1 *Introduction: Gospel and Rabbinic Parables*

PARABLES

The reality of God is revealed in the word-pictures of a parable. Jesus and the rabbis of old taught about God by using concrete illustrations that reach the heart through the imagination. They challenged the mind on the highest intellectual level by using simple stories that made common sense out of the complexities of religious faith and human experience. On the one hand, in finite terms God is beyond human comprehension, but on the other, his infinite majesty may be captured in vivid stories of daily life.

The Hebrew parable, mashal (משל), has a wide range of meanings. The word is stretched from its basic meaning of similarity or resemblance to cover any type of illustration, from a proverbial saying to a fictitious story. It may refer to a proverb, riddle, anecdote, fable, or allegory. A mashal defines the unknown by using what is known. The mashal begins where the listener is, but then pushes beyond into a new realm of discovery. The rabbinic parable illustrates its point by redescribing, in drama, the nature of God and human responses to his love.

The Greek parable, *parabolē* (παραβολή), refers to what is cast alongside. The dramatic image of a story illustration is thrown out as a comparison of the reality of the source with its fictional representation in words. It may refer to a saying or story example. The idea of resemblance is not quite as pronounced in the Greek word *parabolē* as it is in the Hebrew term *mashal*, but both terms show a likeness between the images of an illustration and the object being portrayed. The Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels loves to use miniature plays to communicate his message. The word-picture of the parable creates a drama that redescribes in clear terms the reality being

illustrated. The resemblance between the reality and the illustration makes an instructive comparison.

The genre of story parables, however, seems to be independent of the terms selected to designate them. Jesus and the rabbis of old created these illustrations, and their stories became known as parables. Jewish teachers seem to have developed the classic form of the parable from their religious heritage and cultural experience. The method of teaching developed first, then the term parable (mashal or *parabolē*) was used to describe the story illustrations that resulted. In this book we will pursue an inductive study of the parables, as mini-dramas designed to teach a message by illustrating a resemblance between the source of the word-picture and its redescription in metaphor. Moreover, we will look at the background of the story in Jewish culture and religion, as A. M. Hunter has already suggested in his fine, popular book on the parables: "The word itself, *parabole*, is of course Greek, and means a comparison or analogy. Aristotle discusses it in his *Rhetoric.* But the antecedents of Christ's parable must be sought not in Hellas but in Israel; not in the Greek orators but in the Old Testament prophets and the Jewish Fathers."[1]

The way the parables speak about God is deeply rooted in the historical and cultural background of the Hebrew Bible. The rich imagery used to describe God is similar to that of the Bible. The differences between the East and the West have been perceptively brought out by John Donahue when he describes biblical statements about God:

> Biblical statements about God and God's actions in the world are expressed in a language of images that moves in the rhythmic cadences of Hebrew poetry. God is not simply powerful but one who "kills and brings to life; he brings down to sheol and raises up" (1 Sam. 2:6). God does not simply free a people but leads them out of a house of bondage "with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm" (Deut. 5:15). The Hebrew Bible images a God who lays the foundations of the earth and shuts in the sea with doors (Job 38:4, 8), who seeks an unfaithful people with the longing of a rejected lover (Hosea 2) and remembers a people with a mother's love (Isa. 49:14–15). The biblical God speaks through images that touch hidden depths of human experience and cover the whole gamut of human emotion.[2]

Parables are like that. God's redemptive work is redefined in vivid images of strength and force. The Eastern mind tended to conceive of God in dynamic metaphors; God is known through his mighty acts. Parables describe God in similar images. This type of language is appropriate for the later rabbinic *meshalim* (parables). Jesus knew well this medium of communication. Hunter boldly asserts, "Doubtless it was in the synagogue that Jesus first heard men

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[1] A. M. Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables* (London: SCM, 1972) 8. Hunter surely knew Jeremias's theory, discussed below, that Jesus invented parabolic teaching. Hunter rightly rejected it.

[2] John R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable, Metaphor, Narrative, and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 1.

talking in parables."[3] Jesus used the parable to drive home his message about God and God's relationship to every human being. Each person has supreme value for the parable teacher of the Gospels. The stress on human relationships emerges from the interaction among the stock characters within the drama of the Gospel parables.

The Gospel parables of Jesus, moreover, are full of everyday ordinariness along with a God-consciousness. The unexpected usually enters into the drama with a surprise action by one of the leading characters or an unanticipated change of events. The stage of daily life becomes the scene for viewing the world from God's perspective. By putting God and his ways on open display for all to ponder, the parables create a new dimension. God enters the world of humanity with the challenge of religious conviction and corresponding action. The listener catches a glimpse of the divine character and the spiritual realities of life. Parables use rich imagery of language to catch the listener unaware. At first it all seems so familiar, and then a shift develops in the plot of the story. The ordinariness of the parable is transformed by a surprising twist. A consciousness of God and his way of viewing the world enters the commonplace scene to communicate the divine message. The familiar setting of the parable allows each person to understand God's will. The local color of the story is changed for a special purpose. This storytelling methodology is present in both rabbinic and Gospel parables. They share many common motifs and literary types in this dynamic process, which demands interaction from every listener.

Parables are a shadow of the substance. The physical reality of the parable reveals the natural affinity between the world in which we live and the spiritual dimension. The theological presuppositions of the parables undergird the descriptive elements of a dramatic presentation. The drama comes alive in meaning because of the theological significance of the parables.

In the creative genius of the parable teacher's imagination, the listener is catching glimpses of the divine character. The shadow is an inexact representation of the substance. But in the shadow one discovers a clear outline of many features of the reality. In many ways, God is the ultimate reality, providing the substance for the shadow in the word-pictures of a parable. In fact, the old root word behind the Hebrew term mashal refers to shadow. In one early Semitic proverb, the king is the shadow or resemblance of God, and a common person is the likeness of the royal ruler. J. Heintz has stressed this point in his discussion of this ancient saying that compares the king to God. Heintz believes that the comparison (mashal) is based on an earlier tradition. The comparison itself is made in an official address to the king Asarhaddon or Assurbanipal between 680 and 627 B.C.E.[4] It has far-reaching ramifications for the meaning of parables in ancient Semitic thought.

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[3] Hunter, *Parables*, 8.

[4] J. G. Heintz, "Royal Traits and Messianic Figures: A Thematic and Iconographical Approach (Mesopotamian Elements)," *The Messiah* (ed. J. Charlesworth; Minneapolis:

> As it is said, "The [human] king is the shadow of the god, and man [the human being] is the shadow of the [human] king." Thus the king himself is the perfect resemblance of the god![5] (=LAS, no. 145)

The word for parable is instructive here as highlighting the likeness between divine majesty and human royalty. The human king is the "perfect resemblance" or the shadow of the god. Heintz observes, "This important text, though difficult to interpret, presents the interesting citation of an archaic proverb very relevant to the theme that qualifies the king as 'the image of god.' "[6] Rabbinic and Gospel parables first and foremost tell us about God. They are stamped with the image of God, who is the substance of the shadow. Through comparative language, they teach the listener about the divine character by showing what God is like. The listener moves from what is known in his or her experience unto the unknowable in human understanding. God is like a generous householder or a compassionate father. The likeness of the parable is the shadow of the object.

"Above all else," says David Stern, one of the foremost authorities on rabbinic parables, "the mashal represents the greatest effort to imagine God in all Rabbinic literature."[7] The rabbis talked about God in parables. The creative process of conceptual thought brings life to simple stories about kings, householders, or fathers who resemble some aspect of God's character. How can one imagine what God almighty is like? In Stern's eyes, rabbinic parables constitute the strongest effort to reveal his nature. Community leaders and old rabbis tried to communicate the divine character and sought to comprehend God's will by telling stories about daily living. They recognized the affinity between the natural realm and the ways of God. So it is with Jesus and his Jewish parables.

Augsburg Fortress, 1992) 52–66. Cf. also S. Loewenstamm, "Chaviv Adam Shnivra Betzelem," *Tarbiz* 27 (1957–1958): 1–2; and "Beloved Is Man in That He Was Created in the Image," in *Comparative Studies in Biblical and Ancient Oriental Literature* (Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1980) 48–50.

[5]Heintz, "Royal Traits," 62.

[6]Ibid.

[7]David Stern, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991) 93. Stern perceptively observes,

> The one character in the mashal who is never a type or stock character is the king; he is the only character consistently to possess a personality—or personalities, since he can change utterly from one mashal to another—and this distinction among characters may stand, from a theological perspective, as an emblem of God's profound difference from all else in the universe. For our concerns, however, the more pressing question is the nature of God's character, the precise personality of His characterization as king. The image of God as king—ubiquitous in the Bible, and common in other ancient Near Eastern literatures—is distinct in the mashal in that the king here is a genuine character.

PARABLES AS GOSPEL

One-third of the recorded sayings of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels are in parables. If we do not understand the parables, we miss what may be known about the historical Jesus. One must understand parables to know Jesus. But the approaches advanced to study the Gospel parables are in conflict with one another. In this study we will seek to find common ground among the positive elements of the various approaches that have been advanced to understand the teachings of Jesus. The historical and critical method is the starting point. Recent advances in textual study, archaeology, Greek studies, epigraphy, literary analysis, folklore, the Dead Sea Scrolls research, rabbinic thought, and Jewish religious movements have provided fresh insights into the parabolic instruction of the Gospels.[8] After all, Jesus was a Jew, and his parables represent a form of Judaism from his time.

The Semitisms of the Synoptic Gospels reveal the rich heritage of Jews and Judaism during the days when the temple was a reality. The Greek elements of the texts, however, also show the editorial process and the reinterpretation of the parables for a new setting beyond the ministry of Jesus within the life of the early church. The Christian interpretation of the parables at the close of the first and the beginning of the second centuries infused new meaning into the Gospels. While the parables have a message that transcends time, the reinterpretation of the illustrations in a new context often has distorted the authentic meaning. Far-fetched allegories and teachings directly opposed to Jesus and his Judaism have undermined the force of the parabolic messages that the original audiences heard. Because every interpreter of the parables is limited by time and place as well as by a different religious and cultural orientation, historical research promises to discover more about Jesus and his methods of teaching. Jesus' Jewish culture and his devotion to Torah open up much of the deeper meaning of the parables for us. Ancient Judaism is the backdrop for Jesus and his parables.

The Gospels make one thing clear: Jesus is fond of teaching in parables. Moreover, the stories of God and people that Jesus used to illustrate his message called for a decision from everyone who listened. Parables are works of art in the discipline of communication. In fact, Jesus' parables are prime examples of Jewish haggadah.

Parables as Haggadah

First and foremost, both the parables of Jesus and the parables of the rabbis must be studied as Jewish haggadah. Haggadah, or storytelling with

[8] See, e.g., the important work of P. W. van der Horst, *Ancient Jewish Epitaphs* (Kampen, Netherlands: Pharos, 1991), which covers a long-neglected area of study, Jewish funerary epigraphy. His valuable analysis has pointed out the pervasive use of Greek in much inscriptional evidence.

a message, has its own dynamic within the parameters of religious and ethical teaching. Often designed to be entertaining or even captivating, the haggadah proclaims a powerful message that usually demands a decision. A good story can drive home the point better than a sermon. Often an earthy illustration says so much more than a lofty homily. But haggadah is more than entertaining stories because it serves a higher purpose, centering on God's way among people whom he loves. After all, the focus of haggadah is to understand the divine nature. Regarding the purpose of haggadah, the rabbis teach us, "If your desire is to know Him who spoke and the world came into being, then study Haggadah and from this study you will know Him who spoke the world into being and you will cleave to His ways."[9] One who seeks to know God must listen to the stories from haggadah and learn its message. Such illumination precedes obedience. The haggadah makes a path for the earnest student who loves God and seeks his ways.

