

The Contexts of Jesus' Parables

BY DAVID B. GOWLER

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Jesus' parables were created and preserved in conversation with both Jewish and Greco-Roman cultural environments, and they partake, vigorously at times, in those cultural dialogues. To continue our own dialogues with the parables, we must become more aware of the diverse webs of meaning in these narratives. In that way we can respond more fully to the message of the one who spoke these parables with one ear already listening for our responses.

Jesus of Nazareth taught primarily, if not exclusively, in Aramaic (though he likely knew some Greek and Hebrew). The Gospels, however, are written in Greek, which is clear evidence that the Jesus portrayed in them speaks and acts in roles that combine Jewish and Greco-Roman modes of words and deeds.¹

Even as we recognize the importance of Greco-Roman contexts, however, we should not neglect the critical nature of Jesus' Jewish heritage. Since Hellenistic culture influenced all first-century Judaism to a certain extent, Jesus' Jewishness does not preclude the existence of Greco-Roman elements in his teachings and actions.

Therefore, I will examine briefly two Jewish and two Greco-Roman contexts that can help illumine the parables of Jesus.

THE PARABLE AS A TYPE OF MASHAL

The Greek term for parable (*parabolê*) typically is used to translate the more general Hebrew term *mashal* (plural: *meshalim*). *Mashal* is extremely difficult to define, but a central aspect of its meaning is “to represent” or “to be like,” and it refers to a wide range of literary forms that utilize figurative language.² Here are some examples:

A *proverbial saying*, a popular and concrete comparison, is the archetypal *mashal*. For example, the question in 1 Samuel 10:12, “Is Saul also among the

prophets?” (cf. 1 Samuel 24:13), compares appearances with reality, and Ezekiel 18:2 compares the actions of one generation with the results seen in the next.

Bywords contain an implied comparison between present appearances (e.g., peace and prosperity) and future reality (e.g., when God’s judgment will come). The byword may refer to

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Israel as a whole (Deuteronomy 28:37), part of Israel (Jeremiah 24:9), or those who turn to idolatry (Ezekiel 14:8).

Examples of a *prophetic figurative oracle* can be seen in the prophecies uttered by Balaam concerning Israel’s future in Numbers 23 and 24.

A *song of derision or taunting* describes a divine judgment that serves as an object lesson, such as the satire against the King of Babylon in Isaiah 14:4–23 or the taunt against the rich in Micah 2:4.

All *meshalim* have a teaching function, but *didactic poems* instruct Israel on the wisdom of living correctly (e.g., Job 29; Psalm 49).

The *wise sayings from the “intellectual elite”* have a riddle-like character whose hidden truth must be deciphered by those with the wisdom to interpret it correctly (Proverbs 1:5–6; cf. Sirach 39:1–3).

Finally, an *allegorizing parable* often uses imagery that serves as a warning, such as the allegories of the Eagle and the Vine (Ezekiel 17:3–10) or the Boiling Pot (Ezekiel 24:3–5).

A parable thus is just one type of *mashal*, although rigid distinctions are difficult to make (Luke 4:23, for example, uses *parabolê* for the proverb, “Physician, heal thyself”). The Old Testament tends to use *mashal* for whatever is “proverb-like,” with hidden or allusive truth, which means that the response of the reader or hearer is essential to the process of creating understanding.

Yet the *meshalim* of the Old Testament do not offer any definitive examples of parables like the ones Jesus created. The Old Testament does contain

some fables, such as Jotham's *mashal* of the Trees (Judges 9:7–15), Jehoash's *mashal* of the Thistle (2 Kings 14:9), and Ezekiel's *mashal* of the Vine and the Eagles (Ezekiel 17:3–10), but no Old Testament *mashal* serves as a direct parallel to the New Testament's use of parable as a short narrative. Isaiah's *mashal* of the Vineyard (Isaiah 5:1–6) might qualify at best as an allegorizing parable. Of all the *meshalim* in the Old Testament, the closest we come to a narrative parable is Nathan's *mashal* of the Poor Man's Only Lamb (2 Samuel 12:1–4). Although we see some development toward the narrative parables as Jesus used them, "parable has not yet emerged as a genre in the Old Testament."³

PARABLES IN RABBINIC LITERATURE

Parables play a prominent role in later Jewish literature, such as in rabbinic traditions, where the rabbis used them for preaching, interpreting Scripture, and providing guidance for daily lives.

Harvey McArthur and Robert Johnston find a fivefold structure is typical for the narrative *mashal* in rabbinic literature, although elements are sometimes omitted.⁴ We can observe this structure in the rabbinic parable in *Deuteronomy Rabbah* 2:24, which is a midrash (or commentary) on Deuteronomy 4:30 from the ninth or tenth century A.D.

