Nath. A 16 [Becker 168]). This opening is followed by the parable itself. There are seven manuscripts available for the parable in question in Avot de Rabbi Nathan A, which show no essential differences. The dating of the manuscripts, which come roughly from the fifteenth to the sixteenth century CE, has little to tell us about the priority of the versions. I follow the text of the *editio princeps Venedig*:

Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai said: From here we know that Israel will never see the inside of Gehenna. They tell a parable. To what may this be likened? It is like a king of flesh and blood who had an inferior field. Some men came along and rented it for ten *kor* of wheat per year. They fertilized it, tilled it, irrigated it,<sup>5</sup> and cleared it, and they did not collect from it more than one *kor* of wheat per year.

The king said to them: What is this? They said to him: Our lord and king! You know that this field that you gave us, from the outset you did not collect anything from it and even now that we fertilized it, cleared, and irrigated it with water, they collected<sup>6</sup> no more than one *kor* of wheat.

Likewise in the future Israel shall say to the Holy One blessed be He: Lord of the world, You know about the *yezer hara'*, that he tempts us, as it is said: "For He knows our inclination (*yezer*)."<sup>7</sup>

רבי שמעון בן יוחי אמר מכאן שאין  
 ישראל רואין פני גהינם לעולם משלו  
 משל למה דבר דומה למלך בשר ודם  
 שהיה לו שדה זבורית באו בני אדם  
 והשכירוהו בעשרת כורין חטים בשנה  
 זבלוה עדרוהו השקוהו וכסוהו ולא  
 הכניסו ממנה אלא כור חטים בשנה  
 אמר להם המלך מהו זה אמרו לו אדננו  
 המלך אתה יודע בשדה שנתת לנו  
 שמתחלה לא הכנסת ממנה כלום ועכשיו  
 שזבלנוה וכיסחנוה והשקינהו  
 מים לא הכניסו ממנה אלא כור אחד  
 חטים בלבד  
 כך עתידים ישראל לומר  
 לפני הק"ב רבו" של עולם אתה יודע  
 ביצר הרע שהוא מסיתת בנו שנ' כי הוא  
 ידע יצרנו

5 I translate "cleared" (< KSH), emending it from the other versions. MS New York Rab. 25 adds: "they twisted it"; the meaning of this clause is uncertain, but it was undoubtedly meant as a narrative embellishment.

6 MS Oxford Opp. 95, MS New York Rab. 25, MS New York Rab. 50, and MS Oxford Opp. 247 read: "we collected" (Becker 170).

7 "For He knows how we were made; He remembers that we are dust" (Ps 103:14 NRSV). In translations, "yizrenu" is often interpreted as "our formation," but in our parable as "our (evil) impulse."

1.1.1 The *Mashal* Proper of the Parable of the Inferior Field:  
Avot R. Nath. A 16

Let us take a closer look at this curious parable. Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai is, like many other rabbis quoted in Avot de Rabbi Nathan, a *tanna* from the beginning of the second century CE. We cannot be sure, however, of the date of this parable. Furthermore, the parable is a so-called king-parable, which does not mean that a king was the main character from the outset: there is a tendency in parables to transform a parable into a king parable even if a landlord or master of the house (Heb. *ba'al ha bayit*; Gk. *oikodespotēs*) would be more suitable, as in our case.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the king does not appear as a contrast with God's behaviour, but serves as an illustration of it.<sup>9</sup>

As in other parables, the parable of the Inferior Field has an element of astonishment to it, meant to shock the audience: the king demands ten *kor*, probably not in advance, but from the harvest (cf. Luke 16:7 for a *kor*). The tenant (Heb. *arīs*; Gk. *geōrgos*; cf. the wicked tenants in Mark 12:1) are to be distinguished from both the servant/slave (Heb. *eved*; Gk. *doulos*; cf. Matt 25:14 and esp. Luke 17:7–10) and the labourer (Heb. *po'el*; Gk. *ergatēs*; cf. the labourers in the vineyard in Matt 20:1).<sup>10</sup> A slave does not receive a salary but may be rewarded and a labourer agrees to work for a fixed wage in cash, but a tenant must give a considerable part of the harvest to the owner of the field.<sup>11</sup>

The relationship between *arīs* and landlord is quite a delicate one: both could suffer under the selfish behaviour of the other. Especially when the amount from the harvest to be ceded to the owner has been agreed upon ahead of time and the harvest fails to meet expectations, the tenant can find himself

8 Cf. the parable of the Banquet in Luke 14:15–24 (“somebody”) and in Matt 22:1–14 (“a king”); parable of the Talents in Matt 25:14–30 (“a human being, somebody”) and of the Pounds in Luke 19:11–27 (“a highborn person to become king”); and see the two parables about the Jar and the Scorpion in Avot R. Nath. A and B 1.

9 David Stern, “Rhetoric and Midrash: the Case of the Mashal,” *Prooftexts* 1 (1981): 261–291, overestimates the king's parables as contrast (268). For a comparison between king's parables as contrast and as similarity, see Marcel Poorthuis, “The Invasion of the King: The Virtual Mashal as Foundation of Storytelling,” in *Parables in Changing Contexts: Essays of the Study of Parables in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism*, ed. Eric Ottenheijm and Marcel Poorthuis, JCP 35 (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 205–225.

10 For a collection of rabbinic parables about a *po'el*, see Catherine Hezser, *Lohnmetaphorik und Arbeitswelt in Mt 20, 1–16: Das Gleichnis von den Arbeitern im Weinberg im Rahmen rabbinischer Lohngleichnisse*, NTOA 15 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990), 301–310. Our parables do not deal with labourers who receive wages.

11 See Gustav Dalman, *Arbeit und Sitte in Palästina* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1964), 155–159. In addition, there is the *hoker* and the *sokher*, the difference between them having to do with paying a fixed sum of money, irrespective of the harvest. This does not need to detain us further. Cf. t. Demai 6:2.

in a difficult plight. In rabbinic literature, tenants are advised to flatter their landlord, especially when the harvest is bad.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, the midrash criticizes a landlord when he praises his own vineyard for a good harvest, but chides his tenants in case of a poor harvest.<sup>13</sup> The moment when the harvest was presented to the landlord must have been a delicate one: Would the landlord be satisfied, or would he suspect the tenants to have kept more than the agreed share of the harvest for themselves? And if the landlord demanded more than was offered him, what would that imply for the tenant's daily life? It is no wonder that regulations were needed to prevent landowners from staking a claim on the land tilled by the tenant (see y. B. Bat. 14a/3.6[4]).<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, one parable describes how tenants (*'arīsim*) rob the king who owns the field (Sifre Deut. 312), a *mashal* possibly reflecting real-life problems between tenants and the landowner. Again, the king comes in the place of the landowner as the regular protagonist of parables.<sup>15</sup>

Using parables to assess the socio-cultural background is a tricky business. Parables may describe a "pseudo-realistic" state of affairs meant to astonish the hearer. In our case, however, the astonishment is not provided by the *mashal* about the severe landlord. As is often the case in parables, the narrative embellishments (fertilising, tilling, etc.) do not add to the message of the parable, and precisely because of that they may contain reliable information about how such work was done. In contrast, the portion of the harvest demanded by the owner may be exaggerated.<sup>16</sup>

We have seen how non-parabolic texts likewise describe a sometimes-problematic relationship between landlord and tenant. The element of surprise is not lacking in our parable, however, but is created by the application of the severe landlord's behaviour to God!<sup>17</sup> Hence, in this case it is the *nimshal* that contains a genuine surprise or shock for the audience.

Sometimes God's behaviour is contrasted positively with that of a human landlord/king of flesh and blood. For instance, the human agent only gives a single coin to a labourer who has worked, ploughed, sown, and weeded. God, in contrast, gives human beings children, wisdom, and possessions (Mekh. R. Ishm. Shirata 8 [Lauterbach]). But the opposite happens in our parable: the cunning behaviour of the landlord is compared to God's dealings with human

12 Lev. Rab. 5:8.

13 Pesiq. Rab Kah. 16; Pesiq. Rab. 29–30(A9). Cf. Exod. Rab. 43:9.

14 Ze'ev Safrai, *The Economy of Roman Palestine* (London: Routledge, 1994), 335.

15 Safrai, *The Economy*, 336.

16 Cf. Matt 18:24: a debt of ten thousand talents; or Sifre Deut. 26: a loan of 1000 *kor* each year, which amounts to roughly 230 m<sup>3</sup>.

17 See also Teugels's contribution in this volume.

beings. In spite of all the efforts they exerted, the tenants do not manage to harvest more than one *kor*.

1.1.2 The *Nimshal* of the Parable of the Inferior Field: Avot R. Nath. A 16 In a way, the application (*nimshal*) of the story points to the impossibility of fulfilling one's obligation, which is described as a kind of dead-end street, a road without issue.<sup>18</sup> In addition, one is reminded of the parable of the Talents in the Gospel of Matthew, in which the metaphor of the harvest plays a central role as well, in spite of the fact that the parable itself deals with talents.<sup>19</sup>

Although the context deals not with tenants but with slaves, the New Testament parable likewise refers to harvest, while alluding to the absence of the large estate owner. The social situation of the tenant and the large estate owner is particularly apt for parables, as the king/owner of the estate/master is often portrayed as temporarily absent. This absence is often due to a journey, but here it reflects the social circumstances of the large estate owner who receives his income from the estate while living in the city. On the level of the *nimshal*, this absence denotes the responsibility granted to humankind to act responsibly in view of the final reckoning, indicated by the return of the master.<sup>20</sup> The predominance of tenants over slaves in "king" parables about a field is as such no proof of their predominance in the social reality, but demonstrates the particular aptitude of this *Bildfeld* for illustrating the human condition before God.<sup>21</sup>

The harsh behaviour of the master who, according to Matt 25:46, reaps where he has not sown, has baffled many commentators. Joachim Jeremias is convinced that Jesus would never have applied this clause to himself, as the returning Son of Man, the master being "raffgierig hinter dem Gelde her ... rücksichtslos auf den eigenen Vorteil bedacht."<sup>22</sup> There is no doubt, however,

18 See Marcel Poorthuis, "Between Jesus and Kafka: The Parables of Seder Eliyahu," *NTT* 70 (2016): 224–235, in which the "impossibility" of parables plays a central role.

19 "Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter?'" (Matt 25:24–26, italics are mine).

20 In New Testament parables, the return of the master should not always be interpreted as the return of Christ, since many rabbinic parables likewise contain this motif of the master's absence and return.

21 Safrai, *The Economy*, 336, possibly jumps too quickly from the level of the *Bildfeld* to the social reality.

22 Joachim Jeremias, *Die Gleichnisse Jesu* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1978), 41.

that the rabbinic parables, which do not reckon with a returning Messiah, apply this behaviour to God himself. Likewise, there is no reason to doubt that the parable in the Gospel of Matthew originally contained an application to God.<sup>23</sup> Craig Evans argues that the original version would have been preserved in Gos. Naz. 18, in which the servant who hides the money entrusted to him may have been accepted with joy and in any case was not subjected to punishment.<sup>24</sup> In my opinion, this version of the parable is rather an attempt at harmonization, which was effected when the anomalous character of the parables was no longer understood.

The anomaly in the parable of the Talents is as clear as in our parable of the Tenants. The servants were not given any instructions, hence the behaviour of the one who hid the talent in the ground is fully comprehensible.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, his master charges that he chose the wrong course of action.

It is necessary to distinguish between two different motifs in these parables: parables that emphasize the return of an entrusted deposit in its integrity, and parables that demand gain. While the latter motif of growth can be related both to harvesting and to increasing the entrusted sum, the motif of the return of the deposit—often a treasure, a pearl, or a deposit entrusted by a friend—emphasizes the importance of careful preservation.<sup>26</sup> This is the case in the parable about the Deposit of a King Returned Unharmed.

In contrast, the motif of increase may be applied to human responsibility to work productively with that with which one has been entrusted. Often, but not always, the entrusted good has to be returned. However, the parable, which is quoted below, deals with a gift, applied to the land: A king gives his servant a field as a gift, and the servant plants a vineyard upon it. Hence he improves the gift (Sifre Deut. 8). In rabbinic literature, this increase is related to such maxims as: “If you have studied much Torah, do not claim merit for yourself, for to this purpose you have been created” (m. Avot 2:8), or Hillel’s maxim: “Whoever does not increase diminishes” (m. Avot 1:14).<sup>27</sup>

23 Cf. the similar parable of the Corn and Flax Entrusted to Two Servants in S. Eli. Rab. 2. One slave/servant uses the corn and flax to prepare a banquet for his master upon his return from his journey, while the other hides it in the ground.

24 Craig Evans, *Ancient Texts for New Testament Studies: A Guide to the Background Literature* (Michigan: Baker Academic, 2005), 330–333.

25 For a recommendation to hide money in the ground, see b. B. Mets. 42a.

26 The *nimshal* emphasizes the importance of returning the soul as pure as one has received it. See also Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai’s son, who died as a young Torah scholar (Avot R. Nath. A 14). Even the Torah can be symbolized with a precious and unique treasure to be guarded carefully (cf. Deut. Rab. 8:5).

27 The confusion about the servant in the parable of the Talents according to the Gospel of the Nazarenes mentioned above, who did nothing with what had been entrusted to

Our rabbinic parable of the Entrusted Field, as well as the parables of the Talents and the Pounds, emphasize the obligation to increase. Still, the demands are out of proportion. Later on we will see that in the second version of the rabbinic parable of the Entrusted Field, the king's behaviour is even worse and should be considered outright insulting and greedy. At the same time, both versions want to emphasize the tenants' futile aspirations to satisfy the master's greed. Even that is no reason to desist from the effort.

Similar to the parable of the Talents and the Pounds, our parable of the Inferior Field emphasizes the master's greed. However, our parable gives a remarkable twist to this master's severe demand by giving the tenants' protest its due. This becomes particularly clear in the *nimshal* in which the demanding master forms only one aspect of God's attitude to Israel.

1.1.3 The Meaning of the *Nimshal* of the Parable of the Inferior Field:  
Avot. R. Nath. A 16

The *nimshal* of the parable is not meant as an accusation, but as an excuse for Israel's poor moral behaviour. Due to the evil inclination which takes possession of a person from birth, the struggle cannot be but uneven. God knows about the evil inclination—He created it Himself—and He should take that into account. This explains why, according to our parable, in a paradoxical way, precisely because of the poor human condition, Israel will not see the inside of Gehenna. This may be an allusion to the well-known dictum that “all of Israel has a share in the World to Come” (m. Sanh. 10:1), incidentally followed by some noteworthy exceptions.<sup>28</sup> The parable does not focus explicitly upon the fate of the gentiles, but one may assume that they will only escape Gehenna in exceptional cases, since they do not possess the antidote against the evil inclination, namely the Torah. Hence, Israel will not be saved from Gehenna because of its exemplary behaviour, but because of the poor human condition.

One may be inclined to think here of a polemical thrust against the idea of original sin in Christianity, understood as the condemnation of all the non-baptized—i.e., non-Christians—to hell.<sup>29</sup> The *yezer hara'* does show some similarities with the notion of original sin, since both reign from birth on. However, according to the parable, neither redemption nor baptism is

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him and was still not punished for it, may have been caused by a conflation of these two motifs.

28 The same topic is dealt with in Avot R. Nath. A 36, and at the end in Avot R. Nath. A 41.

29 As such, this is of course a misguided depiction of the Christian conviction, but we are dealing with its possible perception within Judaism and not with the theological intricacies.

necessary, and God's benevolent understanding will be enough. However, the text is too succinct to assess the parable as a polemical thrust against early Christianity with certainty. The quotation from Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai is lacking in the parable of Avot R. Nath. B, and may be considered a "floating logion," betraying as it does a somewhat different context.

1.2 *The Second Version of the Parable of the Inferior Field:  
Avot R. Nath. B 30*

This brings us to the parallel parable in Avot R. Nath. B 30. For this parable there are two manuscripts, including a Spanish manuscript from the thirteenth century, which is extremely early for a Hebrew manuscript (see Becker, p. xvii). I follow this manuscript, MS Parma de Rossi 327 (Becker 363), even though its early date does not necessarily imply priority over the (later) manuscripts, either here or in the case of Avot de Rabbi Nathan A. The other manuscript of Avot de Rabbi Nathan B, MS Vatican 303, is defective *ad locum*.

Again, the context deals with the *yezer hara'*, albeit in a much more condensed way than in Avot de Rabbi Nathan A. The parable is anonymous, and, as stated earlier, it lacks the introductory statement about Israel not seeing the inside of Gehenna present in Avot R. Nath. A 16. Instead, the text deals with the difference between animals and human beings, where the latter alone possess the evil impulse, "[f]or the evil impulse has been cast into him":

A parable. To what may it be compared? It is like a king who possessed many fields and he had one field which was so bad as no other field.

And the king said: "I will rent it to a tenant (*'arīs*)".<sup>30</sup>

And he rented it to a tenant. The tenant cleared it,<sup>31</sup> fertilized it, planted it, harvested the grain, winnowed it, and sifted it,

משל למה הדבר דומה למלך שהיו לו  
שדות הרבה והיה לו שדה אחת שלא היה  
לו שדה אחרת רעה כמותה  
ואמ' המלך לחכירה לאריס והבחירה  
לאריס גויה וזיבלה זרעה וקצרה דשה זרה  
בררה

ולא עשת אלא עשרת כורים ומה שעשת  
הכניסו בתוך ביתו של מלך אמ' לו המלך  
הבא את השאר אמ' לו אדני המלך אתה  
יודע שדה שלך

30 The status of an *'arīs*, a tenant, differs from that of a servant or a slave in that he is allowed to keep the rest of the profit. According to Asher Feldman, *The Parables and Similes of the Rabbis, Agricultural and Pastoral* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1924), 39, an *'arīs* tills the owner's ground for a fixed share of the produce. Feldman quotes a midrash which advises an *'arīs* to flatter his landlord when he discovers that his crop will be insufficient (40). Cf. also the parable by Rabbi Judah Hanasi about the vineyard of the king handed over to a tenant, who has the right to a certain portion, even when the king takes his own possession (Eccl. Rab. 5:10).

31 In the translation I follow Schechter's emendation to read NRH instead of GDH, GRH or GWYH.

but it yielded only ten *kor*.

He brought what the field produced into the house of the king.

The king said to him:

“Bring me the rest”. The tenant said: “My lord king, you know<sup>32</sup> that your field was so bad as no other field. What it produced I have already brought into your house”.

Likewise, in the future Israel will say to the Holy One blessed be He: “Lord of the world, You know the *yezer hara*’ (bad inclination) that you cast into us, as it (Scripture) says: “For the *yezer* of the human being is bad (from his youth)” (Gen 8:21).

Similarly it says: “For He knows our *yezer* (inclination), remember that we are dust.”

Ps. 103:14

שלא היה לך שדה אחרת רעה ממנה ומה  
שעשת כבר הכנסתי לתוך ביתך  
כך הם ישראל עתידין לומר לפני הקב"ה  
רבון העולם אתה יודע יצר הרע שנורקתה  
בנו  
שנ' כי יצר לב האדם רע. וכן הוא אומ' כי  
הוא ידע יצרנו זכור כי עפר אנחנו

1.2.1 The *Mashal* of the Parable of the Inferior Field: Avot R. Nath. B 30  
Let us take a closer look at this parable. The *mashal* is slightly different compared to our first parable. The first parable only speaks of one field. It remains unclear whether the king knew of its bad condition; it could be that the tenants only discovered this while harvesting. In the second parable, things are worse: the king possesses several fields and seems to rent the worst one to the tenant deliberately, knowing that he himself will have little success with it. No produce has been agreed upon beforehand. We should note that the plural of the first parable (*bene Adam*) has become a singular tenant here, which renders him even more vulnerable before the king in this situation. The field yields ten *kor* (which, incidentally was the portion of the produce agreed upon in the first parable, in which the field only produced one *kor*). The king is not satisfied and demands “the rest.” In a way, the demands of the king are even more outrageous than they were in the first parable, for nothing had been

32 MS Vatican 303 jumps from the first “you know” in the *mashal* to the second “you know” in the *nimshal*, skipping what is in between. I give what is lacking in italics: “You know that this field that you gave us, from the outset you did not collect anything from it and even now that we fertilized it, cleared, and irrigated it with water, they collected no more than one *kor* of wheat. Likewise, in the future Israel shall say to the Holy One blessed be He: Lord of the world, You know.”



agreed upon in regard to the yield ahead of time. The king seems, in fact, to be asking for the whole produce, which may even be interpreted as a violation of the tenant's rights. The tenant can only state that he has already brought the whole produce into the king's house. This parable emphasizes the visibility of the produce before the king more powerfully than our first parable does, which creates a harsher confrontation.

Like many parables, the story breaks off without a conclusion, and we do not get to hear whether the tenants and the king come to an agreement. Referring to Lessing's fable theory, David Flusser emphasizes that the hearer/reader of the parable is left behind, as it were, "at the middle of the road." The narrator is not prepared to satisfy the curiosity of the hearer/reader.<sup>33</sup> We will never know the end of the parable, probably because the hearer/reader is supposed to draw the conclusion himself. This constitutes the appealing aspect of the parable.

1.2.2 The *Nimshal* of the Parable of the Inferior Field: Avot R. Nath. B 30  
The application of the *nimshal* is similar to that of our first parable, with the exception that it adds one more scriptural reference. And that reference is telling, since the context in Scripture concerns the situation of the world after the flood. Noah brings a sacrifice, and God decides not to curse the earth anymore because of the human beings, "for the inclination (*yezer*) of the human heart is evil from his youth" (Gen 8:21). Although this statement is often interpreted as a sign of divine compassion on humanity, one might just as well interpret it as an avowal that human nature cannot be remedied. In that case, the divine compassion is rather directed at the earth, which had to suffer the flood due to human wickedness! The destruction of the earth has no use. It is possible that our parable takes the quotation in that sense, as if to suggest that human beings will never live up to God's demands due to their evil inclination.<sup>34</sup> One may even detect an allusion to the inferior field in the quotation that the human being "is but dust" (Ps 103:14).<sup>35</sup> The fact that God has decided not to

33 David Flusser, *Die rabbinischen Gleichnisse und der Gleichniserzähler Jesus*, vol. 1, *Das Wesen der Gleichnisse*, JudChr 4 (Bern: Lang 1981), 53, points to the New Testament parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (Matt 20:1–16). We will never know whether the earlier workers were eventually persuaded by the boss's explanation to give an equal wage to the "workers of the eleventh hour."

34 The same prooftext (Gen 8:21) to account for the frail human condition can be found in the more elaborate and later midrash of Exod. Rab. 46:4, in which the *yezer* (inclination) is connected to a parable about a potter (*yozer*) who is responsible for the flaws in the pottery. Likewise, God as Creator (*yozer*, Jer 18:6) is held responsible for the *yezer*.

35 I owe this insight to Adiel Kadari. The combination of Gen 8:21 and Ps 103:14 can be found in Gen. Rab. 34:10 as well.

destroy the earth anymore is taken as an indication that God is well aware of the frailty of the human condition. Again, God's benevolence is called upon—yet not because human beings deserve it, but because they cannot help acting in a poor way.<sup>36</sup>

In contrast with our first parable, antagonism between Jew and non-Jew does not play a role here. In our first parable, this antagonism was already somewhat awkward anyway, since the poor human condition is, after all, shared by all mankind and not a special prerogative of Israel. So how could this poor human condition explain a privileged position for Israel? It is not clear then why only Israel would escape Gehenna. This would hold good for all of humankind. The possible antidote of Torah does not play a role at all in our parable. It should furthermore be noted that the biblical proof-text is pre-Mosaic, which might render a reference to the Torah as antidote problematic.

### 1.3 *Conclusion*

Both parables emphasize God's extraordinary demands upon human beings. The plight of human nature, which is badly adapted to such demands, forms the surprising clue to both parables. The second parable is in its motif far more striking than the first: the tenants do not know how much they are supposed to hand over to the king; the king seems to be fully aware of the deplorable condition of the field in advance, while the tenants probably find out later; and the king insists that even the total harvest does not suffice as his share. Obviously, both parables want to emphasize the same application (*nimshal*), which is the poor human condition for which God Himself is held responsible, but the second parable is much sharper than the first in drawing a nearly malevolent portrait of the king.

From a theological point of view, God manifests Himself in two ways in these parables: on the one hand, as the demanding, severe master who will harvest even what he has not sown; on the other hand, and in the application, God is supposed to be full of understanding. He himself created human beings, including their evil inclination, and should understand the human predicament. It would be no exaggeration to see an example here of what Dov Weiss has felicitously called "pious irreverence."<sup>37</sup> Implicitly, God is taken to account

36 One gets the impression that the second parable is a reworking of the first parable, to render its message even more gripping. However, the relationship between the two parables can only be determined after investigating the entire text of Avot de Rabbi Nathan A and B, while also taking into account oral transmission.

37 Dov Weiss, *Pious Irreverence: Confronting God in Rabbinic Judaism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017). Weiss limits the "protest-genre" to the time after the Tannaitic period. If our text is really from the Tannaitic period, his periodization

for the creation of humankind. The evil in humankind is not denied, on the contrary, but the field was “lousy” from the outset. The human evil inclination has been there from the beginning, and it is not the consequence of human acts (as original sin is in a way, being caused by Adam). Hence, there is no prospect of getting rid of evil, which is ingrained in human existence. Complaints about it should not be directed to the human being but to his Creator. All this sounds very bold and irreverent, which may be why these thoughts have been wrapped in parables and attributed to biblical texts, instead of being packaged as the personal convictions of named rabbis.

However, this feature of parables should not be confined to the later type of rabbinic parables, in Amoraic literature, as Weiss argues.<sup>38</sup> Nor should it be attributed exclusively to the parables of Jesus.<sup>39</sup> We have here a salient feature of some parables, old and new, New Testament and rabbinic, which has probably been obscured by centuries of harmonising explanations.<sup>40</sup> It is worthwhile to throw full light upon this hidden challenge to mainstream religion. Although the protest element is not lacking in New Testament parables, Weiss’s argument about church fathers doing away with protest against God remains a challenge. It would imply a discontinuity of the creation of parables as a living narrative genre in Christian tradition (which is true) in favour of an allegorical reading of them (which is plausible as well). On the other hand, Weiss seems to recognize in the stories of Desert Fathers and monks a continuation of the bold narratives confronting rulers. Likewise, the Syriac Christian dialogue poems contain many bold assertions, such as Sarah’s complaint about Abraham wanting to sacrifice his son, which implicitly challenge God’s command.

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should be challenged. In addition, the New Testament parable of the talents, as quoted above, likewise contains “pious irreverence”!

- 38 Weiss, *Pious Irreverence*, 65–70, identifies a transition from anti-protest in early rabbinic literature to pro-protest in later rabbinic literature, often put in the mouth of a well-known biblical hero.
- 39 Harvey K. McArthur and Robert Johnston, *They Also Taught in Parables: Rabbinic Parables from the First Centuries of the Christian Era* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1990), 114: “The parables of the Rabbis seem to resolve perplexities, the parables of Jesus create them.” This seems untenable to me, as proved by our rabbinic parables of the tenants treated unmercifully.
- 40 For a striking example in the New Testament, see the end of the parable of the Pounds: “I tell you, that to every one who has will more be given; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away. But as for these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slay them before me” (Luke 19:26–27). See also Marcel Poorthuis, “The Invasion of the King: the Virtual Mashal as Foundation of Storytelling,” in *Parables in Changing Contexts*, 205–225.

The treatment of the existence of evil in these parables is both pious and irreverent. It may be understood as a way to deal with existential tensions caused by the eternal antagonism between human desires and the dictates of divine law.

## 2 The Second Pair of Parables: About One versus Many Fields

The second pair of parables, again from Avot de Rabbi Nathan A and B, involve many scribal errors and textual variants among the manuscripts, apparently due, at least in part, to controversies over the content. Textual variants should not always be explained as scribal errors, but may relate to debates about the actual contents of a text. Tractate m. Avot 1:6 recommends the provision of a teacher. In the commentaries, the saying is problematized: does it recommend you provide yourself with *one* teacher? This is the starting point for a long, confused debate, which also features a parable. We will trace the whole debate and try to clarify the confusion, which extends to different readings in the manuscripts of Avot R. Nath. A 3 and Avot R. Nath. B 18.

### 2.1 *The Context of the Parable of the One versus Many Fields: Avot R. Nath. A 8*

In the case of the advice to study with one or with more teachers, two conflicting recommendations can be found within one and the same document: one a saying, another a parable, both in the name of rabbi Meir, a *tanna* from the second century:

Rabbi Meir says: “If you have studied with one master, do not say: enough! But go to a sage and learn Torah and don’t go to anyone but first go to someone close to you, as it is said: ‘Drink water from your own cistern and running water from your own well’ (Prov 5:15).”

Avot R. Nath. A 3 [Becker 58], *editio princeps*

Some confusion can be detected in MS New York Rab. 25, which reads: “But go to someone to learn Torah and *don’t go* to some sage, but first go to someone close to you” (Avot R. Nath. A 3 [Becker 59]). The confusion can be explained by the phrase “go to someone close to you,” which this manuscript has clearly understood as a contrast with “some sage.” However, when we turn to another saying, this time commenting the dictum in m. Avot 1:6 (i.e., “Provide yourself with a teacher”), the confusion increases:

“Provide yourself with a teacher,” how so? It teaches that one should provide oneself with one fixed teacher and learn from him Scripture and Mishna and halakhot and aggadot. The argument that he (the teacher) neglects for him in Scripture he will eventually tell him in the Mishna, the argument that he neglects in Midrash he will eventually tell him in halakhot, the argument that he neglects in halakhot he will eventually tell him in aggadah. That man will find himself full of goodness and blessing.

Avot R. Nath. A 8 [Becker 98–99], all eight manuscripts with only minor differences

The idea seems to be that one and the same teacher can correct himself by adding later on what he had initially neglected. If one studies with several different teachers, this possibility is not an option. However, MS Oxford Opp. 95 continues the debate in Avot R. Nath. A 8 (Becker 100) by adding the following: “Whoever learns from *many* teachers, the argument that he [the teacher] neglects for him in Scripture, he [the teacher] will eventually tell him the one in the Mishna” (italics are mine). The text continues in the same vein as the one quoted above, but here to buttress the argument that you should provide yourself with more teachers, and not just one. It apparently confused the argument, since it did not agree that having a single teacher is actually an advantage.<sup>41</sup> The text then continues with the parable, likewise attributed to Rabbi Meir, recommending the use of only one teacher, which serves to refute the dictum of Rabbi Meir which had actually just been quoted!

## 2.2 *The Parable of the One versus Many Fields: Avot R. Nath A 8*

Rabbi Meir’s parable about the advantage of a single teacher is available in eight manuscripts of Avot R. Nath. A 8, four of which have a corrupt text. I quote the *editio princeps Venedig*, which numbers among those four and whose text reads as follows:<sup>42</sup>

41 MS New York 10848 (MS Epstein, available until chapter 13) also has an addition, but it reads: “Whoever learns from many teachers, the argument that he [the teacher] neglects for him in Scripture, he [the teacher; perhaps “another teacher” is meant?] will eventually tell him another (reading: *aḥer*, not *ehad*, “one”) in the Midrash.” This reading may consider “many teachers” as a bad circumstance after all, for the teacher forgets to teach what has been skipped over.

42 More or less the same reading, with an equally corrupt text, can be found in MS Oxford Heb. c. 24 (Halberstam), MS Oxford Opp. 95, and MS New York Rab. 50. These manuscripts more often share readings that differ from MS Oxford Opp. 247, New York Rab. 25 (in general a quite deviant MS), and New York Rab. 1305 (Avot R. Nath. A 6, about Rachel *feeding the children*, cf. Becker 82 bottom; about a hedge (*seyag*) Avot R. Nath. A 7 [Becker 98–99];

Rabbi Meir used to say: Who learns Torah from one teacher, to what can this be likened? To someone who has one field and he sows partly wheat and partly barley and he plants one (Heb. *ehad*)<sup>43</sup> with olives and one with trees and the man will find himself dispersed among the pieces of land and full of goodness and blessing.

Avot R. Nath. A 8 [Becker 100]

היה רבי מאיר אומר הלומד תורה מרב  
אחד למה הוא דומה לאחד שהיה  
לו שדה אחת וזרע מקצתה חטים ומקצתה  
שעורים ונטע אחד זיתים ואחד  
אילנות ונמצא אדם ההוא מפוזר בין  
הארצות ומלא טוב וברכה

This text is corrupt, probably due to the similar lines in the two parts of the parable. The copyist omitted part of the parable by jumping from the one to the same expression further on (i.e., “he plants”; error by haplography), thereby conflating the case of one field with the case of many fields. However, the confusion should also be explained by reason of the content, since studying with several teachers does not seem as bad as Rabbi Meir makes it out to be here, as he himself had argued otherwise in Avot R. Nath. A 3.

This brings us to MS Oxford Opp. 247, which, in my view, has preserved the entire parable in its integrity.<sup>44</sup> I have followed the division of lines in the manuscript, and have added italics to indicate what has been left out in the *editio princeps* (and in three manuscripts):

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a parable only in these three manuscripts in Avot R. Nath. A 12 [Becker 130–131]). For MS Oxford 24 and MS Oxford Opp. 95 against all others, see: Becker 204 (Avot R. Nath. A 25). In a few cases, MS Oxford Opp. 247 and MS New York Rab. 25 share a reading different from all other manuscripts (cf. Becker 68–69: saying of Rabbi Joshua (Avot R. Nath. A 4), omitted in all other manuscripts by homoioteleuton; Becker 71: once again, only MS Oxford Opp. 247 and MS New York Rab. 25 have the addition: “Kaḥ hayah mazkir” (N.B. in MS New York Rab. 25 “makriz!”). MS Oxford Opp. 95 frequently skips a line by homoioteleuton (Avot R. Nath. A 20 [Becker 184]; cf. Avot R. Nath. A 29 [Becker 222] and Avot R. Nath. A 30 [Becker 224]). Kister, *Avot de Rabbi Nathan*, 8, divides the manuscripts of Avot de Rabbi Nathan A into two branches, but that is not supported by my observations.

43 This strange use of “one” will be clarified presently.

44 MS New York Rab. 25, MS New York Rab. 1305, and MS New York 10484 (Epstein) contain more or less the same reading. I hesitate to say whether these manuscripts deserve a general priority over the other four. MS New York Rab. 1305 contains an error by homoioteleuton, in the saying of Rabbi Eliezer ben Jacob in Avot R. Nath. A 23 (Becker 194). Regrettably, Menahem Kister’s meticulous research in *Studies in Avot de-Rabbi Nathan* does not, as far as I can ascertain, deal with our parable, although in this case the differences between the manuscripts are quite revealing.

Rabbi Meir said: Who learns Torah from one teacher is like a man who had one field and he sows partly wheat and partly barley *and he plants partly olives and partly other trees and the man will find himself seated in his place full of goodness and blessing.*

*Who learns Torah from many teachers is like a man who had many fields and he sows one (ahat) with wheat and one with barley and he plants one with olives and one with other trees. That man will find himself dispersed among pieces of land and full of goodness and blessing.*<sup>45</sup>

ר' מאיר אומר הלומד תורה מרב אחד  
דומה לאדם שיש לו שדה אחת  
וזרע מקצתה חטים ומקצתה שעורי' ונטע  
מקצתה זיתי ומקצתה  
אילנות אחרים ונמצא אדם שהוא מיושב  
במקומו ומלא טוב וברכה  
הלומד תורה מרבנני' הרבה דומה לאדם  
שיש לו שדו'  
הרבה וזרע אחת חטים ואחת שעורי' ונטע  
אחת זיתי ואחת  
אילנות אחרים ונמצא אותו האיש מפוזר  
בין ארצות ומלא טוב וברכה

Apparently the *editio princeps* quoted earlier jumped from the first “he plants” to the second “he plants,” skipping the text in between. Probably, the *editio princeps* has been misled by the problematic ending of the second part of the parable: “full of goodness and blessing.” How can the negative, second part of the parable end with “goodness and blessing,” just like the first part? It may well be that the narrator intended to say that the fields do contain goodness and blessing, but that the owner cannot really enjoy it due to the great distance separating the fields. The shorter parable has thus done away with this problem, and yet it cannot be but secondary, since it is hardly possible to reconstruct the longer version of the parable from the shorter version.

### 2.2.1 The *Mashal* of the Parable of the One versus Many Fields: Avot R. Nath. A 8

When we limit ourselves to what is stated in the *mashal*, we are warranted to conclude that ownership of large estates is frowned upon and that the preference is for possession of a small field. Although the description of the *mashal* may have been influenced by what is stated in the *nimshal*, it still seems plausible to deduce this glimpse of a social reality from the parable.

It should be noted that the conclusion of the positive part of the parable in MS Oxford Opp. 247 speaks about someone “seated in his place” (מיושב במקומו), which is “full of goodness and blessing” (ומלא טוב וברכה). Obviously,

45 Solomon Schechter, *Avot de Rabbi Nathan* (New York: Feldheim, 1967), 36, emends “full (male) of goodness and blessing” into “without (*belo*) goodness and blessing.” Although the *mem* and the *bet* are quite similar and the emendation would solve an inherent tension, there is no textual warrant for it whatsoever.

this parable advocates studying in one's own place, rather than far away. But as we will see below, this point of view will be challenged later on by a statement in the name of Rabbi Akiva in Avot de Rabbi Nathan B.

### 2.3 *The Parallel Parable of the One versus Many Fields: Avot R. Nath. B 18*

The text that forms a parallel to Avot R. Nath. A 8 is Avot R. Nath. B 18. There are two quite similar versions extant, and we have chosen to follow MS Vatican 303 (Becker 349). The confusion continues here. Commenting upon the same saying from m. Avot 1:6, albeit with a minor variant ("Provide yourself with a teacher *for wisdom*"; italics added), a saying, this time anonymous, states:

Who learns from one teacher, he will transmit him something about halakhot and he will make him understand midrash, he hears from him something about midrash and he will transmit him aggadot and he will make him understand aggadot. He hears from him aggadot and he will understand him in every place.<sup>46</sup>

Who learns from many teachers, they will transmit to him something about halakhot and he will understand halakhot. They will transmit to him something about midrash and they will make him understand midrash. He will hear from them something about aggadot and he will understand from them aggadot. He will not understand him in every place.

After that we find a parable somewhat similar to that in Avot R. Nath. A 8:

Who learns from one teacher, to what is he likened? To someone who has a field of one *seah*.<sup>47</sup> He sows wheat in one place and barley in another place. It (the field) will be found full of blessing.<sup>48</sup>

Who learns from many teachers, to what is he likened? To someone who has a field of one *kor*. He sows wheat and barley in one place, and figs, grapes, olives, and figs in one (other) place. He will find himself fearing in the whole world.

הלמד מרב אחד למה הוא דומה למי שהיה לו  
כבית סיאה זרע חטים במקום אחד ושעורים  
במקום אחר ונמצאתו זה ומלאה ברכה  
הלמד מרבנות הרבה למה הוא דומה למי  
שהיה לו כבית כור זרע חטים ושעורים  
במקום אחד ותאנים וגפנים זיתים ותאנים  
במקום אחד נמצא זה מפחד בכל העולם

46 "Place" is probably meant in the sense of "topic."

47 Lit. "as a house of one se'ah," which means a field that needs one se'ah of seed.

48 Note that the ending of the parable in Avot R. Nath. A 8 ("he will be seated in his place full of goodness and blessing") is lacking here. The continuation of the text in Avot de Rabbi Nathan B makes this conclusion problematic.



The ending מִפְּחָד *mefahed* (fearing) probably is a misreading of מִפְּזוֹר *mefuzar* (dispersed), or else may even represent an attempt to “correct” the latter reading. The latter reading is the one found in the parable in Avot de Rabbi Nathan A, and the letters of the two words can be easily confused. It seems probable that the copyist may have struggled with the positive ending of the parable in Avot R. Nath. A 8 (“full of goodness and blessing”), and tried to adapt it to the negative message of the second part (“fearing in the whole world, everywhere”). It is furthermore worth pointing out that the clause “the pieces of land full of goodness and blessing,” which also concluded the negative second part of the parable in Avot R. Nath. A 8, is altogether lacking here in the second part.

Still, the parable is not easy to understand. The field of one *kor* is equal to thirty *se'ah*, making the second field much larger. With some effort, one can extract from this parable the same lesson that emerged from the parable of the many fields in Avot de Rabbi Nathan A, namely that dispersion on such a large field is unfruitful. Turning to the rather rambling description of the learning process with many teachers, one might conjecture that the point being made is that studying with many teachers creates a fragmentary learning process in which the different fields of Scripture, halakhah, and midrash are not organically interconnected.

As Avot R. Nath. B 18 continues, it is not Rabbi Meir (who transmitted the kernel of this saying in Avot R. Nath. A 3) who speaks, but his teacher, the famous Rabbi Akiva:

If you learn with one teacher and you will find that all his words remain with you, do not sit down and say: “enough”, but go to someone else and learn from him midrash, halakha, and aggada, as it is said: “She is like the ships of a merchant, she brings her food from afar” (Prov 31:14).<sup>49</sup> Is it possible that one studies with someone far away and afterwards with someone nearby? Scripture states: “Drink from your own cistern”.

Prov 5:15<sup>50</sup>

Apparently, Avot de Rabbi Nathan B has arranged the material in such a way that the saying which initially featured in Avot R. Nath. A 3 has been moved to Avot R. Nath. B 18. As a consequence, the tension between this statement and the parable preceding it becomes even more apparent. Avot de Rabbi Nathan B

49 Food is interpreted as Torah. Cf. Midr. Prov. 31:14.

50 In Midr. Prov. 5:15, this quotation is explained not as a prohibition on learning Torah far away, but as an exhortation to study nearby first and far away only afterwards.

therefore seems to have attempted to improve the readings of Avot de Rabbi Nathan A or its *Vorlage*, but failed to dispel the confusion.<sup>51</sup>

#### 2.4 *The Content of the Debates*

The point of departure was the counsel in m. Avot 1:6 to provide oneself with a teacher. The first debate introduced an issue that was not explicit in the saying. The debate revolved around the question as to whether *one* teacher would suffice. The parables of the fields then spell out the advantages of a single teacher over multiple teachers. The corrupted readings in some of the manuscripts demonstrate the uncertainty about this conclusion. Some of these readings suggest that several different teachers could teach about the different topics at least as well as only one teacher could.

A new element is introduced by distinguishing between a teacher nearby and a teacher far away. The authoritative saying of Rabbi Akiva states that one should not be satisfied with only one teacher, but should rather pursue greater wisdom.<sup>52</sup> Two scriptural quotations play a seemingly contradictory role: The one recommends drinking from one's own cistern, that is, choosing a teacher from nearby. The other quotation, however, recommends searching for "food" (i.e., Torah) far away, which might be best interpreted as a recommendation to search for a teacher far away. These two points of view can be harmonized in first searching for a teacher nearby and only afterwards for a teacher further away.

Interfering with these debates is the distinction between a teacher and a sage, where the latter is apparently someone famous but often also further away. The text dismisses the option of studying with such sage *instead of* a teacher nearby. It is quite possible that the statements were initially mutually exclusive, and that later editorial activity managed to harmonize them by distinguishing different occasions. The overall emphasis on studying close to home may have to do with the burden incurred by the family when a young father leaves for a long time.

The confusion in the manuscripts is not caused by textual errors alone, but relates to a continuing debate about the content of the different sayings. The ambiguity of the different points of view contributed to different versions. The ensuing attempts at correction only served to add to the variety of readings,

51 Unfortunately, the Genizah fragments of this text do not contribute to a reconstruction. See Hans-Jürgen Becker, *Geniza-Fragmente zu Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, TSAJ 103 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 33 (facsimile) and 39 (comment).

52 The addition to the saying of Pirkei Avot in Avot de Rabbi Nathan B ("provide yourself with a teacher *for wisdom*") can be explained as an anticipation of this debate.

thereby witnessing to an ongoing debate about the best path to choose: staying with one's own teacher nearby, or going out to a famous sage further away.

### 3 The Social Background of the Parables

The social background of the parables of the fields and the recommendation to stay close to home may be sketched as follows: In Palestine of the first centuries, agriculture often took place on fields owned by a landlord. As has been noted, the tenant (Heb. *ʾarīs*; Gk. *geōrgos*, cf. the Wicked Tenants in Mark 12:1) was not a slave, since he had the right to wages. Hence, as in our first pair of parables, the tenant must be distinguished both from the servant/slave (Heb. *ʿeved*; Gk. *Doulos*; cf. Matt 25:14 and esp. Luke 17:7–10) and the labourer (Heb. *poʿel*; Gk. *Ergatēs*; cf. the Labourers in the Vineyard in Matt 20:1).<sup>53</sup> The delicate relationship between tenant and owner has been illuminated in our first pair of parables above. Often the rich landowner, who generally did not work on the land himself, was absent for prolonged periods of time, which makes the confrontation between landlord and tenants especially tense, as some sort of a “final reckoning.”

Our pair of parables in their non-corrupted state clearly favour small estates over large estates, and may even imply the advantage of owning a field of one's own instead of working as a tenant for the owner of a large estate. Add to this the emphasis on staying at home instead of going to another teacher abroad, and it becomes clear that the social background plays its role in the *Bildfeld* of these parables.

In spite of the serious textual corruption in our parables, caused not only by scribal errors but also by implicit debates about the content (concerning the number of teachers, and the choice to stay at home or to go abroad for wisdom), we have managed to reconstruct the parables in their integrity and to catch a glimpse of the social background behind them.

### 4 Conclusion

The two pairs of “synoptic” parables which we have studied here have offered a glimpse of the harsh social reality behind the tenant-master relationship. The bringing of part of the harvest to the master could serve as a gripping and even shocking image of the final reckoning of the human being before God. As such,

<sup>53</sup> For a collection of rabbinic parables about a *poʿel*, see Hezser, *Lohnmetaphorik*, 301–310.

the first pair of parables can be numbered among those dealing with the so-called intrepid piousness.

In spite of the significant textual confusion in the manuscripts, the second pair of parables clearly advocates small estates over large estates. The advantages of working on a small field serve to illustrate the controversial opinion that it is better to study with one teacher than with many. Although social reality may once again have been an influential factor (i.e., a Torah student cannot take care of his family and household if he goes far away), the other opinion recommending a plurality of teachers interferes with the overall formula of the parables. It shows that different readings in manuscripts are not just scribal errors, but witness to an ongoing debate.

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## Honouring Human Agency and Autonomy: Children as Agents in New Testament and Early Rabbinic Parables

*Annette Merz and Albertina Oegema*

This article examines the representation of children as agents in selected New Testament and early rabbinic parables, and the potential theological meaning facilitated by these representations.<sup>1</sup> It is based on the sociological concept of agency, a concept that can be paraphrased in terms of someone's capacity to act purposefully and to make a difference within social networks and in structures of power.<sup>2</sup> Focussing on children's agency, this study draws attention to the ways parables construct the active role of children in the context of parent-child relationships in their narratives. These stories about parents and children are typically used to shed light on the God-human relationship. The question of children's agency therefore directly touches on theological questions, in particular debates concerning divine providence, omnipotence, and the role of the human free will. Given that, from a conceptual blending perspective, a parable's narrative and its application exert mutual influence on each other,<sup>3</sup> both the narrative representation of children's agency and its theological function in the application will be addressed.

New Testament and rabbinic parables draw on a common pool of early Jewish narrative themes and motifs, share many formal characteristics, and are often also closely related theologically.<sup>4</sup> The representation of the God-human relationship in terms of a parent-child relationship is one such common characteristic. Yet this metaphorical representation has also been one of the areas

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1 This article is an expanded version of Albertina Oegema and Annette Merz, "Kinder als handelnde Subjekte in neutestamentlichen und rabbinischen Gleichnissen," *ZNT* 48 (2021): 27–43.

2 See Ville Vuolanto, "Experience, Agency, and the Children in the Past: The Case of Roman Childhood," in *Children and Everyday Life in the Roman and Late Antique World*, ed. Christian Laes and Ville Vuolanto (London: Routledge, 2017), 17.

3 Albertina Oegema, "Negotiating Paternal Authority and Filial Agency: Fathers and Sons in Early Rabbinic Parables" (PhD diss., Utrecht University, 2021), 76–88.

4 See, e.g., David Flusser, *Die rabbinischen Gleichnisse und der Gleichniserzähler Jesus*, vol. 1, *Das Wesen der Gleichnisse*, *JudChr* 4 (Bern: Lang, 1981).

in which anti-Jewish stereotypes in New Testament scholarship and Christian theology continue to abound to this very day. For instance, in the interpretation history of Luke's parable of the Father and His Two Sons (Luke 15:11–32), commonly known as the parable of the Prodigal Son, Christian exegetes often contrasted their perception of God as a loving, merciful, and forgiving father with the supposedly demanding, stern, and punishing God of Judaism. The younger son is positively interpreted as an image of the followers of Jesus, be it Jewish “tax collectors and sinners,” or gentile Christians, who are graciously welcomed (back) by God, while the elder son is negatively seen as a representation of the (Pharisaic) Jews who are believed to be serving God slavishly out of duty rather than love, mistakenly thinking that God's grace must be earned and resenting God's graceful outreach, which is believed to be unique to the Jesus movement and early Christianity.<sup>5</sup> Focussing on children's agency and the representations of the father in selected New Testament and early rabbinic parables, this article intends to replace such anti-Jewish stereotypes in parable research with unprejudiced comparisons.

With the concept of agency, we bring scholarship on New Testament and rabbinic parables in conversation with the emergent field of childhood research in the New Testament and ancient Judaism. Agency as an analytical tool has found wide acceptance in various disciplines, including, most recently, the study of children and childhood in the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, rabbinic studies, and ancient history. However, while numerous studies in parable scholarship have examined parables with children, they hardly take such theoretical developments in the field of childhood research into account. Childhood scholarship, in turn, has only devoted limited attention to synoptic and rabbinic parables; the parable of the Children at the Market (Matt 11:16–19//Luke 7:31–35) is a notable exception.<sup>6</sup> It is only recently that

5 For an overview of these anti-Jewish stereotypes in the interpretation history of this parable, see Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014), 54–58, 64–66.

6 See esp. Alon Goshen-Gottstein, “God and Israel as Father and Son in Tannaitic Literature” (PhD diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1987); Eckhard Rau, *Reden in Vollmacht: Hintergrund, Form und Anliegen der Gleichnisse Jesu*, FRLANT 149 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990); Wolfgang Pöhlmann, *Der Verlorene Sohn und das Haus: Studien zu Lukas 15, 11–32 im Horizont der antiken Lehre von Haus, Erziehung und Ackerbau*, WUNT 68 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993); Teaseong Roh, *Die familia dei in den synoptischen Evangelien: Eine redaktions- und sozialgeschichtliche Untersuchung zu einem urchristlichen Bildfeld*, NTOA 37 (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2001); Alon Goshen-Gottstein, “God the Father in Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity: Transformed Background or Common Ground?,” *JES* 38 (2001): 470–504.

On the parable of the Children at the Market (Matt 11:16–19//Luke 7:31–35), see most recently Sharon Betsworth, “Children Playing in the Marketplaces,” in *T&T Clark Handbook of Children in the Bible and the Biblical World*, ed. Sharon Betsworth and Julie Faith Parker (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 245–263. Other parables are usually referred to in passing. An

Albertina Oegema, in her PhD dissertation “Negotiating Paternal Authority and Filial Agency: Fathers and Sons in Early Rabbinic Parables” (2021), brought the two fields of study into conversation. Reading father-son relationships in early rabbinic parables from a children’s perspective, she demonstrates, among others, how the concept of agency brings the mutual interactions between fathers and sons—and, indirectly, between God and Israel—into sharper relief.<sup>7</sup>

Building on this dissertation, the present article aims to contribute to the scholarly conversation between the two fields and examine the representation and theological function of children’s agency in New Testament and rabbinic parables from a comparative perspective. In order to facilitate the scholarly exchange, we will first sketch the state of scholarship on children in the New Testament and ancient Judaism (1). Then we will introduce the concept of agency and our approach to it (2). Subsequently, we will discuss the representation of filial agency in four New Testament and early rabbinic parables (3–4) and evaluate this representation from a theological perspective (5). Central to our study are the parables of the Food-Requesting Son (Luke 11:11–13) and the Father and His Two Sons (Luke 15:11–32) on the New Testament side, and the parables of the Starving Children and Slaves (Sifre Deut. 40) and the King and His Unfaithful Daughter (Mekh. Deut. 1:11) on the rabbinic side.<sup>8</sup> Although the ages of the portrayed sons and daughters are left unclear, all these parables revolve around children who are still part of their father’s household, are on the verge of leaving it, or are returning to it.

## 1 The Study of Children in the New Testament and Ancient Judaism

The history of research on children and childhood in the New Testament and early Christianity can be traced back to the 1960s and 1970s. Several

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exception is Bettina Eltrop, *Denn solchen gehört das Himmelreich: Kinder im Matthäusevangelium: Eine feministisch-sozialgeschichtliche Untersuchung* (Stuttgart: Verlag Ulrich E. Grauer, 1996), 53–59, 84–91, 122–126, 135–143, 144–148. See also Amram Tropper, “The Economics of Jewish Childhood in Late Antiquity,” *HUCA* 76 (2005): 212–213, 222, 226, 229, 231–232; Amram Tropper, “Children and Childhood in Light of the Demographics of the Jewish Family in Late Antiquity,” *JSJ* 37 (2006): 306, 317–318.

7 Oegema, “Paternal Authority.” In a recently published article, Oegema compares the role of children’s agency in Synoptic and rabbinic parables. See Albertina Oegema, “What Are These Sons Doing? Filial Agency in New Testament and Early Rabbinic Writings,” *ZNW* 113 (2022): 261–283.

8 See Eric Ottenheijm, “On the Rhetoric of ‘Inheritance’ in Synoptic and Rabbinic Parables,” in *Parables in Changing Contexts: Essays on the Study of Parables in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism*, ed. Eric Ottenheijm and Marcel Poorthuis (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 15–36, for a treatment of the concept of inheritance in Luke 15:11–32 and rabbinic parables, touching also briefly on the parables in Sifre Deut. 40 and Luke 11:11–13 (pp. 25–26).



exegetically and theologically oriented studies discussed the role of children in Jesus's preaching in the Gospels.<sup>9</sup> The field of research was definitively established with the work of Peter Müller, William Strange, and Bettina Eltrop in the 1990s.<sup>10</sup> Their contributions were stimulated by a growing attention to children and children's needs in church and society, and, in the wake of Philippe Ariès's influential monograph *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime* (1960), contributed to the development of historical childhood research as an academic discipline.<sup>11</sup> With a central focus on Jesus's blessing and welcoming of the children (Mark 9:33–37 par.; 10:13–16 par.), Müller, Strange, and Eltrop emphasized Jesus's positive attitude towards and valuation of children within the comparative framework of his Graeco-Roman and Jewish cultural contexts. Yet they also pointed to androcentric and patriarchal tendencies in the New Testament Gospels and the earliest Christian communities.

From the 2000s onwards, the study of children in the New Testament became more prolific. Scholars started to explore new sources and methodologies, as a result of which their studies became increasingly specialized.<sup>12</sup> One influential study is Cornelia B. Horn and John W. Martens's "*Let the Little Children Come to Me*" (2009).<sup>13</sup> Taking into account the Graeco-Roman and Jewish socio-historical contexts as well as the heterogeneity among children, they attempted to assess the difference Christianity made in children's lives in antiquity. Another leading scholar is Sharon Betsworth, who combined socio-historical and literary approaches in her examination of children in the canonical and apocryphal Gospels. She argues that these overlooked characters play

9 See esp. Simon Légasse, *Jésus et l'enfant: « Enfants », « petits » et « simples » dans la tradition synoptique* (Paris: Gabalda, 1969); John S. Pridmore, *The New Testament Theology of Childhood* (Hobart: Buckland, 1977); Hans-Reudi Weber, *Jesus and the Children: Biblical Resources for Study and Preaching* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1979).

10 Peter Müller, *In der Mitte der Gemeinde: Kinder im Neuen Testament* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1992); William A. Strange, *Children in the Early Church* (Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 1996); Eltrop, *Himmelreich*.

11 Philippe Ariès, *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1960). English translation: Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, trans. Robert Baldick (New York: Vintage Books, 1962).

12 Besides the publications mentioned in the main text, see esp. Peter Balla, *The Child-Parent Relationship in the New Testament and Its Environment*, WUNT 155 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003); Margaret Y. MacDonald, *The Power of Children: The Construction of Christian Families in the Greco-Roman World* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014); Arthur James Murphy, *Kids and Kingdom: The Precarious Presence of Children in the Synoptic Gospels* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013).

13 Cornelia B. Horn and John W. Martens, "*Let the Little Children Come to Me*": *Childhood and Children in Early Christianity* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009).

a significant role in the Gospels' narratives, with each gospel adding its own emphasis.<sup>14</sup> Most recently, Amy Lindeman Allen, who makes use of a "childist approach" (see below), placed great emphasis on the inclusion, participation, and power of children in the Gospel of Luke and its audience.<sup>15</sup>

This diversification of methodologies and source material calls for scholarly integration. After predecessors in the 2000s,<sup>16</sup> recently two handbooks on children in the Bible and the biblical world have been published, bringing together various leading scholars, methodological approaches, and sub-disciplines. In the *T&T Clark Handbook of Children in the Bible and the Biblical World* (2019), edited by Sharon Betsworth and Julie Faith Parker, childist biblical interpretation is established as a method for focussing on the agency and action of children and for reassessing their role and impact in biblical (incl. apocryphal) texts.<sup>17</sup> It builds upon the child-centred and childist interpretations introduced by Hebrew Bible scholars in the early 2010s.<sup>18</sup> In *Children and Methods* (2020), edited by Katherine Henriksen Garroway and John W. Martens, the literary and socio-historical approaches of childist biblical interpretation are supplemented with new methodologies.<sup>19</sup> Their "childist criticism" aims to give children in literary, epigraphic, and material sources agency and a voice, fill in the gaps in these sources, change the focus from adult-centric to child-centric, and explore the interplay between a child's value and vulnerability in a society.<sup>20</sup>

Compared with New Testament childhood scholarship, the study of Jewish children in antiquity is still in its infancy. The first substantial exploration of

14 Sharon Betsworth, *The Reign of God Is Such As These: A Socio-Literary Analysis of Daughters in the Gospel of Mark*, LNTS 422 (London: T&T Clark, 2010); Sharon Betsworth, *Children in Early Christian Narratives*, LNTS 521 (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

15 Amy Lindeman Allen, *For Theirs Is the Kingdom: Inclusion and Participation of Children in the Gospel According to Luke* (Lanham, MD: Fortress Academic, 2019).

16 Marcia J. Bunge, ed., *The Child in Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001); Martin Ebner, ed., *Gottes Kinder*, JBTh 17 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2002); Marcia J. Bunge, Terence E. Fretheim, and Beverly Roberts Gaventa, eds., *The Child in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

17 Sharon Betsworth and Julie Faith Parker, eds., *T&T Clark Handbook of Children in the Bible and the Biblical World* (London: T&T Clark, 2019).

18 Esp. Laurel W. Koepf-Taylor, *Give Me Children or I Shall Die: Children and Communal Survival in Biblical Literature* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013); Julie Faith Parker, *Valuable and Vulnerable: Children in the Hebrew Bible, Especially the Elisha Cycle*, BJS 355 (Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2013).

19 Kristine Henriksen Garroway and John W. Martens, eds., *Children and Methods: Listening to and Learning from Children in the Biblical World*, BSJS 67 (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

20 Kristine Henriksen Garroway, "Conclusions: The Childist Criticism of the Future," in *Children and Methods: Listening to and Learning from Children in the Biblical World*, ed. Kristine Henriksen Garroway and John W. Martens, BSJS 67 (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 217.

Jewish childhood in late antiquity can be traced back to Leopold Löw's *Die Lebensalter in der jüdischen Literatur* (1875).<sup>21</sup> His study was followed by several other publications on Jewish childhood, the most seminal and “encyclopaedic” of which was William Feldman's *The Jewish Child: Its History, Folklore, Biology, and Sociology* (1917).<sup>22</sup> After Feldman's monograph, it was not until the mid-1970s that new publications on Jewish childhood started appearing, with distinct historical, literary, and halakhic foci. This renewed interest was stimulated by the psychological and medical study of children, social changes regarding the Jewish family in Western society, and the scholarly development of family history as a field of study. As in New Testament scholarship, Ariès's *L'enfant et la vie familiale* exerted much influence. Still, during this phase, the study of Jewish childhood in late antiquity remained limited and fragmentary; the resulting publications were spread across different disciplines and had distinct historical, literary, and halakhic foci. Most ground-breaking was Shaye Cohen's collected volume *The Jewish Family in Antiquity* (1993), which includes three articles devoted to Jewish parent-child relations.<sup>23</sup> These articles point to the similarity between Jewish and non-Jewish family relations and emphasize their social, economic, and freeborn/slave varieties.

Since the 2010s, there has been a continuing scholarly interest in the Jewish family and Jewish childhood in late antiquity. The greatest theoretical and methodological advancement was brought about by the publication of Hagith Sivan's monograph *Jewish Childhood in the Roman World* (2018).<sup>24</sup> Sivan examines rabbinic constructions of Jewish childhood, analyzes the imagery and epigraphy relating to children in late ancient synagogues, and includes four

21 Leopold Löw, *Beiträge zur jüdischen Alterthumskunde*, vol. 2, *Die Lebensalter in der jüdischen Literatur: Von physiologischem, rechts-, sitten- und religionsgeschichtlichem Standpunkte betrachtet* (Szegedin: Druck von Sigmund Burger, 1875).

22 Salomon Schechter, “The Child in Jewish Literature,” *JQR* 2 (1889): 1–24; Israel Lebediger, “The Minor in Jewish Law,” *JQR* 6 (1915–1916): 459–493; 7 (1916–1917): 89–111, 145–174; William M. Feldman, *The Jewish Child: Its History, Folklore, Biology, and Sociology* (London: Baillière, Tindall and Cox, 1917).

23 Oliver Larry Yarbrough, “Parents and Children in the Jewish Family of Antiquity,” in *The Jewish Family in Antiquity*, ed. Shaye J.D. Cohen, *BJS* 289 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), 39–59; Adele Reinhartz, “Parents and Children: A Philonic Perspective,” in *The Jewish Family in Antiquity*, ed. Shaye J.D. Cohen, *BJS* 289 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), 61–88; Ross S. Kraemer, “Jewish Mothers and Daughters in the Greco-Roman World,” in *The Jewish Family in Antiquity*, ed. Shaye J.D. Cohen, *BJS* 289 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), 89–112.

24 Hagith Sivan, *Jewish Childhood in the Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). Sivan was a participant in the research project “Tiny Voices from the Past: New Perspectives on Childhood in Early Europe” (2013–2017), financed by the Norwegian Research Council and the University of Oslo and led by Reidar Aasgaard.

fictive autobiographies of Jewish children living in various places around the ancient Mediterranean.<sup>25</sup> With this creative form of narrative historiography (“faction”), Sivan offers an innovative method for imagining the experiences of children from their own perspective. This turn to the children’s own perspective is further accentuated in Oegema’s aforementioned study, in which she employs the perspectives of agency, masculinity, and emotion to examine the diverse ways sons and their fathers interact with each other.<sup>26</sup>

## 2 Agency

Building on Oegema’s examination,<sup>27</sup> the present article aims to further the conversation between scholarship on New Testament and rabbinic parables and to contribute to the study of childhood in the New Testament and ancient Judaism. As indicated above, both childist interpretation and childist criticism focus on the agency and action of children. Yet the contributors to the recent *T&T Clark Handbook of Children in the Bible and the Biblical World* and *Children and Methods* fail to reflect on the notion of agency itself. They rather employ it as a synonym for a child’s capacity to act. This is a missed opportunity, since scholarly reflections on agency in other disciplines enable one not to just describe *what* children do, but also to explain *why* they do what they do—in interdependence and interaction with the social structures of their environment—and how their deeds influence these social structures. The present article aims to refine and apply the concept of agency to parables featuring children and fathers so as to contribute to the theoretical foundations of childist criticism and evaluate the theological potential of this analytic tool in parable research.