Of course, haggadah embraces a much wider genre of Jewish literature than parables. Generally speaking, whatever is not halakah (legal lore) or midrash (Bible exposition) may be called haggadah. Haggadah is found in abundance in midrash as well as in some halakic texts. Haggadah bridged the gap between the common people and the highly educated. By focusing on the heart and the imagination, haggadah reaches people on all levels, from the learned to the untutored, in the ways of Torah. The Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel proclaimed the distinctives of haggadah in comparison with halakah in this way: "Halacha deals with subjects that can be expressed literally; agada introduces us to a realm which lies beyond the range of expression. Halacha teaches us how to participate in the eternal drama. Halacha gives knowledge; agada gives us aspiration. Halacha gives us the norms for action; agada, the vision of the ends of living."[10] In Heschel's thinking, haggadah inspires the people while halakah deals more with details. Both disciplines of study have significant roles, but haggadah captures the heart through the imagination. It reaches out and takes hold of the spiritual qualities of the human heart. It reveals God's presence in personal experience. The world of haggadah often soared high above to reach ordinary people below. It communicated God's love in a meaningful way to the most erudite scholar as well as to the common folk.

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[9] *Sifre Deut.* 49 (*Sifre Devarim*, ed. L. Finkelstein [New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1969] 115). The saying, attributed to the dorshe hagadot, is: דורשי הגדות אומרים רצונך להכיר את מי שאמר והיה העולם למוד הגדה שמתוך כך אתה מכיר את מי שאמר והיה העולם ומדבק בדרכיו.

[10] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976) 336–37. Heschel also explains the relationship of haggadah and halakah thus: "Agada deals with man's ineffable relations to God, to other men, and to the world. Halacha deals with details, with each commandment separately; agada with the whole of life, with the totality of religious life."

A fine example of haggadah is found in the story of R. Eleazer's encounter with the exceedingly ugly man. Unlike the exceedingly ugly man, who probably had labored menially throughout the day, R. Eleazer had the privilege of devoting himself entirely to the study of Torah. His master was R. Meir, and perhaps R. Eleazer and his beloved teacher had spent the day learning the deeper things of God.

The Rabbi and the Exceedingly Ugly Man

> On one occasion Rabbi Eleazer son of Rabbi Simeon was coming from Migdal Gedor, from the house of his teacher. He was riding leisurely on his donkey by the riverside and was feeling happy and elated because he had studied much Torah. There he chanced to meet an exceedingly ugly man who greeted him, "Peace be upon you, rabbi." He, however, did not return his greeting but instead said to him, "*Raca* ['Empty one' or 'Good for nothing'] how ugly you are! Is everyone in your town as ugly as you are?" The man replied; "I do not know, but go and tell the craftsman who made me, 'How ugly is the vessel which you have made.'" When R. Eleazer realized that he had sinned he dismounted from the donkey and prostrated himself before the man and said to him, "I submit myself to you, forgive me!"[11]

Rabbi Eleazar could not hold his tongue. When he encountered the exceedingly ugly man, all he could think about was that ugliness. When he made his stinging insult, he failed to see each person as created in the image of God. The ugly man, on the other hand, perhaps because of life experience, had come to realize the deeper significance of the story of creation—every human being, attractive or otherwise, has the divine image superimposed. Each person is crafted according to plan by the master designer. In the world of haggadah, one discovers the healthy tension between a scholar and an unlearned man. In this case, the lofty scholar, who had the privilege of studying all day, crossed paths with the ignorant day laborer. The scholar rides a donkey. The ugly man walks. The scholar's opportunities in education and superior financial standing far exceed that of the day laborer, who had to work hard to survive. But who has greater wisdom?

The incident described teaches more about the love of others who are created in the divine image than exhortations from the pulpits of churches or synagogues. The haggadah reaches the heart and challenges the mind. It inspires the people to see God's image—even in the face of another human being with a wretched, uncomely appearance. The intellect grasps the meaning of the biblical text. But haggadah penetrates the heart with the message that every human being is created in the image of God. According to the

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[11] b. *Taan.* 20a–b, *Abot R. Nat.*, version A, ch. 41 (*Aboth de Rabbi Nathan*, ed. S. Schechter [Vienna: Lippe, 1887] 66a); *Der. Er. Rab.* 4:1 (*Masekhtot Derekh Eretz*, ed. M. Higger [2 vols.; Jerusalem: Makor, 1970] 1:166 vol. 1; *Pirke Ben Azzai* 2:1). See also ch. 15 of my *Jesus the Jewish Theologian* (Peabody Mass.: Hendrickson, 1995), 163–70.

exceedingly ugly man, a parable-like comparison may be made between a human craftsman who forms a vessel and the divine creator who formed each person out of the dust. The story illustrates, moreover, the deep Jewish roots of Jesus' teachings on love. Like Jesus, many streams of thought in ancient Judaism stressed loving the outcast. Many Jewish teachers from the period would have strongly embraced the commandment of Jesus, "But I say to you, Love your enemies."[12]

In Judaism, haggadah inspires esteem for others by calling to remembrance God and each person who is created in his image. Haggadah infuses life into the written word. The Bible simply describes the story of creation. Haggadah reveals the ones created in God's image in the nameless faces of all humanity. Moreover, anyone who kills another has murdered an entire world and diminished the divine image. Causing one soul to perish from Israel, the rabbis warn, is like wiping out an entire nation.[13] An earthly king stamps every coin with his image, and all the coins look exactly alike. Not so in regard to God himself! The rabbis teach, "the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be he, has stamped every human being with the likeness of the first human and there is not a single individual who looks the same as another."[14] Perhaps these theological concepts serve as a background for the saying of Jesus, "Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."[15] After all, not only is Caesar's image stamped on coins that he has minted; the divine image of the King of kings is stamped upon each person. Jesus was calling upon the people to give everything to God, the Creator of every human being.

Parable lore reveals the divine character in the physical world. Haggadah illustrates the ways of God. For the rabbis, every human being is like God, because of the creation story. They teach about creation in haggadah in order to expand the mind and reach the soul. Parables are filled with the likeness of God in metaphoric language describing everyday life. One must be trained to see the likeness of God in the parables. Rabbi Meir develops this theme in a remarkable parable, in which he draws a direct correspondence between God and a human being hanged upon a cross.

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[12] Matt 5:44. See also David Flusser, "A New Sensitivity in Judaism and the Christian Message," in his *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1988) 469–89.

[13] Compare m. *Sanh.* 4:5.

[14] See m. *Sanh*. 4:5 (cf. *Mishnah,* ed. C. Albeck [6 vols.; Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1978] 4:182; English trans. in Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1977] 388) and parallels.

[15] Luke 20:25; Matt 22:21, and Mark 12:17. Cf. also the saying of Hillel in *Lev. Rab.* 34:3. Hillel had a high self-awareness, esteeming himself as being created in God's likeness. In Hillel's eyes, even taking a bath should be considered a meritorious deed in God's service, because an earthly king hires laborers to wash and care for his statues.

Identical Twins

> Rabbi Meir used to say, "Why does the Scripture teach, ' . . . for a hanged man is accursed by God' [Deut 21:33]? The matter may be compared to two brothers who were identical twins. One was the king of the entire world and the other one went out and joined a band of robbers. Eventually they caught the one who was a robber. They crucified him upon a cross. Each one who passed by exclaimed, 'That one being crucified looks just like the king!' Thus it was said, ' . . . for a hanged man is accursed by God.'"[16]

This amazing parable compares God and every human being to the king of all the world and a wicked criminal. The crucified one in this parable almost seems like Jesus.[17] In much of Christian theology, he alone is like God in that he could be called an identical twin. In R. Meir's creative thought and interpretation of Deut 21:23, "for a hanged man is accursed by God," however, even a criminal may be considered a divine twin because every person is created in God's image. The parable calls upon the listener to ponder in amazement. A human being, even someone quite unlike God, living a life doing wrong, such as a robber, may still be compared to God's identical twin. As Jewish haggadah, the parable reveals the divine nature in startling metaphoric description based upon common human experience.

All parables fall within the realm of haggadah, even though haggadah encompasses much more than parables. The rabbinic parable describes the relationship between God and his people. The theological significance, as Jakob Petuchowski has convincingly argued, must be fully appreciated.[18] Sometimes parables illustrate the message of Torah through dynamic redescription. But they go beyond exegesis. Often rabbinic parables portray the divine nature in the theater of life. Drama becomes an effective mode of communication. The unknown God is revealed in what is known by human experiences of life.

The unpretentious setting as well as the straightforward approach of most parables has led some to criticize their simplicity. Perhaps the popular nature of these stories also contributed to the degrading of their significance. In the one midrash, the rabbis warn against undermining the importance of the parables: "Let not the parable be lightly esteemed in your eyes, because

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[16] See t. *Sanh.* 9:7 (*Tosefta*, ed. M. Zuckermandel [Jerusalem: Wahrmann, 1937] 429). I appreciate the insight of David Flusser, who observed the significance of this illustration for the study of parables. Cf. J. Neusner, trans., *The Tosefta* (New York: KTAV, 1981) 227–28.

[17] The possibility that R. Meir had Jesus in mind when he told the parable should not be dismissed completely, though it seems somewhat unlikely. In all events, the Jewish parable does portray images that are related to Christian thought.

[18] Jakob Petuchowski, "The Theological Significance of the Parable in Rabbinic Literature and the New Testament," *Christian News from Israel* 23 (1972–1973) 76–86.

by means of the parable, a person can master the words of Torah."[19] The parables provided a way for the people to understand Torah. In rabbinic lore, Solomon used parables for illustrations. They were "handles" for the Torah.[20] The parables made the message lucid and practical. They, like a guideline that a person has devised in order to find his or her way through a huge palace with many chambers, provide a path through the intricacies of the Torah. Parables illuminate and clarify the meaning of the sacred text.

While Torah does teach halakah, and haggadah does illustrate God's will, at times halakah and haggadah compete with one another as different methods of interpreting Jewish faith and practice. Two rabbis are teaching in the same town. One teaches haggadah, and the other treats supposedly more serious issues relating only to halakah. The people abandon the one who delves deeply into the details of legal matters in order to hear the words of Torah expounded in thought-provoking illustrations. Rabbi Chaya b. Abba, who does not believe that anything takes a second place to halakah, is offended by the popular success of his colleague R. Abbahu, who captures the attention of the common people through his haggadic lore. The halakic mind clashes with the spirit of the haggadist. In an open conflict, R. Chaya b. Abba attacks R. Abbahu, who makes his defense by telling a parable!