Like most rabbinic parables, it has an *illustrand* that sets out the matter to be illustrated, proved, or explained by the *mashal*. Although the *illustrand* is not actually part of the parable, it provides a rationale for the parable's existence: "Another explanation [of] 'Thou wilt return to the Lord thy God' (Deuteronomy 4:30)."

Next, an *introductory formula* is prefixed to the story: "R. [i.e., Rabbi] Samuel Pargrita said in the name of R. Meir: 'Unto what is the matter like? It is like the son of a king who took to evil ways.'" Often these introductory formulas have three parts: (a) "I will parable you a parable," (b) "Unto what is the matter like?" and (c) "It is like a king who...."

The *parable proper* is an illustrative story (often about kings, animals, or wisdom sayings): "It is like the son of a king who took to evil ways. The king sent a tutor to him who appealed to him, saying: 'Repent my son.' But the son sent him back to his father [with a message], 'How can I have the effrontery to return? I am ashamed to come before you.' Thereupon his father sent back word: 'My son, is a son ever ashamed to return to his father? And is it not to your father that you will be returning?'"

The *application*, often introduced by the word *kak* ("even so" or "likewise"), attaches an explicit interpretation to clarify the *mashal*'s meaning: "Even so the Holy One, blessed be He, sent Jeremiah to Israel when they sinned, and said to him: 'Go, say to my children: Return.'"

Finally, a *scriptural quotation*, usually introduced by the formula "as it is said" or "as it is written," demonstrates the truth of the *mashal*: "Israel asked Jeremiah: 'How can we have the effrontery to return to God?' Whence do

we know this? For it is said: 'Let us lie down in our shame and let our confusion cover us' etc. (Jeremiah 3:25). But God sent back word to them: 'My children, if you return, will you not be returning to your Father?' Whence this? 'For I have become a father to Israel' etc. (Jeremiah 31:9)."

RABBINIC PARABLES AND THE PARABLES OF JESUS

The rabbis commonly used parables to deliver sermons in synagogues and study the Torah in the academies, notes David Stern.⁵ In fact, they

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Stern defines the rabbinic parable as "an allusive narrative told for an ulterior purpose" — usually to praise or disparage a specific situation of the speaker/author and hearer/reader. It draws a series of parallels between the story recounted in the narrative and the "actual situation" to which the parable

is directed. These parallels, however, are not drawn explicitly; the audience is left to derive them for themselves. So the parable is neither a simple tale with a transparent lesson nor an opaque story with a secret message; it is a narrative that actively elicits from its audience the interpretation and application of its message. The social context, then, clarifies the parable by giving the audience the information they need to understand it.

One problem with Stern's approach is that a parable's "original context" cannot be reconstructed. As the context changes (whether in literary form, audience, or historical situation), a parable's meaning will also change, especially when a parable moves from oral tradition to being embedded in a larger, written narrative.

What, then, are the connections between the parables of Jesus and the parables in the rabbinic tradition? Because they share some compositional similarities, rabbinic parables can shed light on Jesus' parables. For example, the king and a wedding feast in Matthew 22:1-14 (contrast the same parable in Luke 14:16-24, in which "a man" gives a "great banquet") resemble the portrayals of kings in rabbinic parables that symbolize God's actions.

Several scholars, like David Flusser, stress other similarities between rabbinic parables and Gospel parables, such as formulaic elements of diction, conventional themes, and stereotyped motifs. Flusser postulates that the rabbinic parables and the parables of Jesus stem from a common narrative tradition — they have affinities with the fables of Aesop, though the par-

ables were a development within Palestine. Jesus' parables are an older, non-exegetical, "ethical" type of rabbinic parable, he suggests, and the differences between Jesus' parables and later rabbinic parables are due primarily to a new rabbinic focus upon the explanation of biblical passages.⁷

Nevertheless, there are striking dissimilarities in form, content, and application between Jesus' parables and rabbinic parables. First, Jesus' parables in the Gospels significantly predate parables in rabbinic literature. Second, the form of rabbinic parables seems to have changed over time, with various usages and in various contexts. Whatever their initial usage, rabbinic parables primarily serve as a means for interpretation of Scripture, and they assume a more standardized form with stereotypical features. In addition, rabbinic parables tend to exceed the Gospel parables in the degree of their explicit interpretation.