What, then, is agency? For the present purposes, we focus on two important elements in the conceptualization of agency. First, scholarly definitions of agency, such as those of the sociologists Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische, make clear that agency does not just consist in an individual’s capacity to act, but always refers to the *interplay* between this individual’s capacity to act and the social structures in his/her environment, in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations. The power of ingrained habits, but also the ability to imagine future trajectories of action and to make practical and normative judgments among them, are constitutive components

25 Sivan, *Jewish Childhood*, 267–389.

26 Oegema, “Paternal Authority.” See also Oegeman, “What Are These Sons Doing?”

27 The following section is based upon Oegema, “Paternal Authority,” 60–66.

of agency.<sup>28</sup> The central importance of this interplay has led researchers of modern childhood to emphasize the active role of children in their growing and learning processes and in the way they cope with social, cultural, legal, physical, and economic structures.<sup>29</sup> Ancient historians, in turn, employ the notion of agency to let the children's "tiny voices" be heard and to unravel something of the richness of everyday childhood culture.<sup>30</sup>

A second important aspect is the multiplicity of agentival forms. Someone's agency can be both directed at reproducing the social structures in his/her environment and at acting contrary to them or even transforming them. It affirms the point made by scholars studying women's agency in gender-traditional religions that agency should not be equated with resistance and subversion alone. Next to "resistance agency" (the ways religious women resist, challenge, or change some aspects of the male-dominated structures of their religion), they point to "empowerment agency" (how women participate in and reinterpret religious doctrines and practices in ways that make them feel empowered in daily life), "instrumental agency" (how women participate in religious practices for advantages in non-religious aspects of their lives), and "compliance agency" (the manifold and diverse ways in which women *conform* to gender-traditional religions) as other forms of agency.<sup>31</sup> Thus, agency can be exhibited in a broad spectrum from compliance to empowerment to resistance.

In our analysis of New Testament and early rabbinic parables, we focus on the diverse interplay between a child's agency and the social structure of its father's authority. Our examination is based on our definition of agency:

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- 28 Cf. the core definition of Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische, "What Is Agency?," *AJS* 103 (1998): 962–1023: "We define it [sc. human agency] as the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments—the temporal-relational contexts of action—which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations" (970).
- 29 Sandra J.T.M. Evers, Catrien Notermans, and Erik van Ommering, "Ethnographies of Children in Africa: Moving beyond Stereotypical Representations and Paradigms," in *Not Just a Victim: The Child as Catalyst and Witness of Contemporary Africa*, ed. Sandra J.T.M. Evers, Catrien Notermans, and Erik van Ommering, *ASCS* 20 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 3–5, 12–16.
- 30 Christian Laes and Ville Vuolanto, "A New Paradigm for the Social History of Childhood and Children in Antiquity," in *Children and Everyday Life in the Roman and Late Antique World*, ed. Christian Laes and Ville Vuolanto (London: Routledge, 2017), 4–5.
- 31 Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 5–10, 153–154, 167–174; Orit Avishai, "'Doing Religion' in a Secular World: Women in Conservative Religions and the Question of Agency," *GenSoc* 22 (2008): 410–413, 420–422, 428. Cf. Kelsy C. Burke, "Women's Agency in Gender-Traditional Religions: A Review of Four Approaches," *SocComp* 6 (2012): 123–128.

The agency of a child consists of the diverse modalities of action, speech, thought, and emotion by which a child interacts with his/her father given the opportunities and confines imposed and presented by the father's exercise of authority.

While its reference to action, speech, thought, and emotion accounts for the diverse ways in which agency can be exhibited in parables, the general reference to interaction with the father covers the interplay between a child's agency and the social structures in its environment. The definition enables us to analyze how the agency of children, according to these parables, is shaped by and gives shape to their father's exercise of authority.

In the next two sections, these two aspects of children's agency will be examined in more detail. First, we focus on the agentival space opened up by the father within the framework of his exercise of authority. The parables of the Food-Requesting Son (Luke 11:11–13) and of the Starving Children and Slaves (Sifre Deut. 40), which consist of two different realizations of the theme of child provision, shed light on the way children's agency is defined by their father's exercise of authority. Thereafter, we turn to the diverse modalities of filial agency, and the way they interact with and exercise influence on paternal authority. In this section, the parables of the Father and His Two Sons (Luke 15:11–32) and of the King and His Unfaithful Daughter (Mekh. Deut. 1:11) will be at the centre of our analysis. While these sections focus mainly upon the role of children's agency in the parables' narratives, the theological import of the parent-child dynamics will be addressed from a comparative perspective in the concluding section of this article.

### 3 The Agency of Children in the Context of Their Father's Exercise of Authority: Luke 11:11–13 and Sifre Deut. 40

Luke's parable of the Food-Requesting Son is part of a larger context in which Jesus gives instructions to his disciples about supplication (Luke 11:1–13). He teaches them a daily prayer, a short version of the Lord's Prayer (Luke 11:2–4), and, with the parable of the Friend at Midnight, he encourages them to pray without fear of rejection (Luke 11:5–8). With a triple logion about asking/receiving, searching/finding, and knocking/being opened, the latter point is underscored (Luke 11:9–10). The climax of the section is formed by a short parable phrased as a question (Luke 11:11–13):

Which father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead of a fish? Or also, if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are wicked, know to give good gifts to your children, *a fortiori* the Father from heaven will give the holy spirit to those who ask him.

Luke 11:11–13

11 τίνα δὲ ἐξ ὑμῶν τὸν πατέρα αἰτήσῃ ὁ υἱὸς ἰχθύων, καὶ ἀντὶ ἰχθύος ὄφιν αὐτῷ ἐπιδώσῃ; 12 ἢ καὶ αἰτήσῃ ὠόν, ἐπιδώσῃ αὐτῷ σκορπίον; 13 εἰ οὖν ὑμεῖς πονηροὶ ὑπάρχοντες οἴδατε δόματα ἀγαθὰ διδόναι τοῖς τέκνοις ὑμῶν, πόσῳ μᾶλλον ὁ πατήρ [ὁ] ἐξ οὐρανοῦ δώσει πνεῦμα ἅγιον τοῖς αἰτοῦσιν αὐτόν.

In comparison with the parable's version in Q, as deduced from Matthew's version of the parable (Matt 7:9–11),<sup>32</sup> Luke's version exhibits several redactional changes.<sup>33</sup> While Q speaks of a person (ἄνθρωπος), and thus enables the comparison of God with a father *and* a mother, Luke explicitly refers to a father (τὸν πατέρα) and thus emphasizes the patriarchal framework of imperial Roman culture. The *pater familias* had the right to decide about the life and death of his children (*ius vitae necisque*).<sup>34</sup> Yet the cultural concept of mutual *pietas* between parents and children counteracted the tyrannical exercise of *patria potestas*.<sup>35</sup> In the Jewish context, rabbinic discussions about a father's obligation to maintain his children demonstrate the importance of paternal authority in a household context. Tannaitic rabbis disagree on whether or not a father is legally or morally obliged to care for his children (esp. m. Ketub. 4:6, 11; t. Ketub. 4:8), while talmudic stories (y. Ketub. 4:8, 28d; b. Ketub. 49ab) make it clear that the rabbis were challenged by individual fathers who refused to maintain their children. Paternal authority seems to have been so encompassing that the rabbis had difficulties restricting it in the area of child provision.<sup>36</sup>

32 9 ἢ τίς ἐστὶν ἐξ ὑμῶν ἄνθρωπος, ὃν αἰτήσῃ ὁ υἱὸς αὐτοῦ ἄρτον, μὴ λίθον ἐπιδώσῃ αὐτῷ; 10 ἢ καὶ ἰχθύν αἰτήσῃ, μὴ ὄφιν ἐπιδώσῃ αὐτῷ; 11 εἰ οὖν ὑμεῖς πονηροὶ ὄντες οἴδατε δόματα ἀγαθὰ διδόναι τοῖς τέκνοις ὑμῶν, πόσῳ μᾶλλον ὁ πατήρ ὑμῶν ὁ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς δώσει ἀγαθὰ τοῖς αἰτοῦσιν αὐτόν.

33 See Christine Gerber, "Bitten lohnt sich (Vom bittenden Kind): Q 11,9–13 (Mt 7,7–11 / Lk 11,9–13)," in *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu*, ed. Ruben Zimmermann et al. (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2007), 119–125.

34 This right is illustrated by an ancient letter in which a soldier orders his pregnant wife to raise the newborn if it is a boy, but abandon it if a girl (P.Oxy. 744).

35 Richard P. Saller, "Pietas, Obligation and Authority in the Roman Family," in *Alte Geschichte und Wissenschaftsgeschichte: Festschrift für Karl Christ zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Peter Kneissl and Volker Losemann (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1988), 393–410.

36 See Oegema, "Paternal Authority," 186–195.

Our parable assumes this encompassing authority of the father, but emphasizes the everyday experience that children's requests for food are rarely answered in a cruel or harmful manner. The theological interpretation of the parable in Luke 11:13 goes one step further and assumes that the addressees, as a rule, give their children "good gifts," that is, generally answer their requests for food in a positive fashion. The everyday experience that human beings, despite their deeply anchored potential for evil, regularly do good to their children enables the *a malo ad bonum* conclusion that God, who is in essence good (cf. Mark 10:18//Luke 18:19), certainly does not cut himself off from the requests of human beings.

The son's agentive space is clearly defined by the restrictive, potentially lethal right of the father to withhold food or serve harmful goods to his son. The son's agency is limited to the utterance of a request, with which the son indirectly honours his father's undisputed position of authority. In the application, God's power to give or withhold material and non-material goods is acknowledged in the requests of the people as well. At the same time, the anticipated positive reaction of God encourages the listeners to submit such requests and to make full use of their limited agentive space.<sup>37</sup>

In the rabbinic parable of Sifre Deut. 40, the agency of children is likewise defined by the restrictive authority of the father in the context of child provision. The parable is part of a midrash on Deut 11:11–12: "And the land which you cross over to inherit is ... a land which YHWH your God cares about; the eyes of YHWH your God are always on it from the beginning of the year until the end of the year." After a preceding midrash which demonstrates that God not only cares about the land but may also curse it, the parable is introduced:

R. Shimon ben Yohai says: A parable. It is like a king who had many children and slaves and they were sustained and provided for by his hand and the keys of the storehouse [were in his hand]<sup>38</sup>. When they did his will,

ר' שמע' בן יוחי או' משל למלך שהיו לו בנים ועבדים הרבה והיו ניזונים ומתפרנסין מתחת ידו ומפתחות שלאוצר כשהן עושין רצונו הוא פותח את האוצר והן אוכלין ושביעין וכשאינן עושין רצו' הוא נוטל את האוצר והן מתין ברעב

37 The mention of the Holy Spirit in Luke 11:13b is due to Lukan redaction. Q, as in Matt 7:11, probably read ἀγαθὰ ("goods"). Gerber, "Bitten," 124 suspects that Luke, with the gift of the Holy Spirit, inserted a promise that was fulfilled and thus verifiable within the limits of his story (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4f; 2:1–4). The goods mentioned earlier (daily bread, forgiveness of sins, etc.) should be included.

38 MS London, MS Berlin, and Editio Princeps read בידו ("in his hand") at the end of this clause. We translate the text of MS Vatican, the oldest preserved witness, in which this



he opened the storehouse and they ate and were satisfied. But when they did not do his will, he carried off<sup>39</sup> the storehouse and they died in hunger.

So Israel: When they did the will of the Place, “YHWH will open for you his good storehouse [the heavens, to give the rain of your land in its time]” (Deut 28:12). But when they did not do his will, what does it say? “And the anger of YHWH will be kindled against you [and he will shut up the heavens, so that there will be no rain and the land will not give its yield. And you will perish quickly from the good land that YHWH gave to you]” (Deut 11:17).

Sifre Deut. 40, [MS Vatican]

כך יש' כשעושה רצו' שלמקו' יפתח יי' לך  
את אוצ' הטו' וכשאינן עושין רצו' מה הוא  
אומ' וחרה אף יי' בכם

The parable's narrative describes how a king has the absolute authority over the sustenance for his many children and slaves. He is the one who has the keys of the storehouse in his hand. When the king's children and slaves do his will, he opens the storehouse so that they eat and are satisfied. When they do not do his will, he closes the storehouse so that they starve to death. In the application, the king represents God, the children and slaves Israel, and the storehouse the heavens and the provision of rain. On the basis of two prooftexts (Deut 11:17 and Deut 28:12), it is argued that God rewards Israel's obedience by opening up the heavenly storehouses, though he punishes them by failing to provide rain from heaven. Just like the children and slaves in the parable's narrative, for Israel the provision or withholding of rain is a matter of life and death.

More than the parable of the Food-Requesting Son, the parable in Sifre Deut. 40 demonstrates how a father's restrictive exercise of authority has potentially lethal consequences. Since the children will die when the king locks up his storehouse, they are presented as highly dependent on their father's provision of food. Indeed, the authority of the king seems to be so encompassing that they are not described receiving food in alternative ways, such as

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phrase is omitted. Since we assume that this omission is by scribal error, we added “were in his hand” in the translation.

39 MS Vatican reads נוטל (“he carries off”) in l. 12. The other witnesses have נועל (“he locks up”), which makes more sense in the context of the clause.

begging (cf. m. Ketub. 13:3) or maintenance by the community (b. Ketub. 49ab). Transferred to the application, the king's restrictive exercise of authority demonstrates how Israel, as the counterpart of the children and slaves, is highly dependent on God's exercise of authority. If God shuts up the heavens and rain fails to appear, there are no alternative ways for Israel to obtain their food. Given the regular food shortages, famines, and endemic, long-term hunger and malnutrition in antiquity, the parable must have reminded its audience of their vulnerability and dependence on God's provision of rain and food.<sup>40</sup>

Nevertheless, the parable still implies that the children and slaves have agency in a different area of life, viz. the way they behave vis-à-vis the king. The king cannot force them to obey his will, but can only motivate them to do so by means of reward and punishment. A similar agentival space is assumed in the parable's application, since it is up to Israel to do God's will and to keep his Torah. God cannot make them do this; he can only enhance their motivation with his rewards and punishments.

This discussion demonstrates that the parable in Sifre Deut. 40 elaborates the interaction between a father's/God's restrictive authority and the agency of the children/Jews in different theological directions than the parable of the Food-Requesting Son. Given that the parable of the Food-Requesting Son expresses implicit disapproval on fathers who fail to provide their children with edible food products, this raises questions about the rabbinic evaluation of the king's withholding of food in the parable of Sifre Deuteronomy. Since the aforementioned rabbinic discussions about child maintenance make it clear that a father's obligation to maintain his children was contested, the king's actions may likewise have been contested. Some rabbis, such as those who plead in favour of a moral or legal obligation resting upon fathers to maintain their children, may have disapproved of the king's withholding of food. Others may have valued the king's rigorous punishment more positively, given that the disobedience of his children and slaves will have disgraced his honour, authority, and masculinity and will have threatened important cultural values as a result. This positive or negative evaluation of the king's actions will have indirectly influenced the way God's supplying or withholding of rain in the *nimshal* was valued.<sup>41</sup>

The parable may therefore have affinities with parables that express critiques and complaints of God. While scholarly discussions of this group of parables

40 Oegema, "Paternal Authority," 199–200. On food crises and malnutrition, see Peter Garnsey, *Food and Society in Classical Antiquity*, ΚΤΑΗ (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1–4, 34–36, 52–60.

41 See the assessment of this issue in Oegema, "Paternal Authority," 197–198, 199.

often focus on explicit formulations of these critiques in their narratives,<sup>42</sup> the parable of the Starving Children and Slaves demonstrates that these critiques and complaints could also be expressed more indirectly. The king's punishment in the form of death by starvation suits one of the narrative techniques that such complaint-parables employ: the king's abusive exercise of power.<sup>43</sup> This could be compared to some New Testament parables, which describe a master's excessive use of violence on his slaves, such as the Matthean parables of a master and a king who harshly punish their disobedient slaves in Matt 24:45–51 (the slave is cut into pieces) and 25:14–30 (the slave who hid the talent is cast into the outer darkness). The reception history of the latter parable makes it clear that the third slave's harsh punishment was regarded as unbearable, given that the apocryphal version of the parable in the Gospel of the Nazarenes (cited in Eusebius of Caesarea, *Theophania*, fragments IV, 22 [on Matt 25:14–15]) rewrites the story and indicates that the slave who hid the talent in the ground is only rebuked.<sup>44</sup> The apocryphal variant of the story therefore forestalls an indirect critique of God, based on the readers' negative evaluation of the king's harsh punishment.

#### 4 The Mutual Interdependence of Filial Agency and Paternal Authority: Luke 15:11–32 and Mekh. Deut. 1:11

The parable of Luke 15:11–32, commonly known as the parable of the Prodigal Son, offers a fascinating case for analysing the agency of adult sons in relation to their father. The younger son sets the plot in motion by asking his father to give him his share of the inheritance in advance, to which the latter obliges. While the son's initiative itself passes without any judgment from the narrator, the way he deals with his inheritance is clearly given a negative assessment in the course of the narrative. The son turns everything into money, goes abroad, and squanders his property in "dissolute living" (15:13). He himself describes this in retrospect as "sinning against heaven and before you [i.e., the father]"

42 See David Stern, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 130–145; Dov Weiss, *Pious Irreverence: Confronting God in Rabbinic Judaism*, *Divinations* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 114–119.

43 Stern, *Parables*, 132.

44 Cf. Jörg Frey, "Die Fragmente des Nazoräerevangeliums," in *Antike christliche Apokryphen in deutscher Übersetzung*, vol. 1.1, *Evangelien und Verwandtes*, ed. Christoph Marksches and Jens Schröter (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 639, nr. 101: "Mit Hilfe dieser Variante will Eusebius die für ihn allzu harte Drohung gegen den Untätigen in Mt 25,30 erklären."

(15:18, 21); the older brother for his part suspects that his brother “devoured” his father’s property “with whores” (15:30).

The parable thus describes a father who initially gives his son a maximum of agentival opportunities to shape his life in accordance with his own aims and wishes. Formally speaking, the father sets no limits to his agency. The son, in turn, exploits this agentival space by violating paternal and cultural norms and values. Through his own fault and due to external circumstances (the famine), he suddenly finds himself in a situation in which hardly any agentival space is left to him. As an impoverished immigrant, he has to accept the humiliating work as a swineherd, but even then he does not have enough to live on. He therefore decides to return home and ask his father to be allowed to work for him on his estate as a day labourer. In this position, he would be entitled to “bread for work,” the barest necessity of life. However, this desired new life, viewed soberly, will be a life on the margins of society, in social isolation, and in psychological misery. He would not really belong anywhere, neither among the “real” day labourers nor among his family, being despised by his fellow men because of his former way of life and social decline. Yet this life is the best of various alternative trajectories of action that the son sees placed in front of him.<sup>45</sup>

With his return, the son “forces” a reaction from his father, who will decide about his future fate. That is, within his limited agentival space, the son exerts influence on his father. How will the father react? He could refuse the son’s return to the family property and leave the homeless man to an uncertain fate. Alternatively, he could comply with his son’s request and condemn him to a shadowy existence in full view of the family’s life. He could also accept him as a “fallen son,” whose misconduct justifies accusations and poor treatment, creating a family constellation that would encourage the older son to despise his younger brother. However, the father does not do any of this. Instead, he ostentatiously reinstates the son who has returned home, in front of everyone, in the role of the beloved child: he runs towards him, hugs and kisses him, adorns him with festive clothing, a signet ring, and shoes, and organizes a joyous celebration with the fattened calf as festive meal. His course of action is motivated by his deep compassion (15:20: ἐσπλαγγνίσθη, loosely translated: he felt the miserable condition of his son in his own bowels). As a result, his behaviour does not show any concern for the restoration of his own honour, which has been damaged by his son’s misbehaviour, and defies the culturally prevailing ideal of masculinity, which demands active dominance. The

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45 Alternative possibilities one could think of are: dying of hunger and impoverishment, committing suicide, pursuing a criminal career, begging, prostituting oneself.

anti-Jewish interpretations of the father's behaviour mentioned in the introduction above therefore have a small kernel of truth to them: his behaviour *does* violate dominant cultural norms. But the motivation for that behaviour is deeply rooted in Jewish traditions of the merciful God. It violates patriarchal norms that Judaism shared with all ancient Mediterranean societies.<sup>46</sup>

When the older brother learns of his father's actions, he reacts angrily and refuses to come into the house. By refusing to take part in the feast, the older son makes clear that he no longer wants to see himself as the "son of the house." Since he does not recognize the son who returned home as his brother ("this one, your son"; 15:30), the father places the brotherly relationship at the centre of his argument (15:32: "your brother was dead and is alive again"). In his response, the older son, in retrospect and from his own perspective, describes the agentival space allotted to him by his father as extremely small. He uses the metaphor of a rule-abiding slave for himself: "See, for so many years I served you like a slave (δουλεύω σοι) and never disregarded your command; yet, you never gave me a kid so that I could celebrate with my friends" (15:29).<sup>47</sup> In contrast, the father presents a completely different picture of the situation: "Child, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours" (15:31). While the younger son made full use of his agentival space and violated his father's norms, the older son did not exploit the agentival opportunities available to him as a son. Rather, honouring his father's commandments, he acted like a slave and did not imagine alternative courses of action, such as requesting his father to arrange a party for him with his friends.

The younger son's return works as a catalyst for change in this second father-son relationship. The older brother distances himself from his father's actions and thus makes use of his right as a son to express his own opinion—which a slave could not have done without endangering his life and well-being. The father, whose masculinity is again threatened, now by the conspicuous absence of his older son, takes the first step towards reconciliation. He goes out to him, pleads with him instead of giving orders (15:28b), listens to him (15:29–30), and puts forward an alternative view of their relationship and of his younger brother's fate (15:31–32). By asking his son to reassess both his view of his father

46 See Annette Merz, "Ways of Teaching Compassion in the Synoptic Gospels," in *Considering Compassion: Global Ethics, Human Dignity, and the Compassionate God*, ed. L. Juliana Claassens and Frits de Lange (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2018), 66–86; and Françoise Mirguet, *An Early History of Compassion: Emotion and Imagination in Hellenistic Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

47 The use of δουλεύω to describe a son's actions towards his father is unusual. See Martijn J. Stoutjesdijk, "Not Like the Rest of the Slaves? Slavery Parables in Early Rabbinic and Early Christian Literature" (PhD diss., Tilburg University, 2021), 141–142.

and the behaviour appropriate to him as a son (i.e., sharing in his father's property and joy about his younger brother's return), the father honours his son's freedom to decide for himself whether he wants to partake in his brother's reintegration into the family. Again, the father's exercise of authority seems to be geared towards the greatest possible autonomy for the son. The parable leaves open the question of the success or failure of the father's reconciliation with his older son and of the older brother with his younger brother. Exactly here lies the appeal to the listeners. They have to recognize one another as equal brothers and sisters of their divine Father and learn that their Father is forgiving, expecting a childlike, not a servile relationship.

In the parable of the Unfaithful Daughter (Mekh. Deut. 1:11), the agency of a daughter functions as a catalyst for change in a father-daughter relationship as well. This parable aims to explain why Moses, in Deut 1:11, wishes for God's thousandfold multiplication of Israel, given that he is also lamenting his inability to bear Israel (1:9) and their burden and strife (1:12). Why is a blessing needed at this point? The parable of the Unfaithful Daughter creates an imaginary series of events that fills in this narrative gap in Deut 1:11:

A parable. To what is the matter similar? To a king who married off his daughter, and wrote for her a large marriage contract, and warned her not to act unfaithfully. In the end, she acted unfaithfully. And her bride's agent reproved her and brought her back, but she did not turn around. In the end, she turned around for the better. As soon as her bride's agent saw that she had turned around for the better, he began to reprove her for the deeds she had done. And she listened and was silent and did not answer him a word. As soon as her father saw that his daughter was reprovved and felt ashamed and accepted the reproofs, he said to her bride's agent: "Double her marriage contract!"

So the assembly of Israel. Because the Holy One Blessed Be He loved her with the love of youths, as it is said:

משל למה הדבר דומה למלך שהשיא את בתו וכתב לה כתובה מרובה והעיד עליה שלא תקלקל מעשיה לסוף קלקלה מעשיה והיה שושבינה מוכיחה ומשיבה ולא היתה חוזרת בה לסוף חזרה למוטב כיון שראה שושבינה שחזרה למוטב התחיל מוכיחה על מעשים שעשתה ושמעיה ושקתה ולא השיבתו דבר כיון שראה אביה שנתוכחה בתו ונתביישה וקיבלה התוכחת אמר לשושבינה כפול לה כתובתה

כך כנסת ישראל לפי שאהבה הקב"ה באהבת נעורים שנאמר כי נער ישראל ואהבו קלקלו מעשיהן שנאמר ויצמד

“When Israel was a youth, I loved him” (Hos 11:1). They acted unfaithfully, as it is said: “And Israel joined Baal Peor” (Num 25:3). Moses stood up and reproofed them for what they had done. And they felt ashamed of it and did not answer him a word. At that moment, the Holy One Blessed Be He said to Moses: “Since they were silent and accepted the reproof, bless them, and not by a hundred but by a thousand.” Therefore, Moses opened and said: “May YHWH, the God of your fathers, increase you a thousand times more than you are” (Deut 1:11).

Mekh. Deut. 1:11 (text reconstructed on the basis of Midrash Hagadol)

ישראל לבעל פעור עמד משה והוכיחן על מה שעשו ונתביישו ממנו ולא השיבו אתו דבר באותה שעה אמר הקב"ה למשה הואיל ושתקו וקיבלו התוכחה בירכסם ולא במאה אלא באלף לכך פתח משה ואמר ה' אלהי אבותיכם יוסף עליכם ככם אלף פעמים

The parable revolves around a king who marries off his daughter and writes a large marriage contract for her. Despite his many warnings, the daughter violates accepted sexual norms and acts unfaithfully (קלקלה מעשיה).<sup>48</sup> Even when the bride's agent—who is presented as bearing responsibility for a woman's faithful conduct before and during her marriage in several amoraic parables (Exod. Rab. 44:4; Num. Rab. 2:15, 18:12)—reproves the daughter, she persists in her misbehaviour. Only when she improves her life of her own accord does she show herself receptive to the reproofs of her bride's agent. As soon as her father notices his daughter's change of conduct, he commands the bride's agent to double her marriage contract. In the application, the girl's sexual misconduct represents Israel's sexual and religious misconduct at Shittim, where they worshipped Baal Peor (Num 25:1). When Moses, just like the bride's agent, is said to have reproofed Israel, this may have reflected Moses's command to kill all Israelite worshippers of Baal Peor (Num 25:5). Since Israel is described as feeling ashamed (cf. Israel's weeping in Num 25:6), God, just like the king, is believed to have rewarded Israel with an additional blessing. With this imaginary course of events, the parable explains why Moses expressed his wish for Israel's multiplication in Deut 1:11.

<sup>48</sup> In rabbinic literature, this verb is applied to a broad range of harmful acts, halakhic violations, corrupt teachings, and socially unacceptable or sexually illicit behaviour. See, e.g., m. Yevam. 10:2; m. Ned. 11:12; m. Sanh. 8:4.

Just like the youngest son in the parable of the Prodigal Son, the daughter in this parable makes the most of her agentival opportunities. When the king writes a large marriage contract for her, his warnings do not seem to be very restrictive. He leaves his daughter with an agentival space in which she is able to disregard her father's advice and violate accepted sexual norms. She could have acted like a proper virgin bride, but prefers to be sexually active—or, at the very least, to arouse this suspicion.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, when the bride's agent reproves her and brings her back, the parable makes clear that it depends on the girl whether or not she will turn around for the better. Only then do the reproofs of the bride's agent fall on fertile ground. Like the youngest son, the girl acts autonomously from her father and her bride's agent and pursues her own aims and desires instead.<sup>50</sup>

In view of the cultural value attached to a bride's virginity at marriage, the daughter's sexual affair (or sexually suspect behaviour) will have been regarded as disgraceful to her and suggestive of a bad moral character.<sup>51</sup> Her behaviour must have infringed upon the honour of her prospective husband, and brought disgrace upon her father (cf. Sir 42:9–11).<sup>52</sup> Specifically, since the daughter still falls under her father's authority, her (actual or suspected) promiscuity will have expressed a disregard for the king's exercise of authority over her. Given his failure to control his daughter's conduct, his daughter's exhibition of agency will have had a negative effect on the performance and perception of her father's masculinity.<sup>53</sup> It is therefore unsurprising that the bride's agent attempts to bring about a change in her behaviour. Like the two sons in Luke's parable of the Father and His Two Sons, the parable of the Unfaithful Daughter honours the freedom and autonomy of the girl to act according to her own aims and wishes.

Eventually, the king's doubling of her marriage contract signals a restoration of family relations. The king accepts his daughter's return into the family

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49 In an age of #MeToo, it should be noted that the parable blames the daughter for her sexual misconduct rather than her sexual partner. The parable mobilizes an ancient cultural rhetoric—which may not have reflected actual social circumstances from a modern perspective—in which women were believed to be less capable of controlling their sexual desires, thus posing a potential threat to men as temptresses and seductresses. On this rabbinic rhetoric, see, e.g., Michael L. Satlow, *Tasting the Dish: Rabbinic Rhetorics of Sexuality*, BJS 303 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 158–169.

50 Cf. Oegema, "Paternal Authority," 418, 420.

51 Tal Ilan, *Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Palestine: An Inquiry into Image and Status*, TSAJ 44 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995), 61–62; Michael L. Satlow, *Jewish Marriage in Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 118–119.

52 Satlow, *Tasting the Dish*, 155–156; Satlow, *Jewish Marriage*, 102–103.

53 Cf. Oegema, "Paternal Authority," 419.



and proceeds with the marriage preparations, apparently assuming that the prospective husband and his family will go along with the change in his daughter's behaviour as well. Transferred to the application, the daughter's agentival space represents the freedom and autonomy God leaves to Israel to act according to his commandments or not. In significant contrast to the death penalty mentioned in Num 25:4–5, the parable suggests that the Israelites are merely rebuked by Moses and can change their misconduct of their own will, according to their own insight, and at a time of their own choosing. In addition, like the father/God in the parable of the Father and His Two Sons, the additional blessing of Israel by God demonstrates that God works for his relationship with Israel. Instead of severing the bonds, he restores the relationship and increases Israel's covenantal blessings after their repentance from their idolatrous worship of Baal Peor.

In view of the severity of Israel's worship of Baal Peor, however, the king's doubling of his daughter's *ketubbah* and God's thousandfold blessing of Israel seems bizarre. It explicitly contradicts God's (and Moses's) pronouncement of the punishment of death upon Israel in the biblical text (Num 25:4, 5, 9). The parable can be compared with other rabbinic traditions in which the exceptional forgiveness God bestows upon Israel for their worship of Baal Peor is foregrounded (Sifre Num. 136; Sifre Deut. 30) or in which Moses's burial opposite Baal Peor (b. Sotah 14a; cf. Deut 34:6), the twenty-four books of the Tanakh, and the twenty-four priestly and Levitical divisions are said to atone for Israel's worship of Baal Peor (both: Num. Rab. 14:18). Other traditions blame the Moabite women for seducing the Israelite men and outsmarting them with the degrading form of Baal Peor's worship, namely by uncovering oneself (פער, a wordplay on Baal Peor's name; Sifre Num. 131; Num. Rab. 20:23; b. Sanh. 106a; cf. b. Sanh. 64a). This apparent mitigation of Israel's idolatry and emphasis on the restoration of the covenantal relationship with God can be contrasted with, for instance, Origen's retelling of Israel's worship of Baal Peor in his *Homiliae in Numeros*. Interpreting Israel's fornication with the Moabite women spiritually, he explains how humankind, seduced by the devil, commits adultery against God and gives birth to all kinds of sin (Origen, *Hom. Num.* 20.1.5–6, 2.1–3). Baal Peor, as a form of baseness (*species turpitudinis*), is one of the demons to whom those who sin devote themselves (*Hom. Num.* 20.3.4). Although penitence is possible (*Hom. Num.* 20.2.4), it seems that guardian angels alone are of real help to prevent one from straying from the right spiritual path (*Hom. Num.* 20.3.6).

This contrast between rabbinic and patristic exegesis of the Baal Peor incident reminds one of the contrast between the way the rabbis deal with Israel's worship of the golden calf and the way the church fathers do. The rabbis mitigate Israel's sin, by, for instance, blaming the strangers in Israel's midst

(b. Ber. 32a) or arguing that God had forgiven Israel and not rejected them (Lev. Rab. 1:3).<sup>54</sup> This mitigation has been explained as an apologetic response of the rabbis to Christian polemics against the Jews in which the golden calf incident played a central role.<sup>55</sup> While the rabbis' degrading presentation of the worship of Baal Peor has already been discussed in view of rabbinic polemics against paganism and Zoroastrianism,<sup>56</sup> we still need to consider whether rabbinic apologetics may have been at work in mitigating interpretations of Israel's worship of Baal Peor as well, for instance in the parable of the Unfaithful Daughter.

## 5 A Theological Perspective

The parables we have discussed clearly demonstrate how God, despite his potentially restrictive exercise of authority, always leaves an agentival space to human beings. The parabolic imagery of children's agency gives expression to a world view in which the human free will is defined and delimited, but never completely restrained, by God's omnipotence. Even when God is in full control of food and non-material resources (i.e., the parable of the Food-Requesting Son), God's willingness to provide good gifts encourages the parable's audience to use their limited agentival space to pray to God in confidence. In particular, the parables of the Father and His Two Sons, the Starving Children and Slaves, and the Unfaithful Daughter make clear how this agentival capacity of humankind is beyond God's direct control. Because of God's limited exercise

54 For these and many other references, see Arthur Marmorstein, *Studies in Jewish Theology*, ed. Joseph Rabbinowitz and Meyer S. Lew (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), 198–214.

55 See Marmorstein, *Studies*, 198–208, 210–212; Marcel Poorthuis, "Sacrifice as Concession in Christian and Jewish Sources: The *Didascalía Apostolorum* and Rabbinic Literature," in *The Actuality of Sacrifice: Past and Present*, ed. Alberdina Houtman, Marcel Poorthuis, Joshua J. Schwartz, and Joseph Turner, JCP 28 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 179–180n12. In this respect, it may be noteworthy that some traditions in Numbers Rabbah relate Israel's worship of Baal Peor to that of the golden calf or even claim that the former was worse than the latter (Num. Rab. 9:44, 20:23).

56 Ephraim E. Urbach, "The Rabbinical Laws of Idolatry in the Second and Third Centuries in the Light of Archaeological and Historical Facts," *IEJ* 9 (1959): 241–244; Saul Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine: Studies in the Literary Transmission, Beliefs and Manners of Palestine in the 1 Century BCE.–IV Century CE*, TSJTS 18 (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1962), 120–121; Paul Michael Kurtz and Martin Lockshin, "Baal-Peor," in *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception*, ed. Constance M. Furey et al., 21– vols (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010–), 3:cc. 221–224; Natalie C. Polzer, "The Fatal Chamber Pot and the Idol of Pe'or: Covert Anti-Zoroastrian Polemic in the *Bavli*?" *JJS* 67 (2016): 285–288.

of authority, human beings have the freedom and autonomy to pursue their own wishes in accordance with or resistance to God's will.

The narratological emphasis on children's agency is used by the parables to hold up a mirror to their audiences, encouraging them to reflect on their own agentival space, motivating them to behave in accordance with social and religious norms, and warning them against undesirable behavioural forms. With its contrast between reward and punishment, the parable of the Starving Children and Slaves encourages its Jewish audience unequivocally to accept their covenantal obligations vis-à-vis God. Yet such appeals are also present in other parables, such as when the audience of the parable of the Father and His Two Sons is invited to identify with one of the two sons. Those who identify as obedient children are challenged by the parable's open ending to reconsider their behaviour towards repenting community members and to reassess their own attitude towards God (am I behaving like a child or a slave?). On the other hand, wayward community members may have felt addressed as well. Since God rewards the human (re)turn for the better and restores his relationship with "lost" children, they may have felt reassured that their past mistakes do not mean the end of the relationship—there is always a way back. This is true for the audience of the parable of the Unfaithful Daughter as well.

The portrayed agentival space for human autonomy has an effect on the image of God in New Testament and early rabbinic parables, which is given parabolic shape in a broad spectrum of depictions of human father figures that range from brutal to average to indulgent. In this process, God regularly becomes susceptible to challenge and resistance. Interestingly, this applies to both overly restrictive and remarkably compliant behaviour. The king who lets his children starve to death may have provoked criticism from the parable's audience, while the father who slaughters the fattened calf for the prodigal son, visits his angry son in the field, or gives his daughter the opportunity to be sexually active and later doubles her marriage contract does not correspond to the ancient ideal of masculinity. Both kinds of imagery for God as an excessively cruel or exorbitantly forgiving father provoke a strong emotional reaction from the audience as part of the intended message, deterrent as in Sifre Deut. 40 or encouragement as in Mekh. Deut. 1:11 and Luke 15:11–32. But there is more to it. The cognitive dissonance caused by both types of parables is probably part of their moral persuasion. They appeal to the basic human need for harmonious relationships between fathers and children, as they are portrayed in the parable of the Food-Requesting Son. A father whose exercise of authority honours the needs of his children and a child who does not challenge his or her father's position of authority are considered aspiring ideals in the real world and also for the relationship with God.

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## Father's Child: Fatherhood in the Rabbinic Parables of Song of Songs Rabbah

*Tamar Kadari*

This article seeks to examine the relationship between father and son as reflected in rabbinic parables. It focuses on midrash Song of Songs Rabbah, an aggadic midrash from the land of Israel redacted at the end of the sixth or the beginning of the seventh century CE. Song of Songs Rabbah is an exegetical midrash that cites midrashim on each and every verse of the Song of Songs. It is the longest, earliest, and most comprehensive midrash on the Song of Songs.<sup>1</sup> Song of Songs Rabbah contains eighty-three parables, twenty-two of which deal with the parent-child relationship.<sup>2</sup> In all of these parables the father is also a king, a phenomenon consistent with David Stern's findings about parables in the Amoraic period.<sup>3</sup>

Our discussion of the relationship between father and son in the parables raises several methodological questions. As many scholars have demonstrated, the role of rabbinic parables is first and foremost exegetical.<sup>4</sup> Lieve Teugels has convincingly argued that even if rabbinic parables had an oral or narrative pre-history, most of them have been deliberately adapted to a midrashic context

1 On Song of Songs Rabbah see Tamar Kadari, "The Amoraic Aggadic Midrashim," in *The Classic Rabbinic Literature of Eretz Israel*, vol. 1, *An Introduction to Rabbinic Literature*, ed. Menahem Kahana, Vered Noam, Menahem Kister, and David Rosenthal (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, 2018), 319–325 (Hebrew); Günter Stemberger and Hermann Strack, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, trans. and ed. Markus Bockmuehl (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 315–316.

2 These parables can be divided as follows: eleven parables about father and son; nine parables about father and daughter and two about mother and son.

3 David Stern, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 19–21, 93.

4 David Flusser, *Die rabbinischen Gleichnisse und der Gleichniserzähler Jesus*, vol. 1, *Das Wesen der Gleichnisse*, JudChr 4 (Bern: Lang, 1981), 21, 27–28. Flusser maintains that exegetical parables emerged at a later stage in the development of the parable, beginning at the turn of the second century CE, and are of lesser literary merit. This position was challenged by later scholars who point to the sophistication and highly literary design of exegetical parables. See Stern, *Parables in Midrash*, 17–19, 44–45, 66–74; Yonah Fraenkel, *Darkhei ha-aggadah vehamidrash*, 2 vols. (Givatayim: Yad Latalmud, 1991), 1:323–325, 1:327–329, 1:338–347 (Hebrew).



and play a major role in biblical interpretation.<sup>5</sup> Thus we must ask whether the parable accurately reflects the nature of father-son relationships in the rabbinic period, or whether the primary role of the parable is to interpret the biblical event it describes.<sup>6</sup>

Another question relates to the way in which children are depicted in literature written by adults. In her book *Jewish Childhood in the Roman World*, Hagith Sivan studies a series of episodes about Rabbi Joshua bar Hananiah confronting children (Lam. Rab. 1.19).<sup>7</sup> She questions whether these rabbinic stories tell us about the genuine experiences of children, or whether they speak more to the ways in which adults constructed childhood. A similar question ought to be asked about the father-child parables that appear in rabbinic literature composed and redacted by adults.

Alon Goshen-Gottstein's work raises a third methodological question. In his doctoral dissertation entitled *God and Israel as Father and Son in Tannaitic Literature*, Goshen-Gottstein analyses Tannaitic parables about father-son relationships. He highlights eight fixed and recurrent archetypes in these parables: Parables about anger and reconciliation, competition between brothers, education and instruction, the king issuing decrees, the king's son and his pedagogue, the king giving gifts, the king's son and the king's slave, protection and rescue.<sup>8</sup> Against this backdrop we must ask whether the relationships depicted in parables reflect actual relationships or rather patterns of behaviour dictated by literary conventions. We will consider these methodological questions in our discussion of parables about father and son in Song of Songs Rabbah.

## 1 Two Types of Parables in Song of Songs Rabbah

A close analysis of the parables in Song of Songs Rabbah shows that one should distinguish between two types of exegetical parables. The first type of parables appears alongside verses from the Song of Songs, but does not in fact interpret them. These parables were woven into Song of Songs Rabbah by the redactor for various reasons, but are actually commentary on verses from other biblical

5 Lieve M. Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhilot: An Annotated Edition and Translation of the Parables in Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael and Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai*, TSAJ 176 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 7–9.

6 See Alon Goshen-Gottstein, *God and Israel as Father and Son in Tannaitic Literature* (PhD diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1987), 79–80 (Hebrew).

7 Hagith Sivan, *Jewish Childhood in the Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), xii–xiv.

8 Goshen-Gottstein, *God and Israel*, 88–185.

books. The second type is based on verses from the Song of Songs, and they serve to interpret the verse anew.

We will begin with a close examination of a parable that appears in Song of Songs Rabbah, but actually serves as an exegetical commentary on a verse from Genesis. Then we will turn to the second type of parables, those that are centred around verses from the Song of Songs. A comparison of the two types of parables in Song of Songs Rabbah will serve to highlight a unique phenomenon that has not yet been noted in the academic literature.

## 2 First Type: Parables in Song of Songs Rabbah that Interpret Verses from Other Biblical Books

The following parable, about a king and his young son, appears in Song of Songs Rabbah as commentary on the verse “With all powders of the merchant” (Song 3:6). Though it is integrated in Song of Songs Rabbah, its purpose is to interpret the story of the struggle between Jacob and the angel in Gen 32:24–28.

“With all powders of the merchant.”  
(Songs 3:6) ... “And there wrestled a man with him.” (Gen 32:25) ... To a king who had a tame lion and a savage dog. What did the king do?

He took the lion and provoked it so it would fight against his son, and said, “If the dog comes to attack my son, my son will say: ‘I prevailed against the lion; cannot I prevail against the dog?!’”

So when the other nations come to attack Israel, the Holy One, blessed be He, says to them:

“Your guardian angel could not overcome their ancestor, could you overcome them!?”

Song Rab. 3:5<sup>10</sup>

... “מִכָּל אֲבָקַת רוֹכֵל” (שה”ש ג, ו) ...  
... “וַיֵּאבֶק אִישׁ עִמּוֹ” (בראשית לב, כה) ...  
למלך שהיה לו ארי אימירון וכלב אגריון.  
מה המלך עושה?  
זיוג את הארי והיה מלכבו כנגד בנו  
והיה אומר: שאם יבא הכלב להזדווג לבני  
יאמר בני: לארי יכולתי ולכלב איני יכול?!  
כך בשעה שאומות העולם באים להזדווג  
לישראל, הקב”ה אומר להן:  
שר שלכם לא יכול לעמוד באביהן ואתם  
יכולין להם?!<sup>9</sup>

9 All Hebrew citations from Song of Songs Rabbah are according to the version of MS Vatican, Bibliotheca Apostolica Vaticana Cod. Ebr. 76.3.

10 All translations of Song of Songs Rabbah in this article have been taken from Harry Freedman, *Midrash Rabbah*, vol. 9 (London: Soncino, 1983), with some adjustments.

This parable is about education and the raising of princes in the palace. The king prepares his son for the dangers that he anticipates in the future. But he does not want his son to be harmed, so he sets before him a tame lion (Gk. ἡμερσος, σς; Heb. אַימירון), and not a wild dog (Gk. ἄγριος; Heb. אַגריון).<sup>11</sup> This confrontation strengthens the son's self-confidence, which in turn serves to intimidate the dog. But we know that it is in fact an illusion, because the lion does not present a real threat. The father ultimately wishes to protect his son, and so he does not confront him with a savage dog.

The parable suggests that God intentionally orchestrated the struggle between Jacob and the angel so as to prepare Jacob for the anticipated confrontation with Esau the next day. Perhaps Jacob is convinced that he overcame an angel, but he does not know that it is in fact an angel that is subject to God's authority. Jacob's artificial victory prepares him for the confrontation with his brother by bolstering his confidence. Moreover, Esau, who hears that Jacob has prevailed against an angel, is intimidated and wary of clashing with him.

The exegetical role of this parable is reflected in the way it interprets the verse from Genesis anew: "When he saw that he could not overpower him" (Gen 32:26, וירא כי לא יכול לו). The angel "could not overpower" Jacob, and he is defeated in the struggle against him. The Hebrew word for "when he saw" (*vayar*, וַיִּרְא) is understood by the parable as referring not to the angel but to Esau, and it is interpreted as referring to both seeing and fearing (*vayira*, וַיִּירָא), since the two words are spelled identically in Hebrew.<sup>12</sup> When Esau hears that Jacob has defeated an angel, he grows fearful and decides that he cannot fight against Jacob.

The parable carries a relevant message for Jews living under Roman rule. The victory of the Jews against their enemies is not a result of their superior strength or their military prowess, but is due to God's ongoing providence.<sup>13</sup> Contemporary psychologists are critical of "helicopter parenting," in which parents overprotect their children.<sup>14</sup> In a sense that is the role God plays here.

11 See Theodor's interpretation in Julius (Yehuda) Theodor and Chanoch Albeck, eds., *Midrash Bereshit Rabbah: Critical Edition with Notes and Commentary*, 2nd rev. ed., 3 vols. (Jerusalem: Wahrman, 1965), 2:913–914 (Hebrew).

12 On the importance of identifying the textual anchor of the parable, see Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhilot*, 8–9.

13 This stands in contrast with Neusner's conclusion that the parable focuses on Jacob's supernatural powers and projects his ancestors the legitimacy of violence. See Jacob Neusner, *The Theology of the Oral Torah: Revealing the Justice of God* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999), 351.

14 For example Madeline Levine, *Ready or Not: Preparing Our Kids to Thrive in an Uncertain and Rapidly Changing World* (New York: Harper, 2020), 53–74.

But as the parable was composed from the perspective of the son, it looks quite different. The son in the parable is essentially saying that even when his father is no longer present, he feels as if he is still around to help him. In this way the rabbis are trying to reconcile themselves to God's hiddenness and to the absence of revelation during a difficult period of struggle against other nations.

With regard to the methodological questions, we should note that this parable deals with palace life,<sup>15</sup> and so we can assume that it does not reflect Jewish children's experience of childhood during the rabbinic period. Nonetheless, it reflects an experience of parenting that was familiar to the author of the parable, namely the unresolved tension between the need to prepare a child for the challenges of real life and the desire to protect him from harm.

We have seen that the parable about the king's son and the tame lion is essentially a commentary on the verse from Gen 32:26: "When he saw that he could not overpower him." Therefore, as expected, it also appears in midrash Genesis Rabbah in the context of the struggle between Jacob and the angel as an interpretation of this verse.<sup>16</sup> Midrash Genesis Rabbah was redacted in the fifth century CE, prior to the redaction of Song of Songs Rabbah. If so, what is this parable doing in Song of Songs Rabbah?

In his article about the composition of the aggadic midrashim, Julius (Yehudah) Theodor demonstrated that the redactor of Song of Songs Rabbah incorporated large sections of material from earlier midrashic collections, sometimes motivated by common words or phrases.<sup>17</sup> In the case of the parable above, as Theodor demonstrates, the incorporation of the parable from Genesis Rabbah is motivated by the similar word used in the verse "And there wrestled (*va-ye'avek*, ויאבק) a man with him" in Genesis and "with all powers (*avkat*, אבקות) of the merchant" in Song of Songs. Although the parable is almost seamlessly incorporated into its new context, it is still evident that it primarily serves as exegesis on a verse from Genesis, and its connection to Song of Songs is merely secondary.

15 Ziegler proposed that the figure of the king in rabbinic parables was moulded on the figure of the Roman emperor. See Ignaz Ziegler, *Die Königsleichnisse des Midrasch beleuchtet durch die römische Kaiserzeit* (Breslau: Schottlaender, 1903). On the question of whether parables can serve as a source of Roman history and whether they reflect imperial events, see Alan Appelbaum, *The Rabbis' King-Parables: Midrash From the Third-Century Roman Empire*, Jc 7 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2010), 223–270.

16 Gen. Rab. 77:3 (Theodor and Albeck, *Midrash Bereshit Rabbah*, 913–914).

17 Julius Theodor, "Zur Composition der agadischen Homilien," *MGWJ* 28 (1879): 414, 461. For an annotated and updated edition of the article see: Tamar Kadari, *Minkhah L'Yehudah: Julius Theodor and the Redaction of the Aggadic Midrashim of the Land of Israel* (Jerusalem: Schechter Institute; Jerusalem: Leo Baeck Institute, 2017), 135, 143 (Hebrew).

### 3 Second Type: Parables in Song of Songs Rabbah That Interpret Verses from Song of Songs

The second type of parables in Song of Songs Rabbah serves as exegesis on verses from the Song of Songs. The following parable, dealing with the relationship between a father (the king) and his young son, illustrates the revelation on Mount Sinai.

“His mouth is sweet” (Song 5:16).

To a king who spoke before his son,  
and his son was frightened and his soul  
fled (he died).

When the king saw that his soul fled,  
he began to embrace and kiss him, and  
spoke gently to him,  
saying, “What ails you? Are you not my  
only son?

Am I not your father?”

So when God said to Israel:

‘I am the Lord’ (Exod 20:2)

straightaway their souls left them.

When they were dead the angels  
began to embrace and kiss them and  
say: “What ails you? ‘Do not fear’  
(Exod 20:16), ‘You are children of the  
Lord your God’ (Deut 14:1).”

And the Holy One blessed be He made  
the word sweet in their mouths, and  
said to them: “Are you not My sons?!

‘I am the Lord your God’ (Exod 20:2).

You are My people. You are beloved  
unto Me.

And so He began to persuade them  
until their souls returned.

Song Rab. 5:15

”חֲכוּ מִמִּתְקִים“ (שה”ש ה, טז).  
למלך שדיבר כנגד בנו,  
ונתירא ונשמטה נפשו ממנו.  
כיון שראה המלך כך שנשמטה נפשו  
התחיל מגפף ומנשק אותו, ומפתהו  
ואומר לו: מה לך? לא בני יחידי אתה?  
לא אני אביך?  
כך כשדיבר הקב”ה עם ישראל:  
”אָנֹכִי יי“ (שמות כ, ב)  
מיד פרחו נשמתן.

כיון שמתו התחילו המלאכים מגפפין  
ומנשקין אותם ואומרים להם: מה לכם?  
”אל תיראו“ (שמות כ, טז). ”בנים אתם  
ליי אלהיכם“ (דברים יד, א). והקב”ה  
ממתיק בחכן הדיבר ואומר להן:  
לא בני אתם?  
”אָנֹכִי יי אֱלֹהֶיךָ“ (שמות כ, ב) עמי אתם.  
חביבין לפני.  
והתחיל מפתה אותן עד שחזרה נשמתן.

The parable begins with a description of a dialogue between father and son. The phrase “who spoke before his son” (שדיבר כנגד בנו) means that the father

addressed him from an authoritative distance.<sup>18</sup> This kind of relationship is based on fear and hierarchy. The son is so terrified that he nearly dies. The father grows frightened: “When the king saw that his soul fled, he began to embrace and kiss him, and spoke gently to him.” Another aspect of the father’s personality is now revealed. The physical distance is replaced by the physical intimacy of kissing and embracing. Instead of speaking words that intimidate his son, he speaks affectionately so as to revive him: “What ails you? Are you not my only son? Am I not your father?”

This parable is meant to illustrate the revelation of God to Israel on Mount Sinai, shedding new light on the biblical story. According to the parable, when the Holy One Blessed Be He spoke the first words of the first commandment, “I am the Lord” (Exod 20:2), the souls of the children of Israel fled their bodies and they died. God then changed His tone: He made His Word sweet in their mouths and the angels embraced and kissed them, until they were revived.

Returning to the methodological questions we raised, it seems at first blush as if this parable functions as exegesis on the biblical account of the revelation at Sinai and cannot teach us anything about father-son relationships. However, this is not the case. The author of the parable is able to capture the complexity of parenthood. He highlights the tension between the father’s need to educate his son and safeguard parental authority, and the need for love and affection, a deep experience that draws on the real world of the sages.

It is evident that this parable originated as exegesis on the Song of Songs. In Song 5:6 the beloved describes her encounter with her lover using the words, “My soul fled when he spoke,” which suggests a longing so powerful that it leads her to lose her senses. However, in the parable this metaphor is taken literally. The souls of the Israelites actually fled their bodies on account of fear and panic. They heard God’s Word and they died. In the parable, verses 5:6–16 in Song of Songs are read as a narrative, unfolding sequentially in time. After the people of Israel’s terrible reaction in which their souls fled, God changed his tone and revealed to Israel that “his mouth is sweet and he is altogether lovely” (Song 5:16). Here the one God reveals His various aspects to His beloved people.

I wish now to go one step further and point to a unique and unusual feature of this type of rabbinic parable. Over the course of the parable it becomes clear that it is not just the verse from Song of Songs that is being interpreted, but also the verse from Exodus, “I am the Lord Your God” (Exod 20:2). According to

18 On the meaning of the word כנגד as “before” and not “against,” see for example Sifre Deut. 35 (Finkelstein 64): “And these things shall be upon your heart’ (Deut. 6:6), a thing that is before your heart דבר שכנגד לבך, i.e., upon the upper arm.”

the parable, the first commandment was not said all at once. Rather, the Holy One Blessed Be He began saying “I am the Lord” (אֲנֹכִי יי),—words that express God’s power and esteem. After hearing the beginning of this commandment, the people of Israel died from fright.<sup>19</sup> In response, God changed His tone, and continued with “Your God” (אֱלֹהֶיךָ). The word for “Your God” (אֱלֹהֶיךָ) emphasizes the connection, the warmth, and the love, and the shift from first to second person is understood as an indication of this change in tone.

This is a unique phenomenon.<sup>20</sup> The parable essentially serves a double exegetical function, interpreting both a verse from the Song of Songs and a verse from Exodus. This doubled exegesis is based on the layer of allegorical meaning that accompanies the verses from Song of Songs. The word for “when he spoke” (*b’dabbro*, בְּדַבְּרוֹ Song 5:6) is understood allegorically as referring to a particular utterance—the first commandment (*dibber*, דִּבֶּר) spoken by God on Sinai.<sup>21</sup>

The double exegetical function of the parables on Song of Songs can be demonstrated by other examples. The following parable serves as a commentary on Song 2:5: “Sustain me with raisin cakes, refresh me with apples. For I am sick with love.” Its allegorical meaning applies to the situation of the Israelites when they left Egypt:

“For I am sick with love” (Song 2:5).  
 Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai taught:  
 When Israel went forth from Egypt,  
 what did they resemble? A king’s son  
 who got up from an illness.  
 His pedagogue said to the king:  
 “Your son should now go to school!”  
 The king replied: “My son has not yet  
 recovered his colour and he is still pale  
 from his illness.

”כִּי חוֹלֵת אֶהְבֶּה אָנִי” (שה”ש ב, ה).  
 תני ר’ שמעון בן יוחאי:  
 בשעה שיצאו ישראל ממצרים למה  
 היו דומין?  
 לבן מלכים שעמד מחליו.  
 אמר לו פדגוג:  
 ילך בנך לאיסכול!  
 אמר לו המלך: עדיין לא בא בני בזיוו  
 שנשתנה מחליו.  
 אלא יתעדן ויתענג בני בשלשה חדשים

19 The notion of the people of Israel being frightened to death is based on Exod 20:15–16: “All the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the blare of the horn and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they fell back and stood at a distance. ‘You speak to us,’ they said to Moses, ‘and we will obey; but let not God speak to us, lest we die.’”

20 Usually the *mashal* and *nimshal* constitute an interpretation of one base verse, or part of it, see Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhilot*, 12, 14–15.

21 See b. Shab. 88b and Song Rab. 5:16 (section 3). These parallels indicate that the parable was based on an ancient midrash that connected the verse “My soul fled when he spoke,” with the commandments given at Sinai.

Let him therefore enjoy and delight himself for about three months with food and drink, and then he can go to school.” So when the Israelites went forth from Egypt there were among them many who bore the marks of their hard labour with mortar and bricks.

The ministering angels said to God: “Behold the time has come, give them the Torah!”

The Holy One blessed be He replied: “My sons have not yet recovered the colour which they lost among the bricks and mortar. Let My sons therefore be delighted for three months with the well, with the manna, and with the quail, and then I will give them the Torah.”

And when will that be? “In the third month [after the Israelites left Egypt—on that very day—they came to the Desert of Sinai]” (Exod 19:1).

Song Rab. 2:5

במאכל ומשתה ואחר כך ילך לאסכולי.  
 כך בשעה שיצאו ישראל ממצרים  
 היו בהן בעלי מומין  
 משעבוד טיט ולבנים.  
 אמרו לו מלאכי השרת: הרי השעה  
 תן להן את התורה!  
 אמר להן הקב"ה: עדיין לא בא זיותן של  
 בני משעבוד טיט ולבנים.  
 אלא יתעדנו בני עד שלשה חדשים  
 בבאר מן ושלו ואחר כך אתן להן  
 התורה. ואימתי?  
 “בַּחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁלִישִׁי [לְצֵאת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל  
 מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם בַּיּוֹם הַזֶּה בָּאוּ מִדְּבַר סִינַי]”  
 (שמות יט, א).

This is one of several parables that use the recurrent archetype of a father, son and pedagogue.<sup>22</sup> The pedagogue was a private teacher or tutor whom wealthy aristocratic parents hired to educate their children. According to Catherine Hezser, the Greek loanword *paedagogue* (παιδαγωγός) appears in rabbinic literature only in the context of king parables. Since these tutors were considered a luxury of the upper class, the rabbis imagined gentile kings to have hired a pedagogue for their son.<sup>23</sup> In rabbinic parables the pedagogue is a mediator

22 For a partial collection of pedagogue parables see Ziegler, *Die Königsleichnisse des Midrasch*, 419–426, Anhang clix–clxi; Goshen-Gottstein, *God and Israel*, 131–148.

23 See Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine*, TSAJ 81 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 48, 57–61. The Greek *paidagogos* was a slave who accompanied a boy from early childhood until his early adulthood to the various places where he received instruction. He was a supervisor rather than a teacher. On literary portraits of the late antique



figure involved in the power dynamics of the emperor's family. He is supposed to watch over the child, but sometimes he does the exact opposite.<sup>24</sup>

In the parable above, the pedagogue is depicted as a foil to the king. The prince has been sick for a long time and hence absent from school. After he recovers, the pedagogue wishes for him to return to his studies. But the father thinks otherwise. He maintains that his son is still not strong enough to return to school, and thus he would like to keep him home for an additional three months. The pedagogue represents what is fitting and acceptable, as per strict rule. In contrast, the father is attentive to his beloved son and concerned for his welfare. His familiarity with his son and love for him are evident in his ability to read the colour on his son's face and know when he has truly regained sufficient strength to return to his studies.

This parable is brought as commentary on Song 2:5: "Sustain me with raisin cakes, refresh me with apples. For I am sick with love." The parable interprets the verse from the Song of Songs anew. The sick one are the Israelites, who are described as "sick with love." Strictly speaking the people are already healed, but on account of God's love for them they are still considered sick. Thus they are deemed worthy of pampering: "Sustain me with raisin cakes, refresh me with apples."

In addition to the exegesis on the biblical verse from the Song of Songs, there is also the allegorical layer. The verse is understood as describing the situation of the Jewish people when they left Egypt. The parable questions why God waited three months between the exodus from Egypt and the revelation on Sinai.<sup>25</sup> Strictly speaking, the children of Israel are no longer slaves, and so they should be ready to receive the Torah immediately. However, the parable explains that God is a compassionate and caring father. For three months he pampers Israel with the well, the manna, and the quail so that they will regain their strength, and only then does he give them the Torah: "In the third month after the Israelites left Egypt—on that very day—they came to the Desert of Sinai" (Exod 19:1).

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Jewish student and sage, see Marc Hirshman, *The Stabilization of Rabbinic Culture, 100 CE–350 CE: Texts on Education and Their Late Antique Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 127–132 (Appendix 2: Portraits of Jewish Sages Engaged in Study).

24 The pedagogue may even have criminal intentions. See Hezser, *Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine*, 58. An opposite role of the pedagogue is serving as an executor of the king's will. See Goshen-Gottstein, *God and Israel*, 131–148.

25 Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhiltot*, 14–15, uses the term "issue," for parables that answer larger questions that emerge from the verses.

#### 4 The Song of Songs: Lock or Key

We have pointed out the significant difference between two types of parables in Song of Songs Rabbah. One type of parable appears alongside verses from the Song of Songs, but does not in fact interpret them; the other type of parable is based on verses from the Song of Songs, and the verse is interpreted anew by means of the parable. We have also noted a unique phenomenon characteristic of the second type of parable, in which the parables serve a double exegetical function—both as commentary on the verse from the Song of Songs and as commentary on the allegorical layer of meaning.

In his chapter entitled “The Song of Songs: Lock or Key,” Daniel Boyarin considers the intertextuality of rabbinic exegesis on Song of Songs. He writes:

The rabbis of the midrash regarded the holy song as a *mashal*, a hermeneutic key to the unlocking of the Torah ... The *mashal* is a story whose meaning by itself is perfectly clear and simple, and because of its simplicity enables one to interpret by analogy a more complex, difficult or hermetic text ... By reading Song of Songs, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes as *meshalim*, then, the midrash is claiming that they are not hermetic texts, “locks to which the key has been lost,” but hermeneutic keys to the unlocking of the hermetic Torah ... I would suggest that the rabbis read the Song of Songs as a *mashal* written by Solomon to be a hermeneutic key to the unlocking of the book of Exodus.<sup>26</sup>

Boyarin’s description does not properly encapsulate rabbinic interpretation on the Song of Songs as we have seen above. The rabbis did not regard the Song of Songs as a clear and simple text but rather as one that requires exegesis. They used parables in order to interpret verses of the Song of Songs. We have seen how the parable on the verse “My soul fled when he spoke” literalizes the metaphor and reads Song 5:6–16 as a chronological narrative revealing God’s various characteristics to His beloved people. And the parable on Song 2:5 “For I am sick with love” considers the people of Israel still sick on account of God’s love for them. According to Boyarin, the rabbis read the Song of Songs as a *mashal* (parable) that interprets the Torah, whereas we have demonstrated that the rabbis created new parables, about fathers and their sons, in order to explain the verses of the Song. The interpretive role of the parable is used first and foremost in order to interpret the verses of Song of Songs itself. Boyarin concludes:

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<sup>26</sup> Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 105–107.

The Rabbis of the midrash who understood that the Writings as a whole are a reading of the Torah did not perceive the Song of Songs as being at all like a lock to which the key has been lost.<sup>27</sup> They understood it rather as a hermeneutic key to the interpretation of Torah. The way in which the Writings were comprehended as interpretation was by relating the more or less vague situations of various poetic texts to specific parts of the Torah. The reading method was accordingly not allegorical—relating signifier to signified—but intertextual—relating signifier to signifier.<sup>28</sup>

In light of our study the description above needs some fine-tuning. The rabbis understood all Writings, including the Song of Songs, as complex and hermetic. They saw all verses of Holy Scripture as locks and used all of them as hermeneutic keys to unlock each other.

Isaac Heinemann, in his classic book *Darkhei ha-aggadah*, demonstrates how the rabbis spun subtle threads through Scripture, linking different biblical events and characters, connecting fathers and sons, and tying action and retribution.<sup>29</sup> As Heinemann wrote: “For the ancient rabbis, although Scripture was multifaceted, it was nonetheless a single work, and at each stage they tried to prove its unity ... by emphasizing the interconnectedness of all of its parts.”<sup>30</sup> Yonah Fraenkel, in commenting on the unity of the biblical text, writes that “the ancient rabbis regarded the entire Bible as a single living body, with all its limbs nourished as a single entity, such that each limb contained recognizable elements of the body as a whole, and each limb could affect even those at a considerable distance.”<sup>31</sup> The idea of biblical unity pervades rabbinic literature, especially Song of Songs Rabbah.

27 Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*, 115, refers here to Pseudo-Saadya, an anonymous Jewish commentator of the tenth century CE, that characterized the Song of Songs as a lock to which the key has been lost. In a Hebrew article written twenty-five years earlier, Urbach parallels this saying to Origen’s statement in the name of “the Hebrew” (Origen, *Philoc. 2.3* in *Origène: Philocalie, 1–20 sur les Écritures*, sc 302, ed., Marguerite Harl, (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1983), 244, that the Holy Scriptures are compared to many locked rooms in a single house, and in each room lies a key that does not belong to it. See Ephraim E. Urbach, “The Homiletical Interpretations of the Sages and the Exposition of Origen on Canticles and the Jewish-Christian Disputation,” in *Studies in Aggadah and Folk-Literature*, ScrHier 22 (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1971): 247n2.