Halakah and Haggadah

> R. Abbahu answered him: "I will tell you a parable. To what may the matter be compared? It may be compared to two men. One of them was selling precious stones and the other various kinds of small ware. To whom do the people rush? Is it not to the seller of various kinds of small ware?"[21]

By comparing haggadah to various kinds of small ware and halakah to precious stones, R. Abbahu makes his concession to R. Chaya b. Abba. He does not dispute the quintessential importance of halakah, but he does argue that haggadah has a popular appeal because it is within the grasp of the common folk. Everyone enjoys the dynamic force of a good illustration. For R. Abbahu, a parable settles the dispute. The Talmud illustrates the friction between two competing methods of study, the one that promotes halakah and the other haggadah. They are related, but haggadah inspires the people and enables them to understand complex issues.

Who can argue with the truth conveyed clearly in the words of a dynamic parable? The only way to refute a parable is with another parable. The rabbis debate conflicting viewpoints with similar-sounding parables. One parable may be used to prove a point, and then a second will be used to prove the

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[19] See *Song Rab.* 1.1.8; cf. also Shimshon Donski, *Midrash Rabbah Sir Hashirim* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1980) 6.

[20] Ibid. See Donski's edition, אל יהי המשל הזה קל בעיניך שעל ידי המשל הזה אדם יכול לעמוד בדברי תורה.

[21] b. *Sota* 40a and parallels.

exactly opposite opinion. The schools of Shammai and Hillel disputed with one another over the essence of the creation narrative in the Bible. Were the heavens created before the earth, or was the earth created before the heavens? The biblical text is somewhat ambiguous on the subject. But, as in most cases involving the many disputes between the schools of Shammai and Hillel, the disciples of Hillel seem to present more convincing arguments. This state of affairs may be attributed in part to the fact that the followers of Hillel became the caretakers of the Jewish tradition because their views gained prevalence in subsequent history.

The Heaven and the Earth

> "The heaven and the earth" [Gen 1:1]. The School of Shammai say: The heaven was created first. However the School of Hillel maintain: The earth was created first. In support of their view, the School of Shammai say, "It may be compared to a king who first made a throne and then his footstool, for it is written, 'The heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool' [Isa 66:1]." The School of Hillel maintain, in support of their view, "It may be compared to a king who builds a palace. Only after he built the lower story did he build the upper story, for it is written, 'In the day that the LORD God made earth and heaven' [Gen 2:4]."[22]

Both positions may be supported from the biblical text. According to Gen 1:1, the heavens preceded the earth, whereas Gen 2:4 says that the earth was made first. The issue may be resolved through a parable. The parable of the school of Shammai, however, is like the parable produced by the school of Hillel. The same parable may be revised and used to support a very different argument.

The imprecise world of haggadah is not so far removed from the realities of life. The illusion created by a picture is not the same as the reality. Each parable is a work of art that may produce different responses. The interpreter should allow the context and the artist to guide him or her in seeking the proper response. Contradictions and inconsistencies characterize religious philosophy and the practical experience of the faithful. The parables make sense out of the complexities of life even when they reflect inherent inconsistencies themselves.

A parable is an artistic representation. It is a picture of life. Dramatic portrayals within parables are the common characteristics of both rabbinic and Gospel texts. Since the parables are a genre within different types of literary works, or a genre within other genres, comparative study is crucial for a proper understanding of both Gospel and rabbinic parables. The parables of Jesus and those of the rabbis have much in common. As haggadah they tell a story about God and invite their listeners to cleave to his ways.

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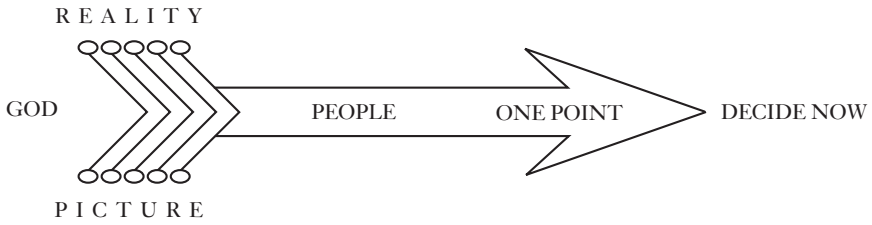
[22] See *Gen. Rab.* 1:15 (ed. Albeck, 1:13); *Midr. Sam.* 28b.

The parables are designed to portray a reality. In a world of metaphorical redescription, the reality behind the parable is dramatized in word-pictures. One must carefully consider the relationship between the picture and the reality while recognizing that the metaphor and the object are not one and the same. The parables give only a pictorial representation. We discover points of contact between the reality being portrayed and the picture. But the picture is not the reality. In some ways, these points resemble feathers that guide an arrow. A parable of haggadah may have multiple points of comparison between the picture and the reality, but it has one purpose. The multiple points of comparison are like the feathers aligned with the shaft of an arrow when it is aimed at a target. Because of the feathers the arrow flies steadily toward a specific destination in the same way that a parable is told to make one point.[23] It communicates a single message, which usually requires a decision. A forceful illustration makes it difficult to ignore the call for an immediate reaction. The parable is designed to elicit a response, a decision.



The parables of Jewish haggadah present a spiritual reality in pictures. They begin with God and involve people. They communicate one message and urge a decision. So while a parable teacher may intend more than one point of comparison between the picture and the reality it illustrates, the drama leads in one direction to communicate a single message. The parables enable the listener to see things the way God sees them. They see human beings

[23] See Hunter, *Parables*, 10: "A parable usually has only one *tertium;* an allegory may have a dozen. In other words, the allegory is a kind of 'description in code,' and, if it is to be fully understood, it must be deciphered point by point, feature by feature. On the other hand, in the parable there is one chief point of likeness between the story and the meaning, and the details simply help to make the story realistic and so serve the central thrust of the parable—like feathers which wing the arrow." As illustrated by my diagram, I believe that a parable may have multiple points of comparison between the picture and the reality. Each point of comparison, however, should be clearly made by either the storyteller or the context of the parable. Creating allegory will distort the single message of the illustration. An oriental parable teacher could not be restricted to the rule of one *tertium*. The interpreter must listen to the parable teacher's story and examine the context.

from God's point of view and challenge the listener to respond to his eternal message. They take the abstract world of spiritual values and enable the audience to visualize them in concrete terms.

PARABLES AS FOLKLORE

Rabbinic and Gospel parables are authentic representations of folk culture. The themes of the stories reveal a people's rich cultural heritage. Royal and aristocratic families are viewed through the eyes of the common folk. Agricultural laborers fill the dramatic scenes of the stories. The plots, which often involve the rich and their money or the landowners and their work forces, are derived from the situations of daily life. They may even contain depictions of high-society weddings. Parables excite attention through the human characteristics of vice and virtue. They are filled with both evil and good while they make use of a fascinating cast of villains and heroes. These stories are fond of contrast, exaggeration, intrigue, and surprise. Money, power, greed as well as generosity, humility, and compassion generate the interest of the listener. Attention-attracting stories communicate the truths of God and the spiritual values of religious life. Humor is also prominent in many folklore traditions. Though much humor is culturally conditioned, the situation comedy of some stories is still apparent.

The Amoraic sage R. Berechiah tells a parable concerning the fat man and the little donkey. The dry wit of the story transcends its cultural setting.

The Donkey and the Fat Man

> R. Berechiah told a parable of a fat man riding on an donkey. The fat man was wondering "When can I get off the donkey?" The donkey was wondering "When will he get off me?" When the time came for the fat man to get off, I do not know which one was more glad.[24]

Originally the story was designed to explain a paradox in the biblical account of the exodus. After the struggle to convince Pharaoh to let the people go, the Egyptians were relieved to see the Israelites leave and the pestilences that had afflicted Egypt cease. The paradox is that both the Egyptians and the Israelites were happy. How may one grasp the irony of the situation? Who was more happy, the Egyptians or the Israelites? The matter may be compared to a fat man riding on a little donkey. The element of folk humor is still felt in the comedy of the situation. It is a folktale that has been used to illustrate a biblical text.

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[24] *Midr. Pss.* 114:1; 105:11 (Yalkut); see also the discussion of humor by H. K. McArthur and R. M. Johnston, *They Also Taught in Parables* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990) 129. See the English translation by W. Braude, *The Midrash on Psalms* (2 vols.; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958) 2:215.

Parables resemble folk stories drawn from a shared cultural experience. In some ways, they have common features with a prevalent form of folklore known as the fable. While some Gospel sayings allude to fable lore and some rabbinic anecdotes are clear replicas of fables, most parables should be placed in an entirely different category. A closer look at the parables shows their distinctive qualities, even though the same Hebrew term, mashal, may designate either parable or fable. Because animals with human characteristics play leading roles in the fable, sometimes a distinction in Hebrew has been made by referring to fables as *mishle shualim*, "fox comparisons," and parables as *meshalim*, "comparisons" or "likenesses." The Jewish people were acquainted with fable lore. Their culture did not escape the pervasive influence of Hellenism.

One of the eminent authorities on fables, H. Schwarzbaum, defines a fable as "a fictitious tale told for the purpose of communicating a certain idea, or a truth of some kind, metaphorically."[25] Like parables, fables make use of metaphorical word-pictures to convey a message about the reality behind the illustration. Concerning the purpose of a fable, Schwarzbaum stresses, "the exclusive object of fable is generally to instruct, and particularly to teach some lesson, to enforce a precept, to convey a definite idea or philosophical concept, to illustrate some principle of conduct." For Schwarzbaum, fables teach a message "through the transparent analogy of actions of gods, heroes, men, animals, and even inanimate objects often furnished by the fabulist with human traits and emotions."[26] Leading fable authority Edwin Ben Perry follows Theon, the second-century C.E. author who described fable in the Aesopic sense of the definition λόγος ψευδὴς εἰκονίζων ἀλήθειαν, "a fictitious story picturing truth."[27] As a recognized scholar of Aesop's fables, Perry finds much merit in Theon's approach. "This is a perfect and complete definition provided we understand the range of what is included under the terms λόγος (story) and ἀλήθειαν (truth)."[28] In studying the relationship between the illustration and the message, Perry focuses attention on the fable itself. "The 'story' may be contained in no more than a single short sentence, or it may be much longer, or include some dialogue; but it must be told in the past tense, as stories normally are, and it must purport to be a particular action or series of actions, or an utterance, that took place once upon a time through the agency of particular characters."[29]

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[25] Haim Schwarzbaum, *The Mishle Shualim (Fox Fables) of Rabbi Berechiah Ha-Nakdan: A Study in Comparative Folklore and Fable Lore* (Kiron, Israel: Institute for Jewish and Arab Folklore Research, 1979) i.

[26] Ibid.

[27] *Babrius and Phaedrus,* ed. and trans. Ben Edwin Perry (LCL; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965; repr., 1984) xix–xx; see Theon, *Progymnasmata,* ch. 3.

[28] *Babrius and Phaedrus,* ed. Perry, xix–xx.

[29] Ibid.

The cultural setting and the teaching context make a significant difference in the interpretation of a fable. Consider the similarities and differences between Aesop's fable of "The Middle-Aged Man with Two Mistresses" and the rabbinic parallel about "The Man with Two Wives." Aesop's version in Babrius explores the meaning of a man's relationship with women, while the rabbis have their minds on the study of Torah. They deal with the issues surrounding haggadah and halakah. The fable has been recycled in the Jewish literature and given an entirely new meaning. On the other hand, Aesop's version deals with the precarious position of a man involved with two mistresses, one older and the other younger.