Many (Christian) scholars argue that rabbinic parables – in contrast to many parables of Jesus – tend to reinforce the conventional wisdom or the societal norms of various rabbis and their communities. A closer reading, however, indicates that some rabbinic parables critique society in a way comparable to many social critiques in Jesus' parables, and in their present Gospel contexts, the parables of Jesus are well on their way to being "domesticated." By that I mean the parables of Jesus, *as utilized in the Gospels*, begin to reinforce the conventional wisdom or the societal norms of the early Christian communities.

Unfortunately, the paucity of written evidence – primarily due to oral tradition – prevents us from detecting a trajectory between Jesus' parables and the rabbinic parables, should one exist. Just as it is difficult to recover the "original" words of Jesus in the Gospels, it is difficult to recover the "original" sayings of rabbis in rabbinic literature. For these reasons, we should not overstress the similarities or downplay the differences between the Gospel parables and rabbinic parables.

THE PARABLES AND GREEK FABLES

When we cast our comparative nets beyond Jewish cultural waters, we discover many aspects in the broader Greco-Roman environment that expand our understanding of how the Gospel parables were spoken and heard, and written and read.

The mention of Greek fables usually conjures up visions of stories with talking animals that illustrate a simple moral. Yet, in antiquity, the term *fable* denoted several kinds of brief narratives: Aelius Theon defined the fable as "a fictitious story picturing a truth."⁸ The realistic portrayals in Aesop's fables, for example, are strikingly similar to the parables of Jesus. An Aesopic fable is even attributed to Jesus in the non-canonical *Gospel of Thomas* 102: "Woe to the Pharisees, for they are like a dog sleeping in the manger of oxen; neither does he eat nor allow the oxen to eat."⁹

Mary Ann Beavis discovered five basic similarities between fables and

the parables of Jesus.¹⁰ Fables and parables are *brief, invented narratives that shed light on aspects of human experience and behavior*. Fables usually *involve ordinary human characters and situations*—like quarreling siblings who are corrected by a loving father. Yet, despite their realism, many fables contain an element of extravagance. Some fables *illustrate religious and ethical themes*, such as the relations between humans and the gods, and most do not have

miraculous interventions.

Likewise only two of Jesus' parables have direct supernatural interventions (Luke 12:13–21; 16:19–31). Some fables have a *surprising or ironic element of reversal* that is reminiscent of Jesus' parables. Many fables have *morals, attached to their beginning or end, which often appear to be secondary*. Similarly, both Matthew and Luke tend to add such moralizing features either to the begin-

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ning of a parable (e.g., Luke 18:1) or the end (e.g., Matthew 18:35).

Even if Greek fables and the Gospel parables are not overwhelmingly similar, one thing is clear: the Old Testament and rabbinic *meshalim* are not the *only* appropriate comparative materials we have for the Gospel parables. Jesus and the Gospel authors probably were influenced by popular Greek fables, as well as by other Greco-Roman elements.

THE PARABLES AND OTHER GRECO-ROMAN CONTEXTS

Some scholars have suggested that the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31) derives from an Egyptian folktale about the journey of Setme Chamois (led by his son Si-osire) through the realm of the dead. They believe Jesus adapted this Egyptian story for his own purposes and created the second half of the parable (16:27–31).¹¹

A closer examination of the evidence, however, calls for a broader, Greco-Roman comparative framework for reading the parable. Ronald Hock, for example, provides an apt comparison from the Lucian texts, *Gal-lus* and *Cataplus*, where a poor, marginalized artisan named Micyllus goes hungry from early morning to evening and must bear the slights, insults, and beatings of the powerful.¹² When Micyllus and a rich tyrant named Megapenthes die, they both make the trip to Hades. Megapenthes, like the rich man in Jesus' parable, tries to strike a bargain to alter his situation, but to no avail. Finally, Micyllus and Megapenthes face Rhadamanthus, the judge of the underworld. Micyllus is judged to be pure and goes to the Isle

of the Blessed. Megapenthes's soul, however, is stained with corruption, and he will be appropriately punished. In Hock's opinion, both this story and the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus betray the ancient Cynic philosophers' views on the problems with wealth and the virtues of poverty.

Another critical context that helps us interpret this parable is the worldview of first-century peasants. This parable gives evidence that Jesus agreed with his fellow peasants that a person like this rich man, who engages in sumptuous living while poor Lazarus lies at his gate, is evil and deserving of punishment. (This view is clearer in the Egyptian folktale that explicitly lists the man's evil deeds, but Jesus' parable assumes the same perspective.)