28 Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*, 115.

29 Isaac Heinemann, *Darkhei ha-aggadah* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1949), 56–74 (Hebrew).

30 Heinemann, *Darkhei ha-aggadah*, 57.

31 Yonah Fraenkel, *Midrash and Aggadah*, 3 vols. (Tel Aviv: The Open University of Israel, 1996), 1:163 (Hebrew).

Parables usually serve as exegesis on one biblical verse (or part of it).<sup>32</sup> Yet our analysis pointed to a unique and unusual feature of the parables in Song of Songs Rabbah, namely their double exegetical role. They interpret not just the verse from Song of Songs, but also the layer of allegorical meaning that accompanies it. We saw how the verse “when he spoke” (*b’dabbro*, בדברו Song 5:6) is understood allegorically as referring to a particular utterance (*dibber*, דיבר, commandment) spoken by God on Sinai. The verse “For I am sick with love” (Song 2:5) served as an explanation of the reason why Torah was given to Israel “in the third month after the Israelites left Egypt” (Exod 19:1). This phenomenon can be understood as an intertextual reading method as Boyarin contends, yet it works in both directions: The verses of the Torah are used as hermeneutic keys to unlock the abstruse poetic texts of Song of Songs, and the verses of the Song of Songs are used allegorically as hermeneutic keys to explain historical narratives described in the Torah.<sup>33</sup>

## 5 Conclusion

Our analysis has shown that there are elements of the parable that are dictated by literary archetypes and exegetical constraints. Yet the educational dilemmas and moral considerations raised by these parables also reflect the rabbis’ contemporary concerns. Should a child be sheltered and protected, or should he have to struggle with the dangers that come his way? Should the parent assert his authority by instilling fear in the child, or should the parent envelop the child in love and pamper him with sweets? Should the child be sent to school, or be permitted to remain at home?

We might have expected that parables about verses from Song of Songs would deal with relationships between men and women. The decision to present the history of Israel’s covenant with God as a parental bond furnished the sages with a sense of security. This is not a contract that can be violated, but a longstanding blood tie that cannot be severed. It poses its own dilemmas, and those dilemmas are not easy, but there is no doubt that it is a relationship built on a firm foundation of concern, warmth, and love.

32 See Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhilot*, 12, 14–15.

33 One should add that Song of Songs Rabbah is a running commentary, offering a wide range of allegorical readings to each and every verse using parables and many other midrashic techniques. Some of them deal with past events, as Boyarin describes, but others suggest allegorical readings of the Song pertaining to contemporary and future occurrences.

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## Why Are Biblical Verses Not Quoted in Parables? A Cultural-Cognitive Explanation

*Ronit Nikolsky*

This contribution to the volume celebrating the end of the project “Parables and the Partings of the Ways” focusses on a phenomenon in parables which might seem banal, asking why biblical verses are not cited in rabbinic parables (*meshalim*).

In order to understand why the absence of verses in parables is indeed meaningful, we must first look at the role of verses in rabbinic discourse, mainly in midrash. The presence of verses in midrash was theorized many times by scholars of Jewish studies and adjacent fields from literary, historical, philosophical, and cultural-critique approaches. However, their absence in parables has never been theorized. When explained from a cultural-cognitive perspective, these two phenomena—i.e., the presence in midrash and absence in parables—show themselves to be interconnected. I believe that these phenomena have a very precise cognitive process behind them, a cognitive process which is basic for the creation of any human culture, and by derivation, for the midrash-parable relationship. This process is described in the Decoupling Theory, a culture-cognitive theory formulated by Barend van Heusden, and I will argue that the Decoupling Theory best explains the absence of verses in parables. This theory is hardly common for the study of rabbinic texts or for Jewish studies in general; however, the cognitive aspect of culture is gaining in importance for cultural studies, and thus helps map Jewish studies within the general study of human culture.<sup>1</sup>

I will first give a short overview of the contexts in which verses are found in midrash, and then discuss Yonah Fraenkel’s and Daniel Boyarin’s theorization of their appearance there. I will content myself with these two, as they

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1 Especially relevant is the field of the Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR), and the work in this direction by Pascal Boyer, Robert McCauley, Thomas Lawson, Armin Geertz, István Czachesz, Risto Uro, Uffe Schjødt, and many others in the past two and a half decades. For a short introduction to this field of study, see István Czachesz and Gerd Theissen, “Cognitive Science and Biblical Interpretation,” in *Language, Cognition, and Biblical Exegesis: Interpreting Minds*, ed. Ronit Nikolsky, István Czachesz, Frederick S. Tappenden, and Tamás Biró, SSR (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 13–39. Cf. also the contribution from Gerd Theissen in this volume.

form a trajectory to spring into the cognitive approach. Following this, I will briefly explain the Decoupling Theory, and then theorize the absence of verses from the parables in light of this theory. Lastly, I will use one parable (The Cow That Follows Its Calf against Her Will) as an example of the phenomenon and its theorization.

## 1 Verses in Midrash and in Parables

### 1.1 *Verses in Midrash*

Biblical verses are an integral part of rabbinic literature. It is certainly an essential component of midrash, as the midrashic discourse is an intertextual activity occurring between the biblical text and the rabbinic text. The rabbinic collections that are called *midrashic corpora* follow the biblical narrative, quote a biblical verse, and relate to it either hermeneutically or homiletically. However, also collections that are of halakhic genres—i.e., Mishnah, Tosefta, and Talmudim—employ midrashic discourse; they focus on a biblical verse, which they quote either at the beginning or at the end of a textual unit, and elaborate upon it.<sup>2</sup> Let us look at the following example:

“And God called the light day, and the darkness—night” (Gen 1:5). Rabbi Elazar says: “God never attaches His name to bad things, only to good things; it does not say ‘and God called the day ‘light’ and the darkness God called ‘night,’ but ‘and the darkness—night.’”

Gen. Rab. 3:5

Rabbi Elazar explains the absence of the grammatical subject, God, in the second part of the verse as an intentional attempt to avoid having God associated with the negative phenomenon of darkness. We see that the explanation of Rabbi Elazar adds to the verse content which is not originally there: the verse does not talk metaphorically about light and darkness, but about the physical phenomena, and it is Rabbi Elazar who adds this metaphorical understanding to the verse. We therefore see here how rabbinic ideology—i.e., that God is all and only positive—is read into the biblical verse.

This re-understanding is typical of rabbinic literature, as this literature is dedicated to illustrating how rabbinic ideology, including rabbinic halakhah, is based on the authoritative source of divine knowledge, the Bible. The direct

<sup>2</sup> Paul D. Mandel, *The Origins of Midrash: From Teaching to Text*, JSJSup 180 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 16–19. Mandel coined the term “Legal Instructional Model” to refer to the role of midrash.



quotation of biblical verses is the way to prove this claim. Often, the discourse is formulated as the solution to a linguistic problem in the biblical text, as we saw above.

But the presence of biblical verses in rabbinic literature goes beyond the quotation of a single verse in a single unit for hermeneutic or homiletic purposes. The verses play more roles than just that of a quote. We also find that one quoted verse is explained by another verse, or by a series of other verses, each giving a different interpretation. We find cases where each word in the verse is associated with a different biblical verse, similar to the “extended metaphor” known in literary studies; we also find the midrashic literary form known as the “proem,” where two verses from seemingly unconnected biblical narratives are juxtaposed and integrated into a single narrative or claim.<sup>3</sup> Lastly, verses are found in ‘midrashic expansion’: these are elaborations on biblical narratives by the addition of dialogues, plotlines, and even characters in order to create a story that would fit the rabbinic understanding of the biblical narrative.<sup>4</sup> We find various characters in this expansion “talk in verses,” so to speak, quoting biblical verses as their speech act. The result of all these ways in which biblical verses are incorporated into midrashic discourse is a body of literature replete with biblical verses serving a variety of different roles.

## 1.2 *Theorising Verses in Midrash*

The prevalence of verses in midrash has been identified and theorized by scholars of rabbinic literature, among them Yonah Fraenkel and Daniel Boyarin.

Fraenkel, a prominent midrash scholar, used a literary approach in his comprehensive work on rabbinic literature in its totality, and midrash in particular.<sup>5</sup> Fraenkel dedicated numerous chapters of his works to the study of the role of verses in rabbinic literature. He defined the principle of “unity of the Bible,” explaining that the rabbinic perception of the biblical text is that

3 For the “extended metaphor” (in narratology), see, e.g., Joanna Gavins, *Text World Theory: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 149–152; for the midrashic “proem” form, see: Yonah Fraenkel, *Darkhei ha-aggadah vehamidrash* (Tel-Aviv: Modan, 1996), 445–448. For a biblical verse interpreted by many verses, see Yonah Fraenkel, “The Role of Biblical Verses in Rabbinic Speech,” in *The Aggadic Narrative: Harmony of Form and Content* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2004), 198–219 (Hebrew), especially the example on page 205.

4 Ofra Meir is known for pioneering this way of conceptualising the midrashic activity; see, e.g., Ofra Meir, “The Story as a Hermeneutic Device,” *AJSR* 7/8 (1982–1983): 231–262.

5 Fraenkel’s major works are: Yonah Fraenkel, *Darkhei ha-aggadah vehamidrash* (Tel-Aviv: Modan, 1996); Yonah Fraenkel, *Midrash and Aggadah*, 3 vols. (Tel Aviv: The Open University of Israel, 1996); Yonah Fraenkel, *The Aggadic Narrative: Harmony of Form and Content* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2001).

of divine words from beginning to end, such that all the parts of the Bible are holy and can thus be seen as one long divine word. This principle is behind the rabbinic conviction that any one part of the Bible can explain any other part.<sup>6</sup> The rabbis, then, felt free to “deconstruct” the biblical text (an expression of which Fraenkel would probably not approve) and to “reconstruct” its parts to assert their ideology, that is, what they thought of as truth.<sup>7</sup> Two parallel drives are at work here, says Fraenkel, the drive to interpret the verse, and the drive to innovate, to give the verse a new meaning. As to which of the two came first, Fraenkel argues that this is a matter of our differentiation for the sake of analysis and that the two phenomena are one for the rabbis.<sup>8</sup>

In spite of the great scope of Fraenkel’s work, there is still room to characterize the phenomenon of verses in the midrash beyond the literary description, and to theorize it from a wider view on human culture. We find this type of high criticism in the work of Daniel Boyarin. In his seminal book *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (1990), which was written in light of the emergence and spread of sophisticated semiotic theories in literary and cultural studies, Boyarin introduced the concept of intertextuality to Jewish studies. In the second chapter, “Reciting the Torah: The Function of Quotation in the Midrash,” Boyarin tackles the role of verses in midrash. Building on Julia Kristeva’s notion of the text as a mosaic of quotations, Boyarin rejects the traditional understanding of verses as prooftexts, and asserts that “the so-called ‘prooftexts’ are to be read as intertexts and contexts of the Torah’s narrative.”<sup>9</sup> This intersection, continues Boyarin, in effect undermines the distinction that we habitually make between literary creation and hermeneutic work, by showing that all literary creation is hermeneutic and all hermeneutic is creation:<sup>10</sup> “The verses of the Bible function for the rabbis much as do words in ordinary speech. They are a repertoire of semiotic elements that can be recombined into new discourse.”<sup>11</sup> Verses are quoted and co-quoted, that is, quoted in nexus with each other, a nexus which conveys an old-new meaning, and thus they are used both as the reference and as part of the narrative itself. This creates a biblico-rabbinic language typical for rabbinic literature. In Boyarin’s analysis,

6 Fraenkel, *Midrash and Aggadah*, 161.

7 This ideology does not necessarily contradict the general biblical ideology, but it is also not identical with all the details of it; see Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 26.

8 Fraenkel, *Darkhei ha-aggadah*, 320–321.

9 Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*, 22.

10 Boyarin, *Intertextuality*, 25.

11 Boyarin, *Intertextuality*, 28.

Fraenkel's claim that the entire biblical text is a single unit has been elevated into "an intuition that the Bible is a self-glossing text."<sup>12</sup>

### 1.3 *Absence of Verses in Parables*

The prevalence of verses in midrash is matched by their absence in parables. One finds verses as a starting point for a parable, in the *nimshal*, or just before the *nimshal*; often the midrash in which the parable is embedded is swarming with verses (to use Gilles Deleuze's term) of various functions and statuses, but the parable itself never quotes a biblical verse—at least not in the parables that I have seen. How do we theorize this?

The intuitive reaction to this recognition is that this is only to be expected, since the narrative of the parable comes from the reality of the rabbis, or at least from motifs that are familiar in their literary sphere,<sup>13</sup> while the biblical text is an unchangeable cultural memory that has to be explained. No study has as yet been dedicated to this phenomenon of the absence of verses in parables, and surely none from a cognitive perspective. Since I claim that the Decoupling Theory can explain this phenomenon, I will first outline the basics of this theory.

## 2 The Decoupling Theory: The Search for Meaning

In the Decoupling Theory, the concept of "meaning" is understood as a comprehensive cognitive phenomenon, a semiotic one albeit not in an exclusively linguistic sense. It may be briefly formulated as follows: "Something is meaningful for an organism if it triggers a reaction, whether an action, an attitude or even only a recognition."<sup>14</sup>

This understanding of "meaning" takes the concept very far back in the evolution of life, where meaningfulness is obtained when an organism reacts

12 Boyarin, *Intertextuality*, 80.

13 For an elaborate and sophisticated description of this issue, see Eric Ottenheijm and Marcel Poorthuis, "Parables in Changing Contexts: A Preliminary Status Questionis," in *Parables in Changing Contexts: Essays on the Study of Parables in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism*, JCP 35 (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 1–11; cf. also Eric Ottenheijm and Marcel Poorthuis, "Parables in Changing Contexts: a Retrospect," in *Parables in Changing Contexts*, 301–306, and Eric Ottenheijm, "On the Rhetoric of 'Inheritance' in Synoptic and Rabbinic Parables," in *Parables in Changing Contexts*, 22–24.

14 Barend van Heusden, "Dealing with Difference: From Cognition to Semiotic Cognition," *CS* 4 (2009): 116–132; Barend van Heusden, "Semiotic Cognition and the Logic of Culture," *P&C* 17 (2009): 611–627.

to input from the environment in order to maintain homeostasis, the stable conditions of the body necessary for survival. Attraction, movement toward favourable conditions, and aversion, movement away from harmful conditions, indicate that there is meaning. Further down the evolutionary line, these reactions become more complex, such as the recognition of favourable conditions for hunting for a lion, for example, or the detection of emotional clues for improving social interactions for social animals, such as people. This understanding entails that “meaning” is not part of the artefact that is sensed, but is in the mind of the one sensing it.

The evolutionary advantage of “meaning,” when understood in this way, is evident: this semiotic system enables any organism, from the single cell’s embedded behaviour all the way to the complex social animals with learned cultural behaviour, to adapt to their environment, while still benefiting from past experience, as they use their familiar behaviour to tackle or react to new events.

The process of “meaning” happens automatically in all animals, without awareness: when a new input is similar to the memory, the organism reacts, when the new input is not exactly the same as the memory, the brain automatically “updates” the memory to include the new version of the phenomenon. The term “memory” in this context must be explained briefly. Since birth, the brain creates mental concepts of reality which are based on experience: any reaction of an infant to the environment which has proven helpful will be stored as a useful reaction, constituting the infant’s (and later the adult person’s) memory, and this reaction will be triggered whenever a similar situation is recognized by the sensory system. The sum of memories is the reality in which we live, and is termed “reality” in the Decoupling Theory. The sensory input coming from the immediate surrounding is called “actuality.”

There is a special quality in the human brain that, as far as we know, does not exist in other organisms: humans can be aware of the *absence* of meaning—that is, they can recognize that the sensory input, the actuality, does *not* match the memory, the reality. Humans can keep both options in their awareness, and they do this without updating the memory automatically in unawareness, as other animals do. This recognition of the gap between actuality and reality is the “decoupling.”

The awareness of the gap between reality and actuality creates a semiotic dissonance. In order to update the memory properly, to gain a new way to handle the new situation, this dissonance demands a reaction. Much of human effort, both on the level of everyday personal experience and on the social-cultural scale, is dedicated to filling the gap between reality and actuality, between existing memories, or more specifically, to accommodating actuality

into reality based on past experience. Thus, the process of creating culture in humans is an effort to accommodate actuality into the reality.

### 3 Integrating Cognition into the Study of Parables and Verses<sup>15</sup>

#### 3.1 *The Rabbinic Midrashic Activity in Cognitive Terms*

Regardless of the meaning any part of the biblical text may have had at its degree zero (if one believes such a moment ever existed), from the moment any part of it became authoritative, whether formally, as a sealed, unchangeable text (for example, as performed in the synagogue), or as a culturally accepted, authoritative oral tradition, it paradoxically separated from the people who originally and intuitively held it as authoritative, since historical circumstances change constantly and unchangeable elements in the culture cannot keep pace with those changes. From this hypothetical moment of separation onward, the memory had to be updated whenever meeting the biblical text. In the case of a cultural, that is, collective, artefact, the process of updating is done on a societal level using social institutions. Precisely this updating is the rabbinic activity.

On the one hand, the rabbinic culture is one of the continuations of Second Temple Judaic circles, and thus had the Bible as part of its cultural canon and a holy text. On the other hand, its enterprise was to establish a particular, rabbinic direction for Judaic culture, to divert it from the priestly hegemonic culture as well as others,<sup>16</sup> and the rabbis endeavoured to show how their culture was based on the accepted Scripture. Thus, they not only had to make the connection between the declared holy text and their culture (which included rabbinic halakhah), but also to connect the text to their developing culture again and again, in every generation. This is the very thing the midrashic activity is doing: connecting the unchangeable, authoritative cultural artefact to the current culture, the current narratives and social values. From a cultural-cognitive approach, it updates the memory, or in Decoupling Theory terms, accommodates “actuality” into “reality.”

15 See also: Ilkka Pyysiäinen, “Holy Book—A Treasury of the Incomprehensible. The Invention of Writing and Religious Cognition,” *Numen* 46 (1999): 269–290.

16 See, e.g., Ra’anana Boustán, “Afterword: Rabbinization and the Persistence of Diversity in Jewish Culture in Late Antiquity,” in *Diversity and Rabbinization: Jewish Texts and Societies between 400 and 1000 CE*, eds. Gavin McDowell, Ron Naiweld, and Daniel Stoekl Ben Ezra, CSLC 8 (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2021), 427–449, esp. 432–444; Hayim Lapin, *Rabbis as Romans: The Rabbinic Movement in Palestine, 200–400 CE*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 45–63.

### 3.2 *How Does This Work in the Case of Rabbinic Parables?*

In a very short and rough way, we can describe a parable as a narrative that sheds light on another narrative or a narrative situation.<sup>17</sup> Parables are ubiquitous in many cultures; in the rabbinic context, *meshalim* shed light on biblical stories, and in many cases, what they in fact shed light on is the understanding of these stories by previous rabbinic generations.<sup>18</sup>

The absence of verses in parables, even though such verses are freely and flexibly added to most other parts of rabbinic discourse like midrash and even the *nimshal*, is a stable quality in rabbinic parables. We can thus say that parables are one element in rabbinic discourse which is not part of the biblico-rabbinic language described by Boyarin. This biblico-rabbinic language of the rabbinic literature represents a holy reality, as does the behaviour of the sages, and the *beit-midrash* environment as a whole. This reality is not the intuitive everyday reality of the lay person, it is a “second level culture,” a culture which is an extra step above the intuitive culture, a step that had to be taken intentionally and was not easy to achieve. Even the rabbis needed to make an effort to make and maintain themselves as part of this reality.<sup>19</sup> In contrast, the parables, in this scheme, are the everyday intuitive reality.

To describe the above in terms of the Decoupling Theory, we would say that the parable is the reality and the biblical story is the actuality, that is, the parable is the internal reality of the rabbis and the biblical story is the external input that has to be accommodated into the internal reality.

Thus, what the rabbis do when expounding the Bible through the use of parables follows the usual process of culture: new input (the biblical text) is recognized as similar but not identical to the memory (the parable) and must

17 For an overview of this literature, I refer the reader to Lieve M. Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhilotot: An Annotated Edition and Translation of the Parables in Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael and Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai*, TSAJ 176 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 20–65.

18 On rabbinic parables shedding light on previous rabbinic understanding, see Ronit Nikolsky, “Are Parables an Interpretation?” in *Sources and Interpretation in Ancient Judaism: A Volume for Tal Ilan at Sixty*, ed. Meron Piotrkowski, Geoffrey Herman, and Saskia Doenitz, *AJEC* 104 (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 289–315.

19 See, e.g., Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2003), 102–122; see also Daniel Boyarin’s (unpublished) lecture “If That’s not Love, What is it? An Unknown Emotion in the Talmud” in the framework of the expert workshop “Personal and Social Emotions in Rabbinic Literature: Methods and Approaches,” which took place in Groningen in May 2018 as a keynote lecture in the framework of the workshop: “Personal and Social Emotions in Rabbinic Literature: Methods and Approaches” organized by Ronit Nikolsky, and supported by a conference grant from the European Association of Jewish Studies and by the University of Groningen.

be accommodated to the memory, by upgrading the memory, understanding the biblical story in light of the parable.

### 3.2.1 The Counterintuivity of Relating to the Bible as External or New Input

To call the biblical corpus external is tricky in the context of Jewish studies, as the Hebrew Bible is the most stable element in rabbinic Judaism and often declared as its core and origin of authority. However, from a cognitive perspective, the biblical narrative and text is an artefact, and it only has meaning if endowed with meaning by the minds that give it that meaning. Since the Bible is an ancient text describing a reality which no longer existed in rabbinic times, its meaning had to be reinvented in every generation to fit the inner world of the members of the society of that time. Therefore, as counterintuitive as it may sound, the biblical text and narrative is the external, actual reality, while the parable is an inner reality for those who use it.

While counterintuitive, most scholars studying rabbinic parables recognize this quality about them, even though they do not openly declare that parables are more the inner reality of the rabbis than the biblical text; such recognition can be deduced by pointing to the parables' culturally inherent nature, for example in Eric Ottenheim's use of Bourdieu's term *habitus*, which points to both the cultural inner reality and the power play associated with it.<sup>20</sup> The difficulty of relating to the Bible as external is that such an understanding stands diametrically opposed to the culture's self-proclamation as apparent in the biblico-rabbinic language. But recognising the nature of the holy text as a cultural artefact, which as such only acquires meaning if endowed with meaning by the users of the artefact, makes it possible to see the Hebrew Bible as "external."

## 4 Example of the Absence of Biblical Verses in *Meshalim*

It is by definition hard to show the absence of verses in parables, and so I will resort to a single example where a similar parable appears in nexus with various verses, in various functions, and in various periods, but verses are never made part of the narrative of the parable itself.

<sup>20</sup> Eric Ottenheim, "Bourdieu und die Exegese; Eine exemplarische Rezeption Pierre Bourdieus am Beispiel der Gleichnisauslegung," in *Resonanzen Pierre Bourdieus in der Theologie*, ed. Ansgar Kreuzer and Hans-Joachim Sander (Freiburg: Herder, 2018), 48–67.

I will present various realizations of the parables side by side to show the fluidity of verses coming into the narrative or being left out, but this activity only takes place in the text around the parable, never in the parable itself, even though other changes, such as the use of different vocabulary or small changes in the plot, do take place. My analysis of the parables will also be very basic, in keeping with the “distant reading” style of the analysis.

The parable tells about a cow which people wanted to slaughter, or, in one case, to use for ploughing, and it refused to take on the yoke. They therefore dragged its calf to the field (or slaughterhouse), so that the cow followed, unwillingly, and was thus forced into the position it had tried to avoid. The parable is then related to Jacob’s descent to Egypt in Gen 46, where the rabbis understand Joseph’s descent to Egypt (Gen 37) to have taken place to prepare the way for the rest of his family to go there (Gen 46); it is thus God’s scheme to eventually convince Jacob to go to Egypt as well. Jacob’s descent to Egypt, in turn, was necessary in order to fulfil God’s prophecy to Abraham that his offspring would be slaves in Egypt for many years (Gen 15:13). In the following, I present three versions of this parable from Genesis Rabbah, Tanhuma Buber, and the Printed Tanhuma.<sup>21</sup> The text of biblical verses has been marked in bold.

#### 4.1 *The Parable*

The midrash which frames the parable builds on the slightly uncommon<sup>22</sup> use of the impersonal passive construction about Joseph being brought down to Egypt, asserting that this refers to Joseph causing Jacob to come to Egypt. At this point comes the parable which likens Jacob’s descent to Egypt to a cow following its calf. The *nimshal* explains why Jacob went to Egypt willingly and in pomp and circumstance: Jacob should have been pulled to Egypt with chains, but as Israel (which is Jacob’s other name), being the firstborn of God (according to Exod 4:22), he was brought down to Egypt as a free agent, even if against his will, as the cow after her calf.

The supremacy of the land of Israel (and of living there) is a common ideology in rabbinic culture, regardless of where the rabbinic community was living and how authoritative they considered themselves. In the *nimshal* above, we find this notion expressed in a manner similar to the words of the

21 All translations are my own and are based on the version of the rabbinic text used in *Ma’agarim*.

22 The *Hufal* form of this verb only occurs twice in the Torah (Gen 39:1, Num 10:17), but is more frequent in the prophets (Ezek 31:18, Isa 14:11, 14:15; Zech 10:11).



TABLE 1 The Parable of Joseph Who Was Brought to Egypt (Gen 39) in three different sources/  
manuscripts

Reference and the manuscript in <i>Ma'agarim</i> : <sup>a</sup>	Gen. Rab. 86:2; MS Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, ebr. 30	Tanh. B. Vayeshev 15; MS Oxford Bodleian Library, 154	(Printed) Tanh. Vayeshev 4; MS Cambridge University Library, Add. 1212
The verse about which the parable is told	<i>"Joseph was brought down to Egypt"</i> (Gen 39:1)	<i>"Joseph was brought down to Egypt"</i> (Gen 39:1)	<i>"Joseph was brought down to Egypt"</i> (Gen 39:1)
The text directly before the parable	He caused our father Jacob to descend to Egypt.	The tribe[s] were brought down to Egypt.	This is what the Scripture says: <i>"Come, and see the works of God; He is terrible in His doing toward the children of men"</i> (Ps 66:5) Rabbi Yehoshua son of Korcha said: when You bring terrible things upon us, You manipulate <sup>b</sup> us. <sup>c</sup> And so it [says] regarding Joseph: <i>"and his brothers saw that their father loved him"</i> (Gen 37:4). <sup>d</sup> And Rabbi Yudan said: The Holy One, Blessed Be He, wanted to maintain the decree of <i>"it is known."</i> And He conspired (והביא עליה) all these things so that Jacob would love Joseph, and his brothers would hate him and would sell him to the Ishmaelites and they would bring him down to Egypt and Jacob would hear that Joseph was living in Egypt and he would go there with the tribes and they would be enslaved there. That is <i>"and Joseph was brought to Egypt"</i> (Gen 39:1); he brought his father and the tribes to Egypt.

a *Ma'agarim* is the online database of the *Historical Dictionary* project of the Academy of the Hebrew Language (<https://maagarim.hebrew-academy.org.il/Pages/PMain.aspx>).

b While the word in the verse and the rabbinic text is the same (עלילה), its meaning differs between biblical and rabbinic Hebrew (see below, note 23).

c The lacuna hides some examples involving cases other than Joseph, which I have skipped for the sake of space.

d The lacuna hides another midrash, which I have skipped for the sake of space.

TABLE 1 The Parable of Joseph Who Was Brought to Egypt (*cont.*)

Reference and the manuscript in <i>Ma'agarim</i> :	Gen. Rab. 86:2; MS Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, ebr. 30	Tanh. B. Vayeshev 15; MS Oxford Bodleian Library, 154	(Printed) Tanh. Vayeshev 4; MS Cambridge University Library, Add. 1212
The parable	Rabbi Berechiah in the name of Rabbi Judah son of Rabbi Simon: [This is similar] to a cow that they were pulling to the slaughterhouse, <sup>e</sup> and she would not [let herself] be pulled. What did they do to her? They pulled her calf in front of her, and she was walking after him against her will.	To what is this similar? To a cow that they wanted to bring inside the slaughterhouse, and she did not want to go in. What did they do to her? They took her son to the slaughterhouse, and put him to slaughter. He started bleating, and his mother followed him against her will.	Rabbi Tanchuma said: To what is this similar? To a cow on whose neck they want to put a yoke. And she did not want it, and removed the yoke from her neck. What did they do? They took her son from behind her, and pulled him to the place where they wanted to plough. And the calf was bleating. The cow heard her son bleating, and she went [there] against her will, for her son.
The text directly after the parable	In the same manner, Jacob our father was supposed to go down to Egypt with chains and neck-chains, [but] God said: " <i>This is my first born</i> " (Ex 4:22) and I will bring him down [to Egypt] in disgrace? So <sup>f</sup> I will pull his son before him, and he goes down after him against his will.	Thus was Jacob our father and his sons were the cow, as it says: " <i>For Israel is stubborn like a stubborn heifer [now God shall feed them as a lamb in a large place]</i> " (Hos 4:16), and Joseph went down to Egypt first, to fulfil the decree which was imposed on the old man (i.e., Abraham), as it says: " <i>and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them</i> " etc. (Gen 15:13) Jacob was afraid to go down, what did the Holy One Blessed Be He do? He brought Joseph down to Egypt, and dragged his father against his will. Thus it says: " <i>Joseph was brought down to Egypt</i> " (Gen 39:1)	Thus, the Holy One Blessed Be He wanted to execute the decree of " <i>Know of a surety [that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years]</i> " (Gen 15:13), and he manipulated an argument for all these things, and they went down [to Egypt] and cashed this check (i.e., fulfilled the decree). This is why it says: " <i>Joseph was brought down to Egypt</i> ". He [Joseph] made him [Jacob] come down to Egypt. This is what is meant by " <i>terrible in His doing</i> " (Ps 66:5)

e The Greek word *Μαχαλειών*, slaughter, is used here.

f Here I have omitted a few words which are not clear (*אני מורידו פורפירי*), but they do not involve a verse or part of a verse.

Palestinian Amora Rabbi Yohanan, as quoted by his student Rabbi Hiyya in the Bavli (b. Shab. 89b): “Our father Jacob should have been dragged to Egypt with chains of iron, but his virtue merited him [to be brought down in pomp]” (רַאוּי הִיּוּ הָיָה יַעֲקֹב אֲבִינוּ לִירֵד לְמִצְרַיִם בְּשִׁלְשָׁלוֹת שֶׁל בְּרוֹזֵל, אֲלֵא שְׂזֹכוֹתוֹ גְּרַמָּה לוֹ). Genesis Rabbah echoes these words in its *nimshal*, formulated as a midrashic expansion, without attribution.

The text in Tanhuma Buber is in general lines similar to the text in Genesis Rabbah, and it too is based on the same verse (Gen 39:1). Again, the parable tells of the cow who followed her son to the slaughterhouse. The *nimshal* explains that the descent to Egypt was necessary as it was a part of the pact between God and Abraham. But Jacob is presented as resentful of the move to Egypt, so that God’s seemingly cruel act of bringing Joseph to Egypt first is not a result of the pact He made, but a result of Jacob’s fear. Jacob therefore becomes a much less heroic figure, and, insofar as he represents the inhabitants of the land of Israel, he also presents them in a less heroic light. This ideological shift is quite common in Tanhuma-Yelammedenu literature.

The printed Tanhuma uses the parable in a proem connecting the reading portion (Gen 39:1) to a verse from Psalms (66:5), building on an elaborate rabbinic understanding of the biblical story which presents God’s act in bringing Jacob and his sons down to Egypt as manipulation (albeit not necessarily negative). The narrative is then built around God’s manipulation for the execution of his plan to bring the Israelites to Egypt. The talk of slaughtering is then changed to ploughing the land, eliciting a much softer image in the mind of the audience. We also see an ideological shift there: while a life in the land of Israel is still understood as the ultimate existence, a diasporic life (i.e., the place to which the cow is led) is no longer the dreaded slaughterhouse but just a field that needs to be ploughed. Here God is presented as a “scheming one” (with the term “manipulate,” עֲלִילָה).<sup>23</sup> Such bold language for God is not entirely strange in Tanhuma-Yelammedenu literature.<sup>24</sup>

#### 4.1.1 Incorporating Verses into These Narratives

Regarding the number and use of verses in this passage: In Genesis Rabbah we only find the verse of the reading portion expounded by the parable. Tanhuma

23 והביא בעלילה לכל אלו הדברים. While the word עֲלִילָה appears both in the biblical verse and in the rabbinic text, its meaning differs. In biblical Hebrew, it refers to a heroic action; in rabbinic Hebrew, it always refers to scheming and appears in a negative context.

24 See Dov Weiss, “Dramatic Dialogue in the Tanhuma-Yelammedenu Midrashim,” in *Studies in the Tanhuma-Yelammedenu Literature*, ed. Ronit Nikolsky and Arnon Atzmon, BRLA 70 (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 247–269; Dov Weiss, *Pious Irreverence: Confronting God in Rabbinic Judaism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2017), passim.

Buber adds more verses to the *nimshal*—it includes a verse comparing Israel to a cow (Hos 4:16), quotes the verse about God’s pact with Abraham (Gen 15:13), and at the end repeats the verse under examination. The printed Tanhuma involves even more verses, as it uses the parable in the framework of a proem: it quotes the verse of the proem, then the verse about the pact (Gen 15:13) and the verses from the reading portion (in the *nimshal*), and then repeats the proemic verse. In none of these three cases do we find any verses included as part of the parable. There is thus a very clear gap between the flexibility and potential abundance of incorporating verses into midrashic narrative and the persistent absence of verses in the parable itself.

#### 4.2 *Analysing the Parable in Light of the Decoupling Theory*

Let us now describe the absence of verses in Decoupling Theory terms. The midrash, in all three occurrences, shows a certain unease with the absence of a negative perspective on Jacob’s descent to Egypt. While the supremacy of living in the land of Israel was, in one way or another, common to both biblical and rabbinic cultures, for the biblical narrative the fulfilment of the pact between God and Abraham was enough to render the descent to Egypt non-problematic, but this was not enough for the rabbis. This, then, is the decoupling process in our example, whereby the gap between the inner reality and the external actuality is bridged:

Firstly, the inner conviction, which is taken for granted in all three cases, is the supremacy of living in the land of Israel, which ought to render any demand to leave it problematic. Secondly, the biblical story, or rather the rabbinic understanding of the biblical story, which in all three cases does not problematize this descent; and thirdly, the parable which bridges the gap between the two.

In Genesis Rabbah, the gap is bridged by making Joseph responsible for Jacob’s descent; by being in Egypt, “He [i.e., Joseph] caused our father Jacob to descend to Egypt.” Had Joseph not been in Egypt, Jacob would have tried to avoid going there. Jacob is thus like a cow which follows the calf to a horrible place (slaughterhouse, referring to Egypt), moved by her motherly drives. The listener thus sympathizes with Jacob’s parental emotion.<sup>25</sup> In Palestinian Amoraic rabbinic culture, Joseph represents diasporic life, thus not one with

25 On sympathizing with narrative reality, see Suzanne Keen, *Narrative Form: Revised and Expanded Second Edition* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 155. For the image of Joseph, see Ronit Nikolsky, “Joseph, Judah, and the Study of Emotions in Tanhuma-Yelammedenu Literature” in *Studies in the Tanhuma-Yelammedenu Literature*, 290–314.

which the Palestinian rabbis identify,<sup>26</sup> so that “blaming” Joseph for the descent to Egypt seems the appropriate solution in this milieu.

The narrative and the parable in Tanhuma Buber make a similar move, but the *nimshal* adds the layer of attitude by declaring that Jacob was “afraid” to go to Egypt, thus giving expression to the proper attitude to leaving the land of Israel. Joseph’s move to Egypt is presented here as God’s doing, and thus Joseph is placed in a more positive light than he is in Genesis Rabbah. This fits the milieu of the Tanhuma-Yelammedenu corpus, coming not directly from the *beit midrash* environment but from less elitist synagogue circles, with diasporic connections, and from a slightly later period, when Jewish culture in the diaspora was a force to reckon with.<sup>27</sup>

The printed Tanhuma goes even further by building the narrative around the image of God as a manipulator. It seems to have a diasporic inner reality in which diaspora could not be represented by a slaughterhouse, and so the cow is taken for ploughing instead of slaughter. Joseph appears in a more positive light here as well, since God is emphatically the one responsible for the descent to Egypt. The inner reality presented in the parable in the printed Tanhuma is not just adherence to the ideology of living in the land of Israel, but also a painful recognition of the impossibility of actualising this ideology.

## 5 Conclusions

The act of making parables is a human activity which intentionally—not in terms of purpose, but in terms of a drive—mimics what happens spontaneously in human cognition: updating the memory to fit the information arriving from the sensory system.

Cultures are upgraded spontaneously as a result of changing conditions, new ideologies or *Zeitgeist*, or interaction with other cultures. However, an unchangeable holy text poses a challenge by not changing together with the rest of the culture, and thus it needs to be constantly integrated anew into that culture. The Bible is the external input, as counterintuitive as this may sound, and rabbis intentionally update their memory to fit with this external input, as counterintuitive as this may sound. Midrash is the way the cultural

26 See Maren Niehoff, *The Figure of Joseph in Post-Biblical Jewish Literature*, AGJU 16 (Leiden: Brill, 1992); Nikolsky, “Joseph, Judah, and the Study of Emotions,” in *Studies in the Tanhuma-Yelammedenu Literature*, 290–314.

27 Arnon Atzmon and Ronit Nikolsky, “Let Our Rabbi Teach Us: Introduction to Tanhuma-Yelammedenu Literature,” in *Studies in the Tanhuma-Yelammedenu Literature*, 1–17.

elites accommodate the Bible to their culture, and parables are a way to do the same, only without resorting to the elitist particular language form of biblicorabbinic Hebrew.

The interaction between memory and actuality is essential for human existence, and it is the way to make sense of one's surroundings. The aim of this study was to theorize parables in midrash in light of this cognitive-cultural perspective. I hope I have succeeded in showing how a cognitive approach in general, and the Decoupling Theory in particular, is relevant for explaining why the midrashic discourse is permeated with verses, which are nevertheless absent in parables.

Recognising the cognitive move behind the role of parables does not render other explanations of this role unnecessary, but it does render them secondary to the cognitive move. While other accounts are successful in describing the way the artefact "parable" performs its role of accommodating external input to the inner reality, in the Judaic context the accommodation of the Hebrew Bible to rabbinic reality, which is the main phenomenon that requires explanation, whether exegetically or rhetorically, is explained by the Decoupling Theory.

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# Moses's Prayer and the *Nimshal* as Scriptural Mosaic

Arnon Atzmon

## 1 The *Nimshal* in Rabbinic Literature

Aggadic midrashic literature frequently features parables followed by an application or moral lesson, in Hebrew a “nimshal,” which presents the essential message of the passage. The structure of a properly detailed *nimshal* should follow the structure found in the *mashal* itself. To use the words of David Stern, “the invention of the *nimshal* is the first and most important feature of the process of regularisation the *mashal* has undergone in midrashic literature.”<sup>1</sup> The point of the *nimshal* is to replace the literary context of the *mashal* and to aid in its comprehension.

At the same time, the *mashal* often lacks accordance with its *nimshal*. This lack could be explained as a lack of meticulousness in the literary creation of the sages, who perhaps did not view the literary structure of the *mashal* to be of paramount importance. Alternatively, it could be viewed as an intentional strategy intended to transform the *mashal* into a less anticipated source and to create an exegesis with a more complicated and deeper meaning.

The *nimshal*, as it appears in aggadic midrashim, usually includes a verse or several verses that aid the *darshan* and his audience in understanding the full exegetical meaning of the *mashal*'s topic. These verses are commonly combined in a simple and trivial fashion in the rhetoric of the *nimshal* and their connection to it is clear. However, at times we find strange or unusual choices for the supporting verses in the context of the *nimshal*. To understand this phenomenon, we need to focus our gaze more sharply on these verses and, in particular, on their biblical context. Deeper analysis can lead to a greater understanding of what seem to be the strange choices made by the *darshan* or the midrashic editor.

In this article, I will focus on one particular case, that of a *nimshal* found following a parable in the midrash on Ps 90 in *Midrash Tehillim*, further referred

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<sup>1</sup> David Stern, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 18–19.

to as Midrash on Psalms. I will show that although the verses used in the *nimshal* seem to be entirely inappropriate for the *mashal*, on deeper analysis we can sense that the *darshan* or editor used these verses on purpose to broaden the scope of the entire *mashal*. Before I begin to analyze this *derashah*, I will offer a brief survey on Midrash on Psalms and the state of its scholarly textual reconstruction.

## 2 The Text of Midrash on Psalms

Midrash on Psalms is a comprehensive aggadic midrash on the Book of Psalms, consisting of literary units bearing different linguistic and literary styles. Scholars have suggested various evaluations as to the time and place in which this composition was created, as well as the nature of its editing.<sup>2</sup> It is clear that its core consists of early Tannaitic and Amoraic material. However, the composition known to us today underwent substantial and late editing, in all likelihood down to the end of the Byzantine period in Palestine.<sup>3</sup> The midrash seems to have enjoyed widespread distribution throughout the medieval Jewish world and thus a relatively large number of manuscripts have

2 For a general survey of the history of Midrash on Psalms scholarship, see: Leopold Zunz, *Ha-Derashot be-Yisra'el ve-hishtalshelutan ha-historit*, ed. Chanoch Albeck (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1947), 131–133 (Hebrew); Günter Stemberger, *Einleitung in Talmud und Midrasch*, 9th ed. (Munich: Beck, 2011), 358–359; Myron B. Lerner, “The Works of Aggadic Midrash and the Esther Midrashim,” in *The Literature of the Sages*, vol. 2, *Midrash and Targum, Liturgy, Poetry, Mysticism, Contracts, Inscriptions, Ancient Science and the Languages of Rabbinic Literature*, ed. Shmuel Safrai, Ze'ev Safrai, Joshua Schwartz, and Peter J. Tomson, CRINT 2/3 (Assen: Van Gorcum; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 165; Anat Reizel, *Introduction to the Midrashic Literature* (Alon Shevut: Tevnot, 2011), 281–291 (Hebrew).

3 Some scholars of previous generations viewed Midrash on Psalms as an early work, created by the sages of the first centuries CE, and found various pieces of evidence for this claim in rabbinic literature. For instance, R. Hiyya relates that he “would look at the ‘aggadah’ on Psalms” which could indicate that he was examining a written book containing midrashim on Psalms (Gen. Rab. 33:3, [Theodor-Albeck 307]; y. Kil. 9:2 [32b]; y. Ketub. 12:3 [35a]). Clearly, this and other, similar evidence does not prove the early existence of the midrash known to us today, but only the existence of some early midrash on Psalms whose connection to that familiar to us is unclear. While it is impossible to rule out the possibility that this early midrash is the core of the midrash known to us, it is abundantly clear that the midrash we know underwent numerous and late editorial changes. The basic impression from the style and language of Midrash Psalms is that it is a Palestinian composition edited towards the end of the Byzantine period (around the seventh century) and expanded, at least in some textual witnesses, with many additions, some under the influence of the Babylonian Talmud. One of the signs of the early nature of this midrash is that even where it contains parallels to classical rabbinic sources, it preserves early and unique versions of those *derashot*.

survived, both partial and full. The midrash was first printed in Constantinople in 1512, and then multiple times based on the same version. In 1890, Solomon Buber published a new version based on the eight manuscripts available to him.<sup>4</sup> Despite Buber's substantial contribution to scholarly research on Midrash on Psalms, the reconstruction of the text is still far from complete. Buber, who chose a "diplomatic" presentation of the text (which is more accurately described as a best-text edition), based his version mainly on the Parma manuscript and deviated from it only when forced to do so.<sup>5</sup> Buber did not offer much in terms of analytic comparison between the various textual witnesses, nor did he present a scientific account of his choice for the Parma manuscript as the basis of his version. Thus, there is no particular reason to view his edition as an improvement on the earlier printed edition.

Beyond the question of the quality of existing editions, today we have available textual witnesses that were unknown to earlier generations of scholars, including full and partial manuscripts discovered in the Cairo Genizah. The existence of these witnesses requires new analysis of the composition's text. Comprehensive analysis of the entirety of the composition's textual witnesses, both direct and indirect, has already demonstrated that there are numerous significant variations between them, and that the content itself often varies substantially between manuscripts. Such a phenomenon makes it difficult even to determine the parameters of the original composition.<sup>6</sup> The findings that emerge from this article and others exemplify the great importance of creating a new edition of Midrash on Psalms that will give appropriate expression to its various textual traditions.<sup>7</sup>

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4 Salomon Buber, ed. *Midrash Tehillim* (Wilna, 1890; repr. Jerusalem, 1966).

5 Found in the Palatine library, Parma Italy, Cod. Parm. 2552. This manuscript is written in Sephardi script and seems to have been penned in Italy during the fourteenth century. See Benjamin Richler, ed., *Hebrew Manuscripts in the Biblioteca Palatina in Parma: Catalogue* (Jerusalem: Jewish National and University Library, 2001), 143.

6 Albeck, 132, 477n6, noted that "the manuscripts of this midrash, as is possible to see from the Buber edition, substantially differ one from the other and contain so many additions that finding the core of the midrash and the earliest version that was created by its editor or editors is impossible."

7 In recent years, I have been leading a large-scale research project focussing on the reconstruction of Midrash on Psalms. This project has allowed me to arrive at the findings that underlie this article, and has been funded with a grant from the Israel Science Foundation (ISF 1907/17). I would like to thank my colleagues, Dr Elhanan Shiloh, Ben-Zion Eshel, and Dr Yonatan Sagiv, who have worked tirelessly and thoroughly in entering these texts into the database. As far as I know, there are two others working on the text of Midrash on Psalms. The first is Mordecai Silverstein, who has related to me that he has been working on this for over twenty years. His work has yet to be published, but hopefully will be in the future. Additional work on the text of Midrash on Psalms is being conducted in Germany and will eventually lead to a synoptic edition of the composition; see Therese Hansberger, Gottfried

### 3 Psalm 90 in Rabbinic Literature

Before we approach the *mashal* itself, let us take a brief look at its overall context. Psalm 90, the opening Psalm of the fourth book of Psalms, is unique in that its title ascribes it to Moses: “A prayer of Moses, the man of God.”<sup>8</sup>

Rabbinic exegetical strategy dictates that this prayer must have been uttered at one of the events of Moses’s life. As such, Tannaitic literature employs two different exegetical interpretations of the biblical narrative that best serve as the setting for this prayer. According to the first of these exegetical moves, found in a number of classical sources, including *Seder Olam*, the *Tosefta*, and the halakhic midrashim, the Psalm’s concluding verse, “May the favor of the Lord, our God, be upon us” (Ps 90:17), connects the Psalm to Moses’s blessing upon the conclusion of the building of the tabernacle:

“And when Moses saw all the work that they had performed it as the Lord had commanded them, thus did they do, that Moses blessed them” (Ex 39:43). With what blessing did he bless them? He said to them: “May it be His will that the Shechinah repose upon the work of your hands”. And they responded, “May the favor of the Lord our God be upon us”.

Ps 90:17<sup>9</sup>

וירא משה את כל המלאכה והנה עשו אותה  
כאשר צוה ה' כן עשו ויברך אותם משה"  
(שמות לט 43)—מה ברכה ברכם?  
אמר להם: יהי רצון שתשרה שכינה במעשה  
ידיכם, והם אומרים: "ויהי נועם ה' אלהינו  
עלינו ומעשה ידינו כוננה עלינו ומעשה ידינו  
כוננהו" (תהלים צ 17). (ספרי במדבר קמג).

Reeg, and Gert Wildensee, ed., *Midrash Tehillim: Kolumnensynoptische Edition auf Basis der erhaltenen Handschriften, Fragmente und frühen Drucke*, 2 vols., TSAJ (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, forthcoming).

8 There is a significant amount of scholarly literature on this Psalm and its ascription to Moses. See, for example: Richard J. Clifford, “Psalm 90: Wisdom Meditation or Communal Lament?,” in *The Book of Psalms: Composition and Reception*, ed. Patrick D. Miller and Peter W. Flint, VTSup 99 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 190–205; Geoffrey W. Grogan, *Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 107; Stephen B. Dawes, “But Jesus Believed That David wrote the Psalms ...,” in *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Authority of Scripture: Historical, Biblical, and Theoretical Perspectives*, ed. Carlos R. Bovell (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), 168–170; Clinton J. McCann, “The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter: Psalms in Their Literary Context,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms*, ed. William P. Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 350–362.

9 Sifre Num. 143 (Menahem Kahana, ed., *Sifre on Numbers: An Annotated Edition*, 4 vols. [Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2011], 4, 480, and his commentary on p. 1187); *Seder Olam Rab. 6* (Chaim Milikowsky, ed., *Seder Olam: Critical Edition, Commentary, and Introduction*, 2 vols. [Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben Zvi, 2013], 1, 240, and his commentary on vol. 2, 131; t. Menah. 7:8.

Moses's prayer, alluded to in the Psalm's title, was offered when the erection of the tabernacle was completed, a one-time event appropriate for a prayer that God's presence should dwell among the people of Israel.

The second exegetical move that appears in Tannaitic literature connects this Psalm to the blessing Moses recited at the end of his life. This exegetical move is based on the appellation "the man of God," which appears in the title of the Psalm. This same appellation is given to Moses close to the end of Deuteronomy: "And this is the blessing [with which Moses, the man of God, bade the Israelites farewell before he died]" (Deut 33:1). This adds to a previous blessing. And which is that? "A prayer of Moses, the man of G-d" (Ps 90:1).<sup>10</sup>

According to this understanding, Ps 90 documents the prayer Moses recited on the eve of his death, immediately before the blessing he gave to the tribes of Israel found at the end of Deuteronomy. This context of Moses's prayer shares some attributes with the other context, as a blessing upon the completion of the tabernacle. The juxtaposition with Moses's blessing indicates that here too it is read as a prayer of praise to God, and a plea for the future of the children of Israel.

In Midrash on Psalms, both of these identifications of Moses's prayer with important events in his life do indeed appear. However, they play a relatively minor role. In contrast, at the core of the midrashic chapter on this Psalm, a third exegetical context for his prayer comes to the fore. According to this exegetical understanding, Moses's prayer in this Psalm is the prayer he offered to God for the salvation of his people after their sin with the golden calf. This interpretation lies at the heart of the many *derashot* that emphasize the boldness of Moses's prayer and the motif of his grievance against God.<sup>11</sup>

#### 4 Moses: Father of Those Who Pray

With this introduction in mind, I wish to closely examine one of the *derashot* on Ps 90. This *derashah* is designed as an exegetical *mashal* meant to explain the unique phrase "Moses, the man of God":

10 Sifre Deut. 342 (Finkelstein 393).

11 For a broader discussion of the literary redaction of the Midr. Ps. 90, see: Arnon Atzmon, "The Prayers of Moses: A Study of Midrash Tehillim on Psalm 90," *Sidra* (forthcoming).

“A prayer of Moses the man of God.” Scripture need have said no more than “A prayer of Moses.” What does that mean, “the man of God”?

A parable of a king who became angry at his son and sought to kill him. But when his friend [אוהבו] said to him: I beg you, pardon him, and do not kill him, the king halted and did not kill his son. The next day the king said: Had I slain my son; I would have harmed myself. Therefore, may my friend who pleaded for mercy for my son be remembered for good; hereafter I shall make him father of kings.

Just so, when the Holy One, blessed be He, said, “Let me alone, that I may destroy them” (Deut. 9:14), Moses said to him, “If You would deal thus with me, kill me rather, I beg You” (Num 11:15). And after this verse, Scripture says, “I have pardoned according to your word” (Num 14:20). And so the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses: Had I destroyed Israel, I would have harmed Myself, and therefore I am grateful to Moses who asked for Mercy for them, as it is said, “And Moses besought the Lord his God” (Ex. 32:11). I shall therefore confer greatness upon Moses, I shall name him father of prophets, father of angels, father of those who pray. Hence, “A prayer of Moses the man of God” (Ps 90:1).

Midr. Ps. 90:1 [Buber 390]

The passage opens with an exegetical question: why is Moses described here as a “man of God?” This question forms the starting point for the *mashal* itself.

”תפלה למשה איש האלהים”—לא היה צריך לומר אלא “תפלה למשה” מהו “איש האלהים”?

משל למלך שכעס על בנו וביקש להורגו ואמר לו אוהבו: בבקשה ממך מחול לו ואל תהרגהו. עמד ולא הרגו. למחר התחיל המלך לומר: אילו הרגתי את בני לעצמי הייתי מכשיל אלא זכור לטוב אוהבי שביקש עליו רחמים ומעכשיו אני עושה אותו אב למלכים.

כך אמר הקב"ה: הרף ממני ואשמידם (דברים ט 14).

אמר ליה משה: "אם ככה את עושה לי הרגני נא הרוג" (במדבר יא 15) ומה כתיב בתריה? "ויאמר ה' סלחתי כדבריך" (במדבר יד 20).

אחר כך אמר לו הקב"ה למשה: אילו הרגתי את ישראל לעצמי הייתי מכשיל אלא מחזיק אני טובה למשה שביקש עליהם רחמים שנאמר "ויחל משה" (שמות לב 11) אני עושה לו גדולה קורא אני לו אב לנביאים אב למלאכים אב למתפללים.

הוי "תפלה למשה איש האלהים" (תהלים ז 1).

The assumption that underlies the *mashal* is that the Psalm's title, "A prayer of Moses," refers to a prayer in which Moses saved the people from God's wrath. From this perspective, this *derashah* continues the direction set in the previous *derashot* and is built upon them. In other words, this *derashah* does not deal with the foundational question: which prayer is the Psalm referring to? Rather, it is asking only the secondary question: what did Moses do to merit being called "the man of God"?

The *mashal* utilizes the frequent image of Moses as God's beloved friend or advisor<sup>12</sup> who intercedes on behalf of the king's son after the king has sentenced his own son to death for having angered him. The king, who answers the pleas of his confidant, later remembers this intercession with favour, for by stopping the king from enacting his wrath, the friend has prevented the king from "harming himself" and killing his son. As a reward, the king appoints his friend to be "father of kings," that is, an elevated advisor who will serve as father for all kings.

The *derashah* continues with the detailed *nimshal* which is accompanied by several prooftexts. However, the choice of verses in the *nimshal* is extremely perplexing, as I shall show. The *nimshal* is constructed of five passages, each of which has an accompanying prooftext:

The first passage is a description of the king's actions. God is angry at Israel and wishes to destroy them; the verse cited is "Let Me alone and I will destroy them" (Deut 9:14). This verse is part of Moses's speech describing the events that follow the sin with the golden calf. The verse parallels the words of God in Exod 32:9–10: "Now, let Me be, that My anger may blaze forth against them and that I may destroy them." Both verses express in a similar manner that God has decided to destroy his children, and thus it is unclear why the *darshan* chose the verse in Deuteronomy from Moses's speech and not the verse from Exodus.

The second passage is a description of the friend's response. Moses prays for the people. The verse cited is "If You would deal thus with me, kill me" (Num 11:15), which documents Moses's response to the complaints of the people at *Qivrot Hata'avah* (Graves of Lust). The *darshan's* choice of this verse is completely surprising. Not only is the verse irrelevant to Moses's prayer after the sin with the golden calf, it also does not reflect a prayer for the salvation of the people. Rather, it is Moses's complaint that he can no longer bear the

12 On the realistic background of this image, see: Samuel Krauss, *Persia and Rome in Talmud and Midrash* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1948), 135, 141 (Hebrew). Alan Appelbaum argues that the Hebrew *'ahuv* is used in the same way Latin writers used the term *amicus*, namely to mean "client"; see Alan Appelbaum, "Hidden Transcripts in King-Parables: Windows on Rabbinic Resistance to Rome," *JSQ* 17 (2010): 289n5. While it is possible to accept Appelbaum's translation in some contexts, in our parable it seems less fitting since the relations between this *ohavo* and the king are not just formal.

weight of carrying his people. Moreover, both places describing Moses's prayer after the sin with the calf contain verses that could easily have fit into this *derashah*: "But Moses implored the Lord his God" (Exod 32:11), "And I prayed to the Lord" (Deut 9:26).

The third passage is the decision of the king to have mercy on his people. The verse cited is "And the Lord said: 'I have forgiven as you have requested,'" which documents God's response to Moses after the sin of the spies (Num 14:20). Again, the choice of proof-text is entirely perplexing; why did the *darshan* or an editor switch to the story of the spies when he had a more or less parallel verse in the context of the sin with the golden calf: "And the Lord renounced the punishment He had planned to bring on His people" (Exod 32)? Moreover, the verse in Exodus, "And God renounced," is even closer to the sequence of events that occur in the *mashal*: the king regrets his original intention to kill his son. The verse could easily have fit into one of the links in the *nimshal*, but it is not there.

The fourth passage is the king's justification of his beloved's intercession which ultimately prevented the king from harming himself: "I am grateful to Moses who asked for Mercy for them." The midrash cites the verse "But Moses implored the LORD his God" (Exod 32:11), a verse taken from Moses's prayer after the sin with the golden calf in Exodus. Here it is not even clear what the function of the proof-text is. The proof-text seems to repeat a motif that has already been explained, Moses's prayer, and adds nothing that we do not already know. The verse does not offer any support to the theme of God's repayment to Moses or even praise if Moses for the aid he provided to God.

The fifth passage is the reward given to the king's beloved: "I shall therefore confer greatness upon him, I shall name him father of prophets, father of angels, father of those who pray." The proof-text is the title of the Psalm: "This is what it means, 'A prayer of Moses, the man of God.'" In other words, Moses's reward for preventing God from "harming Himself" is his appointment as "father of prophets" and, according to some versions, even "father of angels."<sup>13</sup> This brings a new and bold interpretation of the phrase "the man of God": Moses is elevated above the angels and becomes almost like God.<sup>14</sup>

13 The phrase "father of angels" (אב למלאכים), which is retained in the Buber edition, appears only in ms Parma 2552, on which Buber's edition is based. Other textual witnesses have the phrase of "father of prophets" or also the phrase of "father of kings" (אב למלכים).

14 A possible background for this midrashic move is an interpretive concept which reads the words "man of God" in the sense of divinization of Moses. Indeed, other sermons in the same passage also go in this direction and identify divine parts in Moses. Section E, for example, reads: "When he [Moses] When Moses went up on high ... he was called God," and the like. On this trend, see Wayne A. Meeks, "Moses as God and King," in *Religions in*



Clearly, this *nimshal* contains a surprising number of verses that do not seem to be relevant to the setting in which the midrash imagines the Psalm's prayer to have been uttered. To summarize: The midrash opens with a verse from Moses's speech in Deuteronomy, "Let Me alone and I will destroy them," which describes God's words after the sin with the calf. The midrash continues with Moses's words after the sin of the grumblers in the book of Numbers, "kill me," meant to reflect Moses's pleas to God to have mercy on His people. The midrash completes this link with the verse "And the Lord said, 'I have forgiven as you have requested,'" which describes God's response after the sin with the spies. The midrash concludes with a verse from Exodus, "But Moses implored the LORD his God," meant to express God's praise for Moses for having prevented God from harming Himself at the sin with the calf and completes the idea with the verse from Psalms, "A prayer of Moses, the man of God," which expresses Moses's reward. The complexity of this situation speaks for itself—the strange *mishmash* of prooftexts composing the *nimshal* which follows the *mashal* is truly puzzling.

How can we comprehend this situation? Why didn't the *darshan* build the *nimshal* in a logical and coherent fashion based on verses appropriate to the historical setting to which he ascribed the Psalm—the sin with the golden calf? Why didn't he use the appropriate verses from Exodus?

We could perhaps seek specific reasons to explain why each one of these verses was chosen, whether the particular style of the verse or its appropriateness for the framework of the *nimshal*. For instance, "Let Me alone and I will destroy them" (הָרַף מִמֶּנִּי וְאֶשְׂמִידֵם) in Deuteronomy is a short, sharp statement and therefore more appropriate than "Now, let Me be" (וְעַתָּה הַנְּחֵה לִּי וַיַּחַר אַפִּי) in Exodus. The verse "I have pardoned according to your word" (סָלַחְתִּי כְדַבְרֶיךָ) in Num 14:20 is a more pointed expression of the King's forgiveness than the parallel verse at the sin with the golden calf, "And the Lord renounced" (וַיִּנָּחֵם ה') in Exod 32:14.

However, I do not believe these isolated justifications are sufficient to solve the complete lack of coherence in these citations, and they certainly cannot help us understand why the verse "kill me, rather" (הֲרַגְנִי נָא הַרְוֵג) was introduced as an expression of Moses's prayer when stronger and more relevant verses were easily available to express this theme.

It seems, therefore, that behind the choice of the *darshan* or editor stands a broader intention whose purpose is to expand our conception of "Moses's

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*Antiquity: Essays in Memory of Erwin Ramsdell Goodenough*, ed. Jacob Neusner, SHR 14 (Leiden: Brill, 1968), 354–371, who understands the Midrash to read the phrase "Man of God" in the sense of "Man and God," and compared this motif to similar motifs in Philo and in Samaritan literature.

prayer” to include all situations in which Moses stood by his people’s side and pleaded on their behalf before God. According to this understanding, the prayer referred to in the Psalm was not a one-time event that saved the son of the King, as we would be led to believe in the *mashal*. Rather, the prayer is characteristic of Moses’s consistent behaviour as defender of the nation.<sup>15</sup> The *darshan* or editor’s choice to use this method to weave together different moments in which Moses prayed was based on his reading of Moses’s speech in Deut 9, where Moses himself brought together different events in which the Israelites sinned and he interceded with God on their behalf.

Up until now, I have attempted to reconstruct the *mashal*’s creation, to take a peek into the midrashic editor’s workshop by examining his choice of prooftexts for the *nimshal*. I have suggested that the *darshan* or editor strove to express Moses’s intercessory activity in as broad a manner as possible, and not to limit God’s praise for him to the context of the sin of the golden calf.

It might be possible to strengthen this suggestion by focussing on another aspect of the *mashal*: the portrayal of Moses as “the friend of the king.” One of the sources of this image is a *mashal* found in Sifre Numbers on the verse “And the people cried out to Moses” (Num 11:2), which appears in the context of the people complaining in the wilderness:

How could Moses help them? It would have been fitting to say, “And the people cried out to the Lord”? So why does Scripture say, “And the people cried out to Moses”?

R. Shimon would say: A parable to a king who was angry with his son. The son went to the king’s friend and said to him: Please intercede for me with father. Thus, Israel went to Moses and said to him: Please intercede for us with the Lord.<sup>16</sup>

Sifre Num. 86:1 [Kahana 216]

וכי מה היה משה מועילם והלא אין ראוי לומר אלא ויצעק העם אל ה' ומה תלמוד לומר "ויצעק העם אל משה"? היה ר' שמעון אומר: משל למה הדבר דומה למלך בשר ודם שכעס על בנו והלך לו הבן ההוא אצל אוהבו של מלך אמר לו צא ובקש לי מאבא כך הלכו ישראל אל משה אמרו לו בקש עלינו מלפני המקום (ספרי במדבר פו).

15 On the role of Moses’s prayers in defending Israel, see: Michael Widmer, *Moses, God, and the Dynamics of Intercessory Prayer: A Study of Exodus 32–34 and Numbers 13–14*, FAT 2/8 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004); Michael Widmer, *Standing in the Breach: An Old Testament Theology and Spirituality of Intercessory Prayer* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 57–171; Christine E. Hayes, “Golden Calf Stories: The Relationship of Exodus 32 and Deuteronomy 9–10,” in *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Honor of James L. Kugel*, ed. Hindy Najman and Judith H. Newman, JSJSup 83 (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 45–93.

16 See also Kahana’s commentary, 1012.

Here, in the older midrash, we find again the image of the king's beloved praying for the king to have mercy on his son. However, in this version of the *mashal*, the beloved prays only after he has been requested to do so by the king's son who fears for his life. This *mashal* is meant to negate a misunderstanding of the verse "And the people cried out to Moses," namely that the people prayed directly to Moses, that Moses could bring them salvation. The intent of the *mashal* is to clarify that the people turned to Moses, friend of the king, in order for him to pray to God on their behalf.

