

Introduction

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

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

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

Song Rab. 1:1, 8

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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- 3 For the form critical approach, see David E. Aune, “Form criticism,” in *The Blackwell Companion to the New Testament*, ed. David E. Aune (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 140–155. In the so-called literary turn, parables appear as “aesthetic objects”; see Stern, *Parables in Midrash*. For synoptic parables, building on the earlier work of Dan Via, see Charles W. Hedrick, *Parables as Poetic Fictions: The Creative Voice of Jesus* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994). For the importance of performance, see Amy Shuman and Galit Hasan-Rokem, “The Poetics of Folklore,” in *A Companion to Folklore*, ed. Regina F. Bendix and Galit Hasan-Rokem, BCA 15 (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 55–74.
- 4 The fact that the rabbinic parables have been produced over a much longer period than the early Christian parables requires explanation. Eric Ottenheijm, one of the volume editors, is currently writing a monograph focussing on the history of the early Jewish parable in the context of the so-called “partings of the ways.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2 Realism and the Power of the *Nimshal*

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

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

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- 23 For the debate between David Stern and Daniel Boyarin on the priority of the *nimshal*, to which the *mashal* may have been adapted, even if for the audience the reverse appears to be true, see Teugels, *Meshalim in the Mekhiltot*, 54–58.
- 24 Arnon Atzmon's article in this volume illustrates how parables insert new and daring theological information in biblical texts, and by appealing to the reader's reality. On a cognitive theoretical level, Ronit Nikolsky argues that parables serve to cope with tensions between biblical information and lived reality or reigning rabbinic ideology.

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

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

25 Avot R. Nath. A 24 (Schechter 78); because of the shocking nature of this dictum, the text may have become somewhat blurred; b. Hag. 15a and y. Hag. 2:1 (77b) contain a mitigated version.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4 The Contributions to This Volume

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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