The Middle-Aged Man with Two Mistresses

> A man already in middle age was still spending his time on love affairs and carousals. He wasn't young any more, nor was he as yet an old man, but the white hairs on his head were mixed up in confusion with the black. He was making love to two women, one young, and the other old. The young woman wanted him to look like a young lover, the old one like one of her own age. Accordingly, on every occasion the mistress who was in the prime of her life plucked out such of his hairs as she found to be turning white, and the old woman plucked out the black ones. This went on until each of them presented the other with a baldpated lover by the pulling out of his hair. [Aesop told this fable in order to show how pitiable a man is who falls into the hands of women. Women are like the sea, which smiles and lures men onto its sparkling surface, then snuffs them out.][30]

The humorous story is full of life and probably circulated widely. In Babrius, a moral that betrays a strong prejudice against women is attached to the story.[31] The moral could just as easily have referred to the whimsical character of a middle-aged man who is unfaithful to his lover as to the biased portrayal of a woman who entices a man and then destroys him. For that matter, the lesson drawn from the story would more aptly have illustrated the folly of a middle-aged man flirting with different women.

The rabbis take the story out of its worldly context of a man with two lovers and employ the same anecdote to illustrate methods of Bible study. The problem of one who studies halakah without haggadah is like a man with two wives. Rabbi Ammi and R. Assi were exchanging words of Torah with R. Isaac. One wished to hear homiletical aspects of the biblical text while the other kept interrupting R. Isaac because he desired to learn halakic matters. They both interrupted to the point that their enthusiasm prevented R. Isaac from teaching Torah. One method of study might be neglected at the expense of the other. The scholar must embrace all disciplines of Torah learning.

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[30] Babrius, Fable 22 (ibid., 32); Phaedrus, Fable 2.2 (p. 235).

[31] The moral is missing in Phaedrus's version.

The Man with Two Wives

> When R. Ammi and R. Assi were sitting before R. Isaac the Smith, one of them said to him: "Will the Master please tell us some legal points?" While the other said: "Will the Master please give us some homiletical instruction?" When he commenced a homiletical [haggadic] discourse he was prevented by the one, and when he commenced a legal discourse he was prevented by the other. He therefore said to them: I will tell you a parable: To what is this like? To a man who has had two wives, one young and the other old. The young one used to pluck out his white hair, whereas the old one used to pluck out his black hair. He thus finally remained bald on both sides.[32]

For the rabbis, the humorous story of satisfying two lovers is a clear illustration of the proper method of Bible study. Learning halakah without homiletical application will leave the scholar bald on both sides. The immediate predicament of R. Isaac is that he cannot teach Torah at all because one colleague plucks out his haggadic hairs while the other is plucking his halakic ones. Rabbi Isaac is an accomplished scholar who can discourse in either halakah or haggadah, while R. Ammi and R. Assi are confined to one or the other approach. The new reality behind the word-picture is taken out of the cultural experiences of the Jewish people, where Torah learning is central.

While the rabbis had contact with the world of fable lore, they reinterpreted the meaning of the stories for their own purposes. The fable of the heron who removes a bone stuck in the lion's throat is used by R. Joshua ben Chananyah to avert a revolt against Rome. Hadrian had disappointed the people of Israel. The Roman Senate had promised that they could rebuild the temple. Then Hadrian changed the order. After the destruction of the temple, much discontent prevailed among the people. The second revolt in the days of Bar Kochba make this fact clear. Sufficient provocation by the Roman authorities could have sparked a Jewish revolt. The Romans broke faith by rescinding the order to rebuild the temple. The rabbis wanted to preserve the peace. They selected a scholar of Scripture, Joshua ben Chananyah, to pacify the strong popular unrest that could result in war. Joshua ben Chananyah preserved peace by telling the people a fable.

The people would have been entertained by the wit and comedy of a heron helping a lion. The solemn warning is, of course, quite frightening. The lion is so powerful that he can do anything he wants. No one can argue with the lion. Neither should the people entertain thoughts of challenging Roman military might.

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[32] b. *B. Kam.* 60b (I. Epstein, ed., *The Babylonian Talmud* [35 vols.; London: Soncino, 1935–1978] 350); see also the fine discussion by Schwarzbaum, *Fox Fables*, ii–iii. Also of interest here is the language. Aramaic is used to tell the story of the context, in which the rabbis argue over haggadah and halakah. The parable of the Man with Two Wives, however, is told in Hebrew.

The Heron and the Lion

> Thereupon [the Sages] decided: Let a wise man go and pacify the congregation. Then let R. Joshua b. Chananyah go, as he is a master of Scripture. So he went and harangued them: "A wild lion killed [an animal], and a bone stuck in his throat. Thereupon he proclaimed: 'I will reward anyone who removes it.' An Egyptian heron, which has a long beak, came and pulled it out and demanded his reward. 'Go,' he replied, 'you will be able to boast that you entered the lion's mouth in peace and came out in peace' [unscathed]. Even so, Let us be satisfied that we entered into dealings with this people in peace and have emerged in peace."[33]

By way of contrast, the cultural context in Aesop is completely unrelated to the issues confronting the Jewish people during the days of R. Joshua ben Chananyah. Nonetheless such an application is entirely suitable for this story about the weak heron and a fierce wolf, which is replaced by the lion in the rabbinic version of the story. The people of antiquity were largely naturalists at heart because of their contact with the wonders of wildlife. Their innate fascination with the animal kingdom produced a ready audience for fable lore. The animals' behavior and interrelationships mirrored those of people. People studied animals to learn about themselves. They could identify with the heron's fear of the wolf.

Dr. Heron's Fee

> Once a wolf had a bone lodged in his throat. He promised a heron that he would give a suitable fee if the latter would let his neck down inside and draw out the bone, thus providing a remedy for his suffering. The heron drew out the bone and forthwith demanded his pay. The wolf grinned at him, baring his sharp teeth, and said: "It's enough pay for your medical services to have taken your neck out of a wolf's mouth safe and sound."
>
> You'll get no good in return for giving aid to scoundrels, and you'll do well not to suffer some injury yourself in the process.[34]

Fables were widely used in antiquity.[35] In the Hebrew Bible, illustrations such as Jotham's fable of the bramble and Jehoash's fable of the thistle are dynamic expressions of Near Eastern culture.[36] The Greek and Latin collections of Babrius and Phaedrus have preserved many colorful tales, which have entertained audiences for centuries. Sadly, many other fables probably were lost in the transmission of oral cultures. The same would be true of rabbinic parables.

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[33] *Gen. Rab.* 64:10 (ed. Albeck, 2:712; Epstein, 580). In genre, the story is a clear example of fable, which makes use of animals with human characteristics. Unlike all rabbinic parables, this fable is told in Aramaic. See also Schwarzbaum, *Fox Fables,* ix–x.

[34] Babrius, Fable 94 (*Babrius and Phaedrus,* ed. Perry, 114); Phaedrus, Fable 1.8 p. 200).

[35] See the discussion by Schwarzbaum, *Fox Fables,* i–lv.

[36] Judg 9:8–15; 2 Kgs 14:8–14.

Jesus, too, shows a knowledge of fable lore. As David Flusser has demonstrated, Jesus recalled the rich imagery of the fable of "The Oak and the Reed" when he described John the Baptist. He asked the people, "What did you go out into the wilderness to behold? A reed shaken by the wind?"[37] Which is more powerful, the reed or the oak? The first response is a majestic oak. But in a storm with violent gusts, the oak is broken while the reed is merely shaken.[38] In such a storm, the flexible reed proves stronger than the mighty oak. John the Baptist was broken because of his prophetic call. He was unwilling to compromise his message. Those who occupy kings' palaces, however, are finely attired politicians who blow with the wind, this direction and that, according to the expediency of the moment. The satire of the fable has political implications. But Jesus applies the imagery to John, who is a prophet. He is no reed shaken by the wind.

In addition, Jesus seems to have been acquainted with a version of the fable of "The Fisherman with the Flute." The fisherman invites the fish to hear the tune of his flute and dance. But as the fisherman plays the flute, the fish refuse to dance. When he catches them in the net, however, then they dance. Jesus speaks about the generation that did not dance to the music. They did not realize that the time had come. He warns them concerning their failure to heed the prophetic message of John the Baptist. He satirizes their behavior: "They are like children sitting in the market place and calling to one another, 'We piped to you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not weep.' "[39] In the fable of "The Fisherman with the Flute," the fish ignore the music of the flute. They are free and arrogant. After they are caught in the net, by way of contrast, the fish dance as they squirm this way and that without hearing the fisherman's tune. "Dance now without any music" the fisherman tells the fish; "it would have been better for you to have danced some time ago when I was supplying music for the dance."[40] As Flusser has demonstrated, the saying of Jesus is an echo of some version of this fable, which was widely circulated.[41] The people should have listened to John the Baptist and responded to his prophetic appeal. Though John and Jesus had different approaches to ministry—one came eating and drinking with outcasts, and the other withdrew from society—both were prophets. As

[37] Matt 11:7; Luke 7:24.

[38] Babrius, Fable 36, "The Oak and the Reed," (*Babrius and Phaedrus,* ed. Perry, 51). Cf. Fable 64, "The Fir Tree and the Bramble" (pp. 80–81). The fir tree, though more beautiful than the bramble, is in danger of being cut down. It concludes with the moral "Every distinguished man not only has greater fame than lesser men but he also undergoes greater dangers." See the insightful discussion and analysis of David Flusser, *Die rabbinischen Gleichnisse und der Gleichniserzähler Jesus* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1981) 52, 153.

[39] Luke 7:32; Matt 11:16–17.

[40] See Babrius, Fable 9, "The Fisherman with the Flute" (*Babrius and Phaedrus,* ed. Perry, 14–17). The example is discussed by Flusser, *Gleichnisse*, 153–54. Compare also the words of Eccl 3:4, ". . . a time to dance."

[41] Flusser, *Gleichnisse,* 153–54.

a prophet, John the Baptist is like the fisherman who played his flute. Many did not respond. At the final judgment, they will dance.

On the one hand, fable lore penetrated oriental society, Hebrew thought, and Jewish culture. On the other hand, Gospel parables and their rabbinic counterparts are different from fables. Gospel and rabbinic parables have their own distinctive characteristics. While fables tend to employ animals and plants as leading characters who behave like humans, parables prefer real people from everyday life. Parables portray a realistic setting, where people are people and animals are animals. So the storytelling technique of parable lore, as we encounter it in the Gospels, as well as in rabbinic literature, is distinctive in its own right. Often the fable contains numerous points of comparison in an allegorical representation of truth. In contrast, the parable is less allegorical and more dynamic. The stock characters of parables, such as king, servant, steward, son, or prince, are selected for theological or exegetical reasons. Points of comparison flow toward one point. The parable teaches one message and urges a decision. But the major difference between fables and parables involves the reality behind the illustration. The fables are more anthropological, whereas parables are more theological. Parables tend to be theocentric. Without God, Gospel and rabbinic parables lose their central focus.