This foundational image was adopted by the *darshan* or editor of Midrash on Psalms, and modified so that the friend himself initiates the intercessory prayer. The son's role in approaching the king's beloved was muted. Furthermore, the dramatic point was moved from the prayer itself to the moments following the king's forgiveness of his son—the king praises and elevates the friend. This is the main addition in Midrash on Psalms and it comes to explain "Moses, the man of God."<sup>17</sup> We should note that Midrash on Psalms preserves not only the terminology used to refer to the main images in the *mashal*, "The king who was angered by his son, the beloved who interceded on behalf of the son," but also the exegetical terminology, "It was not necessary to say anything but ... [להלא אין ראוי לומר אלא] / It would have been fitting to say ... [לא היה צריך לומר]; What does Scripture mean [ומה תלמוד לומר] / what does it mean [מהו]?" These remnants of the earlier contexts reveal that the *darshan* or editor was taking older material and refashioning it according to his own exegetical and ideological goals.<sup>18</sup>

Elsewhere, Midrash on Psalms itself cites the classic image of Moses as defender of his people, an image appropriate to Moses after the sin with the golden calf. This interpretation is found in the comment on the following verse:

17 It is possible that the translation should read: "Moses man-god." This line of interpretation also explains why God would have harmed Himself when killing Moses (not the people). One could also assume an anti-Christian polemic here, as if to say: We, Jews, also have our divine man!

18 In that context, see also the parable in Mekh. R. Ishm. Vayehi 3 (Horovitz-Rabin 98). See also Lieve M. Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhilot: An Annotated Edition and Translation of the Parables in Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael and Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai*, TSAJ 176 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 159–166. The versions there differ in the title given to the person "coming in," as some read "אפיטרופו," (his) guardian, and others "אוהבו," his beloved/friend.

“He would have destroyed them had not Moses His chosen one confronted Him in the breach to avert His destructive wrath” (Ps 106:23):

R. Berechiah said: [This is similar] to a prosecutor who was making accusations against the son of the king. What did the defender [סניגור] do? He thrust him aside and stood in his place. Similarly, “He would destroy them, had not Moses his chosen [בחירו] stood before him in the breach to turn back his wrath” (Ps 106:23).

Midr. Ps. 106:23 [Buber 456]

“ויאמר להשמדם לולי משה בחירו עמד בפרץ לפניו להשיב חמתו מהשחית” (תהלים קו כג).

ר' ברכיה אמר: לקטיגור שהוא מקטרג על בנו של מלך מה עשה סניגור דחה אותו ועמד עצמו במקומו כך “לולי משה בחירו עמד בפרץ לפניו להשיב חמתו מהשחית” (מדרש תהלים קו בובר עמ' 456).

This amoraic *derashah* portrays Moses as defending Israel in a bold and brazen manner, pushing aside the prosecutor. This portrayal emphasizes Moses's defence of his people after their sin but does not sufficiently express Moses's intimacy with God. To achieve this desired result, in other words to transform Moses from “defender” into “beloved friend,” the editor of Midr. Ps. 90 borrowed the image of the “friend of the King” from the passage concerning the grumblers in the Sifre. This passage better expresses Moses's intimacy with God and the praise bestowed on him as “the man of God.”

This reconstruction of the work of the Midrash editor may explain why he chose to use verses not only from the sin with the golden calf, but also those related to other events such as Israel's grumbling in the wilderness, when Moses attempted to deflect God's anger by pleading, “kill me rather.”

In the end, this is one of many examples showing the in-depth analysis required to understand the parables found in the exegetical context of aggadic midrashim. Both the images and terminology found in the parables themselves, as well as the *nimshal* portions of the parables and the prooftexts they use, reveal a broad and rich expanse of hidden meanings.

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**PART 3**

*Parables and Social Reality*







# Metaphors, Parables, and the *Bildfeld*

Petra von Gemünden

Starting with the metaphor as a contextual phenomenon, this contribution will focus on the paradigmatic context of a metaphor, the so-called *Bildfeld* (metaphorical field; image field) located in the “*langue*.”<sup>1</sup> Difficulties in determining and analysing a *Bildfeld*, as well as both the limits and the potential of this approach, will be discussed on the basis of examples from the biblical field. Finally, the potentialities of a comparison of actualized *Bildfelder* will be shown by comparing three metaphors that are used by both the gospel parable tradition and the apostle Paul.

## 1 Theory

### 1.1 *The Paradigmatic Context*

It was the Romance philologist Harald Weinrich very successfully introduced the concept of *Bildfeld* into the investigation of metaphors, which was oriented to literary studies. Weinrich was following Paul Claudel’s “*champ de figures*” here.<sup>2</sup> His methodological starting point is Ferdinand de Saussure’s fundamental distinction between *langue* and *parole*, that is to say, the distinction between the supra-individual, virtual “objectively structured language possessed by a community” (*langue*)<sup>3</sup> and the individual speech act (*parole*). He elaborates his *Bildfeld* theory on the analogy of Jost Trier’s theory of the

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1 The author wishes to express her gratitude to Dr Brian McNeil for his translation of the text and the original German citations, and to Dr Albert Gootjes for his attentive reading of the text. Biblical quotations are taken from the NRSV.

2 Paul Claudel, *Introduction au Livre de Ruth: Texte intégral de l'abbé Tardif de Moidrey* (Paris: Gallimard, 1952), 44 (first published in 1938); on the reception, see Harald Weinrich, *Sprache in Texten* (Stuttgart: Klett, 1976), 283. In 1933, Gerhard Fricke was the first to speak of the *Bildfeld*; see Dietmar Peil, “Bildfelder in historischer Perspektive,” in *Lexikologie 1: Ein internationales Handbuch zur Natur und Struktur von Wörtern und Wortschätzen/Lexicology: An International Handbook on the Nature and Structure of Words and Vocabularies*. ed. David A. Cruse, HSK 21.1 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2002), 764–771, at 764.

3 Weinrich, *Sprache*, 277.

*Wortfeld* (lexical field).<sup>4</sup> The lexical field belongs under the *langue*, that is to say, the supra-individual linguistic community. Here, a word and “its closer or more distantly neighbouring” “conceptual relatives” form a “structured whole, a framework, that one can call ... a lexical field”<sup>5</sup> and that can be understood as a synchronous paradigm. If a word from the lexical field is realized syntagmatically on the level of the *parole*, “it contributes the content of meaning that belongs to it in the paradigm because of its relationship to other elements in the field.”<sup>6</sup> The *Bildfeld* should be envisaged on analogy to this, with the difference that “the *coupling of two linguistic ranges of meaning* [*Sinnbezirke*]” takes place “in the metaphor ... in question”:<sup>7</sup> “In the metaphor *Wortmünze* [lit. “word coin”: a word that is in common currency], the reality of ‘word’ is linked with the reality of ‘coin,’ and each term brings its neighbours with it. The ‘word’ brings the language’s range of meaning, and the ‘coin’ brings the financial system’s range of meaning.”<sup>8</sup> Just as a change in the meaning of a word in the *Bedeutungsfeld* (semantic field) has immediate consequences for the meanings of the other words in the lexical/semantic field,<sup>9</sup> the same applies to the change of a metaphor in the *Bildfeld*.<sup>10</sup> According to Weinrich, not every metaphor exists in a *Bildfeld*, but the isolated metaphor is rare and has “usually no success in the linguistic community.”<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, a “metaphor that is integrated into a *Bildfeld*” has “the best chances of being accepted by the linguistic community.”<sup>12</sup>

According to Weinrich, on the analogy of the metaphor (in which two components, the image donor and the image recipient, are linked), there is

4 Peil, “Bildfelder in historischer Perspektive,” 764; Weinrich, *Sprache*, esp. 283–284, 325–326. However, Weinrich does not commit himself to one precise understanding of “field”; see Franziska Wessel, *Probleme der Metaphorik und die Minnemetaphorik in Gottfrieds von Strassburg „Tristan und Isolde,”* MMS 54 (Munich: Fink, 1984), 67.

5 All quotations are from Jost Trier, “Über Wort- und Begriffsfelder,” in *Wortfeldforschung: Zur Geschichte und Theorie des sprachlichen Feldes*, ed. Lothar Schmidt, WF 250 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1973), 1–38, at 1.

6 Hans-Josef Klauck, *Allegorie und Allegorese in synoptischen Gleichnistexten*, 2nd ed., NTAbh 13 (Münster: Aschendorff, 1978), 141; see Weinrich, *Sprache*, 325.

7 Weinrich, *Sprache*, 283 (my italics). For Weinrich, the only thing that matters is that “two linguistic ranges of meaning are coupled by a speech act and are posited as analogous to each other.”

8 Weinrich, *Sprache*, 283, see also 326.

9 Weinrich, *Sprache*, 325, understands “semantic field” and “lexical field” as synonyms.

10 On the genesis of a metaphor in the *Bildfeld* and its slow fading through recurrent use until it becomes an ex-metaphor, and on the *Bildfeld* which then has a free space that can be occupied anew, see Weinrich, *Sprache*, 282.

11 Weinrich, *Sprache*, 286; Peil, “Bildfelder in historischer Perspektive,” 765.

12 Weinrich, *Sprache*, 286.

a similar link in the *Bildfeld* between two linguistic ranges of meaning: a field that is the “image donor,” and a field that is the “image recipient.”<sup>13</sup>

One can identify *Bildfelder* in an empirical-inductive manner by collecting the individual metaphors of a linguistic and cultural community that are realized in specific circumstances and have a literary attestation, thereby endeavouring to determine the virtual possibilities in the *langue*<sup>14</sup> and making a descriptive-systematic presentation of them. It is also possible to rely on one’s own metaphorical competence;<sup>15</sup> but this is not unproblematic with regard to our interest in the ancient world, in view of the historical distance and the fact that we are not “native speakers.”<sup>16</sup> In practice, the search can begin with either the semasiological or the onomasiological aspect,<sup>17</sup> but it must always look for the pendant on the other side, since a *Bildfeld* is constituted only by the coupling of two ranges of meaning, the image donor and the image recipient.<sup>18</sup>

It is, at any rate, clear that despite all our endeavours, one can never regard the identification of a *Bildfeld* as completed once and for all. And in the case of classical antiquity, the scarcity of the source material only makes this more obvious.

## 1.2 *Difficulties and Criticism of the Bildfeld Theory*

This already brings us to the difficulties and limitations of the *Bildfeld* theory, and to the criticism of this theory. In addition to the difficulty of reconstructing a *Bildfeld* from the *langue* in a truly comprehensive manner, we have the

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- 13 Weinrich, *Sprache*, 284. When he uses the terms “image donor” and “image recipient,” Weinrich explicitly refers to Jost Trier’s expression “image donors” (see Jost Trier, “Deutsche Bedeutungsforschung,” in *Aufsätze und Vorträge zur Wortfeldtheorie*, ed. Anthony van der Lee and Oskar Reichmann, JLSM 174 [The Hague: Mouton, 1973], 110–144, here: 141).
- 14 Klauck, *Allegorie*, 143; Catherine Hezser, *Lohnmetaphorik und Arbeitswelt in Mt 20,1–16: Das Gleichnis von den Arbeitern im Weinberg im Rahmen rabbinischer Lohngleichnisse*, NTOA 15 (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990), 224.
- 15 Dietmar Peil, “Bildtheoretische Probleme in der ‘Goldenen Schmiede’ Konrads von Würzburg,” *JOWG* 5 (1988–1989): 169–180, at 172.
- 16 See Klaus Berger, *Exegese des Neuen Testaments: Neue Wege vom Text zur Auslegung*, UTB 658 (Heidelberg: Quelle & Meyer, 1977), 138, 157.
- 17 There are now dictionaries that register the *Bildfelder* from either the semasiological or onomasiological aspect; see Wolf-Andreas Liebert, “Bildfelder in synchroner Perspektive,” in *Lexikologie*. ed. David A. Cruse, 771–783, at 779.
- 18 Weinrich, *Sprache*, 284; Dietmar Peil, “Zum Problem des Bildfeldbegriffs,” in *Studien zur Wortfeldtheorie: Studies in Lexical Field Theory*, ed. Peter Rolf Lutzeier, LA 288 (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1993), 185–202, at 190.

problem of the delimitability of *Bildfelder*. Various *Bildfelder* can overlap,<sup>19</sup> and we must assume that many individual metaphors can belong not only unambiguously to a single *Bildfeld*, but to several *Bildfelder*.<sup>20</sup> And, of course, *Bildfelder* are clearly more complex than lexical or semantic fields.<sup>21</sup> Dieter Peil points out that Weinrich's example (with reference to Jost Trier) of the field of colours, in which the individual colours change their significance in accordance with the number of colours of which each field consists,<sup>22</sup> is made up of very uniform elements—as are Trier's lexical fields in general: "Trier's lexical fields are each restricted to one kind of word."<sup>23</sup> But in *Bildfelder*, there are diverse kinds of words and references. For example, in the *Bildfeld* "Wortmünze," we not only find concepts like *Falschmünzerei* ("counterfeiting") for a manner of speaking that engages in ideological falsification or the "bounced check" for an empty promise,<sup>24</sup> but a word is also "coined" and there is such a thing as "golden words."<sup>25</sup> Moreover, Peil emphasizes that a metaphor is formed in the syntagm—on the level of the *parole*—rather than in the paradigm.<sup>26</sup> This means that the syntagmatic relationships also condition the structure of the *Bildfeld*. It is indeed possible for paradigmatic relationships to occur in the *Bildfeld* as well,<sup>27</sup> but these are not sufficient "to comprehend" a *Bildfeld* "adequately."<sup>28</sup>

Hoberg and Wessel have objected to Weinrich's analogy between the lexical or semantic field and the *Bildfeld* by arguing that the *Bildstelle* (image area, understood as a unity of two concrete halves of an image) has a greater paradigmatic independence than a word in its lexical field, since the fact that the image area itself always presents a brief textual context means that it already

19 Peil, "Bildfeldtheoretische Probleme," 172, adduces the metaphor of the storm that brings "the steersman in the Bildfeld of the ship of state ... to despair" and can cause the collapse of the state in the *Bildfeld* of the public building.

20 Peil, "Bildfeldtheoretische Probleme," 172; Klauck, *Allegorie*, 143.

21 In Harald Weinrich, "Semantik der Metapher," *FL* 1 (1967): 3–17, at 13, Weinrich views the *Bildfelder* "as the link of two lexical fields"; later, in Weinrich, *Sprache*, 326, he speaks of images as "the link of two semantic fields." We can infer from Weinrich, *Sprache*, 325–326, that he regards lexical and semantic fields as synonymous.

22 Weinrich, *Sprache*, 325.

23 Peil, "Bildfelder in historischer Perspektive," 766. In 1931, Jost Trier investigated the "range of meaning of the understanding"; see Jost Trier, *Der deutsche Wortschatz im Sinnbezirk des Verstandes: Die Geschichte eines sprachlichen Feldes*, vol. 1, *Von den Anfängen bis zum Beginn des 13. Jahrhunderts*, 2nd ed. (Heidelberg: Winter, 1973).

24 Examples from Klauck, *Allegorie*, 141–142.

25 Examples from Weinrich, *Sprache*, 280–281.

26 Peil, "Bildfelder in historischer Perspektive," 766.

27 *Ibid.* Peil gives the example of paradigmatic relationships between gold, silver, and copper coins.

28 *Ibid.*

bears “an inherent ... meaning of its own.”<sup>29</sup> This means that the addition of an image area to, or its removal from, the *Bildfeld* does not have the same drastic consequences as the addition or removal of a word to or from the lexical field: “the meaning of an individual word” is “always determined from the outside, from its importance in the structure of the lexical field.”<sup>30</sup> This means that we have touched here on one of the strengths of the image area over against the word in a *Wortfeld*, precisely with regard to traditional stocks of metaphors.

### 1.3 *Strengths and Opportunities of the Bildfeld Theory, and Further Development(s)*

The *Bildfeld* theory appears particularly appropriate for the understanding of traditionally existing stocks of metaphors.<sup>31</sup> This is especially important for exegesis, because traditional metaphors play a significant role precisely in the biblical realm: “in the language of the Bible, we encounter primarily solid metaphors that bear the imprint of a long religious tradition.”<sup>32</sup> Where we have a “canalized tradition of metaphors” of this kind, this relativizes the objection that a *Bildfeld* is insufficiently delimitable, since the *Bildfeld* is in this case frequently “more clearly delimitable than the lexical fields.”<sup>33</sup>

It is easier to understand metaphors when they are “borne up by a *Bildfeld* that already exists in the linguistic and literary tradition.”<sup>34</sup> This is important for the denotation and acceptance of a metaphor.

The fact that an individual metaphor from the *Bildfeld*, which is realized in the syntagm, still refers to its paradigmatic field is relevant from another perspective as well: this fact is the basis for a simple creation of new metaphors, which in their turn can easily be received because of the *Bildfeld*. This creation of new metaphors can be grasped by an example taken from Francis E. Sparshott: the metaphor “ship of the desert” for a camel evokes “the desert as an unharvested ocean, whose wave are dunes, whose islands are oases, where camels travel in convoy caravans so as not to be torpedoed by

29 Wessel, *Probleme*, 68; see Rudolf Hoberg, *Die Lehre vom sprachlichen Feld: Ein Beitrag zu ihrer Geschichte, Methodik und Anwendung*, SG 11 (Mannheim: Institut für Deutsche Sprache, 1970), 125. The proposal that one should therefore avoid the concept of *Bildfeld* and apply a new concept, such as “range of image” (*Bildbezirk*), for the two linked fields, has not achieved a consensus; see Wessel, *Probleme*, 68n290. On various kinds and understandings of the concept of field, see Horst Geckeler, *Zur Wortfelddiskussion: Untersuchungen zur Gliederung des Wortfeldes ‘alt-jung-neu’ im heutigen Französisch*, IBAL 7 (Munich: Fink, 1971), 167–176.

30 Wessel, *Probleme*, 68.

31 Klauck, *Allegorie*, 145.

32 Klauck, *Allegorie*, 143.

33 Both quotations from Weinrich, “Semantik der Metapher,” 13.

34 Weinrich, *Sprache*, 326.

Tuaregs—and then it may occur to us how the ribs of a wrecked camel begin to show through the rotten planking.”<sup>35</sup> The actualized metaphor “ship of the desert” for a camel generates in the human linguistic consciousness the fields neighbouring each individual paradigmatic field: “ship” (“ocean,” “waves,” etc.) and “desert” (“dunes,” “oases,” etc.). That is why you can easily expand the *Bildfeld* in combining further elements of the respective word fields (here: of “ship,” “desert”) by creating new metaphors that are sustained by the already existing word field and are thus easily understood and accepted.<sup>36</sup> What is involved here is in fact an “increase” in metaphors, rather than an “original creation” of metaphors.<sup>37</sup> If a metaphor is “shifted in parallel in the *Bildfeld*,” so to speak, “empty spaces” in the *Bildfeld* are often detected and then filled.<sup>38</sup> Peil develops Weinrich’s theory of *Bildfeld* further, and assumes that elements of image can certainly exist in the image donor,<sup>39</sup> elements that themselves do not (as yet) have any pendant in the image recipient. We could sketch this in greatly simplified terms, following Peil, by means of the following diagram:

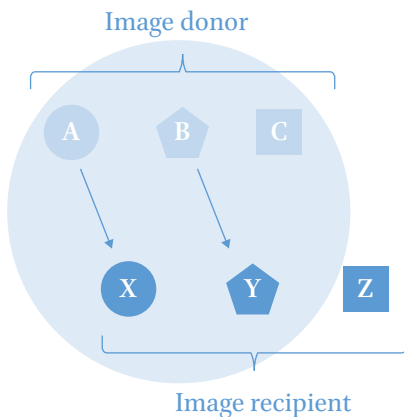


FIGURE 1  
Relation between *Bildfeld* (*langue*) and *parole*:  
Overflowing element “C” in the image donor  
without pendant in the image recipient

- 35 Francis E. Sparshott, “As,’ or the Limits of Metaphor,” *NLH* 6 (1974): 75–94, at 82, see also 84.
- 36 Weinrich, *Sprache*, 326. See also Weinrich, *Sprache*, 280: “One can shift these metaphors [i.e., *Wortmünzen* and similar metaphors] in parallel. In this way, one acquires new metaphors that are either known to us from colloquial speech or encounter us at every turn in our reading, so that we often cannot truly say whether or not we have already heard them” see Harald Weinrich, “Münze und Wort. Untersuchungen an einem *Bildfeld*,” in *Romanica: Festschrift for Gerhard Rohlfs*, ed. Heinrich Lausberg (Halle: Niemeyer, 1958), 508–521, 512. See also Wessel, *Probleme*, 68: “established metaphors” have “the tendency ... to propagate, field by field.” It is so easy to spin out a metaphor into a story; see Klauck, *Allegorie*, 142.
- 37 Weinrich, *Sprache*, 288.
- 38 See Weinrich, *Sprache*, 288, 326. Ultimately, these new metaphors are already potentialities within the *Bildfeld*.
- 39 Peil, “Zum Problem des *Bildfeld*begriffs,” 193, 201, speaks of the “overflowing detail.”

When one spins out a metaphor<sup>40</sup> within a *Bildfeld*—to take up again the example of the camel as the “ship of the desert”—by speaking of a journey through the desert in terms of a voyage by ship, one very easily evokes “rudimentary narrative structures.”<sup>41</sup> This is interesting with regard to the understanding of a parable as a metaphor that is given a narrative elaboration:<sup>42</sup> the metaphor contributes by means of association with the *Bildfeld* that is linked to it.

If we look at the use of metaphors in the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament and inter- and post-testamental writings in the light of the cultural community that sustains the *Bildfelder*, we can get a more precise awareness of the virtual possibilities that were available to the authors or redactors, and whose possibilities they ultimately realized in the metaphor in question. And this also implies that we see which of the virtual metaphors they clearly decided *not* to use.<sup>43</sup> Here, we gain some clarity about the intention of the author or redactor,<sup>44</sup> and perhaps also about the situation. This brings us to the extralingual, pragmatic context in which both the *langue* (and thus also the *Bildfeld*) and the syntagmatic realizations from the *Bildfeld* on the level of the *parole* are embedded.<sup>45</sup>

#### 1.4 *The Embedding of the Paradigmatic (and Syntagmatic) Contexts in the Pragmatic Context*

The linguistic theory of metaphor did not initially envisage the pragmatic context explicitly.<sup>46</sup> This context was, however, implicitly present in the idea of the linguistic community that sustains the *Bildfeld*,<sup>47</sup> as well as in the central category of the expectation of determination in the linguistic consciousness of the recipient(s), which is included in the definition of a metaphor as “a word in a counter-determining context [ein Wort in einem konterdeterminierenden Kontext]”.<sup>48</sup>

40 This formulation follows Klauck, *Allegorie*, 142.

41 Klauck, *Allegorie*, 142.

42 Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *Der historische Jesus: Ein Lehrbuch*, 3rd rev. ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2001), 307.

43 Hezser, *Lohnmetaphorik*, 224–225.

44 See Berger, *Exegese*, 139–140.

45 See Petra von Gemünden, *Vegetationsmetaphorik im Neuen Testament und seiner Umwelt: Eine Bildfelduntersuchung*, NTOA 18 (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), 16.

46 See Gustav H. Blanke, *Einführung in die semantische Analyse* (Munich: Hueber, 1973), 139 (with reference to De Saussure).

47 See Weinrich, *Sprache*, 286; Peil, “Bildfelder in historischer Perspektive,” 765.

48 This is the definition by Weinrich, *Sprache*, 320. Wessel, *Probleme*, 55, refines Weinrich's definition of metaphor as “a word in a counter-determining context”; “it would be more



Both *Bildfelder* and their specific actualizations as metaphors on the level of the *parole* are embedded in an extra-lingual pragmatic context. They are both the expression of an existential context and the expression of the interpretation of this context, but they also have an effect on this existential context and on its interpretation, either altering or stabilising them.<sup>49</sup> This means that we have to look both at the reality to which the images in the *Bildfeld* refer (e.g., “naturalia” or historical-sociological circumstances) and at the specific interpretation(s) of reality. We also have to pay attention to both the intended and the real effect(s) of a realized metaphor.<sup>50</sup>

With regard to the community that sustains a *Bildfeld*, we must assume that the participation in a *Bildfeld* differs according to the (sub)groups and social classes to which a person belongs, to that person’s erudition, and so on. Indeed, metaphors can be decoded differently (or not decoded at all) in terms of the group to which one belongs. In this way, the metaphorical code can have an exclusive function, or—for the “in-group”—an inclusive function that stabilizes the group (see Mark 4:11–12).

The *Bildfelder* in the sphere of religious (biblical) language are relatively constant,<sup>51</sup> but we can nonetheless observe a change in *Bildfelder*, which is, for this reason, particularly noteworthy. This can be discerned only from actualizations in the *parole*. This change is connected to the change of the situation and/or the interpretation of the community.<sup>52</sup> We shall look at examples of this in the second part of this article (2) and then speak briefly (3) about the comparison of *Bildfelder*.

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correct to speak of a ‘text-unit,’ or more precisely, ‘an interpretable text-unit’ (in a counter-determining context).

49 A creative (new) metaphor tends to have an innovative-heuristic function, whereas a conventional metaphor tends to have a stabilising-reassuring function; see von Gemünden, *Vegetationsmetaphorik*, 14.

50 This is because the intended effect and the *de facto* effect of a metaphor are not necessarily identical.

51 This has religious-cultic reasons, and is also connected to the reception of this language. See Klauck, *Allegorie*, 143; Berger, *Exegese*, 159; Lowth cf. Claude Goldsmid Montefiore, “A Tentative Catalogue of Biblical Metaphors,” *JQR* 3 (1891): 623–681, at 626; von Gemünden, *Vegetationsmetaphorik*, 12.

52 Von Gemünden, *Vegetationsmetaphorik*, 12; Günter Röhser, *Metaphorik und Personifikation der Sünde: Antike Sündenvorstellungen und paulinische Hamartia*, WUNT 2/25 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1987), 24. On changes in the interpretation, see Hans Blumenberg, “Licht als Metapher der Wahrheit: Im Vorfeld der philosophischen Begriffsbildung,” *StG* (1957): 432–447, here 433.

## 2 *Bildfelder* and the Analysis of Biblical Texts

### 2.1 *The Change of Focus*<sup>53</sup>

In the First Testament, the image of the tree, and especially the vine stock, the most important fruit tree in Palestine, dominates as a metaphor for the collective.<sup>54</sup> The tree occurs frequently as a metaphor for the community of the people of Israel.<sup>55</sup>

In pre-exilic, especially prophetic literature, image elements from this *Bildfeld* are frequently actualized. These proclaim to Israel, often with reference to bad fruit or a lack of fruit,<sup>56</sup> judgement through the actualization and destruction of expressive image elements: the shoots of the vine stock Israel are to be torn out;<sup>57</sup> the branches of the olive tree will be beaten and its fruit will fall to the ground;<sup>58</sup> branches and even the undergrowth of the wood will be cut down;<sup>59</sup> a fire is kindled around the olive tree, and its branches suffer;<sup>60</sup> the vineyard that only bears bad grapes loses its protective fence and protective wall, it is no longer pruned and hoed, so that thistles and thorns spread, and rain no longer falls on it;<sup>61</sup> it is devastated and trampled down by shepherds.<sup>62</sup>

In the post-exilic period, on the other hand, the focus is on positive image elements in connection with the metaphor of the tree for the people of Israel. This is done above all: a) in a contrast looking back on historical images: YHWH waters the vineyard, protects it by day and night, he fights against thorns and

53 The importance of paying attention to the focus within the *Bildfelder* is emphasized by Ulrich Busse, "Metaphorik und Rhetorik im Johannesevangelium: Das Bildfeld vom König," in *Jesus im Gespräch: Zur Bildrede in den Evangelien und der Apostelgeschichte*, ed. Ulrich Busse, SBAB 43 (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2009), 171–212, at 209–210.

54 In Deut 32:32–33, in narrative literature, as a metaphor for the peoples. In Jer 49:9 = Obad 5, the vine stock stands for Edom; in Isa 16:8–10 = Jer 48:32–33 for Sibmah (probably *pars pro toto* for Moab).

55 For the vineyard/vine stock, it suffices to see Ps 80; Hos 10:1; Jer 2:21; (Jer 6:9); Isa 5:2; Ezek 15. On other metaphors, see von Gemünden, *Vegetationsmetaphorik*, 66–71.

56 Isa 5:2, 4; Jer 8:13; Mic 7:1; Jer 6:9, 2:21.

57 Isa 5:10.

58 Isa 17:6.

59 YHWH cuts down not only the branches (of tall trees), but even the undergrowth of the wood. Here, we note a differentiation within the people: YHWH turns against not only those in higher positions (the tall trees), but also against the lowly people (the thickets). See Isa 10:33–34.

60 Jer 11:16.

61 Isa 5:5–6.

62 Jer 12:10.

thistles and burns them;<sup>63</sup> b) in a positive further development of images of judgement: a holy seed will be a “stump” (which remains when the tree has been felled);<sup>64</sup> c) by reviving the images of the salutary beginning.<sup>65</sup> Here, the change of situation displays its impact in the use of images and in various focusses within the possibilities of the *Bildfeld*.

## 2.2 *Expansions of the Bildfeld or an Expanded Actualization from the Bildfeld*

### 2.2.1 A Semasiologically Oriented Approach

The image of the tree was employed in the First Testament not only for the people, but together with the image of a king, a royal dynasty, or a kingdom (which often interferes with the former image).<sup>66</sup> Ezekiel 31, Dan 4, and Ezek 17 present the image of the great tree (behind which lies the ancient oriental mythologem of the world-tree),<sup>67</sup> in whose branches birds nest and in whose shadow the animals are at rest; peoples too take shelter there.<sup>68</sup> Ezekiel 31 employs this world-tree to describe the greatness and the fall of (the kingdom of) Pharaoh; Dan 4 to describe the greatness and the fall of (the kingdom of) Nebuchadnezzar; and Ezek 17 to describe the judgement on Zedekiah, which is reversed in the later addition in Ezek 17:22–24: a tender shoot from the top of the cedar is to be planted on the lofty mountains of Israel, “in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar. Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shadow of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind. All the trees of the field [peoples] shall know that I am the LORD. I bring low the high tree, I make high the low tree [Israel]” (Ezek 17:22–24).<sup>69</sup>

63 See the “new song of the vineyard” in Isa 27:2–6. On the post-exilic context, see Evangelia G. Dafni, “Jesaja-Apokalypse,” *WiBiLex* (2013), <https://www.bibelwissenschaft.de/stichwort/22404/>, sub point 5. One should note the contrast between Isa 5:2–7 and Isa 27:2–6.

64 Isa 6:13.

65 Amos 9:15 (redactional).

66 The king, as a corporative personality, represents his people, and what happens to him depicts the fate of the people; see Bernhard Lang, *Kein Aufstand in Jerusalem: Die Politik des Propheten Ezechiel*, SBB (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1978), 112.

67 See also Ezek 19:10–14 (vine stock as image of the Davidic royal dynasty); Judg 9:8–13 (olive tree, fig tree, and vine stock as potential kings) and Franz Sedlmeier, *Das Buch Ezechiel: Kapitel 25–48*, NSKAT 21/2 (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2013), 102–104.

68 Ezek 31:6; Dan 4:12, 4:21; Ezek 17:23. On Qumran, see von Gemünden, *Vegetationsmetaphorik*, 199n14; Georg Gäbel, “Mehr Hoffnung wagen (Vom Senfkorn) Mk 4,30–32 (Q 13,18f./Mt 13,31f./Lk 13,18f./EvThom 20),” in *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu*, ed. Ruben Zimmermann et al. (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2007), 333.

69 “This seems to be a clear allusion to the restoration of the Davidic monarchy” (Christopher M. Tuckett, “The Parable of The Mustard Seed and the Book of Ezekiel,”

There can be no doubt that this stock of imagery is taken up in Mark 4:30–32//Matt 13:31–32//Luke 13:18–19 in the parable of the Mustard Seed, with reference to the βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ. Here too, the great size of the plant is emphasized,<sup>70</sup> and we are told that the birds of the air nest in its shade.<sup>71</sup>

We can identify not only agreements in motifs and themes, but also literal agreements with the above-mentioned passages.<sup>72</sup> It is striking—and here we definitely have an expansion of a *Bildfeld*—that the image of the great plant or the great tree is realized in Mark 4:30–32//Matt 13:31–32//Luke 13:18–19, together with the image of a mustard seed, which does not correspond to either the reality<sup>73</sup> or the metaphorical tradition: mustard is not attested in the First Testament or the subsequent early Jewish writings.<sup>74</sup> This is presumably why it was not anchored in the linguistic consciousness of those to whom the parable was addressed.<sup>75</sup> The use of this common annual plant for the βασιλεία is all the more striking. Even more powerfully than the shoot from the cedar tree that is planted in Ezek 17:22–24,<sup>76</sup> it can express an absolutely new beginning, as well as the fact that this βασιλεία is completely different from the proud and arrogant kingdoms, since it is symbolized, not by a valuable plant from Lebanon, but by a simple, everyday plant from the native field (Matt 13:31)

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in *The Book of Ezekiel and its Influence*, ed. Henk Jan de Jonge and Johannes Tromp [Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007], 92).

70 The Q version (Matt 13:32; Luke 13:19) speaks of a “tree”; the Markan version of a “shrub.” The Markan version emphasizes the contrast (the mustard seed is the smallest seed); see Tuckett, “The Parable of The Mustard Seed,” 87.

71 ὑπὸ τὴν σκιάν αὐτοῦ, Mark 4:32; in the Q version, the birds are nesting ἐν τοῖς κλάδοις αὐτοῦ.

72 Klauck, *Allegorie*, 212, assumes a “reproduction via memory of Ezek 17:23.” On the partially literal agreements with Ezek 17, Dan 4, and Ezek 31, as well as with Ps 104 (103), see Klauck, *Allegorie*, 212.

73 Birds cannot nest even in a fully grown mustard plant; and μεῖζον πάντων τῶν λαχάνων (Mark 4:32) is doubtless to be seen as a hyperbole.

74 Gäbel, “Mehr Hoffnung wagen,” 332. Mustard is, however, found in Matt 17:20//Luke 17:6 (here too with the focus on the contrast between small and large) and in rabbinic literature (see Von Gemünden, *Vegetationsmetaphorik*, 198n104).

75 In the case of ancient texts, we can attempt to reconstruct the *Bildfeld*, which is to be located on the level of the *langue*, only via the use of language on the level of the *parole*. The total number of ancient sources that have come to us is small, and we have no direct access to the oral language, nor to the language of all the classes of the people at that time; and this naturally implies a limitation on the “reconstruction” of the *Bildfeld*. It is easier for us to grasp intertextual references, since these take place on the level of the *parole*. They make clear the importance that a formed language had, precisely in religious communities; and this in turn influenced the *langue* and thereby the *Bildfelder* of the members of these communities.

76 Or the tree stump that puts forth a shoot in Isa 11:1, 10.

or garden (Q/Luke 13:19), a plant that is accessible to everyone.<sup>77</sup> As an annual plant, it highlights the contrast between small and great even more clearly than a tree that grows slowly;<sup>78</sup> this can also correspond better with the imminent expectation of the Jesus movement.

### 2.2.2 An Onomasiologically Oriented Approach

As we have seen, the tree as collective metaphor for Israel dominates in the First Testament. It is also found (with a tendency to “narrow it down” to the pious in Israel) in the intertestamental literature,<sup>79</sup> and is taken up in the New Testament in the image of the olive tree in Rom 11 and of the vine stock in John 15, where the image is centred on Christ.<sup>80</sup> This is widely supported by the *Bildfeld* tradition, but in the Synoptic Gospels we encounter a surprising expansion of the *Bildfeld* for a community, something that has scarcely any points of reference in the tradition:<sup>81</sup> in Mark 4 and Matt 13, images from the seed image donor realm are suddenly (also) applied with reference to a community and its problems.<sup>82</sup> While it is true that the metaphors of the seed in the parable of the Fourfold Field in Mark 4:3–8//Matt 13:3b–8//Luke 8:5–8a remain oscillating, since they can refer both to human beings and to the word,<sup>83</sup> the

77 While Greek and Latin authors classified mustard as a garden plant, the rabbis regarded mustard as a plant of the field (Gäbel, “Mehr Hoffnung wagen,” 332).

78 The contrast between large and small plays no role in the *Bildfeld* of the tree of life for a king or a kingdom.

79 See LAB 12:8–9; 23:12; 30:4; 39:7, and Von Gemünden, *Vegetationsmetaphorik*, 94–95.

80 For more precise information, see Von Gemünden, *Vegetationsmetaphorik*, 416–417. The tradition about the Baptist and Jesus avoids such images of the tree for the community (the realization of the fig tree in Luke 13:6–9 is most likely due to its great fruitfulness; in Mark 13:28–29, it is based in the fact that the fig tree announced the summer). The metaphors of the tree and its fruit are in that tradition addressed paraenetically to individuals.

81 In Zech 10:9; Hos 2:(1–3).25; Jer 31:27 (= 38:27–28 LXX) (addition); possibly also in Ps 90:5 and 1 En. 62:8, the constitution of a community is depicted in the image of the sowing of human beings by ΥΗΩΗ; see Gerhard Lohfink, “Das Gleichnis vom Sämann [Mk 4,3–9],” *BZ* 30 (1986): 59–61; Petra von Gemünden, “Ausreißen oder wachsen lassen? (Vom Unkraut unter dem Weizen) Mt 13,24–30.36–43 (EvThom 47),” in *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu*, ed. Ruben Zimmermann et al., 405–419, at 411, and it refers “to the people of God”; see Kristina Dronsch, “Vom Fruchtbringen (Sämann mit Deutung) Mk 4,3–9.(10–12).13–20 (Mt 13,1–9.18–23/Lk 8,5–8.11–15/EvThom 9/Agr 220),” in *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu*, ed. Ruben Zimmermann et al., 297–312, at 305. The donor field of seed–growth–harvest thus displays scarcely any metaphors for a community.

82 Mark 4:3–8; 14–20//Matt 13:3b–8; 18–23//Luke 8:5–8a; 11–15; Matt 13:24–30; 36–43.

83 On this, see in the First Testament the only indirect reference to the word in Isa 55:10. Seed is more widespread as a metaphor for the word in the Greek sphere (Von Gemünden, *Vegetationsmetaphorik*, 220). In the interpretation in Mark 4:14, we are told explicitly: “The sower sows the word (ὁ σπείρων τὸν λόγον σπείρει)” (cf. Matt 13:9). Luke 8:11 has: ὁ σπόρος

difference among the various types of hearers in the allegorical interpretation of this parable (Mark 4:14–20) has a very clear reference to the (early Christian) community.<sup>84</sup> The parable of the Weeds (ryegrass) among the Wheat (Matt 13) makes it clear that while the community's existence is due to the sowing of good seed,<sup>85</sup> it must now also take note of the growth of harmful ryegrass. This leads to the question of how they are to tackle this problem. In this parable too, the metaphors of seed are related in a differentiated manner to the community. It is probably not by chance that an allegorical-explanatory interpretation was given precisely these two parables (and *only* these two parables!), the parable of the Fourfold Field and the parable of the Weeds among the Wheat, with their innovative use of metaphor for which the *Bildfeld* provides scarcely any support: "seed" as a metaphor for a community does not already exist in the conventional *Bildfeld*. That is why images of the seed are more difficult to decode for the addressees—they require further explanation. There are new possibilities of accentuation: whereas the seed grows and is harvested over a relatively brief period of time, a tree grows over long periods of time and is longer-lived. The image of the seed is better able than the image of the tree (which can also develop from a tree stump) to emphasize the absolutely *new* beginning and *brevity* of the time until the harvest (the end), whereas the image of the tree is better suited to continuity and lengthier periods of time. It is striking that the more conventional metaphor of the tree is taken up in the New Testament for the community and modified, in view of Israel or the Jewish Christians (Rom 11), as well as in the latest of the canonical gospels, the Gospel of John (John 15). Finally, it is once again the image of the tree for a collective that dominates in the apostolic fathers—the seed as an image for a community now disappears completely.<sup>86</sup> It is natural to correlate this change within the *Bildfeld* "vegetation" first of all with the history of the community of the *Bildfeld*: with the passage of time, the initial consciousness recedes, as does the image of a speedy harvest implied in the image of the seed, which make sense above all when there is a lively expectation of the end.<sup>87</sup> Secondly,

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ἔστιν ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ. However, Luke 8:12–15 avoids the link between λόγος and σπείρω that is found in Mark (Klauck, *Allegorie*, 208n107). The seed, as a metaphor for deeds that has its privileged locus in the connection between deeds and consequences (Von Gemünden, *Vegetationsmetaphorik*, 220–221), is not realized in Mark 4 in this way, although Mark 4:20 does have ethical connotations.

84 So also Dronsch, "Fruchtbringen," 306.

85 In the background most likely lies the idea of the sowing of the community of salvation; see Von Gemünden, *Vegetationsmetaphorik*, 248n267.

86 Von Gemünden, *Vegetationsmetaphorik*, 416–419.

87 Von Gemünden, *Vegetationsmetaphorik*, 419.

it is precisely the parable of the Mustard Seed that suggests a clear change in the intended affirmation: the βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ is depicted metaphorically, not with a far-off plant that only elite circles can afford, but with the simple mustard plant that is accessible to all, as we just have seen above.<sup>88</sup>

### 2.3 *Narrowing Down the Bildfeld, or a Narrowing Actualization from the Bildfeld*

In the ancient oriental and Greek tradition of fables, we often encounter personified animals and even plants,<sup>89</sup> which speak and quarrel. These are only very rarely met in the First Testament,<sup>90</sup> and they are completely lacking in the Jesus tradition. We do indeed find plants and animals in New Testament parables, but they do not speak.<sup>91</sup> This is striking, because Luke 13:6–9 is very close to a parable of Ahiqar that was most likely current in several versions at the time of Jesus.<sup>92</sup> Here, a fruit tree that bears no fruit directly addresses its owner, who wants to uproot it, and promises him that it will bear *even better* fruit (than its own fruit), if the owner grants it one more year.<sup>93</sup> In Luke 13:6–9, on the other hand, it is the owner of the fig tree and the keeper of the vineyard who speak about the tree that bears no fruit, and discuss what is to be done with it.

The avoidance of the personification of animals and plants in the Jesus tradition is striking, given that animal and plant metaphors are certainly found in this tradition (as in the First Testament).<sup>94</sup> It is possible that the narrowing

88 Von Gemünden, *Vegetationsmetaphorik*, 419–420, cf. also 197–202.

89 See the Egyptian and Babylonian fables, Aesop, Callimachus, and especially Harry C. Schnur, *Fabeln der Antike: Griechisch–Lateinisch–Deutsch*, ed. Erich Keller, 3rd ed. (Düsseldorf: Artemis & Winkler, 1997).

90 The First Testament knows only two fables on plants: 1 Kgs 14:8–14 (cf. 2 Chr 25:18); Judg 9:8–15. The sheep in the parable at 2 Sam 12:1–4 does not speak.

91 For example, the lost sheep in Luke 15:3–7//Matt 18:12–14 does not speak. However, the branches in Paul's metaphor of the olive tree do speak (Rom 11:17–24).

92 Joachim Jeremias, *Die Gleichnisse Jesu*, 9th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1984), 170. Luke 13:6–9 can be seen only with probability as a variation on the Ahiqar fable (Max Küchler, *Frühjüdische Weisheitstraditionen: Zum Fortgang weisheitlichen Denkens im Bereich des frühjüdischen Jahweglaubens*, OBO 26 [Freiburg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979], 402), since the fables are lacking in the texts from Elephantine (sixth or fifth century BCE) which contain fragments of an Aramaic Ahiqar (Küchler, *Weisheitstraditionen*, 325–331).

93 Translation of the Syriac version in: *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, ed. Robert H. Charles, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913), 2:775.

94 On the animal metaphors, see Peter Riede, "Tier," *WiBiLex* (2010), <https://www.bibelwissenschaft.de/stichwort/35794/>; on the vegetation metaphors, see Von Gemünden, *Vegetationsmetaphorik*. In his metaphors and parables, Jesus employs, for example, the fox (Luke 13:32), doves (Matt 10:16), sheep (Mark 6:34//Matt 9:36; 10:6–16; 15:24; 18:12, Luke 15:4–6), lambs (Luke 10:3), and wolves (Matt 7:15; 10:16//Luke 10:3).

down of the *Bildfeld* that we observe in the Jesus tradition is rooted in the rejection of the static-contrasting depiction of human beings characteristic of fables. The Jesus tradition is based on the idea that the human being is capable of changing, and it aims precisely at this change of the human being.<sup>95</sup>

### 3 Comparison of Actualized *Bildfelder*

By way of conclusion, I will briefly show how the comparison of *Bildfelder* can prove heuristically meaningful. In Rom 6–8, three images thematize the fundamental transformation of the human person that one goes through, from the death of the old person (Rom 6:6) to the birth of the new person. This transformation is ritually condensed in baptism (Rom 6). All three images are drawn from the ancient οἶκος:<sup>96</sup> the image of the slave, who changes to a new master; the image of the wife who is free, after her husband's death, to marry a new man; and the image of adoption as son. The three images employed here are also found in the parables of the Jesus tradition, albeit with characteristic differences:

- While Paul speaks of the slave's transition to a *new* master,<sup>97</sup> Jesus never speaks of a new master;
- While Paul speaks of a *new* marriage,<sup>98</sup> Jesus tells only of the marriage feast;
- While Paul speaks of *adoption* as son,<sup>99</sup> Jesus never thematizes adopted sons. He speaks consistently of “natural” sons.<sup>100</sup>

These differences can certainly be explained by the circumstance that Jesus is speaking to Jews who from the outset live in the covenant with God, while Paul is seeking to win over gentiles, for whom conversion to Christ is accompanied

95 Von Gemünden, *Vegetationsmetaphorik*, 136–138.

96 We observe a “heaping up of image donors”: all image donors aim at the same image recipient (Wessel, *Probleme*, 102). This phenomenon can be assumed precisely where people want to communicate something that is important to them. They circle around it with ever new images and generate “a dynamic of varying insistence” (Wessel, *Probleme*, 102). In Rom 6–8, we can also observe a progression from the first image to the last image (Gerd Theissen and Petra von Gemünden, *Der Römerbrief. Rechenschaft eines Reformators* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016], 203).

97 See Rom 6:12–23; Theissen and von Gemünden, *Römerbrief*, 160–175, and Petra von Gemünden, “Der Christ als von der Sklaverei der Sünde Befreiter und als Sklave der Gerechtigkeit bzw. Sklave Gottes,” in *Kontroverse Freiheit: Die Impulse der Ökumene*, ed. Thomas Söding and Bernd Oberdorfer, QD 284 (Freiburg: Herder, 2017), 147–169.

98 Rom 7:1–6; Von Gemünden, *Römerbrief*, 175–186.

99 Rom 8, cf. Von Gemünden, *Römerbrief*, 186–202.

100 Despite the image in John the Baptist that God could raise up children for himself from stones (Matt 3:9).



by a fundamental, radical transformation of their existence. The comparison of the different uses of *Bildfelder* thus allows us to see various contextual conditionings, and thereby also elements of the proclamation that have a different focus.

My conclusion, therefore, is that *Bildfelder* help to open up collective systems of interpretation of life and the world.<sup>101</sup> This is especially true of religious communities' systems of interpretation of life and the world, because religious language, not by chance, displays a particularly close affinity with metaphors. Religious metaphors open up and interpret reality, and they have a point of reference that cannot be expressed exactly in immanent categories. Besides this, they address the mind, the emotions, and the will of the human being, and function to guide conduct. Since some metaphors seem to be specific for the profile of individual religions or religious communities, a study of these "root metaphors"<sup>102</sup> and of the way in which they are developed in *Bildfelder* sheds light on the understanding of the religion in question. Changes in the *Bildfelder* also point to the pragmatic context: they can indicate a change in the situative and sociocultural context and its interpretation.<sup>103</sup> Accordingly, for a deeper understanding of the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the post-biblical writings, and of the communities that were the bearers of these texts, the task that awaits us is the reconstruction of the "*Bildfeld*-field"<sup>104</sup> in each case.

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101 On this and on what follows, see Von Gemünden, *Vegetationsmetaphorik*, 1–2 (with bibliography).

102 The term "root metaphor(s)" goes back to Stephen C. Pepper, *World Hypotheses: A Study in Evidence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1942).

103 Von Gemünden, *Vegetationsmetaphorik*, 11–18.

104 On this expression, see Wessel, *Probleme*, 101. As an alternative, Wessel, *Probleme*, 101, proposes the term "Bildfeld-Konglomerat" (*Bildfeld*-conglomerate).

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# Jesus's Parables Create Collective Identity: Parables of Growth through the Lens of Social Identity Theory

*Ruben Zimmermann*

The early communities of believers in Christ remembered Jesus as a parable teller. Already in the oldest sources of the narrative tradition of Jesus, there is a large number of parables.<sup>1</sup> One can therefore conclude that the genre of parable was one of the preferred media of the collective memory of Jesus.<sup>2</sup> Social memory theory has shown that collective memory in typified forms fulfills a community-building and community-stabilising function. Therefore, the Jesus community constitutes and stabilizes itself in the joint telling of Jesus parables. Those assumptions lead to the guiding question for this article: Is it possible to make more concrete statements about this emerging community below the basic insights into the collective and medially influenced memory process? Here I will draw particular attention to the parables of growth, which address the idea of development already in their plots. Insights from Social Identity Theory will be used as a theoretical base. Thus, this article raises the following questions: What do we learn by approaching parables with social identity theory? Do the parables of growth, in particular, mirror or reflect a specific social situation and a group development? To which groups might the text refer (ingroup, outgroup, subgroup)? Could there be a group conflict? What might be the envisioned development, change, or movement of the groups?

## 1 Methodological Considerations

To answer the question of the role of parables in the constitution of social identity, I would like to propose a combination of three theoretical approaches:

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- 1 Dieter Roth, for instance, counts twenty-four parables in the sayings source Q, see Dieter T. Roth, *The Parables in Q* (London: T&T Clark, 2018), 20–21.
  - 2 See Ruben Zimmermann, “The Parables of Jesus as Media of Collective Memory: Making Sense of the Shaping of New Genres in Early Christianity, with Special Focus on the Parable of the Wicked Tenants (Mark 12:1–12),” in *Making Sense as Cultural Practice: Historical Perspectives*, ed. Jörg Rogge, MHCS 18 (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2013), 23–44.

social identity theories (1.1), social memory theories (1.2), and narrative criticism (1.3).

### 1.1 *Social Identity Theories*

Social identity theories have been employed in New Testament scholarship for quite some time. One needs only to mention the work of Philip F. Esler (on Galatians, Romans), David Horrell (on 1 Corinthians), or Raimo Hakola (on John).<sup>3</sup> Since there is already an established foundation of biblical scholarship on this subject, I will limit my remarks to a basic orientation into the insights of Henri Tajfel and John Turner, and some concepts that are particularly relevant to the subject at hand. In their early work of the 1970s, Henri Tajfel and John Turner undertook empirical studies to investigate group-specific behaviour of small groups (minimal group paradigms). Turner later established the so-called “self-categorization theory,” which describes group members, self-understanding. According to Tajfel, group identity can be defined as follows: “Social identity will be understood as that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his *knowledge* of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the *value* and *emotional significance* attached to that membership.”<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, the feeling of being a member of a group involves three elements: a cognitive component (knowledge of belonging), an evaluative component (belonging could have a positive or negative value connotation), and an emotional component (like—dislike, love—hatred).<sup>5</sup>

Tajfel and Turner pointed out that “belonging to a group is sufficient to trigger intergroup discrimination favoring the in-group.”<sup>6</sup> From this we realise that

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- 3 Philip F. Esler, *Galatians* (London: Routledge, 1998); Philip F. Esler, *Conflict and Identity in Romans: The Social Setting of Paul’s Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003); Philip F. Esler, *2 Corinthians: A Social Identity Commentary* (London: T&T Clark, 2021); David G. Horrell, *Becoming Christian: Essays on 1 Peter and the Making of Christian Identity*, LNTS 394 (London: T&T Clark, 2013); David G. Horrell, *Ethnicity and Inclusion: Religion, Race, and Whiteness in Constructions of Jewish and Christian Identities* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020); Raimo Hakola, *Identity Matters: John, the Jews and Jewishness*, NovTSup 118 (Leiden: Brill, 2005); Hakola, *Reconsidering Johannine Christianity: A Social Identity Approach* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2021); see also the comprehensive volume J. Brian Tucker and Coleman A. Baker, eds., *T&T Clark Handbook to Social Identity in the New Testament* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).
- 4 Henri Tajfel, “Social Categorization, Social Identity and Social Comparison,” in *Differentiation Between Social Groups: Studies in the Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, ed. Henri Tajfel (London: Academic Press, 1978), 63.
- 5 See the overview in Philip F. Esler, “An Outline of Social Identity Theory,” in *T&T Clark Handbook to Social Identity in the New Testament*, ed. J. Brian Tucker and Coleman A. Baker (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 13–39.
- 6 Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, “Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behaviour,” in *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, ed. Stephan Worchel and William G. Austin (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1986), 13.

social identity theory also deals with intergroup behaviour, and mostly with group *conflicts* between different groups in a hierarchical relationship, be it ingroup–outgroup relationships or subgroup–main group conflicts. According to Tajfel and Turner, there are three coping strategies for a group that perceives itself to be inferior to another group:

- a. become more like the superior group (assimilation);
- b. reinterpret its characteristics in new and more positively valued ways;
- c. invent new characteristics that establish a positively valued group distinctiveness.

I would also like to draw attention to two more basic terms, “social change” and “social mobility,” which play an important role in social identity theory. Individual social mobility describes the possibility of moving out of a group to which you no longer want to belong. If it is not possible to move out, social change can take place through competition and creative processes of transformation. There are many further developments and differentiations of this model, but only two aspects are important for my later argument:

a) The *prototype theory*: the prototype theory seeks to clarify the self-categorization process in detail, i.e., why people identify with a group. According to Hogg, Hohman, and Rivera, prototypes “not only describe the group’s attributes but also, very importantly, prescribe how one should think, feel, and behave as a member of the group.”<sup>7</sup> A group’s prototype can be a representation of a person that embodies the identity of a group. The prototype, however, is not necessarily a current member of the group but could also be a remembered person from the past, or an ideal image of the group’s character.<sup>8</sup> Group prototypes can also be reinterpreted according to the contextual needs and challenges of a group.

b) The idealization or *symbolic construction of community*: the social identity is, to a certain extent, not based on reality but on social construction of the group’s image. It was Anthony B. Cohen, who pointed out already in the 1980s that the knowledge and appreciation of the group is first and foremost “symbolic construction of community.”<sup>9</sup> Benedict Anderson, who worked along the

7 Michael A. Hogg, Zachary P. Hohman and Jason E. Rivera, “Why do People Join Groups? Three Motivational Accounts from Social Psychology,” *SPPC* 2 (2008): 1273–1274.

8 See Coleman A. Baker, “A Narrative-Identity Model for Biblical Interpretation: The Role of Memory and Narrative in Social Identity Formation,” in *T&T Clark Handbook to Social Identity in the New Testament*, ed. J. Brian Tucker and Coleman A. Baker (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 109, who follows Eliot R. Smith and Michael A. Zarate, “Exemplar and Prototype Use in Social Categorization,” *sc* 8 (1990): 243–262.

9 See Anthony B. Cohen, *Symbolic Construction of Community* (London: Routledge, 1985).

same lines, introduced the term “imagined community,”<sup>10</sup> the image or ideal of a group that plays a certain role in constituting the group’s identity. According to Anderson, “all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contacts ... are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.”<sup>11</sup>

As interesting as these insights of social identity theories may be, a transfer of these findings to New Testament scholarship always involves two fundamental problems: on the one hand, the results of social identity theory have been obtained through empirical research in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Is it, therefore, possible to transfer them easily to other times and cultures, in particular to ancient society and its group behaviour? On the other hand, Social Identity Theory deals with statements about social reality, which is no longer directly accessible with regard to early Christianity. What we have at our disposal are only sources of the past, and primarily textual sources. Can social identity theories be combined with texts or, more precisely, with the study of the interpretation of texts? A way out of these dilemmas may be found in the combination of social identity theory with two other major fields:

### 1.2 *Social Memory Theories and Social Identity*

Social memory theories can be helpful for issues related to time. Memory theories reflect how the past can be present. This process of remembering also constitutes social groups or group identity. Thus, there is a genuine link between social identity and social memory.<sup>12</sup> A group constitutes itself within a process of remembering the common past. After its beginnings with the work of Maurice Halbwachs,<sup>13</sup> Aleida and Jan Assmann are to be credited with exploring the details of this remembering process and to establish the concepts of social, communicative, and cultural memory.<sup>14</sup> According to Aleida Assmann

10 See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 2006).

11 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

12 See with regard to New Testament text the volume Samuel Byrskog, Raimo Hakola and Jutta Maria Jokiranta, eds. *Social Memory and Social Identity in the Study of Early Judaism and Early Christianity* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016); Sandra Huebenthal, *Reading the Gospel of Mark as a Text from Collective Memory* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020).

13 See Maurice Halbwachs, *Das Gedächtnis und seine sozialen Bedingungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2006).

14 See the summary in Sandra Huebenthal, “Communicative Memory”; “Cultural Memory”; “Social Memory,” in *The Dictionary of the Bible and Ancient Media*, ed. Tom Thatcher et al. (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 66, 69–70, 368–369.



and others,<sup>15</sup> memory always needs *media and form* to be shaped and communicated. Individuals use different media, such as photos, diaries, or objects to remember their own biographies. Similarly, communicative and even cultural memory<sup>16</sup> is shaped by means of special media, which, according to Assmann, can be distinguished in a more abstract way in metaphor, writing, images, bodies, and locations.<sup>17</sup> There are many media that are used non-specifically by different people and groups in the process of memory. In addition, there are also specific media that shape the collective memory of certain groups. Those media help in particular to develop the identity of that group.

In the process of collective memory, certain forms are carried forward, refined, and solidified. It is therefore not only certain contents that are remembered, but over time the forms themselves are remembered and carried forward as media of memory. One can then speak of conventionalized forms by means of which the past can become an object of social and, finally, cultural memory. "The form is not reinvented over and over again. Instead, it exists within a tradition that requires and adopts it."<sup>18</sup> Based on Assmann, Astrid Erll and Klaudia Seibel have spoken of "forms of re-use" (*Wiedergebrauchs-Formen*) that prefigure cultural memory.<sup>19</sup>

A community talks about the same events of the past; however, the events are not communicated each time in a different but rather in a recognizable way. This does not require literal verbal continuity but it does require a structural or formal continuity. The memory of certain events that deviates and updates itself is recognizable due to the use of a defined form. Therefore, literary *genres* can be defined as such forms of re-use in which a genre can be described as the conventionalized form of a text or a story. The past is primarily communicated

15 Aleida Assmann, ed., *Medien des Gedächtnisses*, DVjs 72 (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1998); Astrid Erll, Ansgar Nünning, ed., *Medien des kollektiven Gedächtnisses: Konstruktivität—Historizität—Kulturspezifität*, MCM 1 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2004).

16 Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*, 8th ed. (Munich: Beck, 2018).

17 See Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses* (Munich: Beck, 1999), 236–242; see Zimmermann, "Collective Memory," 24.

18 Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume*, 239.

19 See Astrid Erll and Klaudia Seibel, "Gattungen, Formtraditionen und kulturelles Gedächtnis," in *Erzähltextanalyse und Gender Studies*, ed. Vera Nünning and Ansgar Nünning (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2004), 189: "Wiedergebrauchs-Formen sind daher bedeutungsgeladene Träger von Ideologien des kulturellen Gedächtnisses, d.h. von Vergangenheitsversionen, Geschichtsbildern, Konzepten kollektiver Identität sowie von Wert- und Normvorstellungen." Jan Assmann spoke of "Wiedergebrauchs-Texten, -Bildern und -Riten" ("re-use texts, images and rituals"), see Jan Assmann, "Kollektives Gedächtnis und kulturelle Identität," in *Kultur und Gedächtnis*, ed. Jan Assmann and Tonio Hölscher (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988), 15.

by narratives, and various subgenres of narratives. This brings me to my last point of my theoretical framing:

### 1.3 *Narratology and Social Identity*

Literary forms are media of collective memory, which leads to social identity. The form guarantees the permanence and the stabilization of the memory as well as of the community. This can be seen, for example, in a community's myths of origin as well as, in extreme cases, in the canonization of certain memory literature. In this way, literature is a medium of the portrayal and reflection, the modeling and construction of social identity.<sup>20</sup> But how does this process of literary identity formation take place?

It was in particular Paul Ricœur, who established the idea of "narrative identity." Ricœur distinguished between "mêmité" (*idem*) and "ipséité" (*ipse*) as two basic experiences of a self, and reflected on the relationship of the two terms with regard to identity.<sup>21</sup> Following Ricœur, it is the character in a narration that helps or even enables a person to bridge the gap between the two experiences of a self, and thereby links stability and change of the self over a period of time. In his trilogy "temps et récit"<sup>22</sup> Ricœur described the act of reading as a three-fold process of mimesis, by means of which the narrative identity of a reader is shaped. The meaning of a narrative (*configuration* = mimesis II) is based on pre-understanding (*préfiguration* = mimesis I). Meaningful Comprehension, however, occurs only in the *refiguration* (= mimesis III) of the reader. In doing so, the readers appropriate or distance themselves from the point of view of the literary character, and it is in this way that they gain a new understanding of themselves in the world. Therefore, the process of reading enables "narrative identity." For Ricœur, this identity-creating act of reading is always defined temporally, which is a bridge to memory theory. Genre consciousness plays an important role in shaping such pre-existing concepts that prefigure the narrative process because both producers and recipients of literary works must refer to them. Though Ricœur's focus is the individual reader it also works in constructing the narrative identity of a group. Ricœur states that the union

20 Astrid Erll, "Einleitung," in *Literatur, Erinnerung, Identität: Theoriekonzeptionen und Fallstudien*, ed. Astrid Erll and Marion Gymnich (Trier: WVT, 2003), iii–ix, v.

21 The concept of "narrative identity" is expressed most precisely in the work *Soi-même comme un autre*, see Paul Ricœur, *Das Selbst als ein anderer* (Munich: Fink, 1996), 141–160 ("Personale und narrative Identität") and 173–206 ("Das Selbst und die narrative Identität"); see also Paul Ricœur, "Narrative Identität," in *Vom Text zur Person. Hermeneutische Aufsätze (1970–1999)*, ed. and trans. Peter Welsen (Hamburg: Meiner, 2005), 209–225.

22 See the overview in Paul Ricœur, *Zeit und Erzählung*, vol. 1, *Zeit und historische Erzählung* (Munich: Fink, 1988), 87–135, as well as the entire structure of the three-volume work Paul Ricœur, *Zeit und Erzählung*, 3 vols. (Munich: Fink, 1988–1991).

of history and fiction is the assignment of a specific identity to an individual or a community that one can call its *narrative identity*.<sup>23</sup> The telling, hearing, and retelling of stories within a community over a period of time thus creates social identity.

## 2 The Parable Genre as Medium of Social Memory

As mentioned above, every community possesses a basic inventory of conventionalized forms by means of which social identity can be formed. I have argued elsewhere that I consider parables as one of these specific forms, by means of which the memory and social identity of early Christian groups have been shaped.<sup>24</sup> That does not exclude that Jesus and the Christian community adapted existing forms of brief narratives, i.e., Greek fables or Jewish *meshalim*.<sup>25</sup> However, telling parables established itself as a fundamental pillar for the Christian community and thus played a crucial role in forming their identity. Let me briefly summarize this argument, which can best be done by referring to the six criteria of a parable according to the definition we set forth in the *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu*, here quoted from the English version of my *Puzzling the Parables*:

A parable is a short narrational (1) and fictional (2) text that is related in the narrated world to known reality (3) but, by way of implicit or explicit transfer signals, make it understood that the meaning of the narration must be differentiated from the literal words of the text (4). In its appeal dimension (5) it challenges the reader to carry out a metaphoric transfer of meaning that is steered by contextual information (6).<sup>26</sup>

23 Ricœur, *Zeit und Erzählung*, 2:395.

24 See Ruben Zimmermann, "Memory and Form Criticism: The Typicality of Memory as a Bridge Between Orality and Literality in the Early Christian Remembering Process," in *The Interface of Orality and Writing*, ed. Annette Weissenrieder and Bernhard Cootte, WUNT 260 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 130–143; and Zimmermann, "Collective Memory," 23–44.

25 See on the close relation to fables recently Justin D. Strong, *The Fables of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke: A New Paradigm for the Study of Parables*, SCCB 5 (Paderborn: Brill, 2021); on the various overlaps between parables in different traditions see Eric Ottenheijm and Marcel Poorthuis, eds., *Parables in Changing Contexts: Essays on the Study of the Parables in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism*, JCP 35 (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

26 See Ruben Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 137.

Parables are narrational, thus they include all of the aspects of narrations that are explored by narratological studies, such as giving a structured memory of the past, reflecting on the present, and performing a vision for the future. Narrations are, in a mostly oral ancient society, to be recounted and listened to in a community. Parables are short and employ powerful images, which allows them to be memorized easily. In their style of narration (simple and enigmatic; easy to grasp the plot and stimulate the search for deeper meaning), they integrate different members of a social group, for instance, children and adults, ordinary men and women and intellectuals, masters, and slaves.