Peasants, though they comprised the vast majority of the population, were virtually defenseless in the face of Roman power and often struggled to survive on the meager resources that Rome and its client rulers allowed them to keep. In order to cope, they submitted in deference to patrons, who were more powerful persons that provided for them.¹³ Peasants envisioned the patronage relationship as a moral obligation of the wealthy – that is, rich people had a moral responsibility to help those who were less fortunate (cf. Deuteronomy 15:7–11).¹⁴ Since the rich man in Jesus' parable does not live up to this obligation, peasants would conclude that he amply deserves the punishment he receives.

The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, with its reversal of fortunes after death and the assumed rapacity of the rich man, thus partakes in the broader arena of the cultural life of ancient Mediterranean society. If we compare Jesus' parables *only* to other Jewish literature, we ignore the cultural contexts in which this parable was created, told, and heard.¹⁵

NOTES

1 See Vernon K. Robbins, "Interpreting the Gospel of Mark as a Jewish Document in a Greco-Roman World," in David B. Gowler, ed., *New Boundaries in Old Territory: Form and Social Rhetoric in Mark* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), 219–242.

2 Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), 695. My list of the literary forms of *meshalim* is compiled primarily from Francis Brown, ed., *The New Brown, Driver, Briggs, Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Lafayette, IN: Associated Publishers and Authors, 1978), 605; L. E. Sivers, "A Definition of Parable," *Theological Review* 9 (1988) 60–75; and John Drury, "Origins of Mark's Parables," in M. Wadsworth, ed., *Ways of Reading the Bible* (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1981), 171–189.

3 Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 13.

4 Harvey K. McArthur and Robert M. Johnston, *They Also Taught in Parables* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990).

5 I am summarizing from David Stern, "The Rabbinic Parable: From Rhetoric to Poetics," in *The Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* 25 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1986), 631–643; David Stern, "Jesus' Parables from the Perspective of Rabbinic Literature: The Example of the Wicked Husbandman," in Clemens Thoma and Michael Wyschogrod,

eds., *Parable and Story in Judaism and Christianity* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989), 42-80; and David Stern, *Parables and Midrash* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

6 "So the parable should not be lightly esteemed in your eyes," the rabbis noted, "since by means of the parable a man arrives at the true meaning of the words of the Torah" (*Midrash Song of Songs Rabbah* I.1,8).

7 Flusser suggests the antecedents of Jewish parables can be found in Greek philosophy. See David Flusser, "Aesop's Miser and the Parable of the Talents," in Thoma and Wyschogrod, eds., *Parable and Story in Judaism and Christianity*, 9-25.

8 Theon's quote is from *Progymnasmata* 3. In contrast to David Flusser's claim that the *mashal* was dependent upon Greek philosophy and Aesop's fables, the classicist Ben Edwin Perry argues the reverse: the Greek fable had its literary-historical roots in the Semitic East. In fact, he claims that the Hebrew *mashal* is the precursor of the Aesopic fable. See Perry's "Introduction" to *Babrius and Phaedrus*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), xxiii.

9 Noted by Charles W. Hedrick, *Many Things in Parables* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 19-20.

10 In this section I am summarizing from Mary Ann Beavis, "Parable and Fable," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 52 (July 1990), 473-498.

11 This was the view of Hugo Gressmann in *Vom reichen Mann und armen Lazarus: Eine literargeschichtliche Studie* (Berlin: Königlische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1918). Similarly, Joachim Jeremias argued that Jesus knew this folktale and also incorporated it into his Parable of the Great Supper; see Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, Second Revised Edition (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972), 183.

For a discussion of the Greco-Roman context of other Gospel parables, see David B. Gowler, *What Are They Saying About the Parables?* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2000); and David B. Gowler, "'At His Gate Lay a Poor Man': A Dialogic Reading of Luke 16:19-31," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 32:3 (Fall 2005), 249-266.

12 Ronald Hock, "Lazarus and Micylus: Greco-Roman Backgrounds to Luke 16:19-31," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 106 (Summer 1987), 447-463. Others point to similarities between this parable and the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice as found in Virgil and Ovid; see Wim Weren, "Het dodenrijk. Een vergelijking van Lucas' verhaal over Lazarus en de rijke mer de mythe van Orpheus en Eurydice bij Vergilius en Ovidius," in *Intertextualiteit en Bijbel* (Kampen: Uitgeverij Kok, 1993), 65-92.

13 John Davis, *The People of the Mediterranean* (London: Routledge, 1977), 132.

14 James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976), 11, 27, and 51.

15 Substantial sections of this essay are adapted from David B. Gowler, *What Are They Saying About the Parables?* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2000), 41-67. Used with permission from Paulist Press.



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