In interpreting the message of Jesus and the rabbis, the reality behind their parables is crucial. They imaged God through metaphor and personal experience. The one God of the Hebrew Bible and the Jewish people's encounter with history has shaped the creation of a genre of illustrations that pushes beyond the parameters of fable lore. The essential difference between fables and parables is God. The parables of Jesus and the rabbis are filled with the awe of God. Many times they address some aspect of Torah, but they are not concerned primarily with exegesis. They preach love for the God of Israel and the Israel of God.

Parables should not be removed from the ethnic culture of the people who heard and enjoyed them. The ethnicity of parable lore, as well as the concept of God in Hebrew thought, make the parables unique. Jesus told stories to his own people. He knew their language. He was a part of Jewish culture. Even though many rabbinic parables come from a later period as expressions of Jewish folklore and religious thought, they reveal the heart and imagination of a people. They should be studied side by side with the Gospel texts. As the recognized folklore scholar Valdimir Propp has demonstrated, the tales of folk literature tell the story of a people. The study of their ethnic experience as well as their religious orientation is essential. One should seek the ethnicity of the parable in religious belief and folk culture. Propp observes, "The earliest forms of material culture and social organization are the object of ethnography. Therefore, historical folklore, which attempts to discover the origin of its phenomena, rests upon ethnography. There cannot be a materialist study of folklore independent of

ethnography."[42] Gospel and rabbinic parables are the cultural heritage of a historical people.

The Greek fable had another point of reference. In contrast to the Hebrew concept of God, one may consider the worldview of the tale surrounding the cattle driver seeking the aid of one god or another to recover his ox. In the humorous fable "Better to Lose the Ox Than Catch the Thief" the cattle driver seeks the help of the nymphs by making a vow to offer an animal sacrifice if they will only help him find his lost bull. (Gods and goddesses who are influenced by human promises of gifts fill the conceptual world of Greek folk culture.)

Better to Lose the Ox Than Catch the Thief

> A cattle-driver in a remote part of the forest was searching for a horned bull that he had lost. He made a vow to the mountain-roaming nymphs that he would offer up to them a lamb in sacrifice if he should catch the thief. Coming over a ridge, he caught sight of his fine bull being feasted upon by a lion. Then the unlucky fellow vowed that he would bring an ox to the sacrifice if he succeeded in getting away from the thief.
>
> From this we may well learn not to pray the gods for something ill-considered, moved by a grief brought on us temporarily.[43]

How vastly different is the Hebrew concept of God during the Second Temple period, which is echoed in Gospel and rabbinic parables! The cattle driver who tries to recover his bull is willing to sacrifice a lamb to the gods in order to find the thief. When the thief turns out to be a lion that attacks him, he raises the offer to an ox—probably his most prized possession—if he can only escape with his life.

The view of God in the parable of the Prodigal Son is remarkably different. He is a compassionate father who lovingly reaches out to his sons. The king in rabbinic parables images the majesty and glory of the almighty God. Often the parables dramatize the Jewish people's encounter of the divine presence through the reality of human experience. In word-pictures, parables metaphorically redescribe the nature of God through the lens of this encounter. The whole process is a fruit of Second Temple period Judaism and the cultural experience of the Jewish people. Their folk culture and religion have indelibly impacted the development of parable teaching. Theological belief rooted in the teachings of Torah finds expression in word-pictures and dramatic scenes from real life.

The conceptual world and theological framework of Gospel and rabbinic parables are different from fables, even though some of the storytelling elements of folklore are the same. The theology of the rabbis markedly

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[42] V. Propp, *Theory and History of Folklore* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985) 9.

[43] Babrius, Fable 23 (*Babrius and Phaedrus,* ed. Perry, 35).

departs from the thought of the fable teachers. It is the reality behind the metaphoric representation that determines the development of a parable. Faith in the one God of Israel is what separates the parables from fables. Parables preach love for the God of Israel and urge the people to make a decision to follow the teachings of Torah. The awe and reverence of God is the major objective.

Jesus is very much a part of this world. His parables portray a cultural reality within the heritage of his people. The folklore of the Jewish people is a stream flowing through the stories and anecdotes, which often are used to illustrate the teachings of the Bible or the oral law. Sometimes the rabbinic parables are more involved with biblical illustration than with theological inquiry. A parabolic example may redescribe the biblical story through drama. Many rabbinic parables would be classified as illustrations designed for Bible exposition, while others are more homiletical. They may seek higher theological ground in the classic form of teaching. They may capture the moment of oral communication more fully. Hillel tells his disciples that he is going to perform an important religious duty. They ask him what is the commandment he is going to do. They probably thought that he was going to visit a sick person or give charity to a needy individual. But Hillel tells them that he is going to the bathhouse. They are shocked. Does taking a bath constitute the performing of a mitzvah? Hillel tells them a story. A king hires a laborer to wash his statuary. If a human king pays his laborer to care for his statue, how much more value is a person created in the image of God worthy of care! The one washing oneself must acknowledge the divine presence and recognize that personal esteem in simple actions such as taking a bath are fulfilling God's commandments as much as other religious duties. The parabolic example is not a direct explanation of the Torah's text. It catches the attention of the listener and communicates a message on a higher level than intellectual assent. This type of rabbinic illustration shares much in common with the teachings of Jesus.

The interpreter must learn to listen for the elements of folklore and culture when reading the sacred texts of Judaism and Christianity. The parable teaches more by intuition than by precept. The message is caught rather than learned. Jewish folklore and early rabbinic parables awaken the inner spirituality of the listener rather than challenge the intellect in the purely cognitive realm. This is especially true of the classic form of parable so characteristic of the Gospels and early Jewish teachings.

At least six foundational features are discovered in this classic form of the story parable. While minor deviations from this classic form are fairly common, these six components were the building blocks used by popular teachers who illustrated their messages about God and inter-personal relationships through parables. A master parable teacher creatively built the illustration using a basic model or paradigm. The model emerged during the process of active discourse and oral instruction. Later these elements became more standardized in the compilation of written tradition and the editing of

manuscripts. These foundational building blocks, however, reveal the artistry and creativity of original thinkers who sought to communicate the deeper meaning of religious faith effectively. They should be studied inductively, in an effort to grasp the full impact of effective communication. As Jewish haggadah, they reveal sophisticated storytelling technique and an imaginative method of teaching spiritual truth. In the classic form, the listener is led on the path for change. Learning is change. Discovery leads to action.

SIX COMPONENTS OF THE CLASSIC FORM

1. Prolegomenon. The prolegomenon may be a single word, such as "To" or "Parable." The standard phrase, "A parable, to what may the matter be compared? To a . . . ," became the accepted form to introduce a parable. Often in the Gospel texts Jesus introduces a parable by saying, "The kingdom of God is like . . ." It is probable that these introductory formulas became more standardized in the written form of the parables. In the oral form, such introductions were brief.[44] The prolegomenon serves to prepare the audience. It builds anticipation for a parable.

2. Introduction of the cast. The characters of the parable are crucial for the plot and final outcome of the story. The parable of the Prodigal Son begins by saying, "A man had two sons." The father and his two sons are important for the story, even though the traditional Christian interpretation has focused on the first part of the drama, which involves the resolution of the conflict concerning the prodigal son. The elder brother, however, is also one of the man's two sons. The careful interpreter will always pay close attention to every actor in the drama.

3. Plot of the story. At this juncture the drama begins. What is the story about? The listener is orientated to the dramatic movements of the plot. The listener begins to participate in the action by identifying with the characters. The story line is driven by the development of the parable's plot and the motivation of its characters.

4. Conflict. The classic form of parable often introduces a major conflict. It may be a family crisis, such as in the parable of the Prodigal Son. It may be connected to the relationship between the master of an estate and his servants or a very wealthy person and the poor outcasts of the community. The conflict focuses on the major problem and begs for a solution.

5. Conflict resolution. The parable will lead the listener on a path toward a resolution of the conflict. The audience actively participates in the process. Conflict resolution invites listener involvement with the plot of the drama. Sometimes the parable is left without a clear resolution and invites the

[44] See Robert L. Lindsey and E. dos Santos, *A Comparative Greek Concordance of the Synoptic Gospels* (3 vols.; Jerusalem: Baptist House, 1985–1989), s.v. "parable."

audience to decide the matter. Usually, however, the parable leads the listener to an early resolution of the conflict and illustrates the resemblance between the fiction of the parable and the reality of life.

6. Call to decision and/or application. In the Gospels, Jesus often calls the listener to a point of decision. But both Gospel and rabbinic parables frequently make an application for life. The rabbis will use the word *kakh*, "thus *it is also with* . . ." They apply the parable to daily living or illustrate the purpose of the story. The classic form of rabbinic parables, as with so much Jewish haggadah, speaks to the heart and the imagination of the people and calls for a response. The call to decision and/or application is the major turning point of the parable. Here the storyteller is describing the significance of his or her tale and explaining the central theme.

While the interpreter should be aware of these six features of the classic form of story parable, one will encounter many deviations from these foundational components. Sometimes the story is streamlined. On occasion the classic form will be expanded. Usually the deviations will occur in the plot, conflict, and resolution of the conflict stages of development.

The parable of the Prodigal Son, for instance, introduces a new plot and a major conflict with the elder brother. As an illustration, the classic form has been expanded. The audience has been set up for the deviation from the beginning. The parable has prepared the stage for a surprise already in the introduction of the cast, which mentioned a man and his two sons. In a similar way, the Gospel parable of the Unmerciful Servant introduces a second mini-drama. A major conflict is resolved when the king forgives his first servant of an enormous debt. This is like the prodigal who returns home and is received by his compassionate father. But the stories do not end there. Second conflicts are introduced. The prodigal has a brother, and the servant who received mercy is called upon to show mercy to his colleague. The second mini-drama becomes the primary focus of the parable teller. In these examples the classic form of the parable has been artistically expanded for more dramatic impact.

Other examples of deviation abbreviate the form, such as the parable of the Mustard Seed and Leaven. Here the process of nature is dramatized to show a resemblance to the kingdom of heaven. The features of the classic form, which involve conflict and resolution of conflict, have been streamlined and replaced with the action of leaven in the dough or the growth of a mustard seed. The rabbis used parables frequently in exposition of biblical texts. In these exegetical parables, the scenes of the Bible are reenacted in the drama of a parable. Expositional parables are closely linked to the text of Scripture. But exposition of Torah is not the only type of rabbinic parable. The earliest form was rooted more in life experience than in exegesis. This earlier classic form of rabbinic mashal does not have a direct link to the Torah. Rather, this type of parable teaches the listener how to fulfill God's will more through intuition than by exegesis. The people grasp the higher meaning of Torah intuitively in the realm of haggadah rather than intellectually in the

domain of halakic analysis. This type of rabbinic parable is more like those of the Gospels. They lead to action by demanding a decision. Decisive action is needed for the urgency of the situation.

In all events, deviations from the classic form may be discerned in the study of parable lore. But the foundation of parable teaching is based on a model that developed from the popular oral teachings of respected religious leaders and Bible expositors. Jesus heard this type of teaching in his youth. The Jewish theology of his parables is the essence of the reality behind the metaphor. He is reaching for the higher significance of Torah as he teaches its practical application. Like rabbinic parables, his message catches the listener and motivates that person to make a decision. The urgency of the time requires immediate action. Hence parables infused fresh life into the religious experience of the people by showing the resemblance between the spiritual world beyond and human existence below. Jewish spirituality must be lived in daily experience.