Being realistic (not fantastic) and referring to daily life experience, they mirror social reality as it is. Being fictional, they can also be critical of existing conditions and tease out counterfactual visions of how it could be. Here we see the close link to social identity theory with regard to “social change.” Parables have the power to create visions for social change, for instance with regard to justice (Matt 20:1–26) or forgiveness (Matt 18:23–35).<sup>27</sup> If we have the idea of an “imagined community” (Anderson) in mind, we see that the images that are fundamental for parables construct visions of a new and different order in social life.

The parables are metaphorical first and foremost with regard to the kingdom or realm of God, that is to say, they transfer daily life experience to the field of religious thoughts, in particular Jesus’s eschatological message. It is evident that there are many semantic areas that were obviously developed situationally from the life world of Galilee (e.g., a mustard seed). In addition, traditional motifs are taken up that are closely connected to the motif repertoire of the Jewish as well as the Greek tradition. Based on this “Bildfeldtradition” (stock metaphors) the parables also include the tradition of religious groups, in particular of Judaism, referring to well-known religious metaphors, such as shepherd, kingdom, or vineyards.

Parables are addressed to readers and listeners (appeal structure), and in their enigmatic character they serve as “discussion-starters.” “They were used to invite conversation and to lure their hearers into the process of decoding and problematizing their world.”<sup>28</sup>

The metaphorical and puzzling character of the parables does not allow them to be limited to one single meaning. This openness also allows flexible

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27 See along these lines Ernest van Eck, *The Parables of Jesus the Galilean: Stories of a Social Prophet* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016), 314: “The parables of Jesus the social prophet were about the kingdom, a ‘society’ that posed a real threat to Rome’s and the temple’s rule.”

28 William R. Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 261.

transfers to new and varied situations, as can be seen in the different contexts for the same parable, for instance, the parable of the Lost Sheep in Luke 15 (the chapter of the lost) and Matt 18 (community discourse). In this way, early Christians could reflect upon their own life in discussing parables. Thereby, the parables stimulate a creative process of reception and adaptation which again helped to form and confirm the social identity of the group.

Regarding social identity theory, the parables also fulfill the criteria of a *prototype* in a double dimension: there is a wide production of parables within the first century in early Christianity. This means that parables as a genre served as a prototype of storytelling within this community. By using the term “παραβολή” (*parabole*) and “παροιμία” (*paroimia*) to classify a certain number of texts, the evangelists demonstrate that they already had a consciousness of this genre (*Gattungsbewusstsein*). Furthermore, most of the parables in the Gospel tradition were bound to Jesus as the parable teller. Whereas miracles are also performed by the disciples and apostles, the parables are somehow exclusively linked back to Jesus as the parable teller par excellence. Thus, Jesus can be seen as the person that embodies the identity of the parable telling group. In other words: He is the group’s prototype, remembered as a, or more precisely, as “the” parable teller.

The flexible telling and reading of the parables also allow an ongoing process of reinterpretation of the group’s prototype without losing a center. Thus, the parables created a parable tradition. Put more abstractly, parables manage to include centripetal power (by being linked to Jesus) and centrifugal power (by their openness to others). Though these aspects may very well be true for all of the parables, here I would like to address, in particular, the parables of growth. This group of texts is a good sample to demonstrate the influence of parables on the social processes of their tradents. Reading against the background of social identity theory, we may understand the idea of grow as a process of growing of the group, whether in quantity (as a small group gets bigger) or metaphorically with regards to group experiences of social development and change.

### 3 Analysis of the “Parables of Growth” through the Lens of Social Identity Theories

Which parables should be included in the group of “Parables of Growth”? According to an influential article by Nils Dahl from 1952, these would be the parables of the 1) Mustard Seed (Mark 4:30–32 par.); 2) Leaven (Q/Luke 13:20–21 par.); 3) Seed Growing Secretly (Mark 4:26–29); 4) Dragnet

(Matt 13:47–50); 5) Tares (Matt 13:24–30); 6) Sower (Mark 4:1–9 parr.); and 7) Grain of Wheat (John 12:24).<sup>29</sup> Bernard Brandon Scott confirmed this selection in his article “Parables of Growth Revisited” (1981).<sup>30</sup> Perhaps somewhat surprising is the inclusion of the parables of the Leaven and the Dragnet in this set, which are not about plant growth, the latter not even of growing, but chosen for purposes of parallelism.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, there are good reasons to exclude these texts and instead focus on growing plants. Furthermore, one can ask whether one gains more secure ground by focusing on specific lexemes, such as ἀναβαίνω or αὐξάνω, which mean “grow” in their connotative semantics. However, both terms are semantically polyvalent. In addition, there are texts (such as Mark 4:26–29) that obviously describe growth with completely different words: βλαστάνω (“germinate”) and μηκύνω (“become long”).

A different way of approach could be the focus on semantic fields or *Bildfeldtraditionen* (stock metaphors). Petra von Gemünden distinguished two fundamental semantic domains that can be identified in various fields of texts (Old Testament, apocryphal texts, New Testament, etc.): 1) the “tree-fruit-Bildfeld” or 2) the “seed-growth-harvest-Bildfeld.”<sup>32</sup> If growth is integrated into a “sowing–growth–harvest” sequence, the question arises whether the harvest parables such as Q/Luke 10:2; John 4:35–38; or Luke 12:16–18 (The Rich Farmer) should not also be added.<sup>33</sup> However, even if the process of growing can be presupposed (before the harvest), it is *stricte dictu* not part of the narrative itself. Furthermore, the parable of the Dying Grain (John 12:24) demonstrates that seed and fruit can also be combined. We see, therefore, that there is no fixed group of “Parables of Growth” within the sources. Nevertheless, as interpreters, we can group some texts together due to certain criteria and for the purpose of theological interpretation.

In this regard, we notice that the parables of Growth attracted remarkable attention in the research during the last century and beyond. They also serve as

29 See Nils Alstrup Dahl, “Parables of Growth,” *ST* 5 (1952): 132–166.

30 See Bernard Brandon Scott, “Parables of Growth Revisited: Notes on the Current State of Parable Research,” *BTB* 11 (1981): 3–9.

31 See Dahl, “Parables of Growth,” 150: “The parable of the drag-net ... does not properly belong to the parables of growth, but its connection with the parable of tares makes it natural to treat it in this connection.”

32 See Petra von Gemünden, *Vegetationsmetaphorik im Neuen Testament und seiner Umwelt. Eine Bildfelduntersuchung*, *NTOA* 18 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), 50–54.

33 See on harvest parables in the rabbinic tradition and their intertextual connection to New Testament texts Eric Ottenheim, “Waiting for the Harvest: Trajectories of Rabbinic and ‘Christian’ Parables,” in *Religious Stories in Transformation: Conflict, Revision and Reception*, ed. Alberdina Houtman, Tamar Kadari, Marcel Poorthuis, and Vered Tohar, *JCP* 31 (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 314–336.

a sample to reflect the different leading theological ideas and methods in interpreting parables.<sup>34</sup> Against this background, it may also be methodologically interesting to look at the growth parables now with a new paradigm, or at least with another specific methodology, namely social identity theory.

A basic assumption is made here, namely, growth is understood as a social metaphor, i.e., it refers to group processes and not to internal phenomena such as faith of the individual or self-development. When considering the individual parables through the lens of social identity theory, we can raise the following leading question: *Do the parables of growth mirror or reflect a specific social situation?* And as subordinated questions:

- a. To which groups might the text refer (ingroup, outgroup, subgroup)?
- b. Could there be a group conflict?
- c. What might be the envisioned development, change, movement of the groups?

In the following, I will address these questions in dealing with three selected samples from different traditions, the parable of the Mustard Seed (synoptic tradition), the parable of the Weed among the Wheat (Matthew), and the parable of the Dying Grain of Wheat (John).

### 3.1 *The Parable of the Mustard Seed (Synoptic Tradition)*

The parable of the Mustard Seed can be found in different streams of tradition. In addition to the double tradition of Matthew and Luke, the parable is also found in Mark,<sup>35</sup> and in Gos. Thom. 20. This multiple attestation is one of the reasons that John P. Meier in his fifth volume of *A Marginal Jew* counted it among the so-called “happy few,” the four parables to which authenticity

34 Dodd, for instance, highlights the “realized eschatology” (Charles H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, rev. ed. [New York: Scribner, 1961], 176); Scott applied literary theories, in particular metaphorology (Scott, “Parables of Growth Revisited,” 3–9); Gerd Theissen prefers an ethical reading, see Gerd Theissen, “Der Bauer und die von selbst Frucht bringende Erde. Naiver Synergismus in Mk 4,26–29?” *ZNW* 85 (1994): 167–182. Van Eck points to the political dimension, see Van Eck, *The Parables of Jesus*, 79–83. Focussing on the self growing seed also Andreas Dettwiler, “Das Gleichnis von der selbstwachsenden Saat (Mk 4,26-29) im Licht neuerer exegetischer Ansätze,” in *Gleichnisse verstehen—im Gespräch mit Hans Weder*, ed. Jörg Frey und Esther Marie Joas, BThSt 175 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018), 67–96.

35 There are different explanations for the tradition history of this parable: Some argue for an oral tradition behind the different versions, see Harvey K. McArthur, “Parable of the Mustard Seed,” *CBQ* 33 (1971): 209 n201; others for different stages of a literal development, see, for instance, Ivor H. Jones, *The Matthean Parables: A Literary and Historical Commentary*, NovTSup 80 (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 322–328.

with regard to the historical Jesus can be attributed with some confidence.<sup>36</sup> Following the “memory approach,” I am not interested in vague reconstructions of the so-called historical Jesus.<sup>37</sup> Instead, I will focus on the synoptic tradition as varying forms of the parable of the *remembered* Jesus.

I do believe that there was as sayings source Q, which includes this very parable due to the verbatim overlaps between Matthew and Luke. According to our Mainz Approach, which seeks to work with the Q-hypothesis without reconstructing the wording of Q,<sup>38</sup> I will refrain from presenting a Q-version of the text. Instead, I will give attention to the different synoptic versions, dealing with strong overlaps next to remarkable variations.

Though there are some differences in the various sources,<sup>39</sup> the basic plot demonstrates a solid coherency in all of them: the mustard seed is sown into the ground, it grows up, becomes an adult plant (tree/shrub), and the birds of heaven come and make nests. The texts follow a parallel structure that draws attention to the places where they diverge:<sup>40</sup> the mustard seed is—following Mark—“the smallest of all the seeds on the earth” (μικρότερον ὄν πάντων τῶν σπερμάτων) and will become “the greatest of all shrubs” (μείζον πάντων τῶν λαχάνων). The addition of πᾶς turns the comparative into a superlative: that which is smaller than “all” is the smallest and that which is greater than “all” is the greatest. Thus, the central contrast is that of the extreme smallness of the mustard seed to the extreme greatness of the mustard shrub. Both parts are then described even more precisely. Though the superlatives are missing in the double tradition (Q), the contrast between the seed and the tree is still evident.<sup>41</sup>

Anyone in first-century Palestine from a rural society is familiar with mustard. This applies equally to the postulated first hearers of the parable in Israel because black mustard (*brassica nigra*) occurs quite commonly in Galilee. Thus, even a child should know that a mustard seed is very small and that it grows into a very large bush. This experience from daily life is then used to

36 John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 5, *Probing the Authenticity of the Parables* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 230–240. According to Meier “the parable also meets the criterion of coherence” (239).

37 See my argument addressing Meier in Ruben Zimmermann, “Memory and Jesus’ Parables. J.P. Meier’s Explosion and the Restoration of the ‘Bedrock’ Of Jesus’ Speech,” *JSHJ* 16 (2018): 156–172.

38 See for details Roth, *Parables in Q*, 39–44.

39 See for details to the following Ruben Zimmermann, “Parables in Matthew: Tradition, Interpretation and Function in the Gospel,” in *Early Reader of Mark and Q*, ed. Gilbert van Belle and Joseph Verheyden, *BTS* 21 (Leuven: Peeters, 2016), 169–171.

40 See on the following, Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables*, 241.

41 See Roth, *Parables in Q*, 301.



teach a theological lesson. It is in this lesson that we find a surprising turn in a two-fold way:

Usually, the religious language of the tradition makes use of the logical consistency of seed, growth, and harvest in order to indicate the consequences of human behaviour or even to point to the eschatological judgement. Therefore, nature comparisons are often made in an ethical context.<sup>42</sup> One will reap that which one sows (Gal 6:7; 2 Cor 9:6). Whoever sows a small amount, will reap a small amount. However, the message in Mark 4:30–33 is the complete opposite: even though the seed that is sown is small, the harvest will be great! Of course, there is no mention of a harvest in Mark 4:30–32. But it is no less surprising to discover the result of sowing this mustard seed: a tree (following the double tradition).<sup>43</sup> The black mustard grows up to a huge shrub (2–3 metres),<sup>44</sup> however, a large shrub is not a tree. The second surprise of the parable is that the final goal is not realized in the growth of the plant. Instead, the goal is that the mustard shrub/tree becomes a habitat for others. The mustard shrub or tree offers space to “live” in and shade in which to nest, in particular for the birds of heaven.

Let me turn to social identity aspects in particular: which groups are imaged with such a text? The smallness of the seed does not refer to a powerful group, which is dominant in society or religion. The small seed, transferred to a group, takes up the experience of an unimportant, marginalized group. We might also think about the plant itself, which serves as a donor field for the image. Mustard is an ordinary plant, without symbolic meaning in Jewish tradition (different from, for instance, an olive tree, vine, or cedar). Having the Q-community in mind, it is not only the small numbers, but the experience of being rejected in the context of their missionary work. Thus, the parable tells a story for a small and marginalized community that should be encouraged by the extraordinary and fast growth of the mustard.

In the second part of the parables, new characters have been introduced. “Birds” come and “live” in the large branches rather than simply perching on them. Matthew reads that “the birds of heaven come and make nests in its branches” (Matt 13:32). In Mark 4:32, the nests are built in (beneath) the shade (ὕπὸ τὴν σκιάν αὐτοῦ). Obviously the “birds” are not referring simply to the same little group, who has identified with the seed. The mustard shrub becomes

42 See, for instance, Matt 6:34 (Tree and Fruits).

43 Markus Tiwald, *Kommentar zur Logienquelle* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2019), 141: “Auch wenn die Anfänge bescheiden sind (kleines Senfkorn, kleines Stück Sauerteig), so wird dennoch die Wirkung unaufhaltsam und groß sein.”

44 See Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables*, 245–247.

a centre of attraction for others. It invites others to spend time in its shade, thus removing the dynamics of time. The explicitly formulated “living” is not something that takes place quickly in the same way as growing. Regarding the Q-group, we might conclude that a residential community grows up in the shade of the “kingdom community” envisioned by wandering radicals. This would fit the recent ideas of Giovanni Bazzana, who thinks that village scribes are the authors of the Q-document.<sup>45</sup> The kingdom of God provides space for a new social community.<sup>46</sup>

A different interpretation occurs when taking a closer look at the *Bildfeldtradition*. This different community can, at the very least, break through traditional “borders.” This is because “birds” were used as a symbol for gentiles in the Jewish exegetical tradition,<sup>47</sup> and the background of the tradition (see below) also explicitly links eschatological dimensions (animals experiencing peace; the motif of pilgrimage) to living in the shade. Does the parable also bring in a missionary concept?<sup>48</sup> I think it might be important that in the Q-version of the parable, the Sower does not play an important role and in Mark, there is no sower mentioned at all. Furthermore, in Mark, this parable follows the parable of the Seed Growing Secretly. Thus, I think there might be a vision of a large, attractive community, but no appeal to realize this through one’s own activities, e.g., mission workers. Within the Markan context, however, the birds representing the gentiles began to nest in the shadow of this Galilean bush. Having the in-out separation set in Mark 4:11–12 in mind, the still weak ingroup

45 See Giovanni Battista Bazzana, *Kingdom of Bureaucracy: The Political Theology of Village Scribes in the Sayings Source Q*, BETHL 274 (Leuven: Peeters, 2015).

46 In the Q parable, Cotter looks at the Q-group that must be strengthened in view of the hostilities during the mission. See Wendy Cotter, “The Parables of the Mustard Seed and the Leaven: Their Function in the Earliest Stratum of Q” *TJT* 8 (1992): 45–48. That is also often the interpretation of Matt 13:31–32; e.g., Paul Zingg, *Das Wachsen der Kirche: Beiträge zur Frage der lukanischen Redaktion und Theologie*, OBO 3 (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1974), 106–107.

47 See 1 En. 90:30, 33, 37; Midr. Ps. 104:10, to that Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 27 (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 324: “These intertextual linkages suggest that the birds in our parable may symbolize Gentiles” (331). For Snodgrass these readings are allegorical interpretations: “None of this has much basis.” (Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018], 223).

48 Thus, for example, an almost missionary-ecclesiastic interpretation in Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 2nd ed (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 395: “the tiny seed has grown into a remarkably large mustard bush, but to this day it is no majestic cedar tree ... God is still planting seeds around the world” (395). Referring to Peter Jones, he warns of a “too numerous” or “powerful” church: “Respect the infinitude of the little. Obsession with size is obscene.”

should be encouraged by the image of this parable to settle in the new location and grow in faith and strength.

We may explore one more idea with regard to social identity that becomes most apparent in the Matthean version of the parable: the group imagined in this parable can also be interpreted as an ingroup that may face oppression from a powerful outgroup associated with imperial power. The expression “birds of the heavens” (τὰ πετεινὰ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ) is an established saying from the Jewish apocalyptic tradition. The nesting of birds of the heavens in the branches or in the shade goes back to a group of motifs that appears frequently in Old Testament texts: Dan 4:7–9, 11:18–19 (LXX)/Dan 4:10–12, 14, 21–22 (Theodotion); Ezek 17:22–24 and Ezek 31:6.<sup>49</sup> To cite one example:

Thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar; I will set it out. ... On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it, in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar. Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind.<sup>24</sup> All the trees of the field shall know that I am the LORD. I bring low the high tree, I make high the low tree.

Ezek 17:22–24 NRSV

The earlier Old Testament and stock metaphors can be found in a political setting.<sup>50</sup> The tree represents kingdoms, but only after the felling of the old tree (reign, kingdom) will a new beginning be possible in that a new tree will grow in which *all* birds can live. Warren Carter used these political undertones in particular for his anti-imperial interpretation of Matt 13:31f.<sup>51</sup> According to Carter, the trees mentioned in the Jewish traditions “symbolize the power and rule of nations and their kings, sometimes sanctioned by God and sometimes

49 There are later references to this motif in 2 Bar 36:39–40 (with reference to Ezek 17) and in 1 En. 90:30–33 (here particularly the eschatological collection of animals and birds but without the motif of the tree); 1QH 14:14–16; 16:4–9; the Qumran texts are fully quoted in Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 217.

50 Dan 4:7–9, 11:18f.; Ezek 17:22–24 and Ezek 31:6 (see also 1QH<sup>a</sup> 16:4–9) all speak of the image of a tree and the birds living in its boughs. In each case, the interpretation is a king and his reign. In Dan 4:1–34, it is the Babylonian king, in Ezek 17:1–24, the king of Israel and in Ezek 31:1–18, the Pharaoh, see for details Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables*, 247–251.

51 See Warren Carter, “Mustard Seed,” 198. Robert Funk also reads the parable against the OT kingdom symbolism, see Robert Funk, “The Looking-Glass Tree Is for the Birds,” *Int* 27 (1973): 3–9. Ernest van Eck, on the contrary, although arguing for a political reading, denies any allusion to these Old Testament traditions (Van Eck, “When Kingdoms Are Kingdoms No More: A Social-Scientific Reading of the Mustard Seed (Lk 13:18–19),” *ActT* 33 [2013]: 242; Van Eck, *Parables*, 80), in order to avoid any eschatological reading of the parable.

strongly opposed by God.” Along the line of this interpretation, the “kingship of God” envisioned by the parable of the Mustard Seed can be seen in sharp contrast to the “kingdom of the Romans.” Following the Jewish traditions, however, all the trees/empires are subjected to God’s sovereignty.

Thus, the parable of the Mustard Seed could also be read as a parable of political protest.<sup>52</sup> It imagines an alternate world—a new kingdom that is opposite to the Romans, grown out of a little mustard seed. Does this vision also want to encourage the addresses to revolt against the dominant group? I do not find strong signals in that direction, but at least the imagined community is contrafactual to the existing dominant group.

### 3.2 *On the Parable of the Weeds among the Wheat (Matt 13:24–30)*

The parable of the Weeds among the Wheat has always been read with social groups in view, in particular the Matthean community. Matthew is the Evangelist who reflects a concept of community with the term *ἐκκλησία*. The problem with the weeds can be transferred to a conflict of different groups or subgroups on the level of imagery explicitly noted by the slaves. The slaves observe that there is something wrong with the homogeneity of the wheat: “Where, did these weeds come from?” (Matt 13:27).

The basic questions on social identity about this parable can be linked easily to the tradition of interpretation of the parable. Here a “universalist interpretation” contrasts with an “ecclesiastical” one.<sup>53</sup> Against the background of social identity theory we may also ask: Does the parable point to an ingroup–outgroup conflict (universalist) or an intragroup conflict (ecclesiastical)? Or more precisely: does the parable want the reader to imagine an intra-group conflict or an ingroup–outgroup conflict to stimulate the process of forming identity?

#### 3.2.1 The Matthean Community as Corpus Permixtum: Is There an Intra-group Conflict?

The Matthean community is classified as a “corpus permixtum” and there are some texts that draw on evaluative distinctions being made within this

52 See along this line also the interpretation and sermon by Sigrid Lampe-Densky, “Die größere Hoffnung—Gleichnis vom Senfkorn—Markus 4,30–32,” in *Gott ist anders: Gleichnisse neu gelesen auf der Basis der Auslegung von Luise Schottroff*, ed. Marlene Crüsemann, Claudia Janssen, and Ulrike Metternich (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2014), 202–210.

53 See these terms for the differentiation Robert K. McIver, “The Parable of the Weeds among the Wheat (Matt 13:24–30, 36–43) and the Relationship between the Kingdom and the Church as Portrayed in the Gospel of Matthew,” *JBL* 114 (1995): 644–653.

community, e.g., the dragnet catch with good and bad fish (Matt 13:47–50), the guest without the proper garments at the wedding feast (Matt 22:1–14), and the foolish and the wise virgins (Matt 25:1–11).

A strong argument for this reading is the type of the weeds. The ζιζάνια is most probably *Lolium temulentum* (rye grass), which is indistinguishable from the wheat for a lengthy period of its growth. Following Von Gemünden, weeds are not among the well-known stock metaphors used for the gentiles in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>54</sup> If one wanted to draw attention to the wicked and sinners (representing an outgroup) within wheat production, “chaff” (Ps 1) or “stubble” (Isa 47:14) would have been used. That means the weeds can be understood as referring to people from the ingroup. Also, the other images of judgment in the Gospel of Matthew are, above all, to admonish the congregation, which is to be shaken and woken up out of its inactivity and false security by all cognitive and emotional means.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, the question from the slaves in Matt 13:28, “Then do you want us to go and gather them?” might be transferred to in-group authorities, who discipline community members, rather than to the outgroup, over whom they would not have power or influence. This argument is linked to a wide use of “slave” in Matthew as a model for members of the community. In the history of scholarship, Bultmann already pointed out that the parable criticizes people who engage in the “church discipline” (*Kirchenzucht*) of others.<sup>56</sup> More recently, Müller also advocated the ecclesiastical interpretation: “Das auf Erden gegenwärtige Reich Gottes enthält nicht nur Weizen, sondern auch Taumellolch, d.h. Menschen, die trotz ihrer Zugehörigkeit zur Gemeinde in ihrem Leben nicht die geschenkte Gerechtigkeit in gute Werke umsetzen.”<sup>57</sup> For Müller, the parable explicitly argues against a subgroup in the congregation that is allowed to exercise authority over others. According to Müller, this contradicts not only the church rules of Matt 18, but also the interpretation of the parable in Matt 13:36–43, in which the slaves are explicitly interpreted as the angels of the Son of Man, i.e., a heavenly outgroup. In contrast, the purpose of the parable is to explain the passivity of the Son of Man, which is ultimately

54 See Petra von Gemünden, “Ausreißen oder wachsen lassen? (Vom Unkraut unter dem Weizen) Mt 13,24–30.36–43 (EvThom 57),” in *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu*, ed. Ruben Zimmermann et al., 2nd ed. (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2015), 408.

55 See on emotions and ethics in parables: Tanja Dannenmann, *Emotion, Narration und Ethik. Zur ethischen Relevanz antizipatorischer Emotionen in Parabeln des Matthäus-Evangelium*, WUNT 2/498 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019).

56 See Rudolf, Bultmann, *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition*, 10th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995), 203.

57 Mogens Müller, “Die Zeit der Kirche als die Zeit göttlicher Langmut. Der Taumellolch im Weizenfeld und seine Deutung (Mt 13,24–30.36–43),” *ZNW* 109 (2018): 289.

an indication of God's patience.<sup>58</sup> It encourages the community member also to be patient with some group members who do not bear fruit. Although Müller has taken over the interpretation of the slaves from Matthew's allegorical interpretation, he ignores other fixations of meaning from there. This leads me to the second pattern of interpretation: an ingroup–outgroup conflict.

### 3.2.2 The Matthean Community in a Political Setting: Is There an Ingroup–Outgroup Conflict?

In the subsequent teaching of the disciples, Jesus explains that “the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil” (Matt 13:38–39). So, the field is not identified with the congregation, but with the world, which points to the universalist interpretation. “Children of the kingdom” and “children of evil” make an ingroup–outgroup conflict visible to the eye of the recipient. The Son of Man faces the “diabolos” (devil).

Such an interpretation fits into the prophetic-apocalyptic tradition of the kingdom concept. It could also easily be connected with the mission strategy of Matthew, who seems to be oriented towards the gentile mission. One sees this, for example, in his inclusion of pagan women in the genealogy of Jesus at the outset of his Gospel (Matt 1) and concluding his Gospel with the Great Commission (Matt 28). While it is difficult to really discover a mission instruction for the gentiles in this parable, the universalistic interpretation can be combined with a different sociological interpretation:

As already mentioned in the interpretation of the Mustard Seed, Carter and others have placed the Gospel of Matthew in an anti-imperial conflict with the Roman Empire.<sup>59</sup> The wheat and the children of the kingdom imagine themselves as an ingroup in a far superior outgroup. The question of the slaves seems ridiculous in this scenario. The feelings of inferiority cannot be solved here by their own activities, by competition, or by group transformation. Instead, this sense of inferiority becomes bearable in view of the last judgement of the Son of Man in which final salvation takes place. The defeated ingroup now has to endure the poisonous *Lolium* in order not to get lost in the end, even when rebelling.

58 Müller, “Zeit der Kirche,” 293: “Es geht in diesem Gleichnis schlichtweg nicht um Kirchengründung, sondern darum, eine Erklärung zu geben für die augenscheinlich beängstigende Passivität des erhöhten Menschensohnes Jesus gegenüber bösen Elementen in seiner Gemeinde.”

59 See Warren Carter, *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 2001).

In both interpretations, social identity construction can be combined with text observation. It turns out that the method alone does not lead to unambiguous results, but leads to divergent interpretations depending on weighting context reference and sociological framework models.

### 3.3 *On the Parable of the Dying Grain of Wheat (John 12:24)*

I turn finally to the parable of the Dying Grain in John 12:24. Interestingly, both Dahl and Scott included John 12:24 in their list of “Parables of Growth” without further explication, though it is widely disputed among scholars that there are parables in the Fourth Gospel. I myself have argued elsewhere that the Gospel of John should be included in parable research.<sup>60</sup> In our *Kompendium* we listed eighteen texts that can be classified as parables according to the criteria mentioned above.<sup>61</sup>

The brief narration in John 12:24 does not recount specifically the process of growing. This narrational gap can and must be added by the reader, there will be no fruit without the process of growing. Instead, it is emphasized that the grain bears fruit only if it dies. Within ancient agricultural knowledge, this must not be read metaphorically, but rather literally. Thus, the grain does not just sleep in the earth in order to reawaken at some point to new life. In ancient times (according to Greek and Jewish sources)<sup>62</sup> it was assumed that the grain rotted and died and then swelled again with new life.

Within the context of John 12, the dying of the grain points to the dying of Jesus, which is explained as glorification and being lifted up. Therefore, it can hardly be denied that John 12:24 can be interpreted Christologically in the context of John 12 with special focus on Jesus’s death.<sup>63</sup> The dying of the grain, however, is also not the final point of the development. It serves the fruit. This opens up the horizon of interpretation toward social dimensions. Which groups might be imagined and/or addressed?

In the narrower context, the abundant fruit of the grain of wheat corresponds with Jesus’s statement, that he will draw “all people” to himself (John 12:32)

60 See Ruben Zimmermann, “Are there Parables in John? It Is Time to Revisit the Question,” *JSHJ* 9 (2011): 243–276.

61 See Ruben Zimmermann et al., *Kompendium der Gleichnisse*, 2nd ed. (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2015), 709.

62 Epictetus states that the seed “is buried” (*καταρυγῆναι*; Epictetus, *Diatr.* 4.8.36), and according to a Plutarch fragment in Proclus’s *Commentary on Hesiod’s Opera*, the grain must (*δεῖ*) be buried in the earth (*κρυφθῆναι*) and must rot (*σαπῆναι*), “so that a single (*ἕξ ἐνός*) grain of wheat or barley may perhaps become a large amount (*πληθὺς*).” (*In Hes.* 104). See m. Kil. 2:3; m. Hal. 1:1; t. Kil. 1:16, according to Gustaf Dalman, *Arbeit und Sitte in Palästina*, vol. 2, *Der Ackerbau* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1932), 305.

63 See Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables*, 352–354.

when he is lifted up from the earth. Who are those “all people” connected with the fruit metaphor? Is this a universal statement that Jesus’s death is addressed to all people on earth, in other words: there will be no subgroups any more with regard to faith in Jesus? Or does the text address different groups that can be unified through Jesus’s death? Which subgroups in particular might be imagined to be integrated according to John 12?

To answer these questions, it will be helpful first to briefly reconsider the use of the fruit metaphor elsewhere in the Gospel. One finds that there is a close and even linguistic connection to the parable of the Vine and the Branches (John 15:1–8, 16) in which the formulation καρπὸν πολὺν φέρειν, “bear much fruit” (John 15:5, cf. John 12:24c) is also used. Furthermore, in John 15, the statement of laying down of one’s life (John 15:13) creates a close connection to John 12:24f. The harvest parable in John 4:35–38 (in particular v. 36) also speaks of fruit in a missionary context.<sup>64</sup> Correspondingly, one can conclude that the fruit metaphor in John is related to both, to the death of Jesus as well as to mission. Can we conclude from this that Jesus’s death realizes its goal not only in the re-constitution of the community of disciples, but also in the missionary endeavour?<sup>65</sup>

But to which group of people does the mission apply in particular? To whom is the message directed? Let us look at the extended contextual narrative framework of the parable of the Grain of Wheat. The narrative unit begins with John 12:20, referring to the “Greeks” (Ἕλληνες) who had gone to Jerusalem to worship at the Passover festival. These Greeks, or—on the level of the narrative world—God-fearing gentiles (see John 7:35) want “to see” Jesus (12:21). This is communicated to Jesus by Philip and Andrew, two disciples with Greek names (John 12:21f). Without responding to this request, Jesus gives a speech (John 12:23–32) that is only briefly interrupted by the voice from heaven (John 12:28b, 29). At the heart of this speech is the parable of the Dying Grain

64 See for details Ruben Zimmermann, “Shared Labor—Twice the Joy! The Harvest Parable in John 4:35–38” in *Breaking New Ground in John*, ed. Ruben Zimmermann, WUNT (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, forthcoming), see also R. Alan Culpepper, “John 4:35–38. Harvest Proverbs in the Context of John’s Mission Theology,” in *Expressions of the Johannine Kerygma in John 2:23–5:18: Historical, Literary, and Theological Readings from the Colloquium Ioanneum 2017 in Jerusalem*, ed. R. Alan Culpepper and Jörg Frey, WUNT 423 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 199–218.

65 See Rodríguez M. Ruiz, *Der Missionsgedanke im Johannesevangelium: Ein Beitrag zur johanneischen Soteriologie und Ekklesiologie*, FB 55 (Würzburg: Echter, 1987), 189–190; also Jörg Frey, “Heiden—Griechen—Gotteskinder: Zu Gestalt und Funktion der Rede von den Heiden im 4. Evangelium,” in *Die Heiden: Juden, Christen und das Problem des Fremden*, ed. Reinhard Feldmeier und Ulrich Heckel, WUNT 70 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1994), 260.



of Wheat, which is, at least indirectly, directed at the Greeks who were introduced previously.

For John, the explicit mention of the Greeks is certainly not a coincidence. On the level of the narrative world, Greeks are the “representatives of the κόσμος in as far as he comes to belief in God, representatives of the world of Gentiles coming to belief.”<sup>66</sup> The parable itself can also be related to the Greek world. The grain of wheat directly picks up on a central symbol of the mystery cults. A connection may be present in the explicitly formulated desire to “see” Jesus because the mystery cults are, in a certain sense, a visual performance. For example, the climax of the liturgy is seeing Persephone, which turns the “mystai” into “epoptes” (overseers).<sup>67</sup> The actual seeing at the level of the narrated world is denied to them; however, after Jesus’s death, in the time of the Gospel writing (maybe located in Ephesus), the Greek world, or more precisely the gentiles are directly addressed. For Ebner, John 12:24–26 “is formulated as a spiritual offering in particular for anyone who is open to mystery cults.”<sup>68</sup>

According to John 7:35—formulated with Johannine irony—it was, of all people, the uncomprehending people of Jerusalem who announced Jesus’s future impact in the gentile world.<sup>69</sup> Even though the scene in John 12:20–36 does not involve a direct meeting, there is indeed an indirect one. And that might be precisely the intention of the pericope and more generally the social dimension of the missional strategy of the Fourth Gospel. There is not one single group responsible for the proclamation of the Gospel. The passing of the message from one disciple to the next, from one group to another, which strikes the reader as strange, corresponds closely to the Johannine narrative mode of appeal to the disciples from the beginning (see John 1:35–51).

Turning back to John 12:24, the parable of the Grain of Wheat points explicitly to the fruit as a final result of germination and growth. The parable works on a time-lapse principle as there is actually a considerable amount of time between the dying of the grain and the bearing of fruit. If one interprets the context accordingly, the present time is a time that should be filled with the disciples’ mission to win the people in the gentile world. On the level of gospel

66 Frey, “Heiden,” 255; differently Jonathan Draper, “Holy Seed and the Return of the Diaspora in John 12:24,” *Neot* 34 (2000): 347–359, who, with a targumic reading of Isa 6:13, has Diaspora Jews in view.

67 Marion Giebel, “Weizenkorn und Weinstock: Todesüberwindung in antiken Mysterienkulten,” *JBTh* 19 (2004): 250.

68 Martin Ebner, “Überwindung eines ‚tödlichen‘ Lebens: Paradoxien zu Leben und Tod in den Jesusüberlieferungen,” *JBTh* 19 (2004): 95.

69 Frey, “Heiden,” 251–253; Johannes Beutler, “Greeks Come to See Jesus (John 20:20f.),” *Bib* 71 (1990): 333–347.

communication, the Christ image of the “dying grain of wheat” is thus part of the communicative strategy to envision a community in which the message is delivered from one group to another. Furthermore, the groups deemed Jewish and Greek by tradition can be unified when Jesus draws “all people” to him to be one single group of Christ-believers. With regard to social identity theory, this movement reflects social mobility. The former Jewish ingroup should learn that Greek people are also part of the Christ community and should be integrated. It is exactly Jesus’s death that enables this process of integration to be linked to the more recent group experiences of the Johannine community. There was some kind of expulsion from the synagogue (John 12:42; 16:2) that was certainly a painful experience and disturbing for the believers. The parable of the Dying Grain also reflects a painful and with regard to Jesus even deathly experience that, despite appearances, has a good outcome. Telling and retelling the parable, therefore, leads to the stabilization of the community in an unstable and changing social situation.

#### 4 Conclusion

What is the yield of a social identity approach to the interpretation of growth parables? When growth processes are transferred to group processes, facets of the texts are undoubtedly brought to light that otherwise cannot be seen so clearly. The parable of the Mustard Seed (Mark 4:30–31 par.) encourages a marginalized group with the vision of a large, attractive community. The ingroup (identified with the seed and the bush/tree) is related to a different group (represented by the birds) that is attracted to nest in the shadow/on its branches. In the Matthean version, the stock metaphor of the tree also opens up the horizon toward the hostile outgroup of the Roman Empire. It, therefore, fulfills a stabilising function of the ingroup in an endangered world. The parable of the Weeds among the Wheat (Matt 13:24–30) can also be read along these lines. In particular, the allegorical interpretation in Matt 13:36–43 draws attention to the hostile situation that can easily be linked to a conflict with the Roman Empire. The ingroup would not be able to resist this superior outgroup but finds within the parable a cognitive reinterpretation of its difficult situation by turning to the final judgment. Therefore, the parable helps to establish group distinctiveness instead of helplessness when faced with a superior power. However, the parable can also be interpreted as reflecting an intragroup conflict within the Matthean community. In the setting with other texts in Matthew’s Gospel, the community consists of different groups (*corpus permixtum*) that should be accepted, at least for the moment. The addressed

group should not make hasty separation actions but is called to tolerance and patience towards those who are different.

Within the last sample, the parable of the Dying Grain (John 12:24), the fruit metaphor is linked to missionary activities within the frame of the Gospel. The narrow context of chapter 12 as well as the grain symbolism allows us to imagine a group of Greek believers who will be integrated through Jesus's death. The remarkably close connection between death and fruit seems to be a cognitive offer also to reinterpret the current experience of the Johannine Community. The addressees of the Gospel are also experiencing a difficult time of repression. Thus, the parable helps to shape and stabilize group identity within the experience of painful changing circumstances. Despite appearances, the final outcome will be good, as demonstrated with the fruit of the grain.

At the same time, the interpretation of these parables through the lens of social identity theory demonstrates that the parable alone might not be sufficient to reach these conclusions. If one wants to locate a deeper historical grounding, e.g., concerning the Q-community or the Matthean and Johannine community, one has to employ hypotheses of the social situation of these communities. In most of the cases, such information cannot be derived from the parable texts themselves, but only from the macro-text and historical-sociological constructions about their contextual setting. Such interconnected hypotheses have their own persuasive power but they are always subject to the hermeneutical suspicion that certain ideas and theories gain the upper hand over the text itself.

The commitment to polyvalent interpretation<sup>70</sup> makes it easy to use social identity theory as a beneficial method for understanding parables. It must not claim to be a meta-method. Parables are metaphorical texts that cannot be transformed into propositions. They already have manifold meanings due to their figurative way of speaking and, therefore, applying manifold methods will be most appropriate to their form. As diverse as the results of polyvalent methods are, so also are the results of social identity theories, as we have seen, for example, in the retelling of the Mustard Seed in different contexts. One need not protest against this openness. It is one of the powers of the parable genre. It is this openness that ultimately leads to surprising growth and manifold fruit in reading these texts.

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<sup>70</sup> See Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables*, 163–174.

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# Host and Guests: Some Features of the Eschatological Banquet in Rabbinic Parables and Gospels

*Reuven Kiperwasser*

In this article, I examine several rather late rabbinic parables (Midr. Ps. 4:11 and 25:9) and aim to show that their exegetical context is secondary to an ancient prototype that pre-existed their current exegetical context. I suggest a possible original context for this type of parable (“Dogs and Guests”) and propose that these parables go back to eschatological speculations of the first centuries, shared by the parables in the Gospels. I aim to explore the contours of the hypothetical prototype of a parable.<sup>1</sup> Besides typical *Traditionsgeschichte* inquiry, this article also aims to shed light on the genesis of the literary form known as the parable.

## 1 Methodological Remarks

In the study of ancient texts, there are two basic trajectories: diachronic and synchronic. One uses extant sources to posit the necessity of discovering the missing origins of the text; the other deliberately avoids the assumption that, in addition to the existing story, there were once additional sources, attributing self-sufficiency to the extant sources in seeking to understand their transformation. These trends are not mutually exclusive.<sup>2</sup> Even a reader who prefers

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1 Two different drafts of this article were read on two occasions: 1) International Parable Seminar: “The Parable in Early Christian and Rabbinic Sources: Form, Content and Theological Significance” at the Schechter Institute in Jerusalem in May 2018; and 2) International Conference: “The Power of Parables: Narrating Religion in Late Antiquity” at Utrecht University in June 2019. I am grateful to all the participants for their insightful questions and comments. I wish to express special thanks to Ruben Zimmermann and Justin Strong, whose comments were incorporated into my argumentation in this article. The responsibility for what is written remains entirely mine.

2 There is no need to prefer one over another; see and compare: Eric Ottenheim and Marcel Poorthuis, “Parables in Changing Contexts: a Preliminary Status Questions,” in *Parables in Changing Context: Essays on the Study of Parables in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism*, ed. Eric Ottenheim and Marcel Poorthuis, JCP 35 (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 5–6.

to view every parable as a unique realization of metaphors and motifs<sup>3</sup> cannot be completely uninterested in the parable's previous life, particularly taking into account that such metaphors and motifs probably once served a variety of theological discourses. In a multi-voiced chorus of sources, however, the assumption that there had once been a now-absent additional participant makes sense only when it can properly explain the roughness of the literary integrity of the ancient text.

In my article entitled "A Bizarre Invitation," I discussed a specific subset of rabbinic "king parables,"<sup>4</sup> namely parables of a king who invites commoners to a banquet but with secret strings attached. This article claimed that rabbinic parables originated in folk-rhetorical contexts, which were then adapted to serve as exegetical hermeneutic tools based on a particular local exegetical interest.<sup>5</sup> This contribution continues my previous attempt to read the rabbinic royal banquet parables in comparison with New Testament parables, including one from Matthew. The plots of these rabbinic parables were shaped by the realities of daily life in the Mediterranean home, its everyday customs, and the relations between hosts and guests, which were typical of symposia. The prototype of the parables can be isolated from one particular story in the Synoptic Gospels, which appears in both Matt 15:21–28 and Mark 7:24–29. In this story, whose plot invites analysis and reconstruction of a common nucleus, the narrator alludes to a hypothetical prototype of the Dogs and Guests parable. I wish to reconstruct the proto-parable that preceded its existing literary metamorphosis and, thus, to reflect on the evolution of the parable as a literary form. My approach avoids the assumption that all details in the parable serve either rhetorical or exegetical goals. As I have proposed in previous articles,<sup>6</sup> sometimes these details are present because they became over time, as the parable journeyed through subsequent stages of transmission, a significant

3 See Ottenheijm and Poorthuis, "Parables in Changing Contexts," 6.

4 Still there is a place to mention a pioneering work of Ignaz Ziegler, *Die Königsleichnisse des Midrasch beleuchtet durch die römische Kaiserzeit* (Breslau: Schottländer, 1903). The theme has been discussed in more recent works; see Yonah Frenkel, *Darkhei ha'aggadah vehamidrash*, 2 vols. (Givatayim: Yad Latalmud, 1991), 1:323–393; and David Stern, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 19–24. The work of Ziegler was revised and taken further by Alan Appelbaum, *The Rabbis' King-Parables: Midrash from the Third-Century Roman Empire*, Jc 7 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2010).

5 See Reuven Kiperwasser, "A Bizarre Invitation to the King's Banquet: The Metamorphosis of a Parable Tradition and the Transformation of an Eschatological Idea," *Prooftexts* 33 (2014): 147–181.

6 See Kiperwasser, "A Bizarre Invitation," 147–181. See also Reuven Kiperwasser, "Facing Omnipotence and Shaping the Skeptical Topos," in *Expressions of Skeptical Topoi in (Late) Antique Judaism*, ed. Reuven Kiperwasser and Geoffrey Herman, STIS 12 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), 101–123.

motif.<sup>7</sup> My modest contribution to the study of parables is in correcting the tendency to consider the parable as a hyper-meaningful text. Some of the parable's details, I suggest, are not intentional but accidental. Or, more precisely, their intention belongs to some previous stage of their literary metamorphosis.

Parables, as figurative narrative texts, were part of the toolkit of the oral memory cultures of early Christianity and rabbinic Judaism.<sup>8</sup> Moving from one stage of transmission to another, they often migrated to a new literary context, while retaining elements that were relevant in the old context but alien to the new one. Thus, dealing with parable genres in the New Testament, Ruben Zimmermann views parables as “media of collective memory” and “forms of re-use” that “codetermine the memory process productively and constructively.”<sup>9</sup> The parables “influenced the collective memory of early Christianity and thus became definitive and identity-giving media of memory.”<sup>10</sup> As they are memorized, parables both preserve and create tradition.<sup>11</sup> Each parable text is “a form of literary memory of the social roots of the Jesus movement.”<sup>12</sup> Zimmermann, therefore, is not interested in discovering the authentic core of any particular parable, but rather in exploring the variation of parable forms as these have been deposited in Christian memory.<sup>13</sup>

David Stern, describing the rich plots of the king parable traditions in rabbinic literature, noticed two opposite impressions that a careful reader would receive: “On the one hand, the vast majority of *meshalim* [parables] resemble one another. ... On the other hand, as the reader will also notice, nearly every *mashal* ... is also a singular composition, appearing as though it had been created specifically for the verse it explicates.”<sup>14</sup> Stern came to similar conclusions—albeit in much broader strokes—about the rabbinic parables, concluding that “the actual history of any given *mashal* is impossible to trace.”<sup>15</sup> Taking into consideration these methodological restrictions, I nevertheless will try to trace, if not the exact history of a particular parable-tradition,<sup>16</sup> then at least the history of a particular unity of the parable genre, the parable of the strange royal banquet and its eschatological reflections.

7 See Kiperwasser, “A Bizarre Invitation,” 169–170.

8 Regarding New Testament parables, see, for example, Ruben Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables of Jesus: Methods and Interpretations* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 83–93. Regarding rabbinic parables, see Stern, *Parables in Midrash*, 34–37.

9 See Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables*, 88–89.

10 Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables*, 80.

11 Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables*, 90.

12 Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables*, 93 and 90.

13 Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables*, 80.

14 See Stern, *Parables in Midrash*, 35.

15 See Stern, *Parables in Midrash*, 36.

16 The exact history is, of course, not impossible, but nonetheless rather difficult to trace.

## 2 Host, Dogs, and Guests in Midrash on Psalms

“You put joy into my heart when their grain and wine show increase.” (Ps 4:8)

Israel says: “Because the nations of the world have kept only seven laws, You have enriched them with the good things of this world as a reward: how many more good things will You lavish in the world-to-come upon us who are charged with the keeping of six hundred and thirteen laws! Therefore, we rejoice when we behold the prosperity of the nations of the world. As it is told: You put joy into my heart when their grain and wine show increase.”

Ps. 4:8

R. Joshua ben Levi told a parable of a king who prepared a banquet, assembled the guests, and seated them at the gate of his palace. When the guests saw dogs coming out with pheasants, heads of fat birds and calves, in their mouths, the guests began to say, “If the dogs fare so well, how much more abundant will our banquet be!” According to Scripture, the nations of the world are like the dogs, for it is said Yea, they are greedy dogs which can never have enough (Isa. 56:11). Hence it is said You put joy into my heart (when their grain and wine show increase).

Midr. Ps. 4:8<sup>17</sup>

“נתתה שמחה בלבי מעת דגנם ותירושם רבו”  
 אמרו ישראל מה אומות העולם על ידי שעשו שבע מצות השבעת להם טובות בעולם הזה במתן שכרן אנו שנצטוינו תרי”ג מצות על אחת כמה וכמה שתשפיע לנו טובות בעולם הבא לפיכך כשאנו רואין שלותן של אומות העולם אנו שמחים הוי אומר “נתתה שמחה בלבי מעת דגנם ותירושם רבו”

ר' יהושע בן לוי אמר [משל] למלך שעשה סעודה והכניס את האורחין והושיבן על פתח פלטין שלו ורואין את הכלבים שיוצאים ובפיהם פסיונים וראשי פטומות וראשי עגלים התחילו אומרים ומה אם הכלבים כך סעודה עצמה על אחת כמה וכמה ואומות העולם נמשלים ככלבים שנאמר “והכלבים עזי נפש הוי נתתה שמחה בלבי”

17 The text is according to ms Cambridge, University Library. I also used Or. 786. Parma, Biblioteca Palatina, 2552 [698] and Jerusalem, National Library of Israel, ~4 5767. For the published text, see Salomon Buber, *Midrasch Tehillim* (Wilna, 1891), 47–48. The translation is based on Braude, though revised and adapted. See William G. Braude, *The Midrash on Psalms* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 75–76. The text was analyzed briefly by Fraenkel, *Darkei ha'aggadah*, 323–324.

The group of texts I discuss is constructed from passages found in Midrash on Psalms, a Galilean Midrash, which we have received in its late version, but whose textual history is still unexplored.<sup>18</sup>

This parable is exegetically connected to the verse in Ps 4:8 which is usually translated as: “You have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine abound.” The verse presents a certain opposition between the poor but joyful believer and certain other figures who possess much grain and wine—the midrashic interpretation is proposing here that the contrast is between poor but joyful Israel and rich gentiles. Israel is happy because, if gentiles who are poor in commandments to fulfil are so ridiculously rich, the future rewards of Israel will be proportionally enormous. Then comes the parable. It does not represent an opposition between those who are satiated in this world and those rewarded in the Hereafter, however, but rather further explains the difference between these two groups: Jews and gentiles are different kinds of guests.

The king, as happens quite often in the sub-genre of king parables, is amusing himself.<sup>19</sup> He receives his guests at an appointed time,<sup>20</sup> which is an important motif both in rabbinic parables and in Matt 22. They come well-disciplined, presumably dressed in their best clothes.<sup>21</sup> However, they discover when they arrive that the banquet hall is closed, and the host places them at its gates. Here we need to take into consideration the typical structure of the Roman house and the choreography of the gathering of commensals. As typical in those days, the banquet consists of two stages. At first, the guests, arriving a little before or exactly at the appointed time, mingle in the yard which is

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18 This fascinating and undervalued rabbinic work still awaits its scholarly due. For a survey of the research, see Günter Stemberger, *Einleitung in Talmud und Midrasch*, 9th ed. (Munich: Beck, 2011), 358; for a proposition regarding the relatively ancient character of this work, see Chaim Milikowsky, “Vayyiqra Rabba Chapter 30: Its Transmissional History, its Publication History and the Presentation of a New Edition (to sections 1 and 2),” *Bar-Ilan* 30/31 (2006): 316–318.

19 See Stern, *Parables in Midrash*, 19–24.

20 For the importance of appointed time in the culture of the Mediterranean banquet, see Kiperwasser, “A Bizarre Invitation,” 151–152, 164–165.

21 Kiperwasser, “A Bizarre Invitation,” 151–152.

close to the banquet hall and called a *peristylum*.<sup>22</sup> There they consume various kinds of appetizers, drink some wine, chat, and amuse themselves.<sup>23</sup>

Meanwhile, in the banquet hall, called the *triclinium*, the reclining sofas will be prepared, and the real meal will begin its way from the *culina* to the storage rooms at the entrance to the *triclinium*. Soon, when the food in the *peristylum* is consumed and all the guests are inside the house, the gate will be closed, and no one else will be allowed to enter.<sup>24</sup> Only then will the door of the *triclinium* be opened, and guests will be able to recline according to the previously established order. However, in the plot of our obscure story, the *triclinium*, which ought to be awaiting our guests, is already occupied. Who is inside? The doors open, and the previous group of guests begin to leave the hall. They are dogs. Dogs are friendly animals in rabbinic narratives,<sup>25</sup> though their appearance is a bit unexpected here. In their teeth, they still hold the heads of cattle and fowl, which indicates that the bodies of these animals have already been eaten. Some anxious human guest, it would seem, might wonder why his meal was fed to the dogs and why he was called to watch the animal-guests disperse after their meal. However, pious, and good-natured guests are not offended. They are sure that if the dogs were fed so well, they should expect something even more attractive than what was offered to the previous guests. The guest who arrived close to the appointed time at the *triclinium* of the king and who, instead of receiving the promised meal, was forced to watch the host's satiated

22 This specific word does not appear in rabbinic literature. In rabbinic sources, the *triclinia* is often juxtaposed to the *prozdor*, or *prosodus*, from the Greek πρόθυρον, as it was suggested by Krauss (Talmudische Archäologie, 1, 362, n. 642, designating the porch or portico, the space situated before an entrance; see Eric Ottenheijm, "Prepare Yourself: Spatial Rhetoric in Rabbinic and Synoptic Meal Parables," in *A Handbook to Early Christian Meals in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. Soham Al-Suadi and Peter-Ben Smit (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2019), 79n21.

23 For a description of a typical feast, see t. Ber. 4, 8 (Lieberman, 1, 20). For a translation of this text, see Jacob Neusner and Richard S. Sarason, *The Tosefta: Zeraim*, trans. Alan J. Avery-Peck (New York: Ktav, 1986), 21. In his commentary to this passage, Lieberman emphasizes that this description is not halakhic at all, but purely a portrayal of local Mediterranean custom similar to that which was accepted among Romans as well (*Tosefta ki-fshuta*, 62).

24 See, for example, t. Ber. 4:9 (Lieberman, 1, 20). See Gil Klein, "Torah in Triclinia: The Rabbinic Banquet and the Significance of Architecture," *JQR* 102 (2012): 325–370. See also Ottenheijm, "Prepare Yourself," 79–80.

25 See Joshua Schwartz, "Dogs in Jewish Society in the Second Temple Period and in the Time of the Mishnah and Talmud," *JJS* 55 (2004): 246–277; on dogs in the Bible and the ancient world, see Justin David Strong, "From Pets to Physicians: Dogs in the Biblical World," *BAR* 45 (2019): 46–50.

dogs, should not feel deceived and dissatisfied. The meal is ready, and by looking upon the dogs' food he can get an idea of the menu awaiting him.<sup>26</sup>

This brings us to the transferred meaning, that is, to the *nimshal*:<sup>27</sup> if the dogs are the "nations of the world," what about the miserable Israelites, who have been placed at the threshold of the banquet hall of history to see how well-fed these wicked Others are? Why are they expected to be happy just because tremendous rewards await them in the hereafter? This parable is without a doubt eschatological. The parable strongly conveys the idea of selection: the narrator wishes to distinguish between the true and false participants of the eschaton, or between the participants who deserve it and the ones who are only nourished out of pity. In her thought-provoking book about the portraits of canine and feminine in ancient Greek culture, Christiana Franco relates:

It is thus in the arena of food that one of the most important aspects of the symbiosis between humans and dogs plays out. This division of food-stuffs naturally gives scope for representations of various sorts, according to the different judgments that each social context and each individual brings to it. The dog can figure at different times as a welcome guest and a mark of luxury at the table, like an annoying parasite, as simply an eater of refuse, or as a beloved pet for which leftovers are saved. But the dog figures as a real and true dining companion, the animal with which people divide their food and often share even the time and place of its consumption. Still, this fellowship does not create a situation of equality: the parts that belong to the dog are mostly predetermined—bones, gristle, fat unwanted by people—and constitute the waste products of human eating. As such, the banquet is the space that both unites men and dogs and distinguishes them, by fixing a definite hierarchy.<sup>28</sup>

The fixation of the definite hierarchy in the abovementioned parable went through a rhetorical distortion. The dogs were fed with food belonging to a

26 Another entirely possible reading, proposed to me by Eric Ottenheim, would be: the dogs show what was served before the main meal in the *peristylum*, as appetiser, and consequently the main meal served in *triclinium* is something even better. For another example of watching and deducing what still awaits the guest waiting for the meal, see t. Ber. 4:14.

27 The Hebrew word *nimshal* is notoriously difficult to translate into other languages; see Stern, *Parables in Midrash*, 13, who prefers not to translate it, rather explaining it as an "application accompanying the narrative." I am basing my use of this term on the understanding of the hermeneutical process as a transfer of meaning; see Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables*, 14.

28 See Christiana Franco, *Shameless: The Canine and the Feminine in Ancient Greece*, trans. Matthew Fox (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 24.

high hierarchical level, and only then was the proper hierarchy restored. Thus, the host in this midrash is intentionally radical in the selection between dogs and humans. The space of the banquet hall will simultaneously unite and distinguish men and dogs. Similarly, the eschaton will both distinguish and reunite the groups at different hierarchical levels, Jews and gentiles, in the new divine order.<sup>29</sup>

Elsewhere in this same midrashic compilation, the following *mashal* is found, which most likely derives from the same eschatological context:

*Be not mindful of my youthful sins and transgressions* (Ps. 25:7). According to R. Yudan, David said to the Holy One, blessed be He: Master of the universe, may my sins and transgressions be considered like the sins of my youth before Thee, and so have no substance whatsoever. *In keeping with Your faithfulness consider what is in my favor, as befits Your goodness, O Lord.*

Ps. 25:7b

R. Eleazar told a parable of a king who prepared a great banquet and charged his steward: "Invite me merchants; do not invite me artisans." The steward said: "My lord king, so abundant is thy banquet that the merchants will not be able to eat it all, unless the artisans will join." Even so, David said: "*In keeping with Your faithfulness consider what is in my favor, as befits Your goodness, O Lord, as is said The Lord is good to all*".

Ps. 145:9

“חטאות נעורי ופשעי אל תזכור”  
אמר ר' יודן אמר דוד לפני הקדוש ברוך  
הוא רבונו של עולם יהיו חטאיי ופשעיי  
כחטאות נעוריי לפניך ולא יהיה בהם ממש  
“כחסדך זכר לי אתה”

אמר ר' אלעזר משל למלך שעשה סעודה  
גדולה ואמר לאפיטרופין שלו זמין לי בני  
אדם תגרים ואל תזמין לי בעלי מלאכה  
אמר לו אדוני המלך סעודתך גדולה היא  
והתגרים לא יספיקו לאוכלה אלא עם בעלי  
מלאכה כך אמר דוד “כחסדך זכר לי אתה  
למען טובך ה' שנאמר טוב ה' לכל”

29 This may not be mentioned explicitly, but due to the fact that the dogs are outside and not in *triclinia*, perhaps it is hinted that the gentiles are in the same way not supposed to enter the world to come at all, since they already obtained their reward in this life. For the eschatological process displayed in terms of spatial movement represented in the well-known m. Avot 4:16, see Ottenheijm, “Prepare Yourself,” 79–84.



R. Jose bar Hanina told a parable of a king who prepared a banquet and invited the guests. The fourth hour passed, and the guests did not come. The fifth and sixth hour passed, and the guests did not come. By evening the guests began to arrive. The king said to them: "I am beholden to you. Had you not come, I would have had to throw the whole banquet to dogs." Thus, the Holy One, blessed be He, says to the righteous: I consider it a great favor on your part, for I created My world because of you, and were you not, all that goodness which I prepared for the Future, about which it is said "*How abundant is the good that You have in store for those who fear You*" (Ps. 31:20), to whom could I give it?<sup>30</sup>

Midr. Ps. 25:9

ר' יוסי [בר חנינא] אמר משל למלך שעשה סעודה וזימן את האורחין הגיעו לארבע שעות ביום ולא באו לחמש לשש ולא באו לעת ערב התחילו האורחין ממשמשין ובאין אמר להן טובה גדולה אני צריך להחזיק לכם לפי שאילולא באתם כל הסעודה הייתי משליך לכלבים כך אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא לצדיקים טובה גדולה אני מחזיק לכם שבשבילכם בראתי את עולמי שאילולא אתם כל הטובה שהתקנתי לעתיד שנאמר "מה רב טובך אשר צפנת ליראיך" למי הייתי נותנה

There are two mutually complementary parables here. In the first, the king first wants to engage in the selection of guests from among the townspeople and invite only merchants. The wise counsellor says that the merchants are not enough, because they will not eat all the food.<sup>31</sup> Then the king concludes that he must also invite artisans, who do not deserve to be fed but are necessary; otherwise, the food will go to waste. No mention of the "nations of the world" is recorded here. The collision is between the two contingents, one more righteous, the other not without sins. However, the merciful host, who was stricter at first, finally decides to feed them all. Why is this? Only because the food is quite enough for both groups? The answer is in the second parable, which offers a much clearer justification for the selection.

<sup>30</sup> See Buber, *Midrasch Tehillim*, 213. The text is based on MS Cambridge, University Library. The present translation takes into consideration Braude, *Midrash on Psalms*, 352–353. The second part of this passage, the parable of Jose bar Hanina, was briefly analyzed by Appelbaum, *The Rabbis' King-Parables*, 186–187.

<sup>31</sup> This motif could be compared with the desire to leave the merchants outside the eschatological banquet hall in the parable in Gos. Thom. 64, which is parallel to Matt 22 discussed below.

Now let us turn to eschatological banquets in gospel parables. The key parable of this sort is a great royal banquet parable in Matt 22:1–14:<sup>32</sup>

Once more, Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come.”

Again he sent other slaves, saying: “Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.”

But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city.

Then he said to his slaves: “The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go, therefore, into the main streets and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.” Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him: “Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding

1 Καὶ ἀποκριθεὶς ὁ Ἰησοῦς πάλιν εἶπεν ἐν παραβολαῖς αὐτοῖς ἰ λέγων ·

2 Ὡμοιώθη ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν ἀνθρώπῳ βασιλεῖ, ὅστις ἐποίησεν γάμους τῷ υἱῷ αὐτοῦ.

3 καὶ ἀπέστειλεν τοὺς δούλους αὐτοῦ καλέσαι τοὺς κεκλημένους εἰς τοὺς γάμους, καὶ οὐκ ἤθελον ἐλθεῖν. 4 πάλιν ἀπέστειλεν ἄλλους δούλους λέγων · Εἶπατε τοῖς κεκλημένοις · Ἴδου τὸ ἄριστόν μου ἡτοίμακα, οἱ ταῦροί μου καὶ τὰ σιτιστὰ τεθυμένα, καὶ πάντα ἔτοιμα · δεῦτε εἰς τοὺς γάμους.

10 καὶ ἐξελθόντες οἱ δούλοι ἐκεῖνοι εἰς τὰς ὁδοὺς συνήγαγον πάντας οὓς εὗρον, πονηροὺς τε καὶ ἀγαθοὺς· καὶ ἐπλήσθη ὁ γάμος ἀνακειμένων. 11 Εἰσελθὼν δὲ ὁ βασιλεὺς θεάσασθαι τοὺς ἀνακειμένους εἶδεν ἐκεῖ ἄνθρωπον οὐκ ἐνδεδυμένον ἔνδυμα γάμου, 12 καὶ λέγει αὐτῷ· ἔταίρε, πῶς εἰσῆλθες ὧδε μὴ ἔχων ἔνδυμα γάμου; ὁ δὲ ἐφίμώθη. 13 τότε ὁ βασιλεὺς εἶπεν τοῖς διακόνοις· δῆσαντες αὐτοῦ πόδας καὶ χεῖρας ἐκβάλετε αὐτὸν εἰς τὸ σκότος τὸ ἐξώτερον· ἐκεῖ ἔσται ὁ κλαυθμὸς καὶ ὁ βρυγμὸς τῶν ὀδόντων. 14 πολλοὶ γάρ εἰσιν κλητοί, ὀλίγοι δὲ ἐκλεκτοί.

32 For the analysis of this parable together with its New Testament and rabbinic parallels, see Kiperwasser, “A Bizarre Invitation,” 160–164.

robe?” And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants: “Bind him hand and foot and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. For many are called, but few are chosen.”

Matt 22:1–14 NRSV

This parable belongs to a group of Matthean parables considering eschatological questions, sometimes with a strong apocalyptic dualism as well as with imperatives (Matt 24:52; 25:13: “Keep awake!”) and harsh concluding sentences (e.g., “there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth”; see Matt 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51).<sup>33</sup> The description of this rather disturbing royal banquet is imbued with the idea of selection between those who are recognized as elect in this world but will be expelled, and those who are considered outcasts in this world but will become insiders. The king in Matthew’s parable is waiting for guests, but they do not come (which can be considered a crime of disobedience against a royal order), and the frazzled king finds comfort in the company of the newly elected guests.

The overtones of the parable from Matt 22 are audible in both parables in the preceding selection of texts from Midrash on Psalms, but in the second parable they are much more pronounced (see above). In our second parable, the king is waiting for guests, but they are in no hurry to come. They were invited to a morning banquet but came in the evening. The king, however, not at all like the one in Matt 22, is as happy as a child to see his tardy guests. Finally, someone will eat his food, which otherwise would go to the dogs.

In both rabbinic parables, there is fear that strict principles for selecting the elect intended for the eschatological era will lead to God simply remaining alone or with very few companions. But this cannot be, because God, in his mercy, is ready to invite cast-outs to his banquet instead of waiting another several thousand years until enough fitting guests are found for the Hereafter. To say that dogs will eat the food actually means that no one from the expected groups will make it to the Eschaton.