PARABLES AS THEOLOGY

In 1972 Petuchowski challenged parable scholars with the intriguing observation that many Gospel and rabbinic parables preach the same theology.[45] The theological outlook of these parables is identical, even though they are derived from two diverse religious traditions. Flusser, moreover, has shown the strong theological solidarity between ancient Judaism and nascent Christianity. In a major foundational study, Flusser elucidated the new sensitivity in Jewish religious thought during the Second Temple period.[46] During this time a fresh intensity for Jewish piety focused greater attention on love rather than fear, stressing a much more intentional approach to the teachings: "Love the Lord your God" and "your neighbor as yourself." The message of the parables communicates the force of this new sensitivity in ancient Judaism, which powerfully influenced the teachings of Jesus.

Perhaps more than any other scholar, Flusser has pioneered a comprehensive methodology for the study of the Gospel parables that reveals their theological foundation in ancient Judaism through synoptic analysis, comparative study, and linguistic research. Now Stern has called upon us to recognize that the rabbinic parable is the supreme attempt, in all of Jewish literature, to imagine what God is like.[47] The theological significance of the parables, however, has not always received the attention that it merits. The comparative study of rabbinic and Gospel parables, moreover, reveals a strong, shared identity. Hence the theological meaning of the parables of Jesus should be sought in the synagogue rather than the church. Jesus is a

[45] Petuchowski, "Significance."
[46] Flusser, *Origins,* 469–89.
[47] Stern, *Parables in Midrash*, 93–97.

teacher of Torah. He focuses on the meaning of the kingdom of heaven with an unprecedented vigor. As a religious teacher, he is a theologian whose theology is rooted in Torah, in true Judaism, as one who knew and experienced his personal faith within the community. Perhaps he should be called a Jewish theologian, a magnetic preacher who would certainly be better understood in the synagogues of the first century than in the churches of today.

The Jewishness of Jesus is related to faith in the one God of Israel. Too often faith in Jesus completely overshadows the faith of Jesus. The religion focused on Jesus as the object of belief overwhelms the deep convictions of Jesus. He was a religious Jew in the context of first-century Israel. He piously practiced his beliefs in pious devotion. He preached from the Torah and the prophets, not from the Epistles of the Apostle Paul. Jesus was consumed with a message of God's compassion, which he discovered in the prayers of the synagogue and the readings of the Torah portion, rather than the hymns of the church and the NT lectionary. G. E. Lessing, during the period of the Enlightenment, struggled with this issue.[48] Religious faith in Jesus should never obscure Jewish belief and practice during the time in which he lived.

The Gospel records provide insight into the practices of the Jewish people during the Second Temple period. Even if the final compilation of the Synoptics was after the destruction of Jerusalem—an issue that continues to be discussed and debated—the sources behind the Gospels demonstrate the high historical value of the texts for the study of Jewish practices during the Second Temple period. In fact, one must seriously entertain another pertinent question: can ancient Judaism be understood apart from the Jesus of the Gospels? The examination of the wide diversity in Judaism of the Second Temple period cannot exclude the Gospel records. In truth, these sacred documents of the NT faith contain valuable evidence that can enrich greatly the study of early Jewish belief and practice. Not only must Judaism see the value of studying the Gospel records; Christianity must see also the value of studying the Jewish writings. New Testament scholars and the church must face bravely the uneasy question, "Can Jesus be understood apart from Judaism?" Christian scholars must study the sacred literature of the Jewish people. On the other hand, talmudic scholars and the synagogue will ask the question, "Can the study of the Gospel texts illuminate the history and the culture of the Jewish people from the days of the temple before it was destroyed by the Romans?"

The parting of the ways between the church and the synagogue and the mutual self-definition of faith communities have not always encouraged honest academic inquiry into the common heritage that made each community distinctive. The Holocaust, the founding of the state of Israel, and the

[48] See Gotthold Lessing, *Lessing's Theological Writings*, ed. and trans. Henry Chadwick (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1956) 106.

recent discoveries of scrolls, as well as scholarly research, make it possible to reexamine the origins of Christianity in the light of ancient Judaism and to achieve a sharper and more objective picture of Christian beginnings and the common Jewish heritage that blossomed into two distinctive expressions of faith in the one God. The scholarly investigation of Christian origins and Jewish thought of the Second Temple period could be compared to someone who was given the task of remarrying a divorced couple. The church and the synagogue have parted ways in an ugly divorce, involving grave misunderstandings and tortuous injuries. After the divorce attorneys of history have completed their work and the judge has determined the final settlement, careful and informed study of the marriage relationship will be a sensitive undertaking for all parties involved. Serious parable study must be informed of the hard realities of Jewish and Christian self-definition.

Nonetheless, the task of understanding Jesus in the context of Jewish life is a precious goal that demands the dedication of careful and objective scholarly scrutiny. Jesus was a theologian. His theology was based on the rich Jewish traditions of Scripture, doctrine, belief, and practice. He was a Jewish teacher who lived in a specific setting. He was not educated in a Christian seminary. He never studied systematic theology. Jesus did not learn about God by going to church. He never recited the Apostles' Creed nor heard a Christian sermon, yet he was a theologian. But the ramifications of his theological approach to God and humankind, with its origin in the synagogue and not the church, have seldom been recognized by scholars.[49] The study of the life and teachings of Jesus has suffered from a series of weaknesses. In this study four disciplines of research will be employed to enlighten the examination of Jesus and his parabolic instruction. When combined, they provide fresh vistas for exploration of the world of the parables.

1. Textual analysis. One must carefully study the interrelationships among the Synoptic Gospels in order to distinguish between the core message of Jesus and the Christian interpretation of his teachings.

2. Linguistic examination. The Semitisms of the Synoptic Gospels demand a careful study of the language of the text. Often the key to understanding the Greek of the Synoptics is to translate the text into [Mishnaic]

[49] While the historical issues are more complex than choosing Hellenism or Judaism, A. J. Heschel insightfully described a problem: "The process of dejudaization within the church paved the way for abandonment of origins and alienation from the core of its message. The vital issue for the church is to decide whether to look for roots in Judaism and consider itself an extension of Judaism or to look for roots in pagan Hellenism and consider itself as an antithesis to Judaism. The spiritual alienation from Israel is most forcefully expressed in the teaching of Marcion, who affirmed the contrariety and abrupt discontinuity between the God of the Hebrew Bible and the God whom Jesus had come to reveal" ("Protestant Renewal: A Jewish View," in *Jewish Perspectives on Christianity* [ed. F. Rothschild; New York: Crossroad, 1990] 302).

Hebrew, using the best linguistic tools available for careful reconstruction of the language of the *Vorlage* (underlying text) of the Gospels.[50]

3. Parallel sources. The relevant religious sources must be carefully studied in order to appreciate Jesus and the various interpretations of his teachings within the crosscultural environment of the Gospels. A rich blend of Hellenism and Judaism flourished during the period. Jesus should be placed believably in the context of Second Temple period Judaism. Archaeology, the Dead Sea Scrolls, recent investigations in the study of the Pseudepigrapha and the Apocrypha, Hellenistic Judaism, rich resources of Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic epigraphy, as well as Greek religious and philosophical thought must be studied. The discipline of research most commonly neglected, however, seems to be the scientific examination of rabbinic thought and literature. As Heschel has reminded us, the birth of Jesus is Bethlehem rather than Athens; he was at home among the people of Israel.[51] In all events, the study of Jewish thought in talmudic texts so often provides the richest insight into the parables of the Gospels. All sources must be scientifically examined and critically evaluated.

4. Theological reflection. The theology of Jesus has deep roots in contemporary Jewish sources. The Judaism of Jesus should be studied as the foundation of the church's Christianity. One cannot understand Jesus without an appreciation of the original context of Second Temple Judaism.

TREASURES NEW AND OLD

The parabolic method of the Synoptic Gospels invited a blending of the old and the new. In Matt 13:52 the words of Jesus concerning parables describe the process: "And he said to them, 'Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."[52] When viewed in the context of the Second Temple period, the Gospel parables are imbued with old and new. According to a saying attributed to Hillel, anyone who does not add to

[50] Probably the consensus of scholars today would look for an Aramaic *Vorlage* of the Gospel tradition or even an Aramaic-speaking Christian community. I am convinced that the parables of Jesus are derived from a Hebrew source that has been translated into Greek and adapted for the Gospel text. In any case, almost all agree that the Semitic flavor of the Gospels is of great importance for understanding the historical Jesus. See also my book, *Jesus and His Jewish Parables*, 40–42.

[51] Heschel asks, "What is the pedigree of the Christian Gospel? These are the words with which the New Testament begins: 'The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham' (Matt. 1:1; see also 1 Cor. 10:1–3; 1 Pet. 1:10ff.). Yet the powerful fascination with the world of Hellenism has led many minds to look for the origins of the Christian message in the world of Hellas. How odd of God not to have placed the cradle of Jesus in Delphi, or at least in Athens?" ("Protestant Renewal," 303).

[52] Cf. Flusser, *Origins*, xii.

one's learning through new and innovative creativity should be killed.[53] One adds to the old as one captures the essence of Torah and passes the message on to subsequent generations. The parables embrace the old world of Jewish learning by making new out of the earlier traditions. The new, however, is not a rejection of the old but rather a renewal and reapplication that blends together a powerful combination of ancient themes and fresh ideas.

Such a process makes the message of Torah relevant. This dynamic breathes fresh life into the old message, which actualizes Torah in experience. It does not replace or cancel Torah but renews its essence through revalidation and reinterpretation. The primary objective of Jewish learning is to realize the purpose of Torah in the fear of God. Each generation must embrace the old and the new. Through this innovative process a parabolic illustration creates a new story that infuses life into the old by adding to what has been learned.

The ancient Torah inspired fresh analysis and creative interpretation. Householders, day laborers, thieves, bandits, judges, widows, shepherds, farmers, priests, Levites, embezzlers, as well as kings and queens, princes and princesses, rich and poor, ordinary men and women, young and old—taking the stage of rabbinic and Gospel parables, they capture the imagination of the original audience. Most of the new stories are combinations of the old.[54] The possibilities for original plots and innovative story lines drawn from a treasure store of stock characters and folklore settings are limitless.

In fact, the parables of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels have striking similarities to the parables in rabbinic literature. The relationship between Jesus' parables and those of rabbinic literature merits intensive investigation. As Flusser has shown, embarking on a new approach of comparative study with scientific method promises significant results.[55] Comparatively study-

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[53] *Abot* 1:13. Compare also the saying of Ben Bag Bag in *Abot* 3:25.

[54] Unfortunately, many of the old school would have embraced without question the view expressed by Siegfried Goebel, *The Parables of Jesus* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1894) 13: "To me, the supposition that certain leading forms and phrases in several parables of Christ passed over into Rabbinical tradition without consciousness of their origin, seems best to correspond to the mutual relations of the parables in question." Today more would embrace what Pinchas Lapide noted about the Jewish parallels to the Sermon on the Mount: "For the fact that the plaster, the cement, and all the building stones come from Jewish quarries in no way diminishes the greatness of the architect who has used these raw materials to design and erect his own moral code. After all, Beethoven did not invent a single new note to compose the Ninth Symphony, his immortal masterpiece" (*Sermon on the Mount* [New York: Orbis, 1986] 10). It is not a question of who copied whom but how we can understand both. Compare also I. Abrahams, *Studies in Pharisaism and the Gospels* (1917; repr. New York: KTAV, 1967) 90–107. Abrahams observes (p. 91), "There must have been a large Jewish stock of fables and parables floating about long before they were set down in writing."