The following parable from Matt 25:1–13 shows the selecting of participants for the eschatological feast and the dialoguing with other, more radical approaches to selection, as in Matt 22:1–14.<sup>34</sup>

33 See Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables*, 262–263.

34 Translation from Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables*, 265 (see also his commentary on 266–269). See also Moisés Mayordomo, “Kluge Mädchen kommen überall hin (Von

Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten virgins took their torches and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their torches, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their torches. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, "Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." Then all those virgins got up and trimmed their torches. The foolish said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil, for our torches are going out." But the wise replied, "No! there will not be enough for you and us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves." And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding; and the door was shut. Later, the other virgins came also, saying, "Lord, Lord, open to us." But he replied, "Amen, I tell you, I do not know you." Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

Matt 25:1–13

Τότε ὁμοιωθήσεται ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν δέκα παρθένοις, αἵτινες λαβοῦσαι τὰς λαμπάδας ἑαυτῶν ἐξήλθον εἰς ὑπάντησιν τοῦ νυμφίου. 2 πέντε δὲ ἐξ αὐτῶν ἦσαν ἁμωραὶ καὶ πέντε φρόνιμοι. 3 αἱ γὰρ ἁμωραὶ λαβοῦσαι τὰς λαμπάδας αὐτῶν οὐκ ἔλαβον μεθ' ἑαυτῶν ἔλαιον. 4 αἱ δὲ φρόνιμοι ἔλαβον ἔλαιον ἐν τοῖς ἀγγείοις μετὰ τῶν λαμπάδων ἑαυτῶν. 5 χρονίζοντος δὲ τοῦ νυμφίου ἐνύσταξαν πᾶσαι καὶ ἐκάθευδον. 6 μέσης δὲ νυκτὸς κραυγὴ γέγονεν· Ἴδου ὁ νυμφίος, ἐξέρχεσθε εἰς ἀπάντησιν αὐτοῦ. 7 τότε ἠγέρθησαν πᾶσαι αἱ παρθένοι ἐκεῖναι καὶ ἐκόσμησαν τὰς λαμπάδας ἑαυτῶν. 8 αἱ δὲ ἁμωραὶ ταῖς φρονίμοις εἶπαν· Δότε ἡμῖν ἐκ τοῦ ἐλαίου ὑμῶν, ὅτι αἱ λαμπάδες ἡμῶν σβέννυνται. 9 ἀπεκρίθησαν δὲ αἱ φρόνιμοι λέγουσαι· Μήποτε οὐ μὴ ἄρχέσῃ ἡμῖν καὶ ὑμῖν· πορεύεσθε μᾶλλον πρὸς τοὺς πωλοῦντας καὶ ἀγοράσατε ἑαυταῖς. 10 ἀπερχομένων δὲ αὐτῶν ἀγοράσαι ἦλθεν ὁ νυμφίος, καὶ αἱ ἔτοιμοι εἰσῆλθον μετ' αὐτοῦ εἰς τοὺς γάμους, καὶ ἐκλείσθη ἡ θύρα. 11 ὕστερον δὲ ἔρχονται καὶ αἱ λοιπαὶ παρθένοι λέγουσαι· Κύριε κύριε, ἄνοιξον ἡμῖν. 12 ὁ δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν· Ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, οὐκ οἶδα ὑμᾶς. 13 γρηγορεῖτε οὖν, ὅτι οὐκ οἴδατε τὴν ἡμέραν οὐδὲ τὴν ὥραν.

The parable tells a story about a wedding, but focusses on only one specific aspect of the wedding celebration: the virgins who are awaiting the arrival of the groom. From the parable's perspective, the virgins are clearly in the

den zehn Jungfrauen) Matt 25,1–13," in *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu*, ed. Ruben Zimmermann et al., 2nd ed. (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2015), 488–503. And see also Peter J. Tomson, "Parables, Fiction, and Midrash: the Ten Maidens and the Bridegroom (Matt 25:1–13)," in *Parables in Changing Contexts: Essays on the Study of Parables in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism*, ed. Eric Ottenheim and Marcel Poorthuis, JCP 35 (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 226–235.

foreground; their readiness to welcome the groom is the main focus of the narration.<sup>35</sup> The polarizing description of the virgins in the introduction constrains the dramatic development of the parable from the start. The end turns out to be what the reader knew or at least suspected from the beginning: the wise are rewarded and the foolish are punished.<sup>36</sup> Five clever girls are invited in; five foolish girls are left behind the closed door, frustrated and miserable. Thus, in the parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins cited above, the group of incompetent guests remains outside, punished and deprived of the opportunity to see the groom, and in the parable of the Royal Feast from Matt 22 cited earlier, negligent guests are beaten and banished. In the New Testament parables, the replacement of one group by another, or the selection of a particular group, is radical and irreversible. One will be alienated, the other will be welcomed. The host needs to make decisions quickly; time is running out, the eschaton is near. The rabbinic parables differ in this respect. The host will not exchange the groups of respectable people for the outcasts, as in Matt 22, and will not cast out the foolish, preferring the wise, as in the second parable cited above. Instead, he will wait patiently for the elect contingent. He has plenty of patience and time. The dogs mentioned in both rabbinic parables are in no way a competing contingent for the right to be a guest. The dogs will not be nourished in the same manner as the guests. They will, however, get something from the royal table, as shown in the first parable we read.

### 3 Host, Guests, and Dogs in the Gospels

Now let us turn to the canine motif, which is lacking in the Jesus parables above. Dogs appear frequently in the rhetoric of the Gospels, and they are quite often mentioned in the context of food distribution. Thus in the parable:

Do not give what is holy to the dogs; nor cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you in pieces.

Matt 7:6

Μὴ δώτε τὸ ἅγιον τοῖς κυσίν, μηδὲ βάλητε τοὺς μαργαρίτας ὑμῶν ἔμπροσθεν τῶν χοίρων, μήποτε καταπατήσουσιν αὐτοὺς ἐν τοῖς ποσίν αὐτῶν καὶ στραφέντες ῥήξωσιν ὑμᾶς.

35 See Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables*, 265.

36 All virgins fall asleep on the place of their "duty," but the wise have prepared themselves better.

The parallel in the Gospel of Thomas reads as follows:

Give not that which is holy to dogs, in case they throw it onto the dunghill, and cast not pearls to swine, for fear that they should make it ...

(1) ΜΠΡΤ ΠΕΤΟΥΑΔΒ ΝΝΟΥΖΟΟΡ ΧΕΚΑΔ  
 ΝΟΥΝΟΧΟΥ ΕΤΚΟΠΡΙΑ (2) ΜΠΡΝΟΥΧΕ  
 ΝΜΜΑΡΓΑΡΙΤΗ(Σ Ν)ΝΕΦΔΑΥ ΦΙΝΑ ΧΕ  
 ΝΟΥΑΔΑΦ ΝΛΑ ...

Gos. Thom. 93

The contextual reading of this passage evokes multiple hypotheses, while the exact setting remains unclear. It could possibly be interpreted as advising the reader not to be meekly charitable against all reason.<sup>37</sup> The dog is a typical household animal, as is the pig, and both are to be fed by its responsible owner, just like other inhabitants of his household.<sup>38</sup> Hierarchy, however, is necessary. The owner will not feed the dog with “holy,” that is, consecrated food, which should be eaten in the state of ritual purity.<sup>39</sup> Maintaining this condition is not a simple task for a human being, let alone for a dog who finds pleasure playing on a dunghill. In other sayings, the dog is also mentioned in regard to food, and is portrayed as less good-natured, perhaps, but still virtually harmless. Thus, in a tradition attested in Gos. Thom. 106 (102), there is a saying attributed to Jesus: “Cursed are they, the Pharisees, because they are like a dog which has lain in the cattle manger, but will neither eat *the food there* nor allow the oxen to eat it.” A dog occupies a place on the cattle manger, thus preventing food from being distributed to the farm’s other animal inhabitants. However, it is mostly a demonstration of egoistic behaviour, so that the attempt to steal the food belongs to the ox and the sheep.

Another example may be offered by the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, which depicts a shocking scene in which the smartly dressed host is

37 See a summary of all approaches, followed by new commentary remarks, in William D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *Matthew: A Shorter Commentary* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 106–107. For more detail, see William D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, vol. 1, *Introduction and Commentary on Matthew I–VII* (London: Bloomsbury, 1988), 674–685.

38 Pace Davies and Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 675, who think that dogs here are wild street dogs, which are dangerous and unwelcome. However, in light of rabbinic parables and with a view to the symmetry between the two parts of this parable, we have to assume that both are domestic animals.

39 Thus, this part of the parable does have a halakhic background (see m. Tem. 6:5), which was noticed by Davies and Allison (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 675), but there is no halakhic rationale in the part about the pearls and swine, unless one supposes that it is a rather allegorical way of saying that words of Torah are not to be carried to an impure place. See Davies and Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 676.

busy with a banquet of people like him, whereas the suffering Lazarus is lying at the rich man's gate.<sup>40</sup> Describing Lazarus's pitiful condition, the narrator informs us that he is "longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table," namely the remains that are usually the food of dogs. Moreover, the narrator finds it necessary to add that "even the dogs would come and lick his sores." This parable has stimulated numerous interpretations. I would like to mention a recent one by Justin Strong,<sup>41</sup> which is very sensitive to the spatial structure of the parable and the role of dogs. According to Strong, the dramatic collision of the parable is similar to its spatial tension. The host is in his *triclinium*, and he does not even notice the suffering Lazarus at the gate, namely, beyond the threshold of the area of hospitality. The space between these two is "occupied by the dogs, liminal creatures that transgress the boundary of animal and human-kind, the household and the pariahs."<sup>42</sup> Non-human inhabitants of the house show mercy that should actually be shown by the host. The licking of the dogs, which is, according to Strong, an attempt to cure Lazarus's skin disease, serves to dramatically highlight the inability of the host to accept a suffering guest. He may open his home to people of his kind, or even to the dogs whose services he knows how to use; but he is unable to open his home to the unknown.

In all these examples, the dog represents a group that deserves to be fed by the owner, though not without some restrictions. The first two examples hinted that food must be of the type that this group deserves. It seems that "dogs" may be opposed to those who eat consecrated food. Nevertheless, dogs are not necessarily gentiles.

The motif of sharing the guest's meal with dogs does appear in the Gospels, however, in a dialogue between Jesus and a gentile woman:<sup>43</sup>

<p>Jesus left and went to the territory near the cities of Tyre and Sidon.</p>	<p>Jesus left and went to the region near the city of Tyre, where he stayed in someone's home. He did not want people to know he was there, but they found out anyway.</p>
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40 See Mathew R. Hauge, *The Biblical Tour of Hell*, LNTS 584 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013); Outi Lehtipuu, *The Afterlife Imagery in Luke's Story of the Rich Man and Lazarus*, NovTSup 123 (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

41 Justin David Strong, "Lazarus and the Dogs: The Diagnosis and Treatment," *NTS* 64 (2018): 178–193.

42 Strong, "Lazarus and the Dogs," 193.

43 See the long and very detailed commentary in Davies and Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 541–560.

Suddenly a Canaanite woman from there came out shouting,

“Lord and Son of David, pity me! My daughter is full of demons.”

Jesus did not say a word. But the woman kept following along and shouting, so his disciples came up and asked him to send her away.

Jesus said, “I was sent only to the people of Israel! They are like a flock of lost sheep.”

The woman came closer. Then she knelt and begged, “Please help me, Lord!”

Jesus replied, *“It isn’t right to take food away from children and feed it to dogs.”* (Οὐκ ἔστιν καλὸν λαβεῖν τὸν ἄρτον τῶν τέκνων καὶ βαλεῖν τοῖς κυναρίοις.)

“Lord, that’s true,” the woman said, *“but even dogs get the crumbs that fall from their owner’s table.”* (Ναί, κύριε, καὶ γὰρ τὰ κυνάρια ἐσθίει ἀπὸ τῶν ψιγίων τῶν πιπτόντων ἀπὸ τῆς τραπέζης τῶν κυρίων αὐτῶν.)

Jesus answered, “Dear woman, you do have a lot of faith, and you will be given what you want.” At that moment, her daughter was healed.

Matt 15:21–28

A woman whose daughter had an evil spirit in her heard where Jesus was. And right away, she came and knelt at his feet.

The woman was Greek and had been born in the part of Syria known as Phoenicia.

She begged Jesus to force the demon out of her daughter.

But Jesus said, *“The children must first be fed! It isn’t right to take away their food and feed it to dogs.”* (“Ἀφες πρῶτον χορτασθῆναι τὰ τέκνα, οὐ γὰρ καλὸν ἐστὶν ἴ λαβεῖν τὸν ἄρτον τῶν τέκνων καὶ τοῖς κυναρίοις βαλεῖν.)

The woman replied, *“Lord, even dogs eat the crumbs that children drop from the table.”* (Κύριε, καὶ τὰ κυνάρια ὑποκάτω τῆς τραπέζης ἐσθίουσιν ἀπὸ τῶν ψιγίων τῶν παιδιῶν.)

Jesus answered, “That’s true! You may go now. The demon has left your daughter.” When the woman got back home, she found her child lying on the bed. The demon had gone.

Mark 7:24–29



The setting of the story is quite different in the two gospels. In Mark, Jesus is seeking privacy in a house in the region of Tyre, and a woman had heard he was there and went to see him. She is described as a gentile of Syro-Phoenician origin (or Canaanite in Matthew).<sup>44</sup> In Matthew, the story is set outdoors in the same geographic region, and some of Jesus's disciples accompany him. They portray the woman as shouting after them. The woman wanted her daughter to be cured by Jesus, who refuses with a rather strange rhetorical argument in which I see the remnant of a parabolical text.<sup>45</sup> A host, so Jesus says, will not feed his dogs with food made for his householders.<sup>46</sup> The wise gentile woman replies that a good host feeds his dogs with crumbs from his children's food.<sup>47</sup> I assume that the dialogue between Jesus and the woman relies on a parable about the master, his children, the meal, and the hungry dogs, which was

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- 44 For a concise summary of the multiple discussions on the metamorphosis of Syro-Phoenician into Canaanite, see Davies and Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 547. The connection between Canaanites and Phoenicians is frequently alluded to in ancient Jewish literature. However, here in Matthew this term is used in a broader literary sense to emphasize the pagan background of the woman; see Katell Berthelot, "Where May Canaanites Be Found? Canaanites, Phoenicians, and Others in Jewish Texts from the Hellenistic and Roman Period," in *The Gift of the Land and the Fate of the Canaanites in Jewish Thought*, ed. Katell Berthelot, Joseph E. David, and Marc Hirshman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 253–274, esp. 264.
- 45 When I first started working on this paper, I was proposing a completely new reading, but then discovered that I was not the first to ask whether Jesus, in his response to the gentile woman, was taking up a traditional maxim or proverb. Scholars compared this New Testament tradition with Targum Neofiti on Exod 22:30. This verse forbids the eating of flesh in the field torn by beasts, and the Targum adds that "you shall throw it to the gentile stranger, who is comparable to the dog." See Martin McNamara and Robert Hayward, *The Aramaic Bible*, vol. 2, *Targum Neofiti 1: Exodus* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 98. It has been suggested that behind this figure of speech in the Targum lies an isolated saying whose basic meaning is something like "charity begins at home," see Roger Le Déaut, "Targumic Literature and NT Interpretation," *BTB* 4 (1974): 243–289.
- 46 Marcus states that Jesus's saying could not be anything but an insult; see Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 27 (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 468. Robert Guelich does see the passage as an indication of Israel's prominence in God's plan which is partially expressed in Jesus's reluctance; see Robert A. Guelich, *Mark 1–8:26*, WBC 34A (Dallas: Word, 1989), 386. Some feminist and postcolonial approaches to the text understand Jesus to be "healed" by the woman; see Jim Perkison, "A Canaanitic Word in the Logos of Christ; or The Difference the Syro-Phoenician Woman Makes to Jesus," *Semeia* 75 (1996): 61, and David Joy, *Mark and Its Subalterns: A Hermeneutical Paradigm for a Postcolonial Context* (London: Equinox, 2008), 159. See also David Rhodes, "Jesus and the Syrophoenician Woman in Mark: A Narrative-Critical Study," *JARR* 62 (1994): 343–376.
- 47 Reflecting on the experience of powerlessness in colonial contexts, Nelavala views the woman's cunning as a strategy of survival; see Surekha Nelavala, "Smart Syrophoenician Woman: A Dalit Feminist Reading of Mark 7:24–31," *ExpTim* 118 (2006): 68.

widely used in the time of Jesus. In this hypothetical parable, the master of the house prepared a meal, intending to feed his household. The master should feed the children/householders both out of love and as a practical obligation. However, as one of the participants in the hypothetical parable would propose, the owner is also attached to his dogs, both emotionally and out of practical considerations (they guard his herds). Both dogs and children are waiting for their share at the entrance to the dining room. What should the master do? The wise master will feed the guests by putting food on trays and sending the servants to distribute it. However, the dogs which, according to custom, are already loitering under the feet of the guests, as shown in pictorial depictions of Roman banquets,<sup>48</sup> will be fed from food remnants that the guests and the master will throw to them under the table.

The *nimshal* (transferred meaning) of this parable would not have been the magical powers of Jesus to heal demoniacs, but rather the kingdom of heaven. The context in which this parable appears here is secondary. Initially, in its primary context which is now lost, it claimed that the kingdom of heaven would be inherited mainly by Israel, but some crumbs would also fall to the peoples of the nations, in accordance with the benevolence of the host and the guests. This implied meaning in the story of the gentile woman develops the hypothetical ancient model of an eschatological feast awaited by humans and dogs, or in other words, by the chosen group and a marginal one, both of which will be rewarded. The same parable is arranged differently in the rabbinic examples. According to both of them, the sharing with the "Others" is merely by chance. According to the first rabbinic parable, the "Others" get their share before Israel begins eating. According to the other rabbinic parable, the "Others" receive their eschatological portion only if Israel does not come to the feast, which is, in general, impossible because the Lord will patiently wait until almost the end of time for the necessary quorum to gather in his dining room.

Thus, the starting point of both the Jewish and the Christian parables is that the host needs his guests, and he must accept them without any conditions, opening his house to the unknown, and treating them as equals. Thus, the host must always, to a certain extent, rely on the guest's good-will, hoping that the guest will limit himself to this role without attempting to seize power or doing something inappropriate in his dining room. The high status of the host in our parables seems to protect him from threats from his subordinates, but at the same time limits the unconditional nature of royal hospitality. Therefore, selection of the guests is necessary. It is only when the king reclines at a feast

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48 Catherine Johns, *Dogs: History, Myth, Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 48–52.

with a selected contingent that he can feel like a true master and provide an almost unconditional hospitality. The guest selection in the Jewish parables differs from that found in the Christian ones. In the former, the host is ready to be flexible in his principles of selection, so that as many participants as possible can join in the meal. In the latter, by contrast, a significant group of potential guests is ultimately found outside the banquet hall, and the usual group of commensals will be disgraced. But these differences relate directly to the elect contingent of the participants, namely to the members of the religious community, whether Jews or Christians.<sup>49</sup> What is an unelected contingent? I suggest that they are gentiles in the case of Jewish eschatology, heathens for Christian eschatology.<sup>50</sup> Notably, both Jewish and Christian parables (or at least one of them, incorporated in the late story) acknowledge the master's condescension towards the un-elected contingent. The inhabitants of the master's yard, his dogs, will receive their share, which—leftovers though they are—still come from the royal table.

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49 Although not explicitly stated, the guests who will not participate are apparently Jews.

50 It could be accepted as support for the theory about the sectarian context of Matthew. See on this: Anders Runesson, "Rethinking Early Jewish-Christian Relations: Matthean Community History as Pharisaic intra-Group Conflict," *JBL* 127 (2008): 95–132.

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## New Testament and Rabbinic Slave Parables at the Intersection between Fiction and Reality

*Catherine Hezser*

In antiquity, parables were ideal media of moral and theological teaching because they employed images that were based on the ancient audience's own experiences. They do not simply replicate social reality, however, but are fictional constructs that play with and subvert reality for ideological purposes. As John Dominic Crossan has already emphasized, New Testament parables “involve fictional characters in fictional stories.”<sup>1</sup> While he concedes that realistic locations may be used (“factual geography”), he argues that “all else is fiction.”<sup>2</sup> This statement seems to be an overgeneralization, however. While parables feature anonymous stock characters, who lack individual characteristics, some aspects may be based on actual practice and lived experience. Unusual elements that lead to the meaning of a parable are identifiable only on the basis of their difference from ordinary life. In the words of John Kloppenborg, “one of the hallmarks of at least some of Jesus' parables is that they tell of unusual actions or unexpected reactions. But they do so by setting a context which invokes the typicalities and commonplaces of ancient Mediterranean life.”<sup>3</sup> What is crucial for the proper interpretation of parables is the identification of unconventional and transgressive elements. This task can be accomplished only through the study of parables in the context of ancient Jewish daily life.

Each individual parable requires its own contextualization. The methodological approach of comparing details of the parable as a literary text with what we know historically about everyday life in Roman Palestine applies to all parables. Everyday life encompasses many different realms, ranging from social and family relations to work conditions, meal practices, and etiquette. The historical investigation of these areas varies and depends on the available

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1 John Dominic Crossan, *The Power of Parable: How Fiction by Jesus Became Fiction about Jesus* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), 142.

2 Crossan, *The Power of Parable*, 142.

3 John S. Kloppenborg, *Synoptic Problems: Collected Essays*, WUNT 329 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 557.

evidence.<sup>4</sup> For a specific topic, archaeological and literary evidence may be abundant or rare. A certain phenomenon may have been researched more in Graeco-Roman than in Palestinian Jewish society. Conflicting evidence may prove difficult to resolve. Last but not least, circular arguments may evolve if literary sources are used to reconstruct daily life. Taking these considerations into account, I shall investigate the fictionality and historical embeddedness of selected parables that thematize the slave-master relationship.

**1 Slave Parables in the Gospel of Mark (Mark 12:1–9; 13:34–37//  
Matt 21:33–41// Luke 20:9–16)**

In English translations of the Gospels, the Greek word δούλος is usually translated with “servant” (and in German translations with “Knecht”) to mitigate the common practice of slavery in early Christian society.<sup>5</sup> Yet the proper translation is “slave” and the references must be understood in the context of ancient slave practices. The Gospel of Mark contains only two parables featuring slaves, and both have christological purposes (Mark 12:1–9 and 13:34–37). In both cases, the owner of the property (a vineyard in Mark 12:1 and a house in Mark 13:34) is said to have travelled abroad. In the first parable, he is said to have entrusted his farmers, probably tenants (12:1; γεωργοῖς), with the task of continuing the work; in the second parable, he expects his slaves (13:34; δούλους) to do various household tasks in his absence. These general scenarios seem rather ordinary. The first parable establishes a tripartite hierarchy with the householder at the top, the tenants below him, and the slaves at the very bottom of the pyramid of authority. Wealthy landlords, who often lived in cities, had their agricultural holdings leased to tenants or administered by stewards on a regular basis, not only when travelling abroad.<sup>6</sup> The differences in power between these status-unequal social groups were expressed through violent behaviour towards subordinates, reflected in the parable in Mark 12. As Kristina Sessa has pointed out, “some landlords treated their *coloni* as servile workers and regularly disciplined them with physical beatings as if

4 For a general overview of daily life in Roman Palestine, see Catherine Hezser, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Daily Life in Roman Palestine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). See also Jodi Magness, *Stone and Dung, Oil and Spit: Jewish Daily Life in the Time of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

5 On slaves in ancient Christianity, see Jennifer A. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

6 That the parable seems to refer to an absentee landlord is also stated by John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2002), 338.

they were slaves. In either case, the elite householder undoubtedly treated the bonded tenant as a dependent, even if his dependency was less absolute than a slave's.<sup>7</sup> Such "horizontal relations of power within a heated competitive environment" are evident in the tenants' beating and stoning of the slave and in the landlord's harsh punishment of the tenants at the end of the narrative (12:9).<sup>8</sup> In Mark 13:34 the term ἐξουσία is used to express the householder's authority over the various types of subordinates. If they refrain from heeding his commands, they must reckon with severe punishment, the loss of their livelihood or even their lives.

Within this narrative depiction of hierarchical relationships some aspects seem unusual, although, perhaps, not impossible. In Mark 12:1 the vineyard owner is said to have planted the vineyard and done the initial work himself before handing it over to his subordinates. In general, elite city-based landowners did not do any physical work themselves and had (servile) stewards available for the supervision of labourers. Owners of smaller estates, on the other hand, would have adopted a more direct hands-on approach.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps also unusual is the sending of one slave at a time (changed in the parallel version in Matt 21:33–41 to a plurality of slaves), and the eventual replacement of the slave by the landowner's son. The sending of the slave into the vineyard seems to be connected to the harvest season (explicated in the parallel version in Luke 20:10 but not in Mark). The statement that he "might receive from the farmers of the fruit of the vineyard" (Mark 12:2) probably relates to the collection of the vineyard owner's percentage of the harvested fruits from the tenants. If so, the slave would function as a substitute for the owner himself, representing his demands. Masters often used slaves in business transactions, especially those that were challenging.<sup>10</sup> Since the collection of seasonal duties would have upset the tenants, their expression of anger is not unexpected. By using the slave as an intermediary, the vineyard owner could avoid direct confrontation with his tenants. The tenants' anger would be directed at the slave instead, that is, the slave would suffer beatings as a substitute for his master.

The reference to the vineyard owner's "beloved son" (Mark 12:6, Luke 20:13, and Matt 21:37 has "son" only), who was sent into the vineyard after the

7 Kristina Sessa, *The Formation of Papal Authority in Late Antique Italy: Roman Bishops and the Domestic Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 47. See also her section on "The Householder's Intermediaries: Stewards and Domestic Agents," 47–53.

8 Sessa, *The Formation of Papal Authority*, 53.

9 On agricultural work in antiquity, see Kristina Sessa, *Daily Life in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 27–29.

10 On the use of slaves in business transactions, see Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 275–284.



mistreatment of the slaves, is probably the main unusual element in the parable and is indicative of its christological meaning. While one cannot rule out the possibility that a landlord might use his son as a representative of the family's power vis-à-vis the tenants, he would probably send an overseer first or even go himself.<sup>11</sup> The reference to the "beloved son" creates tension and raises the suspicion that the tenants might attack him in the same way they had attacked the slaves before. In Mark 1:11 it is stated that after Jesus's baptism "a voice came forth from heaven, saying: 'You are my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased'" (cf. Mark 9:7). The connection between the "beloved son" in the parable and the reference to Jesus as the "beloved son" in Mark 9:7 and elsewhere would have been evident to the gospels' readers and audiences. The tenants' desire to kill the son and claim his "inheritance" seems to be formulated on the basis of the author's theological views. From the perspective of logic and everyday life, the vineyard's fruits were not the son's inheritance but the annual levy his father charged his tenants. Even if they killed the son, they would not be able to take possession of the fruits or some other "inheritance" without incurring severe punishment from the landlord. This element therefore does not fit the logic of the narrative and must have been inserted for theological reasons by an author who belonged to the post-Easter community, to suggest that the current tenants (imagined as Jewish leaders: Pharisees or priests) will be punished for their alleged opposition to the son (Jesus) by being replaced by a new set of tenants (Jesus's followers).<sup>12</sup>

The concrete realm of the narrated world of parables is shaped by the spiritual realm they are meant to elucidate. In parables as extended metaphors, these two dimensions form a unit that cannot be easily disentangled. As Emilio Rivano Fischer has emphasized, "[m]etaphor works with dualism, that is, two irreducible sides, like mind-body, spirit-matter, idea-thing, concept-experience. And metaphor works by creating bridges, pairings, between them. Metaphor

11 John S. Kloppenborg, *The Tenants in the Vineyard: Ideology, Economics, and Agrarian Conflict in Jewish Palestine*, WUNT 195 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 40, thinks that "the sending of the son was NOT an act of parental madness but a predictable and perfectly appropriate strategy in a culture where status displays form part of the lexicon of power arrangements." Yet the tenants would have known that the son was a) subordinate to his father and therefore lacking in independent power, and b) particularly dear to his father and therefore vulnerable. When the parable was told, the listeners must have suspected that the son would be attacked as well.

12 On this theological framework, see Donahue and Harrington, *Gospel of Mark*, 340. See also Eve-Marie Becker, *Das Markus-Evangelium im Rahmen antiker Historiographie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 168, who considers Mark 12:12 a foreshadowing of the alleged decision of the "Pharisees/priests" to kill Jesus, in line with Mark 3:6, 11:18, and 14:1.

makes a leap between these two irreducible sides.”<sup>13</sup> Just as the landlord has authority over his dependents, the spiritual dimension of the parable determines the way in which the narrated world is presented, that is, art and creativity transform reality. The ambiguity between real and unreal, that is, the creation of a narrated world that stands at the margins of the possible while foreshadowing the impossible, is one of the hallmarks of parabolic speech.

In the first parable (Mark 12:1–9) the vineyard owner stands for God. Rather than an ordinary vineyard owner who is mainly interested in his profits, the parable assumes that God has planted a vineyard to provide sustenance to its workers. While an ordinary landowner would hardly expose his son to a dangerous confrontation with unruly subordinates, God would give the tenants another chance. In Mark 12:8–9, where the killing of the son is mentioned, the christological meaning of the parable becomes evident, especially when read in the context of the gospel’s following passion narrative. The storyteller was guided by the christological belief in Jesus as God’s “beloved son” and his alleged mistreatment by his contemporaries. The reference to the death of the son suggests that the parable was not formulated by Jesus himself but by his followers after his crucifixion.

The author of the second parable in Mark 13:34–37 was guided by a belief in Jesus’s resurrection and return in the near future. Both parables have their *Sitz im Leben* in the post-Easter community.<sup>14</sup> The domestics’ required readiness for and alertness to their master’s homecoming fits the mentioned hierarchical power structures. So does the absence of knowledge about the time of the householder’s return from a distant journey. Many variables are involved here, such as the weather conditions, the availability of ships or caravans, unforeseen interruptions, and the behaviour of travel companions. In their master’s absence and without strict surveillance, domestics might be inclined to neglect their duties.

In the context of the Gospel of Matthew (21:33–41), where the first parable appears with few changes (two groups of slaves are sent out into the vineyard and mistreated by the tenants), its anti-Jewish impact is expressed more openly. After the parable, the following statement is attributed to Jesus:

13 Emilio Rivano Fischer, *Metaphor: Art and Nature of Language and Thought* (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2011), 55.

14 See also Dean B. Deppe, *The Theological Intentions of Mark’s Literary Devices: Markan Intercalations, Frames, Allusionary Repetitions, Narrative Surprises, and Three Types of Mirroring* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 326: “Mark is speaking metaphorically and theologically to his community”; Graham H. Twelftree, *In the Name of Jesus: Exorcism Among Early Christians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 104, points to Mark 13:37, where “this parable [is] immediately applied to the readers.”

“Therefore I say to you: The kingdom of God shall be taken from you and given to an *ethnos* that brings forth these fruits” (Matt 21:43). Those who formulated this sentence lived at a time when it had become clear that most Jews did not believe in Jesus as the predicted Messiah. In this context, the parable is used to express Christian disappointment about their unsuccessful missionary activities amongst Jews.<sup>15</sup> Jewish-Christian leaders may have identified with the slaves sent into the vineyard, who were not welcomed by its custodians. Consequently, they threatened their fellow Jews with divine punishment.

The use of the term *ethnos* is interesting here. The reference to “another *ethnos*” probably indicates the change of focus toward missionary activity amongst gentiles. Or Christians (of any background) considered themselves a new *ethnos* on religious grounds.<sup>16</sup> The terminology may suggest a Jewish-Christian perspective: Jews would have considered themselves an *ethnos* and may have viewed others in the same vein.<sup>17</sup> According to Matt 21:45, priests and Pharisees identified with the wicked tenants mentioned in the parable (cf. Luke 20:19; chief priests and scribes). The shift to another *ethnos* is not mentioned by Luke, perhaps because the new focus on mission amongst gentiles had already been accomplished in his community.<sup>18</sup>

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- 15 George Wesley Buchanan, *The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 2 (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 835, confirms that “the most normal way to read Matthew 21:43 is to assume the message was directed to the chief priests and Pharisees mentioned in Matt 21:45.” See also Klyne Snodgrass, *The Parable of the Wicked Tenants: An Enquiry into Parable Interpretation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 68–70, 91–94. According to Kloppenborg, *Tenants in the Vineyard*, 193, “it is possible to understand Matt 21,43 as addressing a priestly *ethnos*, threatening it with dispossession by a similar *ethnos* represented by the Jesus movement.”
- 16 On early Christian self-identification as an *ethnos*, see Denise Kimber Buell, *Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 69: “If we adopt an approach to ethnicity/race as fluid ..., it is no longer necessary to sharply differentiate early Christian appeals to being an *ethnos* from those of any other group.”
- 17 On this issue, see Dennis C. Duling, “Ethnicity, Ethnocentrism, and the Matthean Ethnos,” *BTB* 35 (2005): 125–143; Martha Himmelfarb, “Judaism in Antiquity: Ethno-Religion or National Identity,” *JQR* 99 (2009): 65–73. Steve Mason, “Jews, Judaeans, Judaizing, Judaism: Problems of Categorization in Ancient History,” *JSJ* 38 (2007): 457–512; Mason, “Jews, Judaeans, Judaizing, Judaism,” 457, writes that Jews “were understood until late antiquity as an ethnic group comparable to other ethnic groups with their distinctive laws, traditions, customs, and God.”
- 18 Cf. Stephen G. Wilson, *The Gentiles and the Gentile Mission in Luke-Acts*, *SNTSMS* 23 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 251: “the end of Acts seems to indicate the end of the Jewish mission and usher in the era of Gentile Christianity.”

## 2 The *Peculium* Parable in Matt 25:14–30 and Luke 19:12–26

In the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, Mark's short second slave parable (13:34–37) is replaced by a much longer and more complex parable that seems to reflect the Roman institution of the *peculium*, money given to slaves to do business with.<sup>19</sup> As Robert T. Kendall has already pointed out, the Greek *τάλα-ντα* means “money,” not “a gift or ability.”<sup>20</sup> Luke's version uses the term *μνά* (*mina*), a weight and sum of money equal to one hundred drachmae. What the two versions of this parable share with Mark is a householder who went on a journey and entrusted (some of) his property to his slaves. Mark briefly mentions that the slaves were engaged in various types of (domestic) work before focussing attention on the doorkeeper meant to be alert at the time of his master's return (Mark 13:34). Yet the distinction between the slaves is much more complex in Matthew and Luke. An earlier version of this parable may have been part of the Sayings Source Q. Due to the significant differences between Matthew and Luke, such an earlier version is no longer recoverable, however.<sup>21</sup> According to Matthew's version, the slaves received different amounts of money, “each according to his ability,” without any further instructions as to what to do with it (Matt 15:15). In Luke's version, on the other hand, ten slaves receive ten coins each, with an explicit instruction: “Trade with these until I return” (Luke 19:13).

While Matthew envisions an ordinary (wealthy) householder, Luke turns him into an aristocrat and royal contender. He allegedly “went into a far country to receive a kingdom and then return” (Luke 19:12). But the citizens of his own country “hated him and sent an embassy after him, saying, ‘We do not want this man to reign over us’” (19:14). This unusual element of the householder

19 This aspect seems to be misunderstood by David Flusser, “Aesop's Miser and the Parable of the Talents,” in *Parable and Story in Judaism and Christianity*, ed. Clemens Thoma and Michael Wyschogrod (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 9–10, who views the talents as a deposit and writes: “The meaning of the text is that God has bestowed upon each one of us our individual abilities and everyone is obligated to fully develop his special talent which has been graciously granted to him, in order that it may be productive” (10). If so, the third slave's action of safekeeping the money should have been acknowledged as in line with his character.

20 Robert T. Kendall, *The Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Chosen Books, 2008), 321.

21 For an attempt to reconstruct an earlier version, see Adelbert Denaux, “The Parable of the Talents/Pounds (Q 19, 12–27): A Reconstruction of the Q Text,” in *The Sayings Source Q and the Historical Jesus*, ed. Andreas Lindemann, BETL 158 (Leuven: Peeters, 2001), 429–460. See also Hildegard Scherer, “Coherence and Distinctness: Exploring the Social Matrix of the Double Tradition,” in: *Gospel Interpretation and the Q-Hypothesis*, ed. Mogens Müller and Heike Omerzu (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018), 195.

having been appointed king abroad upon his return becomes relevant later, with regard to the reward he is able to bestow upon his slaves (in Luke 19:17, the slave whose money has increased most is made governor over five cities), and the threatened punishment of his fellow-citizens who initially rejected him: “But as for these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slay them before me” (Luke 19:27).

Whereas the king is used as a common metaphor for God in rabbinic parables,<sup>22</sup> here the aristocrat appointed king seems to stand for Jesus as the Messiah.<sup>23</sup> This added detail seems to be motivated by Luke’s christological perspective. On the metaphorical level, the citizens of his own home country who rejected him seem to represent Jews. The threat of violence against these alleged “enemies” (Luke 19:27: “slay them before me”) would then have a strong anti-Jewish significance. This interpretation seems to be supported by the following narrative about Jesus’s entry into Jerusalem and his eventual passion and crucifixion (Luke 19:28ff.). Lloyd Gaston points to Luke’s presentation of the people as Jesus’s enemies in his version of the passion narrative.<sup>24</sup> According to Luke 23:24, “He [Pilate] delivers him [Jesus] up to the will [of the Jews].”<sup>25</sup> Pilate is thereby exculpated from the execution of Jesus. Altogether, the kingship detail seems artificial, since it is not necessary for the plot of the parable. It is absent in Matthew’s version, which lacks christological and anti-Jewish aspects and is more likely to have been told by Jesus himself.

In Matthew’s parable, the slaves are appointed as their master’s business representatives during his absence. This was a common role with which masters entrusted their better educated slaves. Slaves were allocated variable amounts of money, the so-called *peculium*, to do business with and ideally increase their master’s property. In imperial times, the *peculium* “had become a ubiquitous feature of Roman economic life ... Particularly slaves ... actively traded with their *peculia*, in effect operating as managers of quasi-independent ‘firms’ although still within the ambit of the familiar.”<sup>26</sup> In their role as businessmen, slaves remained subordinate to the householder and had to render him

22 Ignaz Ziegler, *Die Königsgleichnisse des Midrasch beleuchtet durch die römische Kaiserzeit* (Breslau: Schottlaender, 1903).

23 See also Frank Stern, *A Rabbi Looks at Jesus’ Parables* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 129, who points out that in Luke the parable appears before Jesus’s entry into Jerusalem.

24 Lloyd Gaston, “Anti-Judaism and the Passion Narrative in Luke and Acts,” in *Anti-Judaism in Early Christianity*, vol. 1, *Paul and the Gospels*, ed. Peter Richardson and David Granskou, SCJ 2/1 (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1986), 148.

25 Gaston, “Anti-Judaism,” 149.

26 Bruce W. Frier and Thomas A.J. Mc Ginn, *A Casebook on Roman Family Law*, CRS 5 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 21.

account of their actions. If they were particularly successful in their trades, they would be rewarded by their master and could accumulate a certain amount of wealth with which they could eventually purchase their freedom.<sup>27</sup> Although the term *peculium* is not used in ancient Jewish literary sources, rabbinic literature indicates that a similar practice existed in Jewish society.<sup>28</sup> The Tosefta stipulates that “the slave who does business with what belongs to his master, behold ... [the proceeds] belong to the master” (t. B. Qam. 11:2).

A master would carefully assess his slave’s business acumen before entrusting his property to him.<sup>29</sup> In Matt 25:15, this differentiation between slaves is expressed in the comment that money was given “to each according to his ability.” The different amounts of money given to the slaves (five-two-one talents) would have created a hierarchy amongst them. The audience would already suspect the third slave to be less business-oriented than the first and second. In the course of the narrative, this suspicion is confirmed. While the first and second slave are able to increase the capital by one hundred percent through trading, the third slave was anxious about a possible loss and merely hid the coin in the ground, a common way of safekeeping valuables in antiquity.<sup>30</sup>

Since masters would be interested in and reward their servile businessmen’s ability to make a profit, even if this involved risk-taking, the homecoming householder’s reaction is understandable. He praises and elevates the slaves who were able to double his property. The character of a typical householder is expressly described in the third slave’s statement: “Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not winnow” (Matt 25:24; cf. Luke 19:21). His anxiety also indicates the risks that servile businessmen took when using their master’s property. A loss would be considered their own responsibility and have severe consequences. Therefore,

27 On the *peculium*, see also Kyle Harper, *Slavery in the Late Roman World, AD 275–425* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 127, who shows that the church fathers were familiar with this institution.

28 See Hezser, *Jewish Slavery*, 276–280. See also Boaz Cohen, “Peculium in Jewish and Roman Law,” *PAAJR* 20 (1951): 135–234.

29 See also Sam Tsang, *Right Parables, Wrong Perspectives: A Diverse Reading of Luke’s Parables* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 136, with regard to Luke’s version: “With such a large sum, the slaves were obviously trusted stewards in the nobleman’s household. People didn’t just leave large sums of money for slaves to handle if the slaves didn’t have financial skill.”

30 See Catherine Hezser, “Finding a Treasure: The Treasure Motif in Jewish and Christian Parables and Stories in the Context of Jewish and Roman Law and Social Reality,” in *Overcoming Dichotomies: Parables, Fables, and Similes in the Graeco-Roman World*, ed. Albertina Oegema, Jonathan Pater, and Martijn Stoutjesdijk, *WUNT* 483 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022), 295–325.

the audience would have sympathized with the third slave and understood the reasons for his behaviour. The householder's reaction confirms the slave's assumption about his hard character. Since the slave should have known that he was meant to increase the entrusted money, he should have acted wisely and invested it instead (Matt 25:27). His foolishness consists in his avoidance of risk and is punished with the loss of his *peculium*. By contrast, the slaves who took the risk and invested the money are praised and rewarded at the end.

Luke, who has increased the number of slaves and the coins they were given to ten (19:13), nevertheless focusses on the actions of three in the confrontation between slave and master. The increase to ten slaves is entirely irrelevant to the plot and was likely added by Luke or at a pre-redactional stage. In contrast to Matthew, who attributes the same one hundred percent increase of the capital to the first and second slaves, Luke creates a hierarchy between them as far as their business success and reward is concerned (the second slave makes a profit of only fifty percent and is set over five cities). In both Gospels the third slave is punished by being left empty-handed. Altogether, Luke's version is much less realistic than Matthew's. The aspects of the kingdom, hostile citizens, and cities are irrelevant for the progression of the plot-line. These motifs belong to an entirely different field of images (*Bildfeld*) than the slave-master-*peculium* narrative. They seem to have been imposed on an earlier parable that Luke shared with Matthew.<sup>31</sup>

Since the same *nimshal* follows both Matthew's and Luke's version of the parable, it is likely to have been attached to the parable already in their shared source. The sentence "For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away" (Matt 25:29; cf. Luke 19:26, where the added introduction, "I tell you," attributes this statement to Jesus)<sup>32</sup> could be understood as a critical commentary on social reality: the wealthy become ever more rich, whereas the poor can easily lose the little they own. Applied to the slave experience, this would mean that the most capable servile businessmen are rewarded by their masters by being given a share of the proceeds and eventual freedom, whereas the less capable slaves are used for hard physical labour and exploited more. Such an understanding would fit the social context of Jesus's preaching amongst the uneducated and poor members of Jewish society.

31 On Luke's transformation of the parable, see Merrill Kitchen, "Rereading the Parable of the Pounds: A Social and Narrative Analysis of Luke 19:11–28," in *Prophecy and Passion: Essays in Honour of Athol Gill*, ed. David Neville (Adelaide: Australian Theological Forum, 2002), 227–246.

32 The saying also appears in Gos. Thom. 41, where it is attributed to Jesus.

In the post-Easter context of the gospels, the meaning was probably different. The daring slaves who increase the master's profits may have stood for Christian community leaders ready to carry out missionary activities. While the time of Jesus's return was uncertain, they were urged to make the most of the pre-eschatological period.<sup>33</sup> The risk-averse slave may have been identified with those who tried to maintain the *status quo* in the face of Roman repercussions. If so, early Christian community leaders may have turned a social-critical parable into a call for adventurous community-building in a hostile political environment. In Luke, the added element of the enemies of the new king adds an anti-Jewish aspect. This may be a foreshadowing of the subsequent part of the gospel, where Jesus enters Jerusalem (Luke 19:28ff.) and is called "king" by his adherents (Luke 19:38, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!"). With the addition of the kingship element to the parable, those who reject the new king are symbolically destroyed by him at the end (Luke 19:27).

### 3 The Parable in the Gospel of the Hebrews

The apocryphal Gospel of the Hebrews is known only through quotations and references in the texts of some church fathers.<sup>34</sup> In his *Theophania*, Eusebius refers to an alternative version of the *peculium* parable:

For the gospel that has come to us in Hebrew characters does not bring condemnation on the one who hid [the money] but on the one who lived dissolutely. For he had three slaves: the one who squandered the wealth of the master with prostitutes and flute-players, the one who greatly

33 See also already Günther Bornkamm, "Enderwartung und Kirche im Matthäusevangelium," in *The Background of the New Testament and Its Eschatology: Studies in Honour of C.H. Dodd*, ed. William D. Davies and David Daube (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), 231: "Auch das Talentengleichnis rechnet, ... mit dem langen Ausbleiben des Herrn ... Durchweg ist der Gerichtsgedanke in diesen Gleichnissen auf die Kirche angewandt." Lane C. McGaughey, "The Fear of Yahwe and the Mission of Judaism: A Postexilic Maxim and its Early Christian Expansion in the Parable of the Talents," *JBL* 94 (1975): 238, also associates the householder's absence with "the interval between the ascension and the second coming."

34 Cyril of Jerusalem, *Disc. Mary Theot.* 12a; Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 2.12.87; Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 2.9.45.5, 5.14.96.3, and Jerome, *Comm. Isa.* 4; Jerom, *Comm. Eph.* 3; Jerome, *Comm. Ezech.* 6; Jerome, *Vir. Ill.* 2. On the nature and development of the text, see especially James R. Edwards, *The Hebrew Gospel and the Development of the Synoptic Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).



increased the principal sum, and the one who hid the talent. One of them was praised; another was merely rebuked; the other was locked up in prison. As for the last condemnation of the slave who earned nothing, I wonder if Matthew repeated it not with him in mind but rather with reference to the slave who caroused with the drunks.<sup>35</sup>

EUSEBIUS, *Theoph.* 4.22

The Gospel of the Hebrews, to which Eusebius refers, allegedly transmitted an alternative version of the parable. Eusebius seems to be summarising that version rather than quoting it. He knew Matthew's version too and tries to correct Matthew on the basis of the Hebrew version. James R. Edwards follows Rudolf Handmann in considering this Hebrew version the simplest and earliest known version of the parable.<sup>36</sup> Such a view is problematic, however, because we lack direct access to the text of this alleged gospel. Eusebius may have summarized a more detailed version of the parable. There is no indication that he quoted from the text itself. In any case, his Greek rendering of an originally Hebrew text would have constituted an interpretation. His own commentary is interwoven into his rendition of the parable.<sup>37</sup>

In Eusebius's rendering of the Hebrew parable we are not told how much money the slaves were given by their master. The focus is on the slaves' different behaviours. In contrast to Matthew and Luke, who feature two business-worthy slaves who increased their master's property, and one anxious slave who merely preserved the money entrusted to him, this parable presents three different reactions on the part of the slaves: one who increased his master's profits, one who preserved the capital, and one who deliberately squandered it for his own benefit. From a literary point of view, such a tripartite division of characters seems preferable. In the synoptic parables the second slave, who increased the property to a lesser degree and is praised like the first, seems superfluous. This difference changes the meaning of the parable, however.

In contrast to the wicked slave, whose behaviour was illegal, the third slave who hid and preserved the money to return it to his master intact is

35 Translation with Edwards, *Hebrew Gospel*, 63–64.

36 Edwards, *Hebrew Gospel*, 64, with reference to Rudolf Handmann, *Das Hebräer-Evangelium: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte und Kritik des Habräischen Matthäus* (PhD diss., Theologischen Facultät Marburg, 1888), 103.

37 For a more critical approach to reconstructions of the Gospel to the Hebrews, see also Guido Baltes, *Hebräisches Evangelium und synoptische Überlieferung: Untersuchungen zum hebräischen Hintergrund der Evangelien*, WUNT 2/312 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 145–146, and 145n519 for a summary of earlier scholarship.

exculpated. Eusebius assumes that what he did was perfectly legitimate. His master's reaction to his behaviour is said to have been less devastating: he is "merely rebuked," whereas the truly wicked slave is imprisoned. The contrast reveals the overreaction of the master in the synoptic versions. A slave who was expected to do business with his master's property but did not receive more detailed instructions may have been at a loss on how to proceed, especially if he lacked trading experience. The master's harsh reaction, although befitting his character, seems overly strict in view of the fact that he recovers his money upon his return. From this perspective, the master's treatment of the three slaves in the Gospel of the Hebrews seems more plausible. Only the slave who deliberately loses his master's property is punished severely, whereas the slave who preserved the property is admonished so that he might change his behaviour in a similar situation in the future.

These differences in the plot suggest that the parables had different meanings within the social contexts in which they were used. As noted above, Matthew's parable may have been used to motivate missionary activity in the post-Easter community. A small success in gaining adherents would be considered better than inactivity. The Christians who told the version transmitted by Eusebius would have had a different type of behaviour in mind. According to Edwards, "the dissolute servant in the Hebrew Gospel citation is a mirror image of the prodigal younger son in Luke 15:13, 30 ... both lexically and thematically."<sup>38</sup> This is an interesting observation, for both slaves and sons were dependents of the householder and lacked legal authority over the property given to them.

Like slaves, sons could be given a *peculium*, but the property ultimately belonged to the father and master, who would be affected by its increase or decrease.<sup>39</sup> Thomas Collett Sandars writes: "The son might have a *peculium* or property under his control, which, so far as third persons went, who could sue and recover to the extent of the *peculium*, was like the son's property; but the father remained the legal owner of it, and it was only under the son's control because the father permitted this."<sup>40</sup> For cases where the son or slave incurred losses or debts, Roman law discusses complex liability issues.<sup>41</sup> The Tosefta similarly stipulates: "The son who does business with what belongs

38 Edwards, *Hebrew Gospel*, 65.

39 See Adolf Berger, "Peculium," in *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Roman Law*, ed. Adolf Berger (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1953; repr. 1991), 624.

40 Thomas Collett Sandars, *The Institutes of Justinian*, 5th ed. (London: Longmans Green, 1874), 522.

41 See Frier and McGinn, *Casebook*, 282–286.

to his father, and likewise the slave who does business with what belongs to his master, behold, they [the proceeds] belong to the father, behold, they [the proceeds] belong to the master” (t. B. Qam. 11:2). The fact that sons and slaves could do business on behalf of their fathers and masters but were not owners of the property and could not be sued was an advantage in certain business transactions.<sup>42</sup> In all likelihood, slaves would have been punished severely if they incurred losses or wasted the householder’s property.

The threat of imprisonment, mentioned in the version of the parable according to the Gospel of the Hebrews, would have come from the master rather than an external legal authority. Luke’s prodigal son aspires to fill the position of a labourer in his father’s household (Luke 15:17; μίσθοι). In contrast to the severe punishment of the slave in the Hebrew Gospel, the son is pardoned, re-admitted into the household, and reacknowledged as his father’s son and eventual heir. Both the real-life status difference between sons and slaves and the son’s acknowledgement of his misbehaviour would have justified the father’s mercy on him in the perception of the audience.

For whom, then, did the wicked slave in the Gospel of the Hebrew’s version stand? That depends on what the hiding of the money means and in which social contexts the parable would have been told. If the motif of hiding the money refers to Christians who tried to keep the Christian message hidden amongst themselves rather than engaging in public missionising activities, the tolerance—but also criticism—of such behaviour would fit some early Christian circles. Some Christians may have tried to emulate the idea of the kingdom of God as a hidden treasure, expressed in the treasure parable in Matt 13:44.<sup>43</sup> Although the authors and tradents of the parable in the Gospel of the Hebrews would have preferred a more active propagation of the Christian message to gain more adherents, they did not outright condemn the views of (crypto-?)Christians who took a more guarded approach.

#### 4 Rabbinic Analogies

That the safekeeping of entrusted property was a Jewish moral value is evident from rabbinic texts:

<sup>42</sup> See Hezser, *Jewish Slavery*, 276.

<sup>43</sup> On treasure parables, see Hezser, “Finding a Treasure.”

When the son of R. Yohanan b. Zakkai died, his students went in to console him ... R. Elazar b. Azariah entered ... He entered and sat before him. And he said to him: I shall tell you a parable: To what can the matter be likened? To a person to whom the king entrusted a deposit. Every day he wept and cried and said: "Alas, when shall I go out from [the duty of keeping] this deposit intact? You too, Rabbi, had a son. He recited Torah, Scripture, Prophets and Writings, Mishnah, Halakhot, and Aggadot and [then] departed from the world without sin. And you should receive consolation, for you returned your deposit intact."

Avot R. Nath. A 14

משול לך משל למה"ד לאדם שהפקיד  
אצלו המלך פקדון בכל יום ויום היה  
בוכה וצועק ואומר אוי לי אימתי אצא מן  
הפקדון הזה בשלום אף אתה רבי היה  
לך בן קרא תורה מקרא נביאים וכתובים  
משנה הלכות ואגדות ונפטר מן העולם  
בלא חטא [ויש לך לקבל עליך תנחומים  
כשחזרת פקדונך שלם]

While the literary context relates the parable to the death of Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai's son, suggesting that children are deposits entrusted to their parents, when seen as an independent unit the parable may well relate to Israel's safekeeping—and study—of the Torah. Lane C. McGaughey writes: "This parable typifies the rabbinic attitude which prevailed in Jesus' day. This attitude was driven by Torah ... Central to this rabbinic world was the unquestioned notion that Israel's calling was to guard the sacred tradition ... and to preserve it intact" until future messianic times.<sup>44</sup> Although the rabbinic movement had not emerged yet in Jesus's time, the notion of safeguarding the Torah was a Pharisaic-rabbinic value that existed before 70 CE and was emphasized after the destruction of the Temple, that is, at the time when the gospels were written. Whether imagined as a deposit, *peculium*, or treasure, the Torah would then have been contrasted with the new Christian message of the kingdom of God. Whether this new message should be kept safe in hiding or propagated publicly may have been contested amongst Christians.

Rabbinic documents also transmit parables that focus on the behaviour of slaves who receive something from their master. The following parable is transmitted in the Tannaitic midrash Sifre Deuteronomy:

44 McGaughey, "Fear of Yahweh," 243.

A parable concerning a king who gave a field as a gift to his slave. He gave it to him just as it is [i.e., barren]. The slave went and improved it and said: "What I have was given to me just as it is." He [the slave] returned and planted a vineyard and said: "What I have was given to me just as it is."

Sifre Deut. 8

משל למלך שנתן לעבדו שדה אחת במתנה ולא נתנה לו אלא כמות שהיא. עמד העבד והשביחה ואמר: מה בידי לא נתנה לי אלא כמות שהיא. חזר ונטעה כרם אמר מה בידי לא נתנה לי אלא כמות שהיא

The emphasis here is on the contrast between the barren plot of land and the cultivated vineyard that is the outcome of the slave's hard work. In its praise of the slave's own initiative to make the field profitable, the parable resembles the *peculium* parable in Matthew and Luke. The distinction between the *peculium* and the gift means that the slave in the midrashic parable improved the field for his own benefit, whereas the profits made by the slaves in the New Testament parable benefited their master.

In Roman law, slaves could not own property and this rule seems to have been common knowledge in Roman Palestine.<sup>45</sup> Yet there were exceptions to this principle, for example, if the master rewarded his slave's good work or decided to include him in his will.<sup>46</sup> In the latter case, slaves could become free. The Mishnah states:

[If] he writes over his property to his slave, he becomes a free person. [But if] he [the master] maintains any amount of landed property, he [the slave] does not become free. R. Shimon says: "In any case he becomes a free person, unless he [his master] says: 'Behold, all of my property shall be given to So-and-so, my slave, except for one ten-thousandth of it.'"

M. Peah 3:8

הכותב נכסיו לעבדו יצא בן חורין. שיר קרקע כל שהוא לא יצא בן חורין. רבי שמעון אומר לעולם הוא בן חורין עד שיאמר הרי כל נכסי נתונין לאיש פלוני עבדי חוץ מאחד מרבוא שבהן

The rabbinic controversy over the issue is also evident in the Tosefta parallel to this discussion (t. Peah 1:3), which rules that the property excluded from the

45 Hezser, *Jewish Slavery*, 284.

46 Hezser, *Jewish Slavery*, 166–168.

inheritance must be specified to be legally binding. In any case, the parable refers to an unspecified gift rather than an inheritance and there is no indication that the slave was set free.

The slave's improvement of the field is mentioned in two steps. After a general improvement, the vineyard was planted. In both cases, the slave draws attention to the significant change which his own work brought about. In the literary context of Sifre Deuteronomy, the improvement is further extended. The parable is applied to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Quoting Gen 13:17, "Get up and walk around the Land, its length and breadth, for to you have I given it," the slave is compared to Abraham, to whom God gave the land of Israel. First Abraham improved it, then Isaac, and then Jacob, so that it yielded crops "and he [Jacob] acquired a share in the field" (Gen 33:19).<sup>47</sup> As in the case of the king's slave, the patriarchs' work improved the land which ultimately belongs to God. While the slave's participation in the ownership of the field remains dubious, Jacob is said to have shared ownership with God. In the context of late antiquity, when Byzantine rulers claimed the land of Israel as the Christian "Holy Land," this midrash emphasized the divine legitimation of Jewish ownership of the land, tracing it back to ancient patriarchal times.

The most commonly cited analogy to the New Testament parable appears in the post-classical rabbinic work *Seder Eliyahu*, "an ethical discourse consisting of religious teachings, passages of retold Bible, exegesis, and parables."<sup>48</sup> The document is commonly dated to the ninth or tenth century CE and may have been composed in Byzantium.<sup>49</sup> The texts of the parables transmitted in this work could therefore not have been known to the editors of the Gospels. A discussion of the parable is relevant for conceptual reasons, however. Certain images and motifs associated with slave-ownership were probably used in variant combinations over centuries.

The parable in *Seder Eliyahu* is interwoven in a dialogue between a first-person narrator and a stranger he met on a journey, "who approached me in the way heretics do."<sup>50</sup> Since he is said to have had knowledge of Scripture but

47 Martin S. Jaffee's new English translation of Sifre Deuteronomy is available at <https://jewishstudies.washington.edu/book/sifre-devarim/chapter/pisqa-8>.

48 Constanza Cordoni, *Seder Eliyahu: A Narratological Reading*, SJ 100 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 3.

49 See the discussion in Cordoni, *Seder Eliyahu*, 7–15; Cordoni suggests that the author "might have been a Babylonian emigrant who had fled from Abbasid rule" and resided in Byzantium.

50 The translation here and below follows Cordoni, *Seder Eliyahu*, 177. The parable is also cited by Brad H. Young, *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 91.

not of the Mishnah, Wilhelm Bacher has already suggested that the parable was used in the context of anti-Karaite discourse.<sup>51</sup>

He said to me: Scripture was given to us from Mount Sinai, Mishnah was not given to us from Mount Sinai. And I answered him: My son, were not both Scripture and Mishnah uttered by the mouth of the Lord? What is the difference between Scripture and Mishnah?

They told a parable. What does the matter resemble? It is like a king of flesh and blood who had two slaves, whom he used to love with complete love. He gave one a measure of wheat and the other a measure of wheat. He gave one a bundle of flax and the other a bundle of flax. The clever one of the two, what did he do? He took the flax and wove it into a linen cloth. He took the wheat and made a dish of fine flour out of it. He sifted and ground it [the grain], kneaded it [the dough], baked it, set it on the table, and spread the linen cloth over it, but left it [there untouched] until the coming of the king. The foolish one did nothing at all. After some time the king came into his house and spoke to them like this: 'My sons, bring me what I gave you.' One brought out [a loaf of] the dish of fine flour upon the table and the tablecloth spread over it. The other brought out the wheat in a basket and on top of it the bundle of flax.

Oh, for such a shame! Oh, for such a disgrace! Alas, tell me, which of the two was dear to him? The one who brought out the table with [the loaf of] the dish of fine flour upon it.

S. Eli. Zut. 171, lines 16–28

In this parable, the slaves are given certain raw materials rather than money, but the master's expectation resembles that of the householder in the New Testament parable. The slaves are expected to make good use of the wheat and flax to produce something of higher value, namely a meal for the king. The two slaves who are contrasted here seem to stand for the Rabbanites and Karaites of the author's own time. Both had received the scriptural heritage of the Torah from God. Whereas the Rabbanites interpreted and applied it to new circumstances, creating a new body of Oral Torah, the Karaites merely read Scripture, preserving it in its "original" form for future generations. Like the New Testament parable, the "clever" slave's industriousness and enterprise is praised and presented as a model to emulate, whereas satisfaction with the *status quo* is rejected and associated with foolishness. The money or raw material that needs to be used, that is, interpreted, taught, and adapted to contemporary

<sup>51</sup> Wilhelm Bacher, "Antikaräisches in einem jüngeren Midrash," *MGWJ* 23 (1874): 268.

circumstances, is the Torah here, in contrast to the early Christian teaching about the kingdom of God in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

## 5 Conclusions

The study of selected slave parables in the Gospels and rabbinic literature has shown that the way in which social reality is presented is always governed by the specific theological, christological or parenetic purpose for which the parable is used. Social reality is the raw material that is transformed into concise fictional artifices. In fact, unreality, that is, the transgression of reality, seems to be crucial for parables to work metaphorically. A narrative that reflects social reality may be used to criticize reality by, for example, exaggerating certain aspects, as has been observed for the Matthean version of the *peculium* parable, which may have been used by Jesus or his early followers in a social-critical way. Nevertheless, for a parable to work on the metaphorical level, a certain degree of the unreal is necessary. In Luke's version, the unusual elements are increased, for instance by using the number ten (ten slaves who receive ten coins each) and by turning the householder into a nobleman about to become king. Tania Oldenhage refers to Ricoeur's use of the term "tension" to describe the relationship "between everyday life and what the story narrates, between reality as described and re-described."<sup>52</sup> The message the parable attempts to convey cannot be expressed in any other form.<sup>53</sup>

Parables share the utilization and functionalization of reality with other art forms, such as paintings. Rather than merely depicting reality, art represents it to convey particular social, philosophical, or political meanings. Therefore, theoretical discussions about the relationship between aesthetics and everyday life can be applied to parables as well. As Katya Mandoki has pointed out, "art and reality, like aesthetics and the everyday, are totally entwined, not thanks to the explicit will of the artist, but because there is nothing further, beneath or beyond reality."<sup>54</sup> Theoretical ideas such as the belief in Jesus's second coming or the relationship between the Torah and the Mishnah could be communicated to a wider audience through the creative use of familiar images. While parables cannot be used to extrapolate historically reliable information about

52 Tania Oldenhage, *Parables for Our Time: Rereading New Testament Scholarship after the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 119.

53 Oldenhage, *Parables for Our Time*, 121.

54 Katya Mandoki, *Everyday Aesthetics: Prosaics, the Play of Culture and Social Identities* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 15.



slavery, slave parables need to be studied within the social context of ancient slave practices and the literary contexts they are integrated in. Such twofold social and literary contextualization can guide us toward the meaning and function of the parable at the various stages of its (re)telling.

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## Parables between Realism and Ideology

*Anders Martinsen*

It is commonly accepted among New Testament scholars that the parables accurately depict the daily life of Jesus's surroundings.<sup>1</sup> This notion goes back to the inception of modern parable studies in the nineteenth century and has met little resistance from scholars since. In general, realism (or related terms), when applied to the parables, means that they refer to everyday life or nature.<sup>2</sup> This is akin to a common-sense understanding of realism, according to which something is realistic when things are represented "the way they are," as opposed to the fantastical, supernatural, or burlesque. The New Testament parables, as argued by Charles W. Hedrick, are realistic because they represent actions and events that could have taken place, and depict humans and nature accurately and neutrally.<sup>3</sup> Alternatively, when the parables reverse the expectations of their receivers or become hyperbolic, they still resonate with "the common life experience" of Jesus's listeners.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the purported

1 These assertions are, for instance, found in dictionaries and encyclopaedias; literature often encapsulates the consensus of the state of research. See John Dominic Crossan, "Parables," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:150; John Dominic Crossan, "Parable," in *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, ed. Paul J. Achtemeier, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), 805; see also Stephen I. Wright, "Parables," in *Dictionary of Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 1021; William D. Mounce, *Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 496; Daniel J. Harrington, "Parables," in *Historical Dictionary of Jesus*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, HDRPM 102 (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 115–116; Garwood Anderson, "Parables," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, eds. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown, and Nicholas Perrin, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 652. There are some exceptions; a more moderate proposal is found in Bruce D. Chilton, "Parables," in *Dictionary of Biblical Criticism and Interpretation*, ed. Stanley E. Porter (London: Routledge, 2007), 253–254.