[55] See especially Flusser, *Gleichnisse.*

ing rabbinic and Gospel parables enhances our understanding of both these religious traditions so sacred to both Christians and Jews.

When the parables of Jesus are studied as a genre within the Gospels and the rabbinic parables are examined within their literary context, a number of significant facts emerge. First, the texts of the Gospel parables contain remarkable Semitisms in the Greek texts preserved by the church. Second, the rabbinic parables are always written in Hebrew, even if on occasion Aramaic words or phrases occur. Third, parables in their concise story form are unknown outside the Gospels and rabbinic literature.[56] This classic form, so characteristic of the Gospels and a large category of rabbinic parables, shows the close relationship between Jesus and other Jewish teachers.[57] Indeed, most of the rabbinic parables known to us are dated after the Gospel texts, although some of these sources are roughly contemporary with or earlier than the Synoptics. Because of a later date or difficulty in accurate dating, some have claimed that responsible scholars should ignore evidence drawn from rabbinic texts. In the comparative study of folklore, however, diachronic as well as synchronic analysis is often employed to comprehend a people and their culture. If one views rabbinic parables as echoes of Jewish culture, folklore tradition, and theology, that person would be irresponsible to ignore their evidence for the Gospel texts.[58] Which is more responsible scholarship, to ignore evidence or to explore the meaning and the message of Judaism in all its rich diversity over the centuries?[59] A careful analysis of all the evidence is a more productive methodology.

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[56] See my *Jesus and His Jewish Parables* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist, 1989), where I have discussed in greater detail the question relating to the study of the parables as a genre within a genre (pp. 55–128, 236) and the very critical question concerning the original language of the parables of the Gospels (40–42).

[57] This point has been stressed to me by Shmuel Safrai of the Hebrew University (private communication). Peter J. Tomson observes that Paul did not use Jewish parables (*Paul and the Jewish Law* [Assen: Van Gorcum, 1990] 31). See Tomson's important discussion, "Judaism and Hellenism," in his chapter on Paul's historical background, 31–33.

[58] For a sensitive analysis of Jewish life and cultural experience in the first century, see especially S. Safrai's studies in S. Safrai, M. Stern, D. Flusser, and W. C. van Unnik, eds., *The Jewish People in the First Century* (Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1974): "Home and Family," 2:728–92; "Religion in Everyday Life," 2:793–833; "The Temple," 2:865–907; "The Synagogue," 2:908–43; "Education and the Study of Torah," 2:945–70.

[59] Here it must be noted that there is sometimes little agreement among talmudic scholars regarding issues of higher criticism. While J. N. Epstein may not agree with the dating of rabbinic texts by S. Lieberman, care should be taken to consider each argument, and each text must be studied individually. In regard to comparative study of NT and rabbinic literature, E. P. Sanders has discussed the problem. On the one hand, "the rabbinic compilations . . . are later than our period," but on the other hand, "they certainly contain older material. Scholars of all schools accept attributions to a named Pharisee or rabbi as being fairly reliable: a rule attributed to Shammai probably reflects his view."

The parables constitute a genre with its own independent characteristics. They should be studied as examples of a unique form within oral tradition and written texts.[60] When one divorces the Gospel parables from their parallels in rabbinic literature, the form and the structure of the texts as well as their theological message will reflect the arbitrary biases of the interpreter. In this book the genre of parables as a didactic technique will be studied to shed light on the deeper theological significance of Gospel and rabbinic parables.

Needless to say, the synoptic problem and questions relating to the scientific study of rabbinic literature are of vital importance. Samuel Sandmel has warned against the dangers of "parallelomania," when scholars go mad searching for far-fetched parallels between Jewish and Christian texts.[61] Indeed, without a careful analysis of the original settings of both the rabbinic and the Gospel parables the messages of the texts inevitably will be compromised.[62] The parable as a genre within each individual literary context must be weighed wisely and circumspectly in the light of all available evidence. Since the work of Dibelius, scholars have recognized that a form may be adapted by different literatures to achieve diverse purposes.[63] The fine work of Clemens Thoma and Simon Lauer has shown the similar structure and teaching technique of some rabbinic parables and those of the Gospels.[64] Thoma and Lauer, stressing the original context of the rabbinic parables, have helped us capture the essence of the sages' teachings. Henry Fischel has taught us the relationship between rabbinic literature and Greco-Roman philosophy.[65] Hellenism impacted Judaism,

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See E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief, 63 BCE–66 CE* (London: SCM, 1992) 10. In NT studies, sayings of Papias that appear in the fourth-century work of Eusebius are often dated to 130 C.E. Eusebius is quoting Papias. In a similar way, many sayings in talmudic literature preserve earlier traditions. Hillel is quoted at Yavne, and we may with caution accept many of these attributions. The rabbis took care to preserve a teaching in the name of the authority who taught it.

[60] See also the fine studies in Clemens Thoma and Michael Wyschogrod, eds., *Parable and Story in Judaism and Christianity* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist, 1989).

[61] See Samuel Sandmel, "Parallelomania," *JBL* 81 (1962): 1–13.

[62] As Clemens Thoma has noted: "There are many unresolved questions and several deficiencies in contemporary research concerning rabbinic parables. For example, many scholars deplore the fact that the study of the rabbinic parable takes place in the shadow of midrashic research and, even more so, in that of Christian and Jewish ideological presuppositions. Also, a very selective, short-sighted and apologetic comparison between rabbinic parables and the parables of Jesus is an example of unprofessional and overly ideological communication" ("Literary and Theological Aspects of the Rabbinic Parables," in Thoma and Wyschogrod, *Parable and Story*, 26. I have treated this sensitive area of comparative study in my *Jewish Parables*, 55–128, 236–81.

[63] See Martin Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel* (ET; New York: Scribner, 1934).

[64] See C. Thoma and S. Lauer, *Die Gleichnisse der Rabbinen* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1986).

[65] Henry A. Fischel, *Rabbinic Literature and Greco-Roman Philosophy* (Leiden: Brill, 1973). See especially his discussion of *Chreia*, pp. 78–89.

but Hellenistic influence should not be treated as a complete conquest. The rich Hebrew compilations of the Tannaitic literature, the Hebrew Dead Sea Scrolls, as well as the many works of the Apocrypha and the Pseudepigrapha that were translated from Semitic originals demonstrate a thriving culture that remained focused on the God of the Bible while incorporating other philosophical and religious traditions into a strong faith. Martin Hengel has shown the meaning of Hellenistic Judaism.[66] The works of Saul Lieberman and Menahem Stern have made lasting contributions to understanding the original historical environment of first-century Israel.[67] The parables reveal this fascinating cultural diversity.

The parable is a flexible medium of communication that gave itself to serve different masters. Considering the possible applications of the parable, one is surprised that the parable was not employed in other oral or literary teachings. The fact that Jesus and the rabbis exclusively employ parables in this classic form strongly suggests a close relationship between the teachings attributed to Jesus in the Gospels and the instruction of Israel's sages. As will be seen in the following chapters, not only do the rabbinic parables and those of the Gospels have a common structure, similarities in motifs, parallel themes, identical forms, and like plots; they also frequently betray the same theological message.[68]

PURPOSE OF PARABLES

The purpose of the parables in the Gospels and in rabbinic literature was to instruct. Jesus' parables illustrate and teach, despite the argument of a number of scholars that they were designed to conceal his message from the people. The comparative study of the parable as a genre proves that the force behind the parable was designed to drive home a point. The parable is always

[66] See the comprehensive survey and in-depth analysis of Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism* (ET; London: SCM, 1974).

[67] See especially the incomparable work of Saul Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1962); his *Greek in Jewish Palestine* (New York: Feldheim, 1965); and his collected Hebrew writings, *Mechkarim Betorat Eretz Yisrael* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1991). Lieberman examined the question in an important article, "How Much Greek in Jewish Palestine?" reprinted in *Texts and Studies* (New York: KTAV, 1974) 216–34. See the rich insights and careful analysis of the evidence by M. Stern, "The Greek and Latin Literary Sources," in Safrai, et al., *Jewish People*, 2:18–36; and the fine collection of his Hebrew articles published posthumously (after Stern's tragic and untimely death by the hands of terrorists in Jerusalem), *Mechkarim Betoldot Yisrael Beyame Bayit Sheni* (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben Zvi, 1991). The historical situation has been lucidly described by Elias Bickerman, *The Jews in the Greek Age* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1988).

[68] See the very important study of Petuchowski, "Significance"; as well as "A Panel Discussion of the Parable," *Christian News from Israel* 23 (1973): 144–45.

related to its original context. Sometimes the context has been lost in the transmission of the tradition, and thereby the original meaning of the parable may become more difficult to understand. Nevertheless, the intended function of the parable was to communicate a message.[69]

The purpose of the parable is closely related to its context. At first parables were oral stories told to illustrate and communicate. Being told before live audiences, they were intended to entertain and challenge the listener by urging a response. This classic form is often presented in the Gospels. Flusser has demonstrated conclusively that the earlier classic form of the parable was adapted and used for exegetical purposes.[70] The classic form of parabolic instruction is well attested in the Gospels. Powerful themes are illustrated in mini-dramas portrayed in popular oral teaching with wide appeal and with carefully constructed plots, each with a single purpose. The exact same classic form appears in rabbinic literature. A parable could be employed for a variety of occasions. The same parable might be used to illustrate diverse themes in different contexts.

The Gospels portray Jesus as an itinerant teacher who taught in parables. As Jesus travels from place to place, he sits down in a boat to teach the people, or upon a mountain, or on the plain. He also appears sitting in the temple giving instruction. His disciples ask him questions, and he gives his response. As Adolf Büchler noted over eighty years ago, numerous examples from rabbinic literature describe similar circumstances.[71] The rabbis frequently taught their followers in the open air of the great outdoors. As a teacher told a parable, the setting of the mini-drama may have been seen by the listeners somewhere around them. The open fields of harvest or the fishermen's nets around the Sea of Galilee may have been the actual background for the presentation of some Gospel and rabbinic parables. The point was further emphasized in the study of parables and agricultural life made by A. Feldman.[72] The parable lore of rabbinic literature is rich in vivid word-pictures based on the rural setting of country life.

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[69] See especially the Hebrew article on the parables of Jesus and rabbinic parables by David Flusser in his *Yahadut Umekorot Hanatzrut* (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Poalim, 1979) 150–209. Also see the recent popular study by D. de la Maisonneuve, "Parables of Jesus and Rabbinic Parables," *Sidic* 19 (1987): 8–15, where Maisonneuve argues cogently for an understanding of the parables that recognizes their instructional purpose.

[70] See especially Flusser's "Ursprung und Vorgeschichte der jüdischen Gleichnisse," in *Gleichnisse,* 141–60. See also the discussion in my *Jewish Parables,* 38, 105–9. Cf. also C. Thoma, "Prolegomena zu einer Übersetzung und Kommentierung der rabbinischen Gleichnisse," *TZ* (1982): 518–31, and Thoma and Lauer, *Gleichnisse.*

[71] See A. Büchler, "Learning and Teaching in the Open Air in Palestine," *JQR* 4 (1914): 485ff. For parallels to the peripatetic teachers such as the Cynics see F. Gerald Downing, *Cynics and Christian Origins* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1992).