2 This is typical of studies following the work of Charles Dodd and Joachim Jeremias; see below.

3 Charles W. Hedrick, *Many Things in Parables: Jesus and His Modern Critics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 4–81, and Charles W. Hedrick, "Survivors of the Crucifixion: Searching for the Profiles in the Parables," in *Hermeneutik der Gleichnisse Jesu: Methodische Neuansätze zum Verstehen urchristlicher Parabeltexte*, ed. Ruben Zimmermann, WUNT 231 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 165, 174 with n40, 178, and 179.

4 Ernest van Eck, *The Parables of Jesus the Galilean: Stories of a Social Prophet* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2016), 36–39. See also, Norman A. Huffman, "Atypical Features in the Parables of Jesus," *JBL* 97 (1978): 207–220.

realism in the parables is used to differentiate them from other ancient, comparative literature like fables and/or rabbinic parables.<sup>5</sup> Altogether, realism is considered one of the defining traits of the parables to the extent that it has become a truism that the parables of Jesus were realistic. But should this realism be taken for granted?

A cursory look at dictionaries on literary theory shows that realism is a contested concept,<sup>6</sup> which cannot simply be understood as the credible representation of some external, historical reality. Accordingly, the purpose of this article is to discuss realism as it is used in parable studies. The complexities involved in realism can be exemplified with a set of questions: What is realism? How does realism work in fiction? Are parables as a genre characterized by realism, or does this only hold for Jesus's parables? Moreover, how do we know that something is realistic? Is it because a credible or fair representation of the outside reality is given? Is it because the mode of representation is impartial and literary effects are toned down? Is it because the narrative successfully imitates real life? Finally, to whom is something realistic? Can we assume that the degree of realism is equal to every listener, and would the listeners in early Christianity perceive the parables as realistic? In this chapter, I will argue that the prevalent understanding of the parables as realistic is problematic, if not untenable. To do so, I will first provide a brief overview of the history of scholarship on parables, and trace the alleged realism of parables from early, critical parable studies to contemporary parable studies.<sup>7</sup> Next, I will problematize this realism by arguing that parables are realistic on a theoretical level, and, finally, show how scholars struggle to reconcile the violence in the parables with the notion of realism in them.

## 1 A Brief Overview of Scholarship on Parables and Realism

In the middle of the nineteenth century, scholars began to break with the old paradigm of interpreting the parables allegorically, morally, and in

5 John R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable: Metaphor, Narrative, and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 2 and 13; and Ruben Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables: Methods and Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 143, see also 53, 92–93, and 99.

6 See, for instance, Julian Wolfreys, Ruth Robbins, and Kenneth Womack, *Key Concepts in Literary Theory*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 85–86, and John Anthony Cuddon et al., *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, 5th ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 591–593.

7 For the sake of brevity, the presentation is not intended to be exhaustive but constitutes a representative discussion of parable studies and its history of scholarship.

harmony with church doctrine. Richard C. Trench, Siegfried Goebel, and Alexander B. Bruce started approaching the parables in a more systematic and methodological manner than previous generations had done. Bruce in particular challenged the dominance of allegorical interpretations. The three argued that the parables, in the words of Bruce, showed “fidelity to nature, and to the customs of the time in which they were spoken.”<sup>8</sup> For Trench and Goebel, this quality distinguished Jesus’s parables from rabbinic parables, which were supposedly unreal and inferior.<sup>9</sup> Significantly, these were preconceived contentions, not derived from a careful consideration of aesthetic criteria. For the rabbinic parables, their evaluation rested on a theological bias against Judaism.<sup>10</sup> This development in parable studies was paralleled in studies of the historical Jesus and early Christianity, which asserted that the parables—whether all of them, or a selection from Matthew—were authentic and shaped by Jesus’s surroundings in Galilee.<sup>11</sup> Liberal theologians interpreted the parables mostly as moral stories. Bernhard Weiss thus argued that the parables are dissociated from allegory. Instead, they are didactic narratives that refer to reality and real life. Jesus told parables to convey the message of the kingdom, but he also used the parables’ gnomic form to attract the attention of those most receptive to its message.<sup>12</sup> Adolf von Harnack, the leading liberal voice, argued that the parables of the kingdom convey purely moral matters, and as such formed the backbone of the religion of Jesus.<sup>13</sup>

These developments in studies of Jesus and the parables in the latter part of the nineteenth century were influential for the scholarly conviction that the parables of Jesus were unique in their context. This conviction was based upon an interpretation of the content in the parables conforming with the

8 Alexander B. Bruce, *The Parabolic Teaching of Christ: A Systematic and Critical Study of the Parables of Our Lord*, 4th rev. ed. (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, 1886), 1.

9 Richard C. Trench, *Notes on the Parables of Our Lord*, 14th ed. (London: MacMillan, 1882), 7; Siegfried Goebel, *The Parables of Jesus: A Methodical Exposition*, trans. Louis A. Banks (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1890), 4–9.

10 Trench, *Notes on the Parables*, 48–56; Goebel, *The Parables of Jesus*, 13–14. On Bruce and rabbinical parables, see: Bruce, *The Parabolic Teaching of Christ*, 214, 256n1. See also William Arnot, *The Parables of Our Lord* (London: Nelson, 1893), 21–36.

11 Ernest Renan, *Renan’s Life of Jesus: Translated with an Introduction*, trans. William G. Hutchison (London: Walter Scott, 1897), 106–109, and Ernest Renan, *The History of the Origins of Christianity*, vol. 5, *The Gospels* (London: Mathieson, 1890), 41–43 and 51–53; Ferdinand Christian Baur, *The Church History of the First Three Centuries*, trans. Allan Menzies, 2 vols., 3rd ed. (London: Williams and Norgate, 1878), 1:27–36. David Friedrich Strauss, *Das Leben Jesu für das deutsche Volk* (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1864), 194–195.

12 Bernhard Weiss, *The Life of Christ*, trans. John Walter Hope, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1883), 2:117–120 and 2:205–216.

13 Adolf von Harnack, *What Is Christianity?*, trans. Thomas Bailey Saunders, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Putnam’s Sons, 1908), 60 and 79.

interpreters' theological outlook. Jesus the moral storyteller owed more to the modern Christianity of the nineteenth century than the early Christianity of the first century. It is telling that Johannes Weiss's argument that Jesus's teaching was alien to modern sensibilities had little impact on parables studies.<sup>14</sup> Weiss's arguments about the eschatological kingdom, subsequently taken up also by Albert Schweitzer, did find their way into parable studies,<sup>15</sup> but the efforts to harmonize the message of the parables with modern theological sensibilities continued to shape the tendency of these studies. The notion of the realism of parables has its roots in this development. It is an assertion that uses the Jewish tradition and Greek parables as a negative backdrop in order to highlight the uniqueness of Jesus.

It was the publication of Adolf Jülicher's *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* that set the standard for interpreting the parables within the historical-critical paradigm. According to Jülicher, the parables were originally intended as lucid stories, unlike allegories, whose meaning is veiled. For this reason, the language and images in the parables had to be accessible to everyone.<sup>16</sup> Parables were meant to be understood the way they were told.<sup>17</sup> Notably, Jülicher did not share the common dismissal of fables as unrealistic,<sup>18</sup> but he did claim that the parables were uniquely related to Jesus by their "originality," "simplicity," and "naturalness."<sup>19</sup> Two of Jülicher's early critics, Christian Bugge and Paul Fiebig, blamed Jülicher for favouring Greek rhetoric over the Jewish tradition.<sup>20</sup> Although Fiebig emphasized the similarity between Jesus's parables and those of the rabbis, he still maintained the exceptionalism of Jesus and his parables.<sup>21</sup> The suggestion that the parables of Jesus overlapped with Greek fables and/or Jewish parables did not gain much traction among scholars after Fiebig. A more impartial investigation of parables as conventional and generic

14 Johannes Weiss, *Jesus's Proclamation of the Kingdom*, trans. Richard Hyde Hiers and David Larrimore Holland (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), 98, 107–108, and 113–114.

15 Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, trans. W. Montgomery, 2nd ed. (London: Black, 1911). See Charles H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, rev. ed. (London: Collins, 1978), 38–44 and 60–61.

16 Adolf Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 2 vols. (Freiburg: Mohr, 1888), 1:143–145, 53, 72–75, 81–85, 98, and 143–145.

17 Jülicher, *Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 111.

18 Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 101–103.

19 Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 179.

20 Christian August Bugge, *Die Haupt-Parabeln Jesu: Mit einer Einleitung über die Methode der Parabelauslegung* (Giessen: Ricker/Töpelmann, 1903); Paul Fiebig, *Altjüdische Gleichnisse und die Gleichnisse Jesu* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1904).

21 Fiebig, *Altjüdische Gleichnisse*, 162–163, concluded that the superiority of Jesus' parables concerned the form, not the content.

narratives could have worked to diminish the thesis of Jesus's singularity,<sup>22</sup> but the majority of New Testament studies continued to emphasize the uniqueness of Jesus and his parables.<sup>23</sup>

After Jülicher's *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, the most significant development in parable studies came from criticism. The proposal to understand parables in relation to Jesus's activities was proposed by Willard H. Robinson and then by Arthur T. Cadoux,<sup>24</sup> and developed further by arguably the two most influential twentieth-century parable scholars, Charles H. Dodd and Joachim Jeremias. Dodd argued that the parables should be understood in the context of Jesus's ministry.<sup>25</sup> In *The Parables of the Kingdom*, he proposed that a parable "is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life."<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, parables give "a more complete picture of *petit-bourgeois* and peasant life than we possess for any other province except Egypt."<sup>27</sup> This sense of the realism of parables had a clear existential and theological dimension that bridged "the Kingdom of God with the human world."<sup>28</sup> Here Dodd seems to be influenced by the tradition that connected the purported spiritual truths in the parables with their respect for the natural order. Jeremias's *The Parables of Jesus* was in a sense the culmination of the trajectory in parable studies after Jülicher. There had been a tendency in parable studies to argue that Jesus used parables to respond to the situation with which he was confronted—almost as a spontaneous riposte to his opponents. The naturalness of the parables served to support this proposition, since it showed how Jesus used his immediate surroundings to construct his parables. Jeremias's intention was to pinpoint the situation in which Jesus told his parables in order to retrieve their original meaning,<sup>29</sup> and he made them virtually inseparable from Jesus.<sup>30</sup> To reconstruct the original

22 See Martin Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel*, trans. Bertram Lee Woolf (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1935), 252–251.

23 For instance, Rudolf Bultmann, *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition*, 2nd ed., FRLANT 29 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1931), 222, argued that an authentic parable from Jesus was the obverse of Jewish piety.

24 Willard H. Robinson, *The Parables of Jesus in Relation to His Ministry* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1928). Robinson proposes that the naturalness of Jesus's parables makes them distinct from the rabbinic parables and fables (and even from parables in Buddhism), 53–86. Arthur T. Cadoux, *The Parables of Jesus: Their Art and Use* (New York: MacMillan, 1931), 9–59.

25 Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 23–27.

26 Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 16.

27 Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 21.

28 Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 20.

29 Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, transl. Samuel Henry Hooke, 3rd rev. ed. (London: SCM, 1972), 11–22.

30 See particularly Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 228–230.



form of the parables was to read a transcript of Jesus's very words. Hence, Jeremias had little interest in the Jewish tradition as an independent source of parables.<sup>31</sup>

Parable studies in the wake of Jülicher, Dodd, and Jeremias maintained this insistence on the realistic nature of parables.<sup>32</sup> The proponents of the historical-critical paradigm treated the parables as historical pieces in the sense that all the actions ought to be conceivable within a historical setting. To understand the parables was to find historical comparative sources that would explain them.<sup>33</sup> But against this historicism, scholars gradually began to turn their attention to the parables as literature.<sup>34</sup> This turned into an aesthetical approach to the parables that fused recent developments in literary theory, such as new criticism and structuralism, with German scholarship and the new/second quest and a phenomenological hermeneutic approach in the tradition of Rudolf Bultmann, referred to as the "new hermeneutic."<sup>35</sup> The key, as proposed by Ernst Fuchs, was for the parables to be seen as language events (*Sprachereignisse*). In other words, they invited the audience to a partial experience of Jesus's relationship with God.<sup>36</sup> The aesthetical-existential interpretation of the parables strongly emphasized language as constitutive of "our" reality and of the parables' ability to cause ruptures in "our" conventional

31 Bugge and Fiebig are referenced by Jeremias, but not discussed. Jeremias did not refer to William Oesterley, *The Gospel Parables in the Light of Their Jewish Background* (New York: MacMillan, 1936). Oesterley had suggested that the rabbinic parables may have had a long oral tradition (6–7). However, Oesterley also argued that the rabbinic parables paled in comparison to the gospel parables (10–11). On Jeremias and Judaism, see Tania Oldenhage, *Parables for Our Time: Rereading New Testament Scholarship after the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2002).

32 Thomas W. Manson, *Sayings of Jesus: As Recorded in the Gospels According to St. Mathew and St. Luke*, 7th ed. (London: SCM, 1977), 57–59; Geraint Vaughan Jones, *The Art and Truth of the Parables: A Study in Their Literary Form and Modern Interpretation* (London: SPCK, 1964), 57–58 and 77–79; Amos N. Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric: The Language of the Gospel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 73–74; and Archibald M. Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables*, 4th ed. (London: SCM, 1972), 8–19; and Charles W.F. Smith, *The Jesus of the Parables*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1975), 13–16.

33 John Duncan M. Derret, *Law in the New Testament* (London: Darton, Longman & Dodd, 1970), 31–39.

34 Early examples of this approach include Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric*; Jones, *The Art and Truth of the Parables*.

35 See Norman Perrin, *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom: Symbol and Metaphor in New Testament Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 107–127.

36 Ernst Fuchs, *Studies of the Historical Jesus*, SHT 42 (London: SCM, 1964), 30–32, 73–75, and 210–211. It was Eta Linnemann, a student of Fuchs, who developed the concept of language-events into a full study on the parables; see her *The Parables of Jesus: Introduction and Exposition*, trans. John Sturdy (London: SPCK, 1966).

understanding of the kingdom of God.<sup>37</sup> John Dominic Crossan stressed parables as subversive stories, arguing that Jesus was a radical poet whose parables “shatter the deep structure of our accepted world.”<sup>38</sup> While this was a new and, for the time, innovative approach to the parables, it attributed an unprecedented power to them, rendering them incomparable with other forms of narratives. Furthermore, the historical backdrop for Jesus and the parables rested on the work of Jeremias and on the second/new quest, especially its criterion of dissimilarity.<sup>39</sup> An unintentional ramification of this approach was its maintenance of the exceptionalism of Jesus evident in previous scholarship.

The fusion between the literary-aesthetical and historical approaches preserved the goal in parable studies: determining their primary meaning, be it through authorial intent or deep structure. The specific aspect of the aesthetical interpretation was that the literary theories employed were in a sense anti-historical and did not value authorial intent,<sup>40</sup> but the aesthetical movement did little to deflate the image of Jesus and the parables as unique.<sup>41</sup> Suggestions that the parables’ narrative structure, form, and rhetorical style revealed a generic compositional pattern did not fit these ideas of parables as extra-ordinary, challenging, and subversive stories.<sup>42</sup> Nor was the belief that the parables virtually provided a snapshot of ancient life disputed.<sup>43</sup>

The development of parables studies in the aftermath of the aesthetic movement added new perspectives from social history and social/cultural anthropology. The intention was to contextualize the parables by reconstructing their proper environment and the culturally conditioned expectations of the receivers.<sup>44</sup> Bernard Brandon Scott argued that the world of first-century

37 Robert W. Funk, *Language, Hermeneutic, and the Word of God: The Problem of Language in the New Testament and Contemporary Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 124–140 and 158–162; Dan O. Via, *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), 41, 188, and 192; John Dominic Crossan, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus* (Sonoma: Polebridge, 1992), 11–22.

38 John Dominic Crossan, *The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story* (Niles: Argus Communications, 1975), 123. Also, Robert W. Funk, *Parables and Presence: Form of the New Testament Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 16–19 and 30.

39 John Dominic Crossan, *Raid on the Articulate: Comic Eschatology in Jesus and Borges* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 175–177, and John Dominic Crossan, *Cliffs of Fall: Paradox and Polyvalence in the Parables of Jesus* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 48–49.

40 Paul Ricœur, “Biblical Hermeneutics,” *Semeia* 4 (1975): 29.

41 Mary Ann Tolbert, *Perspectives on the Parables: An Approach to Multiple Interpretations* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 42.

42 See Tolbert, *Perspectives on the Parables*, 70–91.

43 E.g., Perrin, *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom*, 104.

44 Kenneth E. Bailey introduced “Oriental exegesis” to bridge the gap between the otherness of first-century Palestine and the situation of contemporary readers of the parables;

Roman Palestine “informs the repertoire, the conventions, world view, ideologies, and stereotypes active in a text.”<sup>45</sup> The repertoire of the parables (like stock characters) was conventional, but their meanings were not. They reverse the expectations of the receivers.<sup>46</sup> In his interpretation of the parables, Scott attempts to reconstruct the implied reader (meaning that the text anticipates a response based on its structural patterns), based on knowledge of the parables’ context.<sup>47</sup> The difficulty, however, is that it is hard to reconstruct those expectations without making crude contrasts between the wisdom of Jesus and conventional wisdom.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, Scott’s elaborate interpretations make it doubtful whether a historical receiver would have understood the parables’ meaning.

A more simplified and direct approach to the parables as subversive was given by William R. Herzog. He combined socio-economic interpretations of the parables with the notion of the subversiveness of parables, especially in the political and material realm.<sup>49</sup> Herzog argues that parables contain types (for instance, the king) which point to the social experiences of the receivers (mostly peasants). Therefore, reconstructions must take the political and economic situation into account to properly grasp that experience.<sup>50</sup> The socio-political interpretations treat the parables as didactic vehicles with the intention of enlightening their receivers. This represents a return to a strong focus on authorial intent and the idea that the parables can only be understood within the correct historical framework. Jesus’s intention is thus considered to have been shaped by a certain socio-economic context. For instance, the unjust distribution of wealth becomes determinative for understanding Jesus’s intention as well as his parables, which in turn amounts to a very instrumental view on the parables as narratives. Likewise, Luise Schottroff argues that the parables address the political structures of their time and real-life

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see Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976); Kenneth E. Bailey, *Through the Peasant Eyes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980). At best, Bailey’s method is eclectic. He is unable to demonstrate how the narrative reflects oriental values other than anecdotally.

- 45 Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 76. According to Scott, the parables “have high verisimilitude, as attested by their use of everydayness, but everydayness has been fictionalized by being taken up into story!” (41).
- 46 Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 66–68.
- 47 Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 75.
- 48 On Judaism, see, e.g., Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 207, 234–235.
- 49 William R. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 3. Herzog models Jesus’s ministry on Paulo Freire (16–29).
- 50 Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 53–73.

issues, informed by “the Gospel of the poor.”<sup>51</sup> Schottroff’s approach cannot escape the same criticism levelled against Herzog, and she is often forced to work against the narrative in the parable to make her interpretations fit her commitment to a liberation theology program.

The social, historical, and literary interpretations of parables were criticized by scholars like Craig Blomberg and Klyne Snodgrass, who favoured a return to Jesus’s theological message.<sup>52</sup> At the same time, the developments in parable studies brought some changes, as new insights into rabbinic parables modified presuppositions about the singularity of the New Testament parables and toned down the naïve acceptance of realism.<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, parable studies still largely centre on Jesus—at times accompanied by exaggerated praise of Jesus as a “master storyteller.”<sup>54</sup> The strong emphasis on Jesus and his message or intent reduces parable studies to the study of Jesus as a charismatic individual whose success can be explained by the persuasive power of his parables. So too the emphasis on the religious message of the parables reflects modern theological presuppositions as much as the oft-criticized socio-political interpretations do.<sup>55</sup> This seems to tie contemporary studies to early critical studies once again by a shared inclination to blend historical-critical reconstructions with theological propositions in the interpretation of parables.

## 2 The Problem with Realism

In this section, I will discuss the mainstream conviction that parables, by virtue of being realistic narratives, refer to facts about a past society.<sup>56</sup> As noted above, it has been recognized that parables include unrealistic parts. In this

51 Luise Schottroff, *The Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 81–105.

52 Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990); Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018).

53 Blomberg, *Interpreting Parables*, 166; Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 3–11; John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 5, *Probing the Authenticity of the Parables* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 42; Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 30.

54 Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 1–3. The praise of Jesus and/or his parables is a common trope in parable studies.

55 Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 324; Klyne R. Snodgrass, “Reading to Hear: A Hermeneutics of Hearing,” *HBT* 24 (2002): 9–11, 31–32, and Klyne R. Snodgrass, “Prophets, Parables, and Theologians,” *BTB* 18 (2008): 65–67 and 77.

56 For example, Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables*, 143–145. It has been suggested that the realism in the parables meant reference to real events. These suggestions have little support, and I will not deal with them here.

regard, it becomes the interpreter's task to identify and distinguish between the realistic everyday life depictions and the exaggerations that break that realism.<sup>57</sup> However, such differentiation is too arbitrary, and it does not solve the basic problems of realism. These problems can be outlined as follows: First, are the parables as narratives merely windows into the past historical reality? Second, do they give access to a stable subject behind them (in this case, Jesus), who composed these narratives based on his experience? Third, is it possible to determine the response to the parables? And fourth, can scholars "in front of the text" successfully reconstruct that historical context, the author's intentions, and the receivers' response?

If parables are understood to represent daily life in Galilean villages and their surroundings, it becomes possible to use the parables as windows into or snapshots of the everyday life of Jesus's environment.<sup>58</sup> As such, the notion of realism is a short step from the argument that the parables also contain Jesus's interpretation of those social and cultural practices.<sup>59</sup> The parables, then, not only provide glimpses into Jesus's historical situation, but also offer access to his theological assessment of that reality.<sup>60</sup> This presupposition lends itself to the idea that Jesus described the reality as it appeared to him and his listeners. And by doing so, the parables reveal Jesus's affinity with everyday life, his ability to connect with the ordinary. Furthermore, it assumes that the parables' description of reality is the same for "us" as it was for the ancient listener, on the condition that "we" as readers are properly equipped to understand their historical context.<sup>61</sup> The core of these assumptions is that the language in the parables transparently represents both the past reality of Jesus and his mindset. These assumptions inevitably tie into perceptions about Jesus as the author

57 For example, Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables*, 217–224, 245–247, and 272–277.

58 Douglas E. Oakman "Was Jesus a Peasant? Implications for Reading the Samaritan Story (Luke 10:30-35)," *BTB* 22 (1992): 122.

59 Van Eck, *The Parables of Jesus the Galilean*, 12–13.

60 Charles W. Hedrick, *Parables as Poetic Fiction: The Creative Voice of Jesus* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 4–81, and Hedrick, "Survivors of the Crucifixion," 176.

61 For instance, social-scientific criticism of the parables presumes that parables have a primary meaning which is directly tied to Jesus and his social environment. See, e.g., Richard L. Rohrbaugh, "A Peasant Reading of the Parable of the Talents/Pounds: A Text of Terror?," *BTB* 23 (1993): 32–39, and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, "A Dysfunctional Family and Its Neighbours (Luke 15:11b-32)," in *Jesus and His Parables: Interpreting the Parables of Jesus Today*, ed. V. George Shillington (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 141–164; Van Eck, *The Parables of Jesus the Galilean*, 1–43. This means that the setting of the parables and their receivers, usually defined as "the peasants," and their values must be reconstructed. The problem is that the peasant becomes an ideal type with a predictable response to a parable.

of the parables. Designating Jesus as their author slots these parables into a specific historical context from which it is possible to extract historical data. For instance, the notion that the parables reflect their historical context and cohere with the overall teaching of Jesus,<sup>62</sup> or that they demand a response,<sup>63</sup> are both closely tied to the image of Jesus as a storyteller.

The understanding outlined above reveals a common-sense conception of referentiality that is associated with historical criticism.<sup>64</sup> The problem is not that it is necessary to situate the parables—as historical and fictional narratives—in their social and literary context if the purpose is to flesh out their possible meaning in early Christianity.<sup>65</sup> Nor does this criticism eviscerate Jesus as a historical person or “author” of the parables, and it also does not deny that the parables were originally told with a specific intent. Rather, the problem is that the conception of the parables as realistic, as outlined above, presupposes that fictional narratives (like parables) in some way successfully imitate real life in a disinterested manner, and, subsequently, that this mode of representation provides a path to the mind that conceived these stories. The idea that the parables are realistic is simply too tidy, since it assumes that facts about Jesus and the parables are waiting to be discovered by the interpreter. Instead, more attention should be given to the interpretive processes that explain and give meaning to the parables. The realities represented in them are not static; what is considered realistic will be prone to change. For this reason, it does not suffice to treat parables as windows to the past.<sup>66</sup>

Treating the parables as windows to the past overlooks the circumstance that representations and narratives generate new meanings. To put it differently, a parable does not merely refer to an outside of the text, but it facilitates that

62 Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable*, 2; Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 36–39.

63 Robert W. Funk, *Parables and Presence*, 17 and 155; Frederick Houk Borsch, *Many Things in Parables: Extravagant Stories of New Community* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 1; V. George Shillington, “Engaging with the Parables,” in *Jesus and His Parables*, 15.

64 See John J. Collins’s description of historical criticism in *The Bible after Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 4.

65 See John S. Kloppenborg, “The Parable of the Burglar in Q: Insights from Papyrology,” in *Metaphor, Narrative, and Parables in Q*, ed. Dieter T. Roth, Ruben Zimmermann, and Michael Labahn, WUNT 315 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 287–306, and Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables*, 196–198.

66 There is no space here to elaborate on theoretical premises for my argument. For further discussion, I refer to Elizabeth A. Clark, *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

outside.<sup>67</sup> A text appears to represent a real world outside the text, and when it is read as such, its mythologising or ideological presentation of said world is accepted as “real.” For example, it matters if the characters in the parables are interpreted as stock characters referring to conventional stereotypes or if they are seen as realistic. Interpreting the parables as “snapshots” or expressions of everyday life as seen by Jesus risks turning ideological representations into credible historical representations. Another aspect is the work scholars do to reconstruct the historical context in which Jesus told the parables. As I showed in the first section, stereotypical presentations of Judaism are often accepted as factual and then projected onto the parables and their context. These stereotypes are not so much “discoveries” of scholars, but assumptions which are disseminated, often unintentionally, simply by citing and referencing the work of others.

Likewise, the problems apply to Jesus as the author of the parables and the effects of the parables on the receivers. The historical subject as author, in this case Jesus, signifies something beyond the purely historical description of him as author/teller of parables which, subsequently, excludes some meanings and opens others. The concept of Jesus as an author is used as a unifying principle that brings a coherent meaning to the parables, which are supposed to be expressive of his imagination and experience.<sup>68</sup> The highly conjectural aspects to reconstructions of Jesus’s life and context make it possible to reconstruct several plausible but nonetheless different contexts for Jesus and the parables. Each context alters the meaning—for instance, when a parable’s addressee is understood to be the disciples, the crowd, or certain Jewish groups. What is understood as “normal,” “natural,” and close to Jesus’s teachings depends to a large degree on the definition of these concepts and on the methods and sources used to reconstruct them.

The same problems apply when scholars attempt to determine the receiver’s response. The response is contingent on the reconstructed context in which the parables were told and on the construction of the receiver, which is usually an ideal receiver (like *the* peasant). The socio-economic and political interpretations treat the realism in parables as a pathway to the expectations of

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67 This is based on Roland Barthes, “The Reality Effect”/“The Discourse of History,” in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 141–148. The linguistic and semantic premises behind this conclusion are debatable.

68 This paragraph builds on Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *The Rustle of Language*, 49–55, and Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975); Michel Foucault “What is an Author,” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 101–121; Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. Alan M. Sheridan Smith (London: Routledge, 2002).

the receivers, as if a historical reconstruction based upon macro-sociological studies with such a level of abstraction can be superimposed upon a historical audience. Moreover, they presuppose an ideal receiver with the right set of expectations and openness to be changed by the parables. Only the proper receiver can fully understand the meaning in the parables and be changed by it. Yet this smacks all too much of a modern understanding of parables. It has been argued that listeners are invited to participate in the story of a parable, a device enabled by its realism. After that, the parable challenges them.<sup>69</sup> But how is it possible to determine the degree of identification and the listeners' response? A closer look reveals that these theories are sustained by specific theories of parables. They are based on a set of propositions that cannot be verified by the parables themselves or by historical reconstructions of them. These theories do, however, serve to maintain the aura of Jesus's uniqueness as well as the allegedly profound nature of the parables.<sup>70</sup>

### 3 The Parables and the Limits of Realism

In this final section, I will address what I refer to as the limits of realism. As mentioned, scholars recognize that aspects in the parables are atypical or hyperbolic. These aspects break away from the realism in the parables. For example, the violence in the parables is often labelled as atypical. Several parables refer to violent retribution against the narrative antagonists (e.g., Matt 18:34, 21:41, 22:7, 24:51; Luke 12:46, 12:47–48, and 19:27). The one who condemns and punishes in the parables is a king, landlord, or slave master, and at the receiving end are the subjects or slaves of the ruler/master. There is little doubt that ancient society was a violent society. Wars and military campaigns were frequent, extraction of goods and taxes common, and slaves were routinely beaten and mistreated. Why would parables too not contain violence?<sup>71</sup> It would follow from the thesis that parables are realistic and close to life, offering depictions drawn from Jesus's own observations. Hence, also the violence should be regarded as realistic. However, once confronted with the harshness

69 David P. Parris, "Imitating the Parables: Allegory, Narrative and the Role of Mimesis," *JSNT* 25 (2002): 33–53 and Matthew C. Rindge, "Luke's Artistic Parables: Narratives of Subversion, Imagination, and Transformation," *Int* 68 (2014): 403–415.

70 Rindge, "Luke's Artistic Parables," 414.

71 John S. Kloppenborg, "The Representation of Violence in Synoptic Parables," in *Mark and Matthew 1: Comparative Readings: Understanding the Earliest Gospels in Their First-Century Settings*, ed. Anders Runesson and Eve-Marie Becker, WUNT 271 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 323–351.



of eschatological violent retribution, scholars seem to reach the limits of realism—perhaps accentuated by the tendency to treat parables as specific of Jesus and as an expression of his intentions—and the violence is categorized as atypical.<sup>72</sup>

In Matt 18:34, the “evil servant” (or, preferably, “slave,” δούλος) is condemned by the king and ordered to be handed over to “the torturers” (τοῖς βασανισταῖς). In response to this verse, it has been argued that the parable reflects an “oriental context” since Jewish law forbids torture,<sup>73</sup> the punishment has been euphemized<sup>74</sup> or its purpose downplayed,<sup>75</sup> or the severity and inhumanity of the punishment have been set aside to focus on God’s forgiveness.<sup>76</sup> In Matt 24:51//Luke 12:46, the “unfaithful steward” is likewise condemned and given the grisly punishment of being hacked or sawn in two (διχοτομέω),<sup>77</sup> and the same interpretive strategies have been applied. The punishment has been interpreted as a mistranslation from the Aramaic,<sup>78</sup> with several different hypotheses concerning the nature of the mistranslation.<sup>79</sup> It has also been labelled “Persian” or “oriental.”<sup>80</sup> Or else the punishment has been explained as hyperbole, without being meant literally.<sup>81</sup> The command for mass executions in Luke 19:27 (the term used is κατασφάζω, slaughter)<sup>82</sup> offers another example of the way violence is downplayed.<sup>83</sup> Other interpretive strategies do recognize the violence, but read the parables against the grain. This strategy is found in approaches coming from the social sciences and from social history,

72 For example, Stephen I. Wright, *Jesus the Storyteller* (London: SPCK, 2014), 73–75.

73 Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, 211–212; Derret, *Law in the New Testament*, 33–45; Borsch, *Many Things in Parables*, 91 and 93; Van Eck, *The Parables of Jesus the Galilean*, 177.

74 Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable*, 76.

75 Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 73–74. Hultgren, *Parables of Jesus*, 30, interprets the king’s benevolence as hyperbole and downplays the punishment. Van Eck, *The Parables of Jesus the Galilean*, 170, opts to omit Matt 18:34.

76 Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 242–243.

77 The literal meaning of διχοτομέω is “cut in two.” The exact nature of the punishment is uncertain, other than being divided in half by some means (see, e.g., Josephus, *Ant.* 8:31).

78 Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 57; Manson, *Sayings of Jesus*, 118; Otto Betz, “The Dichotomized Servant and the End of Judas Iscariot (Light on dark Passages: Matthew 24,51 and Parallel; Acts 1,8),” *RevQ* 5 (1964): 45. Against Betz: Kathleen Weber, “Is there a Qumran Parallel to Matthew 24,1//Luke 12,46?” *RevQ* 16 (1995): 657–663.

79 Alfons Weiser, *Die Knechtsgleichnisse der synoptischen Evangelien*, SANT 29 (Munich: Kösel, 1971), 196–197.

80 Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable*, 100; Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus*, 158–161.

81 Scott, *Hear then the Parable*, 210–211; Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 191; Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 503–504.

82 Cf. 2 Macc 5:2, 5:24, 6:9, and 8:24.

83 John Duncan Derrett, “A Horrid Passage in Luke Explained (Lk 19:27),” *ExpTim* 97 (1986): 136–138. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 540–541. See Brian Schultz, “Jesus as Archelaus in the Parable of the Pounds (Lk. 19:11–27),” *NovT* 49 (2007): 112.

often together with a liberation theology, and interprets the narrative as realistic, but faults tradition for having identified the king/master in the parables as God. Read against the grain, the king then becomes a counter-example of God.<sup>84</sup> The ideological criticism is not directed at the content in the parables, but at historical circumstances to which the parables object.

The examples from the paragraph above show the trouble of reconciling the violence in the parables with theories about the parables and Jesus. The violence seems incoherent with the message and theology of Jesus and creates a tension that is resolved by distancing the violence from Jesus. For example, giving an oriental context for the unsavoury parts in the parables creates a distance from Jesus's daily life. My criticism of the attempts to dislodge the violence from the parables of Jesus does not mean that I believe the violence to be realistic; I would suggest that the vengeful punishments should be interpreted as eschatological retribution on the enemies of the kingdom of God.<sup>85</sup> For instance, "evil" slaves about to get due punishment is a stock motif in the ancient literary imagination, and similar tropes appear in rabbinic parables.<sup>86</sup> The parables simply represent the ideology of the sovereign and his power to mandate violent retribution to opposition. The narratives justify violence against enemies.<sup>87</sup> For this reason, I believe it is necessary to resort to ideological criticism of the parables. It does not suffice simply to divert the attention from these aspects of the parables.

#### 4 Conclusion

In this article, I have attempted to show the problems of the concept of realism as it appears in parable studies or research. First, I demonstrated that the concept of realism has its roots in a theological understanding of Jesus's relation

84 Scott, *Hear then the Parable*, 276–280; Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 140–149; Warren Carter, "Resisting and Imitating the Empire: Imperial Paradigms in Two Matthean Parables," *Int* 56 (2002): 260–272; Schottroff, *The Parables of Jesus*, 41–45, 175–177, and 220; Wright, *Jesus the Storyteller*, 72 and 102–103; and Van Eck, *The Parables of Jesus the Galilean*, 296–299.

85 For a discussion of eschatological vengeance, see John J. Collins, "The Zeal of Phinehas: The Bible and the Legitimation of Violence in," *JBL* 122 (2003): 3–21.

86 Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 346–362.

87 The problem with violence is not solved with a metaphorical interpretation or by relegating the violence to an eschatological future; see Barbara E. Reid, "Violent Endings in Matthew's Parables and Christian Nonviolence," *CBQ* 66 (2004): 253–255, and David J. Neville, "Toward a Teleology of Peace: Contesting Matthew's Violent Eschatology," *JNST* 30 (2007): 134.

to his social environment, and in an arbitrary differentiation between Jesus's parables on the one hand and fables and rabbinic parables on the other, as well as in a bias against Jewish groups. Second, the idea that parables represent the past reality as it is or as Jesus saw it leads to an understanding of representation that bypasses the inherent problems of reconstructing and interpreting that past reality. Third, I showed how scholars have wrestled to reconcile violence in the parables with their alleged realism. What, then, are the overall conclusions to be drawn from this discussion?

The parables continue to generate new research, new perspectives, and new interpretations. Realism has been a vehicle used in support of the exceptionalism of Jesus and his parables. I hope that my discussion contributes to the dismantling of this exceptionalism. The connection between Jesus and the parables is inevitably linked to the virtual absence of direct comparative sources.<sup>88</sup> Nevertheless, Jesus's parables do likely have an antecedent in the Hebrew tradition and share thematic and structural similarities with the rabbinic parables, which were recorded later. The parables are narrative fictions that belonged to the oral/literary imagination of ancient people. Parables are like fables, probably familiar and traditional stories with a pedagogical purpose, which "appealed" to large groups of the population. This suggests a certain kind of accessibility for the parables: they had to be familiar and precise enough to be understood by those listening.<sup>89</sup> Such familiarity must depend on real-life descriptions, but also on traditional motifs and stock characters. The parables are meaningful for listeners/readers in several contexts; their meaning is not bound to one context. If the parables were traditional material that circulated orally within a broad geographical place, they would reveal little about a specific historical context or their author. The parables of Jesus are not different from other comparable narratives by virtue of their realism, exceptional quality, or theological content. Rather, it is their incorporation into the Christian tradition that distinguishes them. On their own, the New Testament parables appear generic—but their ties to Jesus have turned them into vehicles of great spiritual truths to the detriment of our understanding of them. A first step forward for parable interpretation would be to displace Jesus as the author. The second step would be to abandon the colloquial use of realism in the parables.

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88 Craig A. Evans, "Parables in Early Judaism," in *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 51–75.

89 Mary Ann Beavis, "Parable and Fable," *CBQ* 52 (1990): 473–498.

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## Building a Fence Around the Vineyard: The Shepherd of Hermas's Fifth Parable in Light of Comparative Parable Research

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According to Bart Ehrman, “the Shepherd of Hermas was one of the most popular books of early Christianity. Judging from the manuscript remains, it was copied and read more widely in the second and third centuries than any other non-canonical book, even more than many of the books that later came to be included in the New Testament.”<sup>1</sup> In some churches it was part of the canon, and the Muratorian Canon mentioned it as a book that could be read in church.<sup>2</sup> The book consists of three parts: five visions (chapters 1–25), ten commandments or mandates (chapters 26–49), and twelve parables or similitudes (chapters 50–114).<sup>3</sup> It is the last part—i.e., the twelve parables or similitudes (παράβολαι)—that is the focus of this article. Despite the ancient popularity of the Shepherd of Hermas, its parables have not received much attention in the modern field of parable research. Often they have been denounced as “visions,”<sup>4</sup> “allegorical tales,”<sup>5</sup> or “not real parables.”<sup>6</sup> To the best of my knowledge, the parables of the Shepherd of Hermas have never been discussed in light of parable research, even though they might form proof of a tradition, admittedly short-lived, of parable-telling after Jesus.<sup>7</sup> By way of

1 Bart D. Ehrman, *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 2, *Epistle of Barnabas. Papias and Quadratus. Epistle to Diognetus. The Shepherd of Hermas*, LCL 25 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 162; cf. Carolyn Osiek, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 1.

2 Muratorian Canon 73–80; Osiek, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, 6.

3 Joseph Verheyden, “The Shepherd of Hermas,” in *The Writings of the Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Paul Foster (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 65.

4 Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 48.

5 Project description “Parables and the Partings of the Ways,” 4. See also the discussion below of Adolf Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 2 vols. (Freiburg: Mohr, 1899), 1208–209.

6 George A. Barton, “Parables Outside the Gospels,” *TBW* 33 (1909): 308.

7 However, recent times have witnessed a growing interest in the fifth parable of the Shepherd of Hermas, which is also the focus of this chapter. See Mary Ann Beavis, “The Parable of the Slave, Son, and Vineyard: An Early Christian Freedman’s Narrative (Hermas Similitudes 5.2–11),” *CBQ* 80 (2018): 655–669; Marianne B. Kartzow, *The Slave Metaphor and*

case study, we will discuss the fifth parable in the third part of the Shepherd of Hermas (Herm. Sim. 55 [5.2]<sup>8</sup>), of which it has been said that, “despite ... many intertextual echoes, and the early date of the Shepherd, it is rare to see this story cited as an early Christian slave parable.”<sup>9</sup>

The purpose of this article is twofold. On the one hand, it will demonstrate that the fifth parable of the Shepherd of Hermas is a genuine parable and, even more so, a parable that makes use of one of the classical topoi of ancient storytelling and parable telling, namely that of *absente ero*: the absent master. On the other hand, I will argue that it is an innovative parable that adds new elements to well-known story patterns. As we will see, by combining old and new parable elements, the parable teller managed to create a powerful new message. Since the Shepherd's fifth parable so elegantly integrates both new and old elements, it truly is a parable worth studying. As the article title indicates, I do so in light of comparative parable research, meaning that I not only take the breadth of the Christian parable tradition into consideration, but also engage with early rabbinic parables and Graeco-Roman literature.

The present article first introduces the social and rhetorical setting of the Shepherd of Hermas. Then it provides a summary of the fifth parable and its applications. On the basis of this summary, we briefly review why Shepherd of Hermas's story is rightly defined as a parable. Afterwards, the *absente ero*-theme is used as a lens to recognize elements in the fifth parable that are common to the early Christian and early rabbinic parable traditions, as well as elements in which the Shepherd deviates from these traditions. After a brief look at Pauline slavery metaphors, a final section presents a number of conclusions.

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*Gendered Enslavement in Early Christian Discourse: Double Trouble Embodied* (London: Routledge, 2018), esp. chapter 5; Kartzow, “παραβολή and Parabolic Language in the Shepherd of Hermas,” in *Gleichnisse und Parabeln in der frühchristlichen Literatur. Methodische Konzepte, religionshistorische Kontexte, theologische Deutungen*, ed. Jens Schröter, Konrad Schwartz and Soham Al-Suadi, WUNT 456 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021), 181–196; Jennifer Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 105; and cf. Maxime Hermaniuk, *La Parole Évangélique. Enquête exégétique et critique* (Bruges: Desclée de Brouwer, 1947), 359–362, esp. 361–362. I discuss the fifth parable of the Shepherd of Hermas extensively in my PhD dissertation; see Martijn J. Stoutjesdijk, “Not Like the Rest of the Slaves? Slavery Parables in Early Rabbinic and Early Christian Literature” (PhD diss., Tilburg University, 2021), 166–180.

8 For the sake of convenience, I use both the old and the new reference system for the Shepherd of Hermas.

9 Beavis, “The Parable of the Slave, Son, and Vineyard,” 657.

## 1 Social and Rhetorical Setting of the Shepherd of Hermas

Following the majority of modern scholarship, I assume that the Shepherd of Hermas was written between the end of the first century and the first half of the second century<sup>10</sup> by one author (possibly in multiple stages)<sup>11</sup> who calls himself Hermas and identifies as a former slave.<sup>12</sup> The text was probably written in Rome, or at least in central Italy.<sup>13</sup> The text refers to places in Rome, uses imagery that can be traced back to the rural area surrounding Rome,<sup>14</sup> and—as I shall argue below—shows signs of Roman socio-historical and literary influences. The Shepherd of Hermas was originally written in Greek and has as its social location the Christian community of Rome, which was characterized by its “deep Jewish theological roots”; Hermas himself was most likely

10 Verheyden, “The Shepherd of Hermas,” 63; Mark R.C. Grundeken, “The Shepherd of Hermas and the Roman Empire,” in *People under Power: Early Jewish and Christian Responses to the Roman Empire*, ed. Michael Labahn and Outi Lehtipuu (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 187 n3; Osiek, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, 20.

11 See Grundeken, “The Shepherd of Hermas and the Roman Empire,” 188 n5; Osiek, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, 10. The most notable examples of a multiple author theory can be found in Stanislas Giet, *Hermas et les pasteurs: Les trois auteurs du Pasteur d'Hermas* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963), and in Lambartus W. Nijendijk, *Die Christologie des Hirten des Hermas exegetisch, religions- und dogmengeschichtlich untersucht* (PhD diss., Utrecht University, 1986), 175ff.

12 Kartzow devotes a lot of attention to the “special connection” between Hermas’s autobiography and the fifth parable (“παραβολή and Parabolic Language in the Shepherd of Hermas; I am indebted to the author for sharing her paper with me when it was still unpublished). Kartzow asks in her paper “what kind of connections the various first readers and readers” (13) made when they saw how slavery is present at three levels in the Shepherd of Hermas: Hermas’s self-identification as slave, the slave parable, and the oft-used title “slave of God” (3). Was Hermas’s own life story the key to understanding the parable? What we see both in Hermas’s own life and in the parable is a slave who—because he is able to control a household/vineyard—deserves to be free, and even gets more than he expected: the slave in the parable becomes an heir and son of his former master, Hermas inherits the title “slave of God” (13–14). For the connection between Hermas’s biography and the parable, see also Beavis, “The Parable of the Slave, Son, and Vineyard.” Cf. Alexander Weiss, “Hermas’ ‘Biography’: Social Upward and Downward Mobility of an Independent Freedman,” *AS* 39 (2009): 185–202.

13 James S. Jeffers, “Jewish and Christian Families in First-Century Rome,” in *Judaism and Christianity in First-Century Rome*, ed. Karl P. Donfried and Peter Richardson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 137; Carolyn Osiek, “The Oral World of Early Christianity in Rome: The Case of Hermas,” in *Judaism and Christianity in First-Century Rome*, ed. Karl P. Donfried and Peter Richardson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 152–153; cf. Osiek, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, 18.

14 Osiek, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, 18.

a Jew.<sup>15</sup> Hermas's mixed Christian-Jew-Roman identity<sup>16</sup> might be helpful in explaining the peculiarities of the fifth parable, as we will detail later.

## 2 Text and Application of the Fifth Parable of the Shepherd of Hermas

In the introduction to the fifth parable, two characters play a role: a shepherd and an I-figure, Hermas. Hermas meets the shepherd while he is fasting (Herm. Sim. 54 [5.1]), and the shepherd disapproves of his way of fasting, since he claims that the right way is comprised of observation of the commandments and service of God with a "pure heart" (ἐν καθαρᾷ καρδίᾳ).<sup>17</sup> Thereafter, the shepherd tells Hermas a parable (Herm. Sim. 55 [5.2]).

In this parable, a certain man goes on a journey, entrusting his vineyard to a "very reliable and pleasing" (πιστότατον καὶ εὐάρεστον) slave. The only assignment given to the slave is to fence the vineyard. If the slave fulfils this task, the master promises to set him free. So, when the master is away, the slave starts to build fences around the vineyard, but when he is finished, the slave decides also to pull out the weeds and to take care of the garden generally, so that the vineyard will become more attractive and flourish. When the master comes back and sees how the slave has not only fenced his vineyard but also has removed the weeds, he is very pleased with him and decides to assemble his son, his friends, and his advisors. He then declares in their presence that he will make the slave his joint-heir together with his son, "because when he thought of the good [deed], he did not ignore it, but completed it." The son approves of this action.

Then, as a coda,<sup>18</sup> the parable adds an extra scene that follows the structure of the first part (i.e., the slave does something—his deed is evaluated positively—his reward is announced publicly by his master in front of his

15 Osiek, "The Oral World of Early Christianity in Rome," 155.

16 Note also his "rich allusions" to a variety of Jewish, Graeco-Roman, and Christian writings (Osiek, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, 24; cf. Verheyden, "The Shepherd of Hermas," 69–70).

17 Greek text from Bart D. Ehrman, ed. and trans., *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 3, *Epistle of Barnabas, Papias and Quadratus, Epistle to Diognetus. The Shepherd of Hermas*, LCL 25 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 321. All translations of the Shepherd of Hermas are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

18 Scholars like Carolyn Osiek and Martin Dibelius considered this "coda" a later addition. See Osiek, *Shepherd of Hermas*, 171, and Martin Dibelius, *Der Hirt des Hermas* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1923), 564–565. According to Dibelius, the coda is a separate story that has been merged here with the parable of the vineyard to connect that parable with the theme of fasting and sharing from the introduction.

family and friends): A few days later, when the good slave is sent the leftovers of a party he himself does not attend,<sup>19</sup> he only takes what he needs and shares the rest with his fellow slaves. His fellow slaves appreciate this act and pray for him. When the master hears of this, he calls his son and friends together again. He tells them what the slave has done, and they confirm that it is a good thing for the slave to be made fellow heir of the master's son.

The text of the parable is immediately followed by a series of applications or explanations, whose precise number remains the subject of scholarly debate today.<sup>20</sup> I will argue that there are three. Since Hermas indicates that he does not understand the parable, the shepherd offers a rather straightforward explanation (the *first explanation*), namely that he who keeps God's commandments pleases God, but that he who does good beyond the commandments shall gain even more glory (Herm. Sim. 56.2–3 [5.2.2–3]). Despite this rather clear explanation, Hermas again states that he does not understand the parable. The shepherd is reluctant to offer a further explanation of the parable: "He answered me: 'You are very arrogant in asking questions. You should not ask anything at all,' he said, 'for if it is necessary that something is explained to you, it will be explained.'"<sup>21</sup> In the end, the shepherd does give in, and a *second explanation* follows (Herm. Sim. 58 [5.5]). Schematically, this second explanation looks as follows:

19 It is worth noticing that the slave is absent during the meal mentioned in Herm. Sim. 55.9 (5.2.9). Is that because a) he is already released, but not entitled to a place at the meal, being only a freedman (this is not probable, since he is still designated in the story with the title "slave" and since the parable speaks of his fellow slaves); or because b) he was still a slave, but not needed at the meal to serve, since he was an agricultural slave, and not a house slave? Whatever the reason for his absence, the fact that the master sent his slave a special envoy with food shows the master's high esteem for his (former) slave. In tractate Berakhot of the Babylonian Talmud, we read of a similar gesture, when the blessed cup of wine is sent to the wife of Rav Nahman, who—apparently—stayed in a different room (b. Ber. 51b). We should take notice of the way the slave in the parable mimics his master's generosity in sharing food, thereby increasing his master's honour and consequently receiving abundant praise. This brings to mind the parable of the Unforgiving Slave (Matt 18:23–35), in which the slave is similarly expected to imitate his master; the slave's failure to reproduce his master's forgiveness earns him a severe penalty.

20 See below, e.g., footnote 26.

21 The theme of secrecy with respect to the explanation of parables is a theme we find in the New Testament as well (see Matt 13:10–17). On the theme of secrecy regarding parables in early Christianity, see, e.g., Marcel Poorthuis, "Origen on Parables and Prayer: Tensions between the Esoteric and the Universal," in *Prayer and the Transformation of the Self in Early Christian Mystagogy*, ed. Hans van Loon, Giselle de Nie, Michiel Op de Coul, and Peter Van Egmond, LAHR 18 (Leuven: Peeters, 2018), 95–110.

TABLE 1 Second explanation

Parable	Application
Vineyard	This world
Owner of the vineyard	God
Slave	Son of God <sup>a</sup>
Vines	People planted by God himself
Fences	Angels "who keep his people together"
Weeds	Transgressions of the slaves of God
Dainties	Commandments which God gave to his people
Friends and advisers	Angels who were created first
Absence of the master	Time remaining until God's return

- a Note how in this explanation the son in the parable does not have a counterpart in the application. The Old Latin translation of the Shepherd of Hermas adds: "and the son is the holy spirit." See Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers. Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 578–579. See also footnote 27 below.

In spite of this, Hermas still does not understand the entire parable. As a follow-up question, he asks the shepherd why the Son of God is represented as a slave. The shepherd does not agree:

'Listen,' he said, 'the Son of God is not presented in the guise of a slave (εἰς δούλου τρόπον), but he is presented in great power and lordship.' 'How can it be, lord?,' I asked, 'I do not understand.' 'Because,' he said, 'God planted the vineyard—that is, he created the people and gave them over to his son. And the son placed the angels over them, to protect them ...'

Herm. Sim. 59.1–2 [5.6.1–2]

The shepherd's interpretation takes yet another turn with a discussion of the way the slave and the master's son will join in the master's heritage (Herm. Sim. 59 [5.6]). As Bogdan G. Bucur has shown, drawing on the work of Henne,<sup>22</sup> the only way to make sense of this section is to assume that a new level of interpretation has been reached, a phenomenon which Henne has called "allegorical polysemy,"<sup>23</sup> and is described by Bucur as "ascribing to

22 Philippe Henne, *La christologie chez Clément de Rome et dans le Pasteur d'Hermas*, Paradosis 33 (Fribourg: Éditions Universitaires Fribourg Suisse, 1992).

23 Henne, *La christologie*, 181.

the elements of a narration several levels of allegorical interpretation that are coherent in themselves, yet oftentimes incompatible among themselves.”<sup>24</sup> According to Herm. Sim. 59 (5.6), the parable can be summarized with the following scheme (the *third explanation*):

TABLE 2 Third explanation

Parable	Application
Owner of the vineyard	God
Slave	Flesh
Son	Holy Spirit
Advisers	Angels

This new level of interpretation does not concern Jesus, but the Christian believer: “The election refers to any individual (any ‘flesh’) that has faithfully served the holy spirit and has not defiled it in any way.”<sup>25</sup> On the basis of this explanation, the final section (Herm. Sim. 60 [5.7]) adds the exhortation not to defile the spirit or the flesh, so that one can and shall live with God.

Given these different applications, we might wonder about the original parable and its original meaning. As Lambartus Nijendijk rightly observed: “Die Lektüre von Sim. verweckt bereits auf den ersten Blick den Eindruck, dass Gleichnis und Deutungen nicht als ein einheitliches, durchgehendes Stück entstanden sind, sondern sich vielmehr aus mehreren Teilen zusammengesetzt haben, die nur lose miteinander verbunden sind.”<sup>26</sup> The complexity of the explanation can be partly explained “as the unfortunate result of squeezing a Christological meaning out of a parable that was initially about fasting.”<sup>27</sup>

24 Bogdan G. Bucur, “The Son of God and the Angelomorphic Holy Spirit: A Rereading of the Shepherd’s Christology,” *ZNW* 98 (2007): 133. We find this way of allegorizing also in the work of the (early) church fathers. See, for example, Archibald M. Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960); David B. Gowler, *The Parables after Jesus: Their Imaginative Receptions across Two Millennia* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017).

25 Bucur, “The Son of God and the Angelomorphic Holy Spirit,” 136.

26 Nijendijk, “Die Christologie des Hirten des Hermas,” 84–85. Some scholars also doubt the unity of the parable itself. Dibelius, for example, divided the parable into two parables: a parable about a vineyard and a parable about a banquet with three meanings (Dibelius, *Der Hirt des Hermas*, 564ff).

27 Bucur, “The Son of God and the Angelomorphic Holy Spirit,” 132, with reference to Henne. One reason to reject a christological explanation of the parable as original is that such an interpretation would imply the presence of two sons of God in the parables: the slave

Wilson proposes that there was an “original” parable from oral tradition that was taken up, appropriated, and reinterpreted by Hermas.<sup>28</sup> Wilson does not indicate whether that “original parable” dealt with fasting, and, given the tradition of parables with an *absente ero*-theme, I have my doubts about that possibility. First, the theme of fasting only appears—if at all—in the slave eating only a little from the banquet.<sup>29</sup> Second, if we compare this parable to other *absente ero*-parables, from both rabbinic and Christian literature,<sup>30</sup> we may see some obvious resemblances among them. There is an absent master, there is a slave with a certain responsibility, there is a moment of reckoning (now only positive), and there is a reward. That reward consists of freedom and adoption (see below for the promise of freedom in Graeco-Roman literature). These elements do not point to a parable about fasting, but to a parable about good behaviour in the absence of the (heavenly) master.

### 3 The Fifth Parable and Parable Definitions

Before we turn to the *absente ero*-theme, we have to decide whether the fifth parable of the Shepherd of Hermas can be classified as a parable, since—as we remarked in the introduction—the parables of the Shepherd have often merely been seen as visions or allegories. By way of example, we will take a look at Adolf Jülicher’s discussion of this fifth parable in his classic *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*. According to Jülicher, the fifth parable is not a parable, but an allegory “vom reinsten Wasser.”<sup>31</sup> His reasoning can be roughly summarized in two arguments, one that pertains to the application(s) of the parable and one that pertains to flaws in its plot. With regard to the latter, Jülicher observes that, for

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and the son of the vineyard-owner (Nijendijk, “Die Christologie des Hirten des Hermas,” 87). In his study on the Christology of the Shepherd of Hermas, Nijendijk concludes that “die eschatologische Deutung des Gleichnisses, von der wir ... Spuren gefunden haben, verträgt sich nicht mit der Deutung des Sklaven als ‘Son Gottes’ in v.5,2b-v.6,4a” (“Die Christologie des Hirten des Hermas,” 89). The alternative is that the slave represents the believer, the vineyard God’s people, the vineyard-owner God, and his son God’s Son (89–90). Nijendijk also thinks that the identification of the fence with the angels is secondary, and that the weeds do not represent sins. Nijendijk’s simple summary of (at least the first part of) the parable’s message is: “mehr Tun als das Gefragte” (90).

28 Bucur, “The Son of God and the Angelomorphic Holy Spirit,” 132; John C. Wilson, *Toward a Reassessment of the Shepherd of Hermas: Its Date and Pneumatology* (New York: Mellen Biblical Press, 1993), 131.

29 Nijendijk has argued that the focus of the parable seems to be more on the copious banquet than on the fasting (“Die Christologie des Hirten des Hermas,” 85–86).

30 For an overview of relevant parables, see Stoutjesdijk, “Not Like the Rest of the Slaves?” 135–200 (chapter 5 “When the Master is Away: Obeying the Master’s Orders”).

31 Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 1:208.



example, the journey of the master is not motivated, that the manumission of the slave is too big a reward given “der Geringfügigkeit des Auftrags,”<sup>32</sup> and that the faithfulness of the slave vis-à-vis his owner (part one of the parable) has nothing to do with the kindness he shows to his fellow slaves in part two of the parable. With regard to the parable’s applications, Jülicher argues that it has no didactical or rhetorical value on its own; the parable is only designed in view of its application.<sup>33</sup> However, in my view both of the arguments enunciated by Jülicher deserved to be held up for scrutiny. When it comes to the parable’s applications, I have argued above that they are the product of a process of allegorical polysemy and that it might be assumed that the parable originally had a simple(r) application. Moreover, one could easily argue that many parables were only composed in view of certain applications or rhetorical goals. When it comes to the plot holes allegedly discovered by Jülicher, I find that he does not wield the same criteria for the New Testament parables, which are also often elliptical and sometimes not completely logical. Moreover, his argument is actually about the *quality* of the parable and not about its genre.

In my opinion, the fifth parable of the Shepherd of Hermas can quite straightforwardly be categorized as a parable. First, it is important to observe that the author introduces the parable as such: “Listen to this *parable* that I am about to tell you” (Ἀκουε τὴν παραβολήν, ἣν μέλλω σοι λέγειν). Moreover, from Herm. Sim. 56 (5.3) onwards the parable is given explanation(s) or application(s) (“I will explain everything to you” [πάντα σοι ἐπιλύσω]), as is usual with parables. From a more formal point of view, we might want to know whether Hermas’s parable matches parable definitions.<sup>34</sup> If we use the influential definition of Ruben Zimmermann, for example, we see that Hermas’s fifth parable meets all of his criteria. It is a short,<sup>35</sup> narrative, realistic,<sup>36</sup> and fictional text with

32 Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 1:208.

33 Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 1:208.

34 For the scholarly debate on the parable genre, see, e.g., Eric Ottenheim and Marcel Poorthuis, “Parables in Changing Contexts: a Preliminary Status Quaestionis,” in *Parables in Changing Contexts: Essays on the Study of Parables in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism*, JCP 35 (Brill: Leiden, 2020), 1–11; for an overview of parable scholarship with a focus on rabbinic parables, as well as another definition, see Lieve M. Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhilot: An Annotated Edition and Translation of the Parables in Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael and Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai*, TSAJ 176 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 11, 20–64.

35 With 437 Greek words, the fifth parable is, arguably, long, but only slightly longer than the longest parable of the New Testament, which is that of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32; 391 words).

36 Although the son’s elevation to heir might be surprising (see below), the staging of the parable is realistic and references to a supernatural world are absent.

clear transfer signals and an appeal structure (cf. Herm. Sim. 56.9 [5.3.9]; 60.4 [5.7.4]). Co-text and context are needed for the reader to interpret the parable correctly. This context does not consist only of the immediate textual context in the Shepherd of Hermas itself, but also of the well-known parabolic images and motives it evokes, together with the associations that these images carry with them. An exploration of its key theme, *absente ero*, in the next section will show how the content of the fifth parable closely resembles New Testament and early rabbinic counterparts.

#### 4 *Absente Ero* in Social Reality and Parables

If we look solely at the narrative itself, we see that the fifth parable of the Shepherd of Hermas relates to a greater group of Christian and rabbinic *absente ero*-themed parables, but also adds something significantly new to that theme. The term “absente ero” denotes a category of stories in which the master goes away (often abroad) while his slaves stay at home and have to take care of their master’s property.<sup>37</sup> When the master returns, a moment of reckoning occurs: is the master satisfied with the work that the slaves have done? The fifth parable of the Shepherd of Hermas fits this pattern perfectly. As Chris de Wet writes, “the *Shepherd* is part of a longstanding Christian tradition in which agricultural slavery functions to highlight the workings of God and his kingdom.”<sup>38</sup>

##### 4.1 *Absente Ero* in Social Reality as Reflected in Agricultural Handbooks

It is clear from ancient agricultural manuals that the topos of *absente ero* had firm roots in social reality. With the rise of an elite that owned many estates in different locations, owners only visited their property several times a year to see whether the farms were being led effectively.<sup>39</sup> The manuals describe how the daily supervision of the estates (*latifundia*) lay in the hands of the *vilicus*

37 For this term, see Kathleen McCarthy, *Slaves, Masters, and the Art of Authority in Plautine Comedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 71, and its later adoption by J. Albert Harrill, “The Psychology of Slaves in the Gospel Parables: A Case Study in Social History,” *BZ* 55 (2011): 71–73.

38 Chris L. de Wet, *The Unbound God: Slavery and the Formation of Early Christian Thought* (London: Routledge, 2018), 82. De Wet also points to a difference between this tradition and the parable of the Shepherd of Hermas (“this parable exhibits a far more complex metaphorical layering than any of those in the New Testament”), but I would argue that the parable proper does not show these layers; rather, its application does.

39 Cf. Cato, *Agr.* 1.1.

(Gk. ἐπίτροπος), a slave who was set aside for this task and received additional rewards for it. The manuals offer a painstaking description of the capabilities that such a man should have.<sup>40</sup> The general idea was that these slaves could not be trusted,<sup>41</sup> an idea also found in popular culture of the time, like the Plautine comedies.<sup>42</sup> This made a firm and strict moment of reckoning imperative. In Cato the Elder's (234–149 BCE) *De Agricultura*, the first steps of a master's visit to his farm are meticulously described:

When the master arrives at the farmstead, after paying his respects to the god of the household, let him go over the whole farm, if possible, on the same day; if not, at least on the next. When he has learned the condition of the farm, what work has been accomplished and what remains to be done, let him call in his overseer the next day (*postridie eius diei vilicum vocet*) and inquire of him what part of the work has been completed, what has been left undone; whether what has been finished was done betimes, and whether it is possible to complete the rest; and what was the yield of wine, grain, and all other products. Having gone into this, he should make a calculation of the labourers and the time consumed.

CATO, *Agr.* 2.1–2 [Hooper and Ash, LCL]

Elsewhere we read how slaves who are sickly or grow old form a liability and should be sold (Cato, *Agr.* 2.2–7). Slaves who turned criminal or insubordinate were to be judged and punished (Columella, *Rust.* 1.8.16–19). In the end, the values of discipline (*disciplina*), watchfulness (*custodia*), and productivity govern the evaluation of the slaves in the absence of their master (Columella, *Rust.* 1.8.19–20).

The ancient agricultural manuals also paid attention to the effect of rewards. Given his position as his master's representative, a *vilicus* enjoyed some privileges, like choosing his own wife and having his own quarters (Varro, *Rust.* 1.17.4–7). Furthermore, good behaviour could be rewarded with a variety of rewards: food, clothing, time off, permission to keep one's own animals, etc. Next to those more "material" rewards, Columella describes the possibility of inviting a good slave to dinner (Columella, *Rust.* 1.8.5). Of course, the ultimate

<sup>40</sup> Columella, *Rust.* 1.8.2ff.; Cato, *Agr.* 5.1–2; Varro, *Rust.* 1.17.4–7.

<sup>41</sup> Columella, *Rust.* 1.1.20.

<sup>42</sup> E.g., Plautus, *Pers.* 28–31 (for this reference see Harrill, "Psychology of Slaves," 71).

form of reward was manumission,<sup>43</sup> but that was probably only limited to those Moses Finley famously called “faithful slaves.”<sup>44</sup>

#### 4.2 Absente Ero in the Parables

The theme of the absent master not only occurs in agricultural manuals, Plautine comedies, and—as I will discuss later—Graeco-Roman novels, but is also present in early Christian and early rabbinic slavery parables. The frequent appearance of this theme made it one of the core foci of my PhD research on slavery parables.<sup>45</sup> New Testament examples are the parable of the Talents (Luke 19:11–27//Matt 25:14–30), the Faithful Slave (Luke 12:35–38), the Wise and the Unwise Slave (Luke 12:42–46//Matt 24:45–51), the Dishonest Steward (Luke 16:1–8), and the Doorkeepers (Mark 13:33–37). In rabbinic literature we also find parables (*meshalim*) with absent masters, for instance in Mekh. R. Ishm. Beshalah 5:58–79 (The Stubborn Guard) and Mekh. R. Ishm. Shirata 2:130–133 (the Blind and the Lame Guard).<sup>46</sup> When it comes to absent masters in an explicit agricultural context, we should mention Sifre Deut. 8 (A Master Gives His Slave a Field), and, of course, the Shepherd of Hermas. What all these parables have in common is the occurrence of slaves who have to work unsupervised and masters who come back at a certain moment in time to reward and/or punish their slaves.

As an example, I would briefly like to discuss a parable in Sifre Deut. 8 (a rabbinic commentary on the book of Deuteronomy; final redaction in the late third century).<sup>47</sup> Although the parable speaks about a gift,<sup>48</sup> and the element of reward is missing, the parable might help us in making a proper assessment of the fifth parable of Hermas. The parable in question is a response to Deut 1:8:

43 See, e.g., Henrik Mouritsen, *The Freedman in the Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

44 Moses I. Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1980), 103–104.

45 See Stoutjesdijk, “Not Like the Rest of the Slaves?,” 135–200.

46 Cf. b. Sanh. 91a–b, Lev. Rab. 4:5, Apocr. Ezek., frag. 1.

47 Hermann L. Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, trans. and ed. Markus Bockmuehl, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 273.

48 This is rather problematic, since in Roman law it was officially not possible for a slave to own money or property. That is why I would like to suggest that the background to this parable is the *peculium*, a sum of money (a fund) that slaves earned themselves during their time as slaves, and with which (some) masters allowed them to buy their freedom. As Hezser remarks, “both Roman and rabbinic law allowed slaves to accept and make use of gifts they received from their masters or third parties.” (Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006], 166).

“See, I have set the land before you; go in and take possession of the land that I swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give to them and to their descendants after them.”<sup>49</sup> The textual problem facing the rabbis is why the verse speaks both about “your ancestors” and also mentions those ancestors (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob) by name.<sup>50</sup> The answer of the midrash is that all the patriarchs were, *individually*, worthy of the holy land. Then this parable follows:

A parable (משל). It is like a king who gave his slave a certain field as a gift,<sup>51</sup> gave it to him as it was (למלך שנתן לעבדו שדה אחת במתנה לא נתנה לו אלא) (כמות שהיא עמד (מה בידי לא נתנה לי אלא כמות שהיא).” Again, he planted a vineyard, and he said, “What I have is only that which was given to me as it was (מה בידי לא נתנה לי אלא כמות שהיא).”

So, when the Holy One, blessed be He, gave to Abraham, our father, the land, he gave it only like it was (לא נתנה לו אלא כמות שהיא), as it is said: *Rise up, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you* (Genesis 13:17). Abraham rose and improved it (עמד והשביחה), as it is said: *Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beer-sheba* (Genesis 21:33). Isaac rose and improved it, as it is said: *Isaac sowed seed in that land, and in the same year reaped a hundredfold* (Genesis 26:12). Jacob rose and improved it, as it is said: *And he bought the plot of land* (Genesis 33:19).<sup>52</sup>

This parable compares the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to a slave who receives a field from the king as a gift.<sup>53</sup> In her interpretation of the parable, Catherine Hezser emphasizes the slave’s improvements of what was given to him, seeking a connection with the parable of the Talents: “What matters is the master’s/God’s endowment of his slave/human beings with something, a property or talent, that can be used and improved. Both parables stress the advantages of making good use of what one owns. To refrain from using what

49 All biblical quotations are from the NRSV. Other translations are mine, unless indicated otherwise.

50 See also Louis Finkelstein, “The Sources of the Tannaitic Midrashim,” *JQR* 31 (1941), 235n33.

51 Sifre as quoted in Midrash ha-Gadol reads *מתנה* instead of *במתנה*, resulting in: “who gives his slave a field. The gift was only given as it was.”

52 Saul Horovitz, *Sifre Deuteronomy* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1969), 16 (Hebrew).

53 See also Reuven Hammer, *Sifre. A Tannaitic Commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy*, YJS 24 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 394 (note 3, under piska 8).

one has received from God is almost equalled to disobedience towards one's master in the gospel tale."<sup>54</sup>

Following this interpretation, I see the following similarities between the Shepherd of Hermas and the parable in Sifre Deut. 8:

1. A king (master) "gives" a field to his slave;
2. The presence of a vineyard (probably symbolising the land of Israel);
3. The slave improves the field;
4. A positive evaluation.<sup>55</sup>

An interesting difference with the Shepherd of Hermas is that the slave in Sifre is not rewarded for his work. In fact, to the best of my knowledge, we find no examples of slaves being rewarded in any parables from the rabbinic corpus.<sup>56</sup> A parable from Sifre Deut. 28 makes clear that it is a precarious, perhaps even dangerous, thing to do for a slave to go beyond his master's orders.<sup>57</sup> In the New Testament, the situation is different. There we find at least two parables in which slaves are rewarded, both in Luke 12: the parable of the Serving Master<sup>58</sup> and the parable of the Talents/Pounds.<sup>59</sup> However, this element of going beyond the master's wishes does not play a significant role in either one of these parables. Moreover, I do not know of any parable, whether in the Synoptic Gospels or in rabbinic literature, in which a slave obtains his freedom (for following his master's orders, or otherwise). This is why it has been noted that "for readers acquainted with the gospels, the parable [of the Shepherd of

54 Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 358.

55 That these elements appear in both a rabbinic parable and an early Christian parable might lend credibility to Dibelius's claim that the fifth parable's story elements "zweifellos aus dem Judentum [stammen]" (Dibelius, *Der Hirt des Hermas*, 565).

56 A famous saying from m. Avot 1:3 might prove that this is not remarkable after all: "Antigonus of Soko received [the law] from Simeon the Just. He used to say: 'Be not like slaves that serve the master for the sake of receiving a ration (פֶּרֶט), but be like slaves that serve the master not for the sake of receiving a ration; and let the fear of Heaven be upon you'" (following ms Kaufmann [folio 169r]). Cf. the slave simile in Col 3:22.

57 A similar message is conveyed by a parable in Sifra Nedava 2:6, about a slave who brings more than he is ordered to, of whom it is said: "Behold, this is like transgressing his [i.e., God's] words." (Translation mine, on the basis of the text in Louis Finkelstein, *Sifra on Leviticus According to Vatican Manuscript Assemani 66 with Variants from the other Manuscripts, Genizah Fragments, Early Editions and Quotations by Medieval Authorities and with References to parallel Passages and Commentaries*, 5 vols. [New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1983–1991], 2:22 [Hebrew]).

58 Luke 12:37: "Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them."

59 Matt 25:28–29 (//Luke 19:24–26): "So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance."

Hermas] starts on a familiar note, but ends surprisingly.”<sup>60</sup> That the slave is not only manumitted but also adopted is, according to Carolyn Osiek, “a narrative element that would have been as surprising to second-century hearers as to modern ones. Here the story could end.”<sup>61</sup> Jennifer Glancy has even called this reward “distinctive and countercultural.”<sup>62</sup> According to Mary Ann Beavis, this “unexpected outcome” may be due to “the author’s identity as a formerly enslaved person, real or fictionalized.”<sup>63</sup> In that case, “the many intertextual echoes of the synoptic parables in Hermas’ similitude suggest that this story is a reimaging of a slave parable by a formerly enslaved person.”<sup>64</sup>

Without wanting to discount this possibility, I would like to draw attention to another aspect, namely that of Graeco-Roman manumission stories versus Jewish-Christian manumission stories. Even though virtually no examples of early rabbinic or Christian parables or other stories in which slaves are freed are known to us (even Rabbi Gamaliel does not succeed in liberating his slave, although he clearly wants to!),<sup>65</sup> it was not an uncommon topos in Graeco-Roman stories.<sup>66</sup> We find the release of good slaves in several Plautine comedies (second century BCE), including *Rudens*, *Epidicus*, *Miles Gloriosus*, and *Persia*. Similarly, in *Vita Aesopi*, the famous slave and fable teller Aesop is manumitted. This might suggest that the manumission of slaves as a reward for their good work was more a Graeco-Roman literary topos than a Jewish(-Christian) one.

### 4.3 Absente Ero in Graeco-Roman Novels

In support of this argument, I would like to offer a brief discussion of the story of *Daphnis and Chloe*, a Graeco-Roman novel. *Daphnis and Chloe* is a second-century pastoral prose romance written by the Greek novelist Longus, about

60 Beavis, “The Parable of the Slave, Son, and Vineyard,” 655.

61 Osiek, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, 171. Osiek adds (note 9) that in comparable slave-son relationships from the New Testament (John 8:35–36; Mark 12:11–12; Gal 3:26–4:11), the relations between slaves and sons are rather “antagonistic.”

62 Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity*, 118.

63 Beavis, “The Parable of the Slave, Son, and Vineyard,” 660.

64 Beavis, “The Parable of the Slave, Son, and Vineyard,” 661.

65 y. Ketub. 3:10; b. B. Qam. 74b. An exception is the story of Judith (Jdt 16:28). Another (possible) exception is a story in Mekh. R. Ishm. Pischa 15, where a few slave women are “freed” by accident because they submerged in the mikveh—although they keep serving their mistress (cf. Elizabeth L. Gibson, *The Jewish Manumission Inscriptions*, TSAJ 75 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999], 87).

66 I would like to stress that I am talking about stories; the debate on actual manumission in antiquity falls outside the scope of this article. For that topic, see, e.g., J. Albert Harrill, *The Manumission of Slaves in Early Christianity*, HUT 32 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995); Gibson, *The Jewish Manumission Inscriptions*.

two exposed children who are raised by slaves and later discover that they are of noble blood and are then reinstated as their biological parents' children and heirs. In a number of scenes, *Daphnis and Chloe* shows similarities with the Shepherd of Hermas.

Inspecting the estate:

### Shepherd of Hermas

5. After some time the master of the field and of the slave came [back] and he went into the vineyard. And seeing that around the vineyard a fence was beautifully built, and that it was dug and that all the weeds were pulled out and that the vineyard was flourishing, *he rejoiced greatly over the deeds of the slave* (ἐχάρη λίαν ἐπὶ τοῖς ἔργοις τοῦ δούλου).

### Daphnis and Chloe

4.13.4 Dionysophanes (i.e., the master) was arriving with Cleariste ... The following days he spent inspecting Lamo's (i.e., the slave) work. When he saw the plains furrowed, the vines in shoot, the park in its beauty (for Astylus was taking responsibility for the flowers), *he was extraordinarily pleased* (ἦδeto περιττώς) ...<sup>67</sup>

This ancient tale precisely follows the order of a master's visit to his farm, as it is laid down in the ancient manuals. It also resembles the situation of the Shepherd of Hermas.

Promise of manumission:

### Shepherd of Hermas

6. Now he called his beloved son with him, who was to be his heir, and his friends, who were his advisors, and he told them what he had commanded his slave, and what he found done. These congratulated the slave with the testimony that the master had testified about him. 7. And he said to them: "*I promised freedom to this slave* (ἐγὼ τῷ δούλῳ τούτῳ ἐλευθερίαν ἐπηγγείλαμην) ..."

### Daphnis and Chloe

4.13.4 The following days he spent inspecting Lamo's work. When he saw the plains furrowed, the vines in shoot, the park in its beauty (for Astylus was taking responsibility for the flowers), he was extraordinarily pleased, complimented Lamo, *and promised to make him a free man* (ἐλεύθερον ἀφήσειν ἐπηγγέλλετο)."

67 Text and translation of *Daphnis and Chloe* are from Jeffrey Henderson, ed. and trans., *Longus, Xenophon of Ephesus. Daphnis and Chloe. Anthia and Habrocomes*, LCL 69 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 165ff.



In both stories, the reward for the job well done by the slave is manumission. It should be noted how the element of a promise plays a role in both stories. Manumission is not something that is implemented directly, but is used as an incentive by masters to stimulate their underlings in their enterprises.

Slave becomes son:

### Shepherd of Hermas

7. And he (i.e., the master) said to them: "I promised freedom to this slave, when he would carry out my command, that I commanded to him: and he has carried out my command and he added a good work to the vineyard, and he has pleased me greatly. *Now in return for the work that he has done, I want to make him joint heir with my son* (ἀντί τούτου οὖν τοῦ ἔργου οὗ εἰργάσατο θέλω αὐτὸν συγκληρονόμον τῷ υἱῷ μου ποιῆσαι), because when he thought of the good [deed], he did not ignore it, but completed it."

8. *The son of the master agreed with this intention, to make the slave fellow heir with the son* (ταύτῃ τῇ γνώμῃ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ δεσπότης συνηυδόκησεν αὐτῷ, ἵνα συγκληρονόμος γένηται ὁ δοῦλος τῷ υἱῷ).

### Daphnis and Chloe

4.22.3: [brother:] "Stop, Daphnis. Don't be afraid. I am your brother, and those who were your masters before are now your parents." ...

4.24.3–4: [father:] "And you, Astylus, *don't be upset at receiving part of my property instead of the whole; to sensible men nothing is more valuable than a brother.* (μέρος ληψόμενος ἀντι πάσης τῆς οὐσίας, κρεῖττον γάρ τοῖς εὖ φρονούσιν ἀδελφοῦ κτήμα οὐδέν) ... For I shall leave you both a great deal of land, a large number of useful servants, gold, silver, and all the other possessions that rich men have."

What is perhaps surprising in both accounts is how the (other) son is involved in the decision to elevate the slave to the level of heir. In *Daphnis and Chloe*, this decision is explicitly addressed as being possibly disadvantageous to the other son, who loses property and money. A difference between the two stories is that the slave in *Daphnis and Chloe* is restored to his former, free, status as heir, while in the *Shepherd of Hermas* the slave really gains a new status.

Sharing food:

### Shepherd of Hermas

9. After a few days, the householder organized a banquet and he sent to

### Daphnis and Chloe

4.15: "They were all amazed, especially Cleariste [the master's wife], who

him (the slave) many foods from the banquet. *When the slave received the foods that were sent to him by his master, he kept [only] what was sufficient for him, and the rest he gave to his fellow slaves* (λαβὼν δὲ ὁ δούλος τὰ ἐδέσματα τὰ πεμφθέντα αὐτῷ ἀπὸ τοῦ δεσπότης αὐτοῦ τὰ ἀρκούντα αὐτῷ ἦρε, τὰ δὲ λοιπὰ τοῖς συνδούλοις αὐτοῦ διέδωκεν). 10. When his fellow slaves received the foods, they rejoiced and began to pray for him, so that he may find [even] greater favour with the master, because he had treated them like this.

swore that she would indeed give him the presents, since he was a fine musician as well as a fine goatherd. *They went up to the farm and had lunch and sent Daphnis some of what they were eating. He shared it with Chloe and enjoyed having a taste of urban cuisine ...*"

There is yet a final similarity that catches the eye. In both stories,<sup>68</sup> the slaves receive some food from their master's table—a reward in itself.<sup>69</sup> The way they deal with that food—the way they imitate the generosity of their masters—shows that they truly deserve to be lifted to the level of heirs.

To be clear, I do not want to argue that the author of the Shepherd of Hermas knew, or was even influenced by, the story of Daphnis and Chloe. What I do want to argue is that the aforementioned comparison shows that Hermas had a good knowledge of standard Graeco-Roman story elements and scenes, and that he fused that knowledge with his apprehension of Christian and Jewish parable motifs.

## 5 Pauline Slavery Metaphors

As such, the manumission of the slave in Hermas's fifth parable can be explained by his social location in (lower class) Rome, where manumission stories were more common than they were in the Christian and rabbinic literature of Roman Palestine. But there is also another factor that I would like to briefly take into consideration, which is that Hermas may have combined

68 Notice that the scene from Daphnis and Chloe displayed here, precedes in the novel the scene in which Daphnis is reinstated as son and heir.

69 Cf. Seneca's 47th letter, 15: "Invite some to your table because they deserve the honor, and others that they may come to deserve it" (Richard M. Gummere, *Seneca: Epistles, Volume 1: Epistles 1–65*, LCL 75 [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1917], 309). See also footnote 19 above.

elements from synoptic and rabbinic slavery parables with Pauline slavery metaphors. The transition from slave to son described in the parable<sup>70</sup> may remind us (as well as Hermas) of Gal 4, especially 4:7: “So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.” It might also remind us of Rom 8:15–17 and, in a slightly different way, of Col 3:22–24. All these texts promise adoption and partaking—together with Christ (the biological son of the slave’s master in the Shepherd of Hermas?)—in the heritage of the master (God) to (faithful) slaves. It may be that Hermas was inspired by this imagery and took it up in the composition of his parable, perhaps also stimulated by his own biography. As has recently been claimed, “[e]ven if the freedman Hermas had not been adopted like the slave of the parable, he could well have regarded himself and others like him as adopted sons/heirs of God in the Pauline sense.”<sup>71</sup>

## 6 Conclusions

In the fifth parable of the Shepherd of Hermas, the keeping of commandments is compared to the building of fences. With the title of this article, I am (playfully) suggesting that there is a connection with m. Avot 1:1, which says that one should build “a fence around the Torah (ועשו סִיג לַתּוֹרָה).” Whether or not this particular connection can be proven, I in any case hope this chapter has shown convincingly that the “deeply Jewish” Hermas relies for his parable imagery on its rabbinic and New Testament counterparts (*absente ero*/slavery parables) and is truly part of a parable-telling tradition. Considering its counterparts in rabbinic and New Testament literature, as well as its structural features, I see no reason not to consider the fifth parable of the Shepherd of Hermas a full-fledged parable. Finally, I would like to argue that this fifth parable is a good—perhaps even the best—example of Christian parable telling after Jesus; the parable has a complete narrative with an introduction and an application. It is clearly influenced and inspired by New Testament, and possibly Jewish, parables and metaphors, but its creator has also taken the creative liberty of

70 Herm. Sim. 55.7 (5.2.7): “And he (i.e., the master) said to them (i.e., his son and friends): ‘I promised freedom to this slave, if he carried out my command, which I commanded to him: and he has carried out my command and he added a good work to the vineyard, and he has pleased me greatly. Now in return for the work that he has done, I want to make him joint heir with my son, because when he thought of the good [deed], he did not ignore it, but completed it.’” See also Herm. Sim. 55.11 (5.2.11).

71 Beavis, “The Parable of the Slave, Son, and Vineyard,” 666.

adapting the parable to his own, Roman context, in which manumission was a greater possibility—at least literary, but perhaps also real life—than it was in the Jewish context, and, possibly, to his own biography. In this way, Hermas created a truly Christian as well as innovative and powerful parable, one that deserves to be studied.

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## The Land of Israel as Diasporic Topos in Rabbinic Parables

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In a “*mashal* about the *mashal*,”<sup>1</sup> one of the few explicitly poetological passages of rabbinic literature pertaining to the small form *mashal*, a term whose polysemy notwithstanding is generally rendered in English as “parable,” we read: “Let not the parable be lightly esteemed in your eyes, for by means of the parable a man can understand the words of Torah” (Song Rab. 1:1:8).<sup>2</sup> According to this dictum, parables are essentially didactic forms in the service of learning and teaching Torah. In the following pages, I will be concerned with the use of parables in rabbinic literature to convey teachings about a part of Torah which is a major theme of Scripture: the promised land, a notion that is richly expanded upon and elaborated in the literature of the sages.<sup>3</sup>

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- 1 David Stern, *Midrash and Theory: Ancient Jewish Exegesis and Contemporary Literary Studies* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 41.
  - 2 This contribution has been written in the context of the project “Reconfiguring Diaspora: The Transformation of the Jewish Diaspora in Antiquity,” directed by Leonard V. Rutgers and financially supported by the Dutch Research Council (NWO). On the equivalence between *mashal* and parable, see Robert B.Y. Scott, Louis Isaac Rabinowitz, and Ángel Sáenz-Badillos, “Parable,” in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, ed. Fred Skolnik and Michael Berenbaum, 2nd ed., 22 vols. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 15:620; Rüdiger Zymner, “Parabel,” in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik*, ed. Gert Ueding, 12 vols. (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1992–2015), 6:502–514; Rüdiger Zymner, “Gleichnis,” in *Reallexikon der deutschen Literaturwissenschaft*, ed. Klaus Weimar et al., 3rd ed., 3 vols. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2007), 1:724–727. On the rabbinic parable in general, Arnold Goldberg, “Das Schriftauslegende Gleichnis im Midrasch,” *FJB* 9 (1981): 1–90; David Flusser, *Die rabbinischen Gleichnisse und der Gleichniserzähler Jesus*, vol. 1, *Das Wesen der Gleichnisse* (Bern: Lang, 1981); David Stern, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991); Daniel Boyarin, “Midrash in Parables,” *AJSR* 20 (1995): 123–138; Eric Ottenheim and Marcel Poorthuis, eds., *Parables in Changing Contexts: Essays on the Study of Parables in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism*, JCP 35 (Leiden: Brill, 2020).
  - 3 See Richard Sarason, “The Significance of the Land of Israel in the Mishna,” in *The Land of Israel: Jewish Perspectives*, ed. Lawrence A. Hoffman (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), 109–136; Isaiah Gafni, *Land, Center and Diaspora: Jewish Constructs in Late Antiquity*, JSPSup 21 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997); Gabrielle Oberhänsli-Widmer, “Bindung ans Land Israel—Lösung von der Eigenstaatlichkeit: Der Umgang der Rabbinen mit einer virtuellen Heimat,” in *Heiliges Land*, ed. Martin Ebner, JBTh 23 (Neukirchen-Vluyn:

Crucial changes in Roman Palestine in the wake of the defeat of the Bar Kokhba revolt in the second century CE and, more importantly, after the Christianization of the Roman Empire in the fourth century, appear to have had an impact on a new definition of Judaism as decentralized and deterritorialized as well as on the emergence of the Jewish diaspora as we understand it today, the paradigmatic diaspora. Since their beginnings in the 1990s, Diaspora Studies have operated with a concept of diaspora that takes the Jewish case as a departure point and conceives of the homeland as playing a major role in the self-definition of a diasporic community.<sup>4</sup> The literature of the sages is a corpus that can be described as *diasporic* insofar as it was created by Jews dispersed both from and in their ancestral homeland (Sassanian Babylonia and Roman Palestine, respectively). This literature refashioned the promised land of Scripture where Judaism's cultic centre had once stood in a plethora of statements, some of them explicitly exegetical, some others less so. In this chapter I discuss a series of parables on the Land, one of several ways of speaking about the Land indirectly.<sup>5</sup> These parables reveal some of the strategies<sup>6</sup> with which the sages addressed the significance of the Land, which has become a topos of a diasporic literature. What kind of teachings about the Land of Israel did the sages transmit using parables? In what literary contexts and with what different focalizations do these teachings occur? In order to address these questions, I have established a corpus of parables excerpting midrash documents (or corpora), to which I will refer following scholarly convention as Tannaitic,

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Neukirchener Verlag, 2008), 149–175; Daniel Boyarin, *A Traveling Homeland: The Babylonian Talmud as Diaspora* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015); Constanza Cordoni, "Inheriting and Buying a Homeland: The Land of Israel and the Patriarchs," *JSJ* 49 (2018): 551–580.

- 4 See William Safran, "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return," *Diaspora* (1991): 83–99; William Safran, "The Diaspora and the Homeland: Reciprocities, Transformations, and Role Reversals," in *Transnationalism: Diasporas and the Advent of a New (Dis)order*, ed. Eliezer Ben-Rafael and Yitzhak Sternberg, ICSS 19 (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 75–99; André Levy and Alex Weingrod, "On Homelands and Diasporas: An Introduction," in *Homelands and Diasporas: Holy Lands and Other Places*, ed. A. Levy and A. Weingrod (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 3–26; Robin Cohen, "Solid, ductile and liquid: Changing notions of homeland and home in diaspora studies," in *Transnationalism: Diasporas and the Advent of a New (Dis)order*, ed. Eliezer Ben-Rafael and Yizhaq Sternberg, ICSS 19 (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 117–134; Hasia R. Diner, Introduction, *The Oxford Handbook of the Jewish Diaspora*, ed. Hasia R. Diner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 1–19.
- 5 Parables may be regarded as forms of indirect or figurative speech of different scope. See Rüdiger Zymner, "Uneigentlich," in *Reallexikon der deutschen Literaturwissenschaft*, ed. Klaus Weimar et al., 3rd ed., 3 vols. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2007), 3:727.
- 6 Even though Tannaitic, Amoraic, and post-Amoraic midrashim were searched for Land-parables, the present study is not exhaustive.



Amoraic, and post-Amoraic. For reasons of scope, I will focus on a selection of representative examples.

## 1 The Corpus

A first question that arises concerns the way the Land becomes part of the rabbinic parabolical discourse. Is the explicit mention of the Land in a scriptural verse that functions as lemma or base verse the hermeneutic “occasion” for a parable? Or is it rather the case that verses without any evident reference to the Land are interpreted with parables in which the Land happens to feature more or less prominently? As far as the corpora I have excerpted are concerned, the former is the exception.<sup>7</sup> The rabbinic discourse on the Land is brought into an exegetical dialogue with scriptural wording which does not evoke the Land. The heuristic followed to identify parables for my corpus is that a parable is regarded as a Land-parable if the expression Land (אֶרֶץ), in the territorial sense of bounded space or “country” (i.e., Land of Israel) rather than “ground” or “earth,” features in one of the constitutive parts of the rabbinic parable as described for example by Arnold Goldberg or David Stern,<sup>8</sup> or in the co-text/context of the parable.<sup>9</sup> The expression may therefore be found preceding the secular narrative (*mashal* proper) in the lemma (exception), or in the brief commentary on this verse, or else in the general rabbinic wording that connects the base verse to a *petichah* verse. It can also feature in the application of the secular narrative (*nimshal*), which may in turn include other key scriptural verses. Taking these criteria into account, I was able to identify

7 To give but one example: the Book of Psalms contains thirty-five explicit references to the Land (which is not once called “land of Israel,” but “land of Canaan,” “their land,” “his land,” “the land,” “the land of the living,” “the pleasant land”). Furthermore, in fourteen verses the Land is indirectly referred to as a “heritage” with the same expression (*nachalah*) used for the people (male children and even God’s decrees). I was interested in finding out whether the verses that refer to the Land function as lemmata in Midrash Tehillim, the rabbinic midrashic compilation on the book of the Psalms, and if so, whether parables came into play in the interpretation—which proved to be the case in only two instances: Midr. Ps. 5:1 and Midr. Ps. 24:2.

8 See Goldberg, “Das schriftauslegende Gleichnis,” 134–198; Stern, *Parables in Midrash*, 8. In my search for “Land-parables,” I did not include parables that may deal with the Temple, Jerusalem, or the *aratsot* (provinces?) Judea, Transjordan, and Galilee (even though the significance of these “parts” of the Land is of importance in many of the texts I have come across during my research).

9 With the term “co-text,” I refer to the immediate linguistic environment of the parable; with “context,” the wider textual environment.

thirty-two Land-parables transmitted in Tannaitic, Amoraic, and post-Amoraic Palestinian documents.<sup>10</sup> While in some of the sources the Land features only marginally, in others it is evidently focalized. The examples I will discuss in what follows are of the latter type, and they address the Land in relation to three themes: 1) The patriarchs' special attachment to the Land; 2) Moses's vain wish to enter the Land;<sup>11</sup> and 3) God's relation to the Land.<sup>12</sup> For each of these themes I have selected examples from more than one of the three (Tannaitic, Amoraic, and post-Amoraic) periods of rabbinic creativity.

## 2 The Patriarchs and the Land

Only one Tannaitic Land-parable addresses the link between the Land and the patriarchs. In Deut 1:8, Moses quotes the words with which God symbolically transfers its legal title to Israel at Horeb: "See, I have set the land before you; go and take possession of the land that the Lord swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give to them and to their descendants after them." The halakhic midrash *Sifre Deuteronomy* interprets apparently redundant aspects of this verse with the aid of a parable:

[*The land*] that the Lord swore to your ancestors (Deut 1:8): ... Why then does Scripture say [in addition], *to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob*? To [indicate that] Abraham on his own [was worthy], Isaac on his own [was worthy], Jacob on his own [was worthy]. It is like a king who gave a servant a certain field as a gift, gave it to him as it was. The servant went to work and improve it, saying, What I have is only that which was given to me as it was. And he planted a vineyard in it, saying again, What I have is only that which was given to me as it was. So also when the Holy One, blessed be He, gave Abraham the Land, He gave it to him only as it was, for it is said, *Rise up, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will*

10 The distribution is as follows: ten Tannaitic Land-parables (34 percent): Mekh. R. Ishm. (1), *Sifre Num.* (5), *Sifre Deut.* (4); four Amoraic Land-parables (13 percent): *Gen. Rab.* (1), *Lev. Rab.* (2), *Pesiq. Rav Kah.* (1); and eighteen post-Amoraic Land-parables (53 percent): *Song Rab.* (1), *Tanh. B.* (11), *Midr. Ps.* (2), *S. Eli. Zut.* (1), *Ag. Ber.* (1). See the appendix for a complete list of the Land-parables corpus.

11 This includes comparing his punishment to that of the generation of the wilderness and the spies, all of whom die outside of the Land.

12 Apart from these questions, the Land-parables also address the division of the Land after the conquest (*Sifre Num.* 132), the fact that the Levites do not receive a portion (*Sifre Num.* 119), and the evil report of the spies in Num 13–15 (*Tanh. B. Shelah Lekha 4; Vaetchanan 2*).

*give it to you* (Gen 13:17). Abraham then went to work to improve it, for it is said, *And Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beer-sheba* (Gen 21:33). Isaac likewise went to work to improve it, for it is said, *And Isaac sowed seed in that land, and in the same year reaped a hundredfold* (Gen 26:12). Jacob too went to work to improve it, for it is said, *And he bought the plot of land [on which he had pitched his tent]* (Gen 33:19).

Sifre Deut. 8<sup>13</sup>

Although the parable is initially told to explain the rephrasing of “your ancestors” as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as well as the repetition of the preposition *le-* (“to”) before the names of the three patriarchs in the scriptural lemma, the secular narrative stresses only the difference made by the work on the field by one and the same servant. The field of the parable and what the servant does on it, the midrash suggests, is comparable to deeds of each of the three patriarchs in the Land, deeds which are seen as alluded to in Scripture. Each is singled out in the type of action he performs on the Land—Abraham plants a tree, Isaac cultivates the land, and Jacob buys a piece of land from the children of Hamor in the territory of Shechem. Common to the three is that each with his actions modifies the place where he resides, which happens to be the land promised to and/or given to Abraham, and in this way each makes it his own.

This argument is also found in three of the four Amoraic Land-parable in the corpus that focus on the attachment of the patriarchs to the Land and are thus parables of the Land as ancestral homeland.<sup>14</sup> I will limit myself to an example from the Amoraic exegetical midrash on the book of Genesis, *Genesis Rabbah*. In Gen 18:17–18 we read: “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, since Abraham is to become a great and populous nation and all the nations of the earth are to bless themselves by him?” Scripture provides a sort of answer to this question with a dialogue between God and Abraham in which the latter takes up the role of a prophet (Gen 18:19–33). *Genesis Rabbah* addresses the exegetical and theological problem posed by God’s rhetorical question both by spelling out that Abraham is a prophet and by having three Palestinian amoraim<sup>15</sup> tell three consecutive parables. What these have in common is that they compare Abraham to a king’s friend or adviser without whose consent the king does nothing. The first of these parables is the one of

13 The translation follows and slightly modifies Reuven Hammer, ed. *Sifre: A Tannaitic Commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy, translated from the Hebrew with Introduction and Notes*, xjs 24 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), 33.

14 See the discussion of Tanh. B. Shelah Lekha 3 below for a different argument. On the patriarchs’ faithfulness to the Land, see Tanh. B. Re’eh 8.

15 Rabbi Joshua ben Levi, Rabbi Judah ben Rabbi Simeon, and Rabbi Samuel ben Nachman.

interest for the question pertaining to the meaning of the Land in parabolic discourse:

This Abraham is a prophet ... shall I then not reveal to him [the impending destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah?] *<The Lord said, Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, etc. (Gen 18:17)>*. Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said: It is like a king who gave an estate (*usiah*, אַסִּיָא)<sup>16</sup> to his friend and after some time wished to cut down five non-fruit-bearing trees from it. The king said, If I wanted to cut them down even from his *patrikon* (פַּטְרִיקוֹן, “patrimony”),<sup>17</sup> he would certainly not refuse me. What is there [for me to lose]? And he consulted him [about it]. Similarly, the Holy One, blessed be He, said, I have already given [the land as a gift to Abraham, *To your descendants I give*] *this land* (Gen 15:18). Now these five towns were indeed in what is mine; yet if I desired them even of his *patrikon*, he would not refuse me. What is there [for me to lose]? And he consulted him [about it].

Gen. Rab. 49:2 [Theodor-Albeck 499–500]<sup>18</sup>

The parable is told to illustrate Abraham’s status as prophet rather than to address the Land itself. After giving an estate to a friend, the king as previous owner is depicted as still being in a position to decide whether certain trees may be felled in what has become someone else’s property. This is incidentally the first of the Land-parables in my corpus where the Land-equivalent in the *mashal* narrative is an expression that evokes the concept of homeland. The parable uses a Greek loanword (פַּטְרִיקוֹן, *patrikon*) which, like *patria* (for which rabbinic Hebrew has no equivalent), connotes the Land’s ancestral character, that is to say, the link between the forefathers (*patres*) and the Land.

The parable is about the king’s dilemma as to whether he should discuss with his friend this measure, the felling of trees in the estate he has given to his friend (not explicitly referred to as owner or tenant), and about the king’s conclusion that to inform his friend would not imply a conflict of interest.

16 MS reading: Aram. אַסִּיָא. Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Babli, Talmud Yerushalmi and Midrashic Literature* (London: Luzac, 1903), s.v. אַסִּיָא, “(σῦσία) substance, (landed) property, farm, estate”; Michael Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic of the Byzantine Period, 2nd ed.* (Ramat-Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2002), s.v. אַסִּיָא, “landed property, estate.”

17 The Historical Dictionary of the Hebrew Language (*Ma’agarim*) lists six occurrences of this loanword, four of them found in Genesis Rabbah.

18 Quoted with minor modifications following Harry Freedman, *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, ed. Harry Freedman and Maurice Simon, 2 vols. (London: Soncino, 1939).

God—unlike the king of flesh and blood who may have been in doubt—knows his wish will be granted, so asking the flesh and blood possessor of the land entails no risk for him. More importantly, the parable addresses the ambivalent status of a land which, while “given” to Abraham and his descendants in several speech acts, referred to as their patrimony, and acknowledged by God himself as their patrimony, will always be also God’s territory.

While the parables of Sifre Deut. 8 and Gen. Rab. 49:2 suggest that the patriarchs took possession of the Land,<sup>19</sup> a different position is represented by the following post-Amoraic parable on the connection between the patriarchs and the Land:

*Send men [to spy out the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites] ... (Num 13:2). Rabbi Acha the Great opened: The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever (Isa 40:8). What does the matter resemble? It is like a king who had a friend. Now he made an agreement with him and said to him, Come with me, and I will give you a present. He went with him but died. The king said to the son of his friend, Although your father has died, I am not withdrawing the present that I said I would give him. Come and get it yourself. The king is the Holy One, blessed be He, and the friend is Abraham, for it is said, [But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen,] the offspring of Abraham, my friend (Isa 41:8). The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him, Come with me, for it is said, Go from your country (Gen 12:1). He made an agreement with him to give him a present, for it is said, Arise, walk about the land ... for I am giving it to you (Gen 13:17) and it [Scripture] says, for all the land that you see I will give to you [and to your offspring forever] (Gen 13:15). ... The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses, Although I had agreed with the ancestors to give them the land and they died, I am not going back on [my word], rather the word of our God shall stand forever (Isa 40:8).*

Tanh. B. Shelah Lekha 3<sup>20</sup>

This is one of those exceptional cases referred to above in which the Land is mentioned in the verse that provides the hermeneutic occasion for a

19 In the wider context of the rabbinic argument on whether the patriarchs were only promised the Land or also took possession of it, such statements are in line with the notion that Joshua did not have to conquer but could enter the Land without resorting to weapons.

20 Texts from Tanhuma are quoted, with minor modifications, following John T. Townsend, *Midrash Tanhuma (S. Buber Recension)*, 3 vols. (Hoboken: Ktav, 1989–2003).

Land-parable.<sup>21</sup> In its original scriptural context, the lemma is part of the narrative episode of the spies (Num 13–14), which is particularly richly interpreted in Tanhuma literature, not only by means of Land-parables.

Instead of retrojecting the possession of the Land onto the time of the patriarchs as Sifre Deut. 8 and Gen. Rab. 49:2 do, this parable from Tanhuma Buber argues that the promise to the patriarchs could not be fulfilled during their lifetime. After identifying the king and his friend as God and Abraham, the *nimshal* provides a parallel to the secular narrative—according to which someone is promised something which someone else receives—with a rephrasing of the scriptural narrative of the promise that uses prooftexts from that same narrative (Gen 12:1, 13:15). The midrash associates the moment of fulfilment of the promise with Moses, even though Moses is not an exact equivalent of the friend of the *mashal* insofar as he is not told to enter and possess the Land. The *nimshal* is closed with a quotation of the *petichah* verse which the *mashal* seeks to illustrate, as anticipating the fulfilment of the promise in Joshua's time.<sup>22</sup>

### 3 The No-Land's Man Moses

Four out of ten Tannaitic and three out of sixteen post-Amoraic Land-parables in my corpus are concerned with the problem posed by a scriptural narrative event that called for an explanation: God does not allow Moses to enter the promised land. This is a problem with which rabbinic literature deals in extenso in a sort of macro-rabbinic narrative about the end of Moses's life outside of the Land. According to this narrative, following God's command to go up a mountain in Transjordan to see the Land and disregarding God's hints that Joshua will be the one to bring the people into the Land, Moses attempts to have God change his mind and allow him to enter the Land. This is, incidentally, as Günter Stemberger points out, a motif without a parallel in pre-rabbinic Judaism.<sup>23</sup> It is as part of this rabbinic retelling of the end of Moses's life that we encounter several Land-parables. Let us look at the one transmitted in the Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael:

21 Arguably, the Land itself is not strictly speaking part of the lemma in view of the fact that the part of the verse in which it is mentioned is not spelt out and the parable is told to illustrate the so-called *petichah* verse brought in connection with the lemma (Isa 40:8).

22 In the original scriptural context of the book of Isaiah, the prophet would have used these words to refer *back* to the fulfilment in Joshua's time of the promise made to Abraham, given that the words of Isa 40:8 are spoken after Moses's death.

23 See Günter Stemberger, *Moses in der rabbinischen Tradition* (Freiburg: Herder, 2016), 189.

Whence do we know about Moses? It is said, *And recite it in the hearing of Joshua* (Exod 17:14). [With these words God] said [to him], Joshua will lead Israel to inherit the land. However, in the end, he [Moses] was still standing and beseeching, for it is said, *And I besought the Lord* etc. (Deut 3:23). A parable: It is like a king who decreed against his son that he should not come into his palace with him (עמו לפלטרין). The son entered the first gate and the guards kept their peace. At the second [gate] they kept their peace. But at the third they rebuked him and said to him, It is enough for you to have come so far. So also was it when Moses conquered the land of the two peoples, the land of Sichon and Og, and gave it to the tribe of Reuben and the tribe of Gad and to half the tribe of Manasseh. They, then, said to him, It seems as if the decree against you was issued on a condition. Maybe we likewise have been sentenced on a condition.

Mekh. R. Ishm. Amalek 2<sup>24</sup>

According to the tanna Rabbi Eleazar of Modi'in, in the context immediately preceding the text quoted above, Moses and Jacob have in common that they are not able (or willing) to grasp a hint God gives them. In Moses's case, it should have become evident to him at the mention of Joshua in Exod 17:14 that he would not be the one to lead the people into the Land. However, the midrash argues, he failed to interpret the hint properly or chose to interpret it to suit his own wishes. Moses's predicament is what the parable appears to illustrate, taking the words of Deut 3:23 as a hermeneutic occasion: After entering two areas of the king's palace, the king's son is stopped. No reason is given to explain why he may not pass through the third gate.<sup>25</sup> The *nimshal* identifies the two areas the son enters with the lands conquered from Sichon and Og<sup>26</sup> and has the collective character of the two and a half tribes to whom these lands are given argue for a similarity between Moses being obliged to stay outside and their own remaining outside and settling in Transjordan. Furthermore, the *nimshal* somehow conflates in the character of the two and a half tribes the roles of both the king's son and the guards of the secular narrative. The latter's rebuking

24 See Lieve M. Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhilotot: An Annotated Edition and Translation of the Parables in Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael and Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai*, TSAJ 176 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 373–378, for a synoptic edition of the parable in both Mekhilotot, with translation and commentary.

25 In two “parallels” in other Tannaitic documents, it is the rooms of the palace which the prince may enter, not the gates. The bedchamber is the forbidden area. See Sifre Deut. 29 and Sifre Num. 134.

26 Neither in Sifre Numbers nor in Sifre Deuteronomy does the application of the narrative give analogies for the parts of the palace.

words with which the secular narrative is closed are echoed in the *nimshal* with the less determined and more sympathetic words of the two and a half tribes that settled of their own accord in Transjordan. They appear to express a hope that Moses's and, accordingly, their own fate may be changed, but then no explicit answer to this question is given, for both will remain outside.

The passage immediately following upon this question, which strictly speaking does not belong to the parable,<sup>27</sup> has Moses elaborate on the prohibition in an attempt to challenge the parable. He negotiates his right to enter the Land using language that reminds us of the language of parables: his argument can be paraphrased in the typical words of an anti-*mashal*, one that contests God's decree with the words "Your ways are not like those of a king of flesh and blood!" (Mekh. R. Ishm. Amalek 2). In this parable and its parallels, the narrative of the son not allowed into part of the king's palace appears to tell us that, no matter how good the relationship between a king and his son may be, it is for the former to decide who has access to which space of his realm. The fact that in this context the Land is compared to the innermost of a king's place of residence tells us something about a special connection between God and the Land, but also about Moses and the space before the Land—in both a spatial and temporal sense.

Tanhuma literature transmits numerous Land-parables, some of which are especially rich in style and content. The example below depicts Moses again negotiating a chance to enter the Land and drawing a boundary between the spies and himself:

*For the same fate is in store for all: for the righteous, and for the wicked (Qoh 9:2): Moses said [to the Holy One, blessed be He, Master of the world,] everything is the same for You, he destroys both the blameless and the wicked (Job 9:22). The spies provoked You with anger with the evil report on the land, while I have served Your children forty years in the wilderness. Is the same lot [in store] for me as for them?*

Tanh. B. Vaetchanan 2

The report of the men sent by Moses to scout the land is mentioned as part of a homily on Deut 3:23 which makes use of Qoh 9:2 as *petichah* verse. Moses's powerful argument here is that he should not be placed in the same category with slanderers and with the generation of the wilderness. He therefore refuses

<sup>27</sup> We might argue, however, that it is an extended application.



to accept Qoh 9:2 and Job 9:22 as applicable to his case. The following parable is then told to support Moses's argument:

A parable: What does the matter resemble? It is like a king who wanted to take a wife. He sent emissaries to see her, [and find out] whether she was beautiful or not. They went to see her. They came and said to him, We have seen her and there is no one more neglected and uglier than she. When her *shoshvinah* (שושבינה, "bride's friend, agent") heard, he said, My lord, there is no one in the world more beautiful than she. [So] he came to marry her. The father of the young woman said to the king's emissaries, I swear that none of you shall enter [the wedding feast], seeing that you humiliated her before the king. When the *shoshvin* came to enter, he said to him, You also may not come in. The *shoshvin* said to him, I have not seen her and yet told the king that there was no one more beautiful than she, while those said that there is no one uglier than she! And now I shall see whether [the truth is] according to my words or to their words. So Moses said to the Holy One, blessed be He, Master of the world, the spies uttered slander, *a land that devours its inhabitants* (Num 13:32), but I, who have not seen it, said, *for the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills*] etc. (Deut 8:7). And now I shall see it, whether it is like my words or like their words, for it is said, *Let me cross over to see the good land beyond the Jordan* (Deut 3:25). He said to him, *for you shall not go over the Jordan* (Deut 3:27). If so, then everything is the same for you, *he destroys both the blameless and the wicked* (Job 9:22).

Tanh. B. Vaetchanan 2

We could be tempted to think that it is Moses himself who tells God the parable, even though it is more likely that the same anonymous voice that quotes Moses arguing with God is the one that tells the parable and then quotes Moses again applying the narrative to his own case. While the secular narrative ends with the expression of the agent's wish, the *nimshal* comes to a close with Moses's words of resistance. He might repeat the last word in the parable and this is one of reproof,<sup>28</sup> but—as was the case in the parable in the Mekhilta, where the two and a half tribes wondered whether there could be any hope

<sup>28</sup> This is in line with the findings of Dov Weiss on the development of the idea of confronting God. See Dov Weiss, *Pious Irreverence: Confronting God in Rabbinic Judaism* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 11.

for a change of fate for Moses and themselves—the midrash cannot go any further, since Moses’s story cannot be changed.

#### 4 The Land Belongs to God

The majority of the Land-parables of the corpus with a focus on the link between the Land and God are post-Amoraic. It is to three examples of such post-Amoraic Land-parables that I wish to turn in this section of my chapter.

God promises the Land to Abraham, gives the Land for a possession to the three patriarchs and/or their descendants, but the Land, which rabbinic literature characteristically refers to with the genitive construction “Land of Israel,” is God’s, as stated in Lev 25:23. The Mishnah treats the Land as special in its connection with God in the rulings pertaining to cultic purity and agricultural offerings, in rulings relating to social and spatial taxonomies, all of which is part of what Richard Sarason has described as a “sustained act of imagination [that] describes and legislates for an ideal Israelite world of Temple cult, priesthood, Sanhedrin, and king that nowhere existed at the time of its compilation.”<sup>29</sup> We also find traces of the Mishnah’s “as if”-attitude towards the Land in post-Tannaitic texts. An example is the following Tanhuma Buber:

*When you come into the land* (Lev 19:23): This is what Scripture says, *I thought how I would set you among children, and give you a pleasant land* (ארץ חמדה) [*the most beautiful heritage of all the nations*] (Jer 3:19). It is like a king who had concubines and many children. But he had one child with a matrona and he loved him dearly. The king gave fields and vineyards (שדות וכרמים) to all the children of the concubines, and after that he gave this one son one orchard (*pardes*, פרדס) from which all his *qlarin* (“provisions,” קלארין) came. The son sent and said to his father, To the children of the concubines you have given fields and vineyards, but to me you have given one garden. The king said to him, By your life, all my *qlarin* come to me from this garden; and because I love you more than your brothers, I have given it to you. Similarly, the Holy One, blessed be He, created the peoples of the world, for it is said, *There are sixty queens* [*and eighty concubines*] (Song 6:8): these are the peoples; *One is my dove* [*my perfect one*] (Song 6:9): this is the congregation of Israel. And the Holy

29 Richard Sarason, “The significance of the Land of Israel in the Mishna,” in *The Land of Israel: Jewish Perspectives*, ed. Lawrence A. Hoffman (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), 111.

One, blessed be He, distributed fields and vineyards among the peoples of the world, for it is said, *When the Most High apportioned the nations* (Deut 32:8); but to Israel he has given the Land of Israel, the *qlarin* of the Holy One, blessed be He. The offerings come from it; the shewbread comes from it; the first fruits come from it; the *omer* comes from it; all the good things in the world come from it. Why all this? In order to make a distinction between the son of the matrona and the children of the concubines, for it is said, *I thought how I would set you among children* (Jer 3:19).

Tanh. B. Kedoshim 12

It is once again with the aid of loanwords that the midrashic discourse evokes the Land in a parable.<sup>30</sup> The son by the woman who is not referred to as a concubine but as a matrona,<sup>31</sup> is distinguished from his siblings in that he receives from the king an orchard (*pardes*, Persian loan word). When the son questions his father's apparent discrimination, he is told that he has been given the choicest of the gardens.<sup>32</sup>

The *nimshal* specifies that the Land is special to God because it is the place from whence the agricultural offerings come which God expects Israel to bring him.<sup>33</sup> These do not come from the vineyards and fields in the rest of the countries given to the nations. This parable addresses not just the special connection between God and the Land, but rather the fundamental triad of the Hebrew Bible: God–Land–people.<sup>34</sup> While the segment of Jer 3:19 quoted at the end of the *nimshal* emphasizes the view that Israel belong in their Land

30 See Mekh. R. Ishm. Amalek 2 and Gen. Rab. 49:2 above, where the Land is referred to with the expressions פלטרין, פלטייא and פטריקון.

31 Matrona is one of the types of rabbinic narrative and it appears to be based on the idea the Rabbis had of a respectable Roman matron. At times, as Tal Ilan, *Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity*, vol. 2, *Palestine 200–650*, TSAJ 148 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 305–306, argues the expression also functions as a given Jewish name.

32 A Latin loanword used in the sense of food, *qlarin*, as here in the *mashal*, but also in the sense of “receptacle for food,” as in the *nimshal*. Jastrow, *Dictionary*, s.v. קילרין “(cellarium) receptacle for food, pantry; provisions.” According to the *Ma'agarim* of the Hebrew Academy, this is, with just eight occurrences in rabbinic texts, a rare loanword; alternative spelling is קלארין.

33 Cf. m. Kel. 1:6. On this major text on the Land of Israel, see Alexander Dubrau, “Heiligs-konzepte von Eretz Israel in rabbinischen Texten der Spätantike,” in *Heilige, Heiliges und Heiligkeit in spätantiken Religionskulturen* ed. Peter Gemeinhardt, RVV 61 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 143–163.

34 See Jacobus Cornelis de Vos, *Heiliges Land und Nähe Gottes: Wandlungen alttestamentlicher Landvorstellungen in frühjüdischen und neutestamentlichen Schriften*, FRLANT 244 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012), 26.

rather than among the nations, all along the parable seems also to have been addressing the problematic scriptural designation of the Land as “the most beautiful heritage of all the nations” in the unquoted part of Jer 3:19.

Due to its interest in the land-commandments, the previous parable may be considered to be broadly related to *halakhic* questions. The midrashic imagination also represents the special bond between God and the Land in Land-parables in more clearly *aggadic* terms, as in the following midrash on Num 21:14:

*Wherefore it is said in the Book of the Wars of the Lord, Waheb in Suphah and the valleys of the Arnon (Num 21:14):* The signs and miracles in the valleys of the Arnon were like the signs and miracles which were done for them at the Red Sea. What were the miracles of the valleys of the Arnon? A man would stand on the top of this mountain and speak with his neighbour on the top of the other mountain, even though he would be seven miles away. The road went down into the midst of the valley and then went up and Israel on their way had to pass through the midst of the valleys. All the nations assembled endless troops and some among them were stationed in the midst of the valley. [The slope of] the valley became riddled with caves and the mountain opposite them became correspondingly riddled with projections resembling breasts (שדיים), for it is said, *and the slope (אשד) of the valleys (Num 21:15)*. The troops went into the caves and said, When Israel descends into the midst of the valley, those in front of them in the valley and those above them from the caves, will stand and we will kill them all. When Israel arrived at the place, the Holy One, blessed be He, did not make it necessary for them to go down to the midst of the valley. He signalled to the mountains and the breasts of this mountain entered the caves and killed them all. And the mountains brought their heads close to each other and [so] they made a level road (דרך כבושה) and [this in such a manner that] there was no knowing where this one joined its neighbour. And this valley separates the borders of the Land of Israel (*techume erets yisrael*, תחומי ארץ ישראל) and the Land of Moab, for it is said, *for the Arnon is the boundary of Moab (Num 21:13)*. The mountain in the land of Moab was not moved, in it were the caves, while the mountain in the Land of Israel was moved, in it were the projections resembling breasts, joining the mountain opposite. And why was it [that the latter] moved? Because it is from the Land of Israel. A parable: It is like a woman slave who saw the son of her master coming to her. She was excited and greeted him and welcomed him. The projections entered into the caves and crushed all the mighty men among them

and the well descended into the valley and became mighty there and destroyed all the troops, in the same manner as there the sea destroyed them [the Egyptians], therefore it is written, *Waheb in Suphah and the valleys of the Arnon* (Num 21:14). Israel passed along those mountains but did not know about these miracles. The Holy One, blessed be He, said, See, I will let the children of Israel know how many troops I destroyed on their account. The well descended into the cave and brought out innumerable skulls, arms, and legs. So when Israel returned to look for the well, they saw it shining like the moon in the midst of the valley bringing out the limbs of the troops. And whence [do we infer] that the well informed them? [Hence,] for it is said, *and the slope of the valleys* etc. (Num 21:15). *And from there to the well* (Num 21:16). Now was the well given them then? Was it not with them from the beginning of the forty years? It was, but it went down to proclaim the miracles. So Israel would stand by the valleys saying to it, *Spring up, O well! Sing to it!* (Num 21:17): and they stood and sang a song.

Tanh. B. Chukat 47

The parable's exegetical context is a reading of Num 21:14 and Num 21:17. The two verses are interpreted as being related not just because they are part of the same scriptural segment: it is argued that 1) there is a link between the events at the Red (רִדְדָה) Sea and the events in Suphah (סופה) in Transjordan prior to the conquest of the Land (Num 21:14); and 2) the well that had accompanied Israel from the very beginning of the forty years of wandering was only temporarily out of sight when Israel were in Moab, and not, as one might infer from Num 21:17, only at this point given to Israel, at the end (בסוף) of the forty years of wandering.

Thus the etymology of a place name, Suphah, gives the hermeneutic occasion for the midrash to explain the miraculous nature of the events during Israel's journey in Transjordan. For this purpose, Tanhuma's anonymous voice gives an account of how the geography of the Land becomes an ally of the Israelites and an active participant in their military encounter with the nations. According to this account,<sup>35</sup> however, it is not Israel who are responsible for the killing of the troops in ambush in the caves, but rather the mountains of the Land of Israel qua breasts that in response to God's orders crush humans, whom the well then drowns.<sup>36</sup> Resorting to an image of the real world to explain the

35 And against the scriptural account earlier in Num 21, where Israel is explicitly involved in the killing of the Canaanites at Arad.

36 On the rabbinic motif of Miriam's well as related to ancient near eastern myths in which gender and sexuality play a role, see Jan-Willem van den Bosch, "The Well of Miriam and

miracle and echoing the powerful gender metaphor of the lengthy account of the miracle, a brief parable compares the behaviour of the mountains of the Land of Israel to that of a slave woman rejoicing at the arrival of her master's son and moving in his direction. This parable is told to bring down to earth what may be considered a parable of imaginary geography that encompasses it and that purportedly explains a name (Suphah) and argues for a passive role on the part of Israel in their military triumph in Moab.

A final example of a Land-parable that addresses the special connection between God and the Land is found in the late exegetical midrash *Aggadat Bereshit*. As part of the commentary on Gen 37:1, "Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan," we read the following exposition by the fourth-century Rabbi Acha:

Rabbi Acha said: The Holy One, blessed be He, said, I only created a dwelling place in order that you will do my will and fear me on these conditions. [And He also said,] *Fear me, take my lesson and the dwelling place will not be destroyed* (Zeph 3:7). *He drove out the enemy before you, and said, Destroy!* (Deut 33:27). *At that time Israel lives in peace* (Deut 33:28). Whenever the kingdoms of the world live in peace, Israel does not live in peace. It is like a partridge that sang in the house of its master. When he sat down to dine, the partridge would sing. After a while, his master brought a falcon. When the partridge saw it, it fled under the bed to hide itself, and did not open its mouth anymore. The king came to dine and said to his house-servant, *Why does the partridge not sing?* He said, *Because you brought a falcon to it; it sees it and is afraid and therefore does not sing. Take the falcon away and it will sing. So it is with Israel in this world when they are placed outside of the Land of Israel while the kingdoms of the world live in their land. ... Also the Holy One, blessed be He, is, as it were, not visible in the world, until the moment He uproots the kingdom of Edom, for it is said, God is king over the nations* (Ps 47:9), and at that time God sits on his holy throne.

Ag. Ber. 58<sup>37</sup>

The parable is told to illustrate Zeph 3:7 and Deut 33:28, verses that are understood as evocative of how Israel perceive foreign rule both within and without

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Its Mythological Forebears," in *Religious Stories in Transformation: Conflict, Revision and Reception*, ed. Alberdina Houtman, Tamar Kadari, Marcel Poorthuis, and Vered Tohar, JCP 31 (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 213–233, esp. 225–228. I thank Marcel Poorthuis for drawing my attention to this essay.

37 Quoted, with minor modifications, following Lieve M. Teugels, *Aggadat Bereshit: Translated from the Hebrew with an Introduction and Notes*, JCP 4 (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 174–175.

the Land of Israel. The parable stands out in that it is the only one in the corpus which explicitly addresses the fact that foreign rule in the Land of Israel implies that the people of Israel do not live in their land, but in the diaspora. It is a parable about a *Sehnsucht* for the Land that we do not find in the rest of the parables in the corpus. Rabbi Acha's words tend to be interpreted as the expression of a Jewish wish for the end of Roman rule, a wish usually read in terms of anti-Christian sentiment.<sup>38</sup> In view of the assumed date of redaction of this work in the eleventh century or sometime earlier, probably outside of the Land and even beyond the borders of the Islamic world, it is conceivable that the passage above expressed a desire for the end of *all* foreign rule in the Land, that is, including that of the Muslim caliphate. Foreign rule in Israel's land, it is argued, causes Israel not only to be away from their homeland but also to lead an invisible existence. Even God appears to be invisible when foreign kings rule the Land.

## 5 Conclusion

The Land-parables in my corpus show little interest for scriptural or historical geography,<sup>39</sup> for the phenomenon of the Jewish diaspora in the geographical sense of a place of residence outside the ancestral homeland<sup>40</sup> or the notion of a loyal opposition between the Palestinian and Babylonian centres of learning.<sup>41</sup> However, the Land-parables of which the ones discussed are

38 See Teugels, *Aggadat Bereshit*, xxix–xxx; see also Lieve Teugels, “The Background of the Anti-Christian Polemics in *Aggadat Bereshit*,” *JSJ* 30 (1999): 178–208.

39 In one Land-parable, the real historical geography of the Land is addressed: “*The people took to complaining bitterly before the Lord* (Num 11:1). The matter may be compared to the case of people who said to the king, We shall see whether you will come with us to the ruler of Acre. By the time they got to Acre, he had gone to Tyre. When they got to Tyre, he had gone to Sidon. When they got to Sidon, he had gone to Biri. When they got to Biri, he had gone to Antioch. When they got to Antioch, the people began to complain against the king, for they had wandered on the way, and the king had to complain against them, that on their account he too had wandered on the way. So the Presence of God went on a single day a distance of thirty-six *mils* so that the Israelites should enter the land. The Israelites began to complain before the Omnipresent that they had wandered on the way. But the Omnipresent has to complain against them that on their account the Presence of God had gone thirty-six *mils* on a single day so that Israel should enter the land.” (Sifre Num. 84)

40 The one exception is the parable of *Aggadat Bereshit*.

41 For the notion of a “loyal opposition,” see Gafni, *Land, Center and Diaspora*, 96–117.

representative examples are also part of the broader diasporic conceptualization of the Land in the literature of the sages of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages.

How does the Land feature in the Land-parables? How do these parables, mainly king-parables, argue for the significance of the Land, a land that in the period during which they took shape, roughly between the third and eleventh centuries CE, existed as bounded territory in the texts and minds of the rabbis and the anonymous redactors behind the texts? As the examples showed, the Land may be parabolically connoted with various images, including spatial ones. Apart from comparing it to a field (Sifre Deut. 8), the midrashic imagination resorts to loanwords from different languages to evoke the Land in parables: the Land is a palace's third gate to which a king's son is denied access (Mekh. R. Ishm. Amalek 2), a patrimonial estate (Gen. Rab. 49:2), or an orchard/larder (Tanh. B. Kedoshim 12).<sup>42</sup> Although vineyards feature in several of the Land-parables in my corpus, these are never identified with the Land, but rather with other geographies or even other peoples.<sup>43</sup> Other parables use anthropomorphic images, such as that of a bride (Tanh. B. Vaetchanan 2) or a slave girl (Tanh. B. Chukat 47), as well as images of inanimate objects, such as "a present," to connote the Land (Tanh. B. Shelah Lekha 3). The importance of the Land may also be addressed in form of a Land-parable even if no equivalent of the Land can be identified in the *mashal* narrative, as is the case in the parable of the partridge which ceases to sing once it is in the undesired company of a falcon (Ag. Ber. 58).

In the reading of the eight parables in this chapter, we could distinguish several arguments that are made with Land-parables in the three thematic sections related to the links between the Land and the patriarchs, Moses, and God.

1) *Patriarchs*: On the one hand, it is claimed that the Land was in the possession of the patriarchs, not just promised them (Sifre Deut. 8); it is even referred to with a name (*patrikon*) that evokes the forefathers (Gen. Rab. 49:2). On the other hand, it is argued that the land was promised with a promise meant

42 In other parables of the corpus, the Land is a bedchamber, a field, a bride's marital home, and even a dunghill.

43 See, for example, Tanh. B. Re'eh 3. In Tanh. B. Shelah Lekha 4, a vineyard is mentioned in a Land-parable to connote Israel among whom God distinguishes those who may be brought in relation with him ("Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel" [Num 11:16]) from those who should not (the spies, alluded to in: "Send you men yourself" [Num 13:2]). On the motif of the vineyard in Mark 12:1–12, Isa 5:1–5, and rabbinic texts, see the rich survey by Gregory R. Lanier, "Mapping the Vineyard: Main Lines of Investigation Regarding the Parable of the Tenants in the Synoptic and *Thomas*," *CurBR* 15 (2016): 74–122.



to transcend the lives of the patriarchs and whose fulfilment takes place in Moses's time (Tanh. B. Shelah Lekha 3).

2) *Moses*: In line with the account in Scripture, the fulfilment of the Land-promise does not take place during Moses's life. In the comparison of the Land with a king's palace to which his son is not allowed access, another parable addresses Moses's predicament of having to stay outside and leaves unanswered the question of the two and a half tribes with which they express their hope for a change of fate, both for Moses and for themselves. Moses himself slips into the role of his own lawyer to plead with God for mercy, challenging the very genre of the king-parable to argue for his right to see the Land (Mekh. R. Ishm. Amalek 2), a right unjustly granted even to the spies (Tanh. B. Vaetchanan 2).

3) *God*: The Land is compared to an orchard and larder from which God expects Israel to bring their offerings (Tanh. B. Kedoshim 12) and to a woman slave who rejoices at the arrival of her lord's son and moves in his direction just as the Land itself is imagined to have moved following God's orders to relieve Israel in their bellic encounter with the nations in Transjordan (Tanh. B. Chukat 47); God having permitted the Land to be in the hands of others results in Israel being brought to silence just as a cheerfully singing partridge is brought to silence in the undesired company of a falcon (Ag. Ber. 58). These parables illustrate scriptural notions related to the Land, but also embellish and elaborate on them to update and bring them to be in line with the post-scriptural agendas of the sages.

### Appendix: List of Parables

Mekh. R. Ish. Amalek 2; Sifre Num. 82, 84, 119, 132, 134; Sifre Deut. 8, 28, 29, 43; Gen. Rab. 49:2; Lev. Rab. 25:5, 36:5; Pesiq. Rav Kah. 10:2; Song Rab. 8:9:2; Tanh. B. Kedoshim 12; Shelah Lekha 3, 4; Chukat 32, 47; Balak 29; Mase'ei 7; Vaetchanan 2; Re'eh 3, 8, 13; Midr. Ps. 5:1, 24:2; Ag. Ber. 58; S. Eli. Zut. 2 (Friedmann 173).

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