[72] A. Feldman, *The Parables and Similes of the Rabbis, Agricultural and Pastoral* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1927).

The Talmud explains that Johanan ben Zachai sat in the shadow of the temple and taught his disciples.[73] Instruction in the open air was characteristic of early rabbinic teachings. Moreover, the teacher probably used parables regularly to communicate his message effectively. The Tannaitic midrash *ʾAbot de Rabbi Nathan* relates the story of what happened when Johanan ben Zachai's disciples came to comfort him after his son had died. Their beloved master was now a bereaved father. Perhaps quite significantly, R. Eleazer b. Arach uses a parabolic illustration to accomplish his task. Though the precise date of this episode in rabbinic literature cannot be determined with certainty, the episode suggests that the parable was already a known form of instruction at this early period.

The Object of Value

> R. Eleazar entered and sat down before him. He said to him, "I will tell you a parable: To what may the matter be compared? To a man with whom the king deposited an object of value. Every single day the man would weep and cry out, saying: 'Woe unto me! When will I be free [of the responsibility] of this trust in peace?' You too, master, you had a son? He studied the Torah, the Prophets, the Holy Writings, he studied mishnah, halachot, agadot, and he departed from the world without sin. And you should be comforted when you have returned your trust unimpaired." Rabban Johanan said to him: "Rabbi Eleazar, my son, you have comforted me the way men should give comfort!"[74]

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[73] See b. *Pesach* 27a; and cf. the discussion of Abraham Heschel concerning the importance of haggadah in the teaching of the Tannaim in general and in the instruction of Johanan b. Zachai in particular, in A. Heschel, *Torah Men Hashamayim* (New York: Soncino, 1962) X–XI. Heschel demonstrates the importance of haggadah and its relationship to halakah. See *Tanchuma* (*Midrash Tanchuma*, ed. S. Buber [Wilna: Wittwa & Gebrüder Romm, 1885]), Lech Lackah 10, where Johanan b. Zachai is remembered for sitting and teaching his disciples the Torah portion with haggadah and Mishnah, as well as the passage in *Abot R. Nat.*, version B, ch. 28, where Johanan b. Zachai is described: "he studied every section of the Torah; he studied Scripture and Targum, *halachah* and *aggadah*, (arcane) speech and parable" (cf. A. Saldarini, *The Fathers according to Rabbi Nathan* [Leiden: Brill, 1975] 166 n. 5). Cf. A. Hyman, *Toldot Tannaim Veamoraim* (3 vols.; Jerusalem: Boys Town, 1964) 2:674–81. See also the words of Eleazer ben Shamua in *Abot R. Nat.*, version A, ch. 28.

[74] *Abot R. Nat.*, version A, ch. 14. For a discussion of the context of this parable and its relationship to R. Johanan b. Zachai's disciples, see L. Finkelstein, *Mevo Lemesechtot Avot Veavot Derabbi Natan* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1950) 42–44. Finkelstein suggests that the prominence given to Eleazar ben Arach in spite of the fact that he abandoned the sages indicates that an early date must be assigned to the tradition. See also the parallels to the context in *Abot* 2 and in *Abot R. Nat.*, version B, ch. 29, where the parable itself does not appear. David Flusser has called my attention to a close parallel to this idea in *The Sentences of Pseudo-Phocylides*, l. 106: "For the spirit is a loan from God to mortals, and his image." (See the fine critical edition by P. W. van der Horst, *The Sentences of Pseudo-Phocylides* [Leiden: Brill, 1978] 94–95, for the text and especially the important notes on pp. 189–90, where van der Horst discusses the parallels to this idea

The occasion of the parable is the consolation of Johanan ben Zachai by his most esteemed disciple.[75] When the other disciples have failed, R. Eleazar uses a parable to comfort his master. Johanan must view his pain from another perspective. By depicting the loss of his son in a nonthreatening manner, R. Eleazer helped his master to understand life, death, and the divine purpose in another light. In the context, the other disciples tried to comfort their master by citing specific cases from the Bible that describe parents who lost their children. These examples only intensified his pain because they reminded him of someone else's grief. The parable gave comfort to R. Johanan. It redefined the reality of the life situation. The parable helped R. Johanan to view the loss of his son from another, less painful vantage point. It redescribed his experience from the perspective of faith in God. The text also provides a good example of how parabolic teaching appears in rabbinic literature in diverse contexts.

The reality of the parable is discovered in its metaphoric redefinition of the facts.[76] By telling a story about a king who had given a valuable trust requiring arduous care, the parable reminded Johanan ben Zachai of God, the trust of Johanan's son and his own challenging parental obligations, as well as his personal fulfillment in seeing the accomplishments of his child. The parable redefines the reality of the situation. It is not an allegory. But it is not free from code words that form a sequence to teach a single point.[77] They are feathers that guide the arrow to make a specific point.

The fact that a story parable appears here in a text that describes a conversation between R. Johanan ben Zachai and one of his five disciples, as well as the observation that another parable is attributed to R. Johanan ben Zachai in the Talmud, is of significance.[78] The text of *ʾAbot de Rabbi Nathan* preserves many early traditions.[79] Nothing in these texts indicates that

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in Jewish Hellenistic texts and their relationship to the OT motif from Gen 1:26–27.) See also A. Marmorstein, "Das Motiv vom veruntreuten Depositum in der jüdischen Volkskunde," *MGWJ* 78 (1934): 183–95. The well-known idea that the spirit is a loan from God was developed into a story parable. Marmorstein's very important study examines the cultural and linguistic issues of the text. I am grateful to David Flusser for his insight concerning this rabbinic parable.

[75] Ibid.

[76] See some of the suggestions of Paul Ricoeur, "Biblical Hermeneutics," *Semeia* 4 (1975): 75. A recent discussion of Ricoeur's work has appeared in a study of the parable of the Wicked Husbandmen by David Stern, "Jesus' Parables from the Perspective of Rabbinic Literature: The Example of the Wicked Husbandmen," in Thoma and Wyschogrod, *Parable and Story,* 42–80. See also my treatment of the parable of the Wicked Husbandmen in *Parables,* 282–316.

[77] See Young, *Jewish Parables,* 103–9.

[78] b. *Shabb.* 153a; cf. *Semachot Derabbi Chiya* 2:1; and see my *Jewish Parables,* 103–4, 178–79. See also Flusser, *Gleichnisse,* 41–43 and 170–71.

[79] See Finkelstein, *Mavo Lemesechtot,* xxxii–xxxiii. Judah Goldin has arrived at similar conclusions. See *The Fathers according to Rabbi Nathan* (NewYork: Schocken, 1974) xxi.

parables were an entirely new method of teaching. In fact, the parabolic teaching attributed to Jesus in the Gospels would suggest otherwise.[80] Jesus seems to be using a popular method of teaching that is also reflected in the later rabbinic literature. Whether these story parables originated with the authors to whom they are ascribed is difficult to know with absolute certainty. As reminiscences of later disciples, they would represent the character of teaching contemporary with the great spiritual leaders of an earlier age. While less-than-meticulous historians of antiquity have been known to introduce anachronisms into their interpretations of past events, in regard to parabolic teaching the early evidence of the Gospels indicates that rabbinic parables frequently preserve a form of religious instruction that flourished during the Second Temple period. The parables of the Gospels appear as remnants of early Jewish parabolic teaching. Assigning all rabbinic parables to a later time, therefore, is embarking on a highly subjective and questionable enterprise. Surely Jewish parabolic teaching developed long before the destruction of the temple.

Joachim Jeremias, perhaps the most influential parable scholar of our time, held firm his opinion that Jesus was the first parable teacher.[81] Now this approach has been seriously challenged, and one can hardly defend it objectively. Though the evidence is fragmentary, Jesus is much more likely to have used a method of teaching that was already practiced by other Jewish sages during the period. It was his genius and masterful use of the medium that popularized his teaching. As has been seen, probably one-third of all the recorded words of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels are uttered in parables.[82] Indeed, parables seem to characterize the method of Jesus' instruction,

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See also his article, "The Two Versions of Abot de-Rabbi Nathan," *HUCA* 19 (1945): 97–120. There is little reason to doubt that the work is basically Tannaitic. Cf. also H. L. Strack, *Einleitung in Talmud und Midrasch* (rev. G. Stemberger; Munich: C. H. Beck, 1981) 215–17.

[80] The Gospels should be viewed as preserving the early teaching methods of the Jewish people in the first century.

[81] J. Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus* (trans. S. H. Hooke; London: SCM, 1972) 12. Jeremias claims, "Jesus' parables are something entirely new." Jeremias longed to discover incomparable originality in Jesus, which tended to make an unwarranted break between Jesus and his people. Earlier materials from the Second Temple period are surely contained in rabbinic literature. Cf. also Louis Finkelstein, who has even claimed that some sections of rabbinic literature are derived from preexilic and exilic times: "Like the bricks and stones of ancient palaces, these words of the Prophets were incorporated into later structures" (*New Light from the Prophets* [New York: Basic, 1969] 1).

[82] Although NT scholars may not agree on the exact number of parables, certainly the amount of dominical parabolic teachings in the Gospels is considerable. Cf. R. H. Stein, *Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981) 22–26; and see B. B. Scott's list in *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 460. See also the list of Gospel parables according to Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus,* 247–48.

drawing old and new from his treasure store. A strong personality and a captivating religious genius emerges from the core of the parabolic teaching in the Gospels—a quality that does not characterize the later church's redaction of Christian tradition. Though often misunderstood, the parables promise to teach us much about Jesus and his original environment.

CONCLUSIONS

The parabolic teachings of Jesus and the parables contained in rabbinic literature form a specialized genre. The study of parables as a literary genre merits careful examination in itself. The similarities between Gospel and rabbinic parables point to a common background. The common motifs and plots of these mini-dramas are drawn from a rich repository of parable lore. The conceptual world and points of reference within the story parables are shared in both the Gospel and the Jewish traditions. The study of rabbinic parables is not complete without consideration of the Gospel texts. Neither is the examination of the Gospel parables possible without careful study of the parables of talmudic literature. The parables are also a genre. Common themes and shared motifs must be examined in light of similar plots in other story parables.

The identity of thought and the theological significance of the message of the parables, providing a means to understand God and to view humanity, suggest a shared environment. The theological solidarity between Jesus and the Jewish sages too often has been minimized in parable study. The differences will never be appreciated until the full impact of the unity of the theological thought of Jesus and his contemporaries is realized. While the parables serve multifaceted functions in diverse literary contexts, they effectively communicate the deep spiritual values of religious faith. In reality these metaphoric story illustrations possess the ability to transcend religious philosophies and to break into the everyday lives of the listeners. They challenge and illuminate the audience's concept of the divine character, as well as each person's individual relationship and responsibility to others. A study of the rich legacy of Gospel and rabbinic parables indicates not only that these illustrations often succeed in their task but also that they provide a communal bond between nascent Christianity and ancient Judaism. In this work the parables of Jesus will be explored in light of their Christian interpretations and Jewish tradition.