EARLY JEWISH PARABLES AND FABLES AS NON-RELIGIOUS NARRATIVES[1]

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Abstract. To understand the parables of Jesus, it is interesting to compare them with other early Jewish persuasive narratives, including parables but also fables. Recognizing their common features and functions yields a more reliable interpretation of each genre and individual story. To this end, I will scrutinize some examples of these narratives with modern argumentation analysis. I will argue that, in their original context, these stories function best as non-religious persuasive narratives. Each of them aims at enhancing the audience's acceptance of some general principle, which can then be applied to religious discussion. Within these stories, however, nothing requires an allegorical and directly religious interpretation. On the contrary, such axiomatic readings obscure their message and function.

Keywords: parables, fables, argumentation, rabbinic, Jesus.

The parables of Jesus were not unique religious innovations.[2] Rather, he utilized a widespread genre in a persuasive way. Similar narratives are found in the Hebrew Bible, in Hellenistic rhetoric, and especially among rabbinic parables and fables.[3] Although the rabbinic narratives are somewhat younger, they may well reflect the same early Jewish storytelling tradition. Studying differences and similarities between the function and interpretation of the early Jewish persuasive stories will shed light on the way each of them was designed to be understood.

One of the most intriguing questions is whether these narratives should be read as religious allegories. To be sure, any story encouraging the listener to "look

[1] With this article I salute the EELC president, professor, and my friend Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr.

[2] This classical misconception was based on neglecting Jesus's parables' Early Jewish and Greco-Roman context; see M. A. BEAVIS, "Parable and Fable", *CBQ* 52 (1990) 473–497 and E. OTTENHEIJM, "Waiting for the Harvest: Trajectories of Rabbinic and 'Christian' Parables", in A. HOUTMAN et al. (ed.), *Religious Stories in Transformation: Conflict, Revision and Reception*, Brill, Leiden, 2016, 314–333 (314). See also J. JAROMIN, "A parable in Greek-Roman, Old Testament and rabbinic literature", *Scriptura Sacra* 18 (2014), 103–111.

[3] For a brief overview of the parables in the Hebrew Bible, early Jewish, and rabbinic writings, see K. R. SNODGRASS, *Stories with Intent – A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2008, 38–58.

for meanings hidden beneath the literal surface of the fiction," such as fables and parables, may invite the reader to allegorical interpretation.[4] Accordingly, Jesus's parables are often read as allegories, and the same applies to rabbinic and Hellenistic parables and fables. However, I have recently argued that, with regard to the New Testament, such a reading is misleading and based on a misinterpretation of the parable genre.[5]

In this article, I will widen the scope to other early Jewish parables and fables. I will claim that even though these stories were soon allegorized, this was superfluous. Instead, the rabbinic parables and fables are inherently independent, non-religious narratives illuminating some general principle. They make their point and are applicable in their literary context without any direct analogies between their characters and those in real life or theology. If this holds true, it supports the thesis according to which the common allegorical reading of Jesus's parables is also just a secondary way of understanding them. This is not to deny the later religious importance of the allegorical interpretations, but the evangelists and the early rabbis, probably even the historical Jesus, hardly wanted their stories to be understood in such a way.[6]

1. Parables and fables are closely related

Both genres, parables and fables, are deeply rooted in Greco-Roman and Semitic rhetoric.[7] They can be differentiated on a formal basis, but they function in the same way. They are fictitious stories reflecting reality; they display something that holds true not just within the story but also in human (or divine) relations. For a *parable*, there are numerous closer definitions. On the basis of Rüdiger Zymner's and Ruben Zimmermann's suggestions, I have defined the genre as follows:[8] "A

4 A. W. FLETCHER, *Fable, Parable, and Allegory, Encyclopedia Britannica: Macropaedia 7*, Benton, Chicago, 1979.

5 L. THURÉN, *Parables Unplugged – Reading the Lukan Parables in Their Rhetorical Context*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2014; L. THURÉN, "Multiple Communication Layers and the Enigma of the Last Judgment (Matt 25:31–46)", in A. L. H. M. VAN WIERINGEN and B. J. KOET (ed.), *Multiple Teachers in Biblical Texts (*Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology 88), Peeters, Leuven, 2017, 125–146.

6 For the relevance of non-historical, text-oriented studies of Jesus's parables to the study of historical Jesus, see L. THURÉN, "The Jesus of the Text: Unmanipulated Parables as an Alternative to Historical and Theological Reconstructions", in L. HELDGAARD BYLUND, R. FALKENBERG, M. BJELLAND KARTZOW, and K. BRO LARSEN (ed.), *Nordic Interpretations of the New Testament – Challenging Texts and Perspectives*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 2020, 261–282.

7 See M. A. BEAVIS, "Parable and Fable", 475–481.

8 R. ZYMNER, „Parabel", in G. UEDING (ed.), *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik* (vol. 6), Niemeyer, Tübingen, 2003, 502; R. ZIMMERMANN, „Die Gleichnisse Jesu – eine Hinführung", in R. ZIMMERMANN (ed.), *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu*, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, Gütersloh, 2007, 25–28.

parable is a narrative, non-historical, and metaphoric saying appealing to an audience. It illustrates a general principle to be applied in a particular context."[9]

Moreover, according to Zimmermann, a parable ought to be realistic, so that impossible things, such as apocalyptic visions, are excluded.[10] I have previously assessed this criterion as unnecessary, since Jesus's reference to a camel going through a needle's eye (Luke 18,25) is obviously a parable, despite its lack of realism. However, even though the sentence contains an *oxymoron*, Jesus does not actually claim that a camel could ever perform such a maneuver.

A *fable*, instead, typically draws on some "surrealistic notion of an animated world," which is presented as "true."[11] In a fable, according to Madeleine Boucher, "the characters are usually animals, plants or inanimate objects, which have a prudential lesson."[12] More precisely, David Daube finds in the fables that "animals, plants, or objects, while retaining their essential characteristics, talk and act like people so as to convey a message about human affairs."[13] Such an unrealistic storyline is not typically found in parables. Thus, the anthropomorphism and lack of realism separate at least most fables from parables. Despite such formal differences, both fables and parables are rhetorical tools aimed at persuading the audience.[14]

Like Jesus's parables and other early Jewish counterparts, the fables too have been often read allegorically, as reporting theological issues with cover names. However, another option exists, namely, reading them as non-religious stories. Thus understood, the fables emphasize some general principle, which then ought to be applied in different cases, whether theological or not.

In the following, I will scrutinize four case stories, each representing one type of early Jewish narrative. A more extensive analysis would further validate my findings, especially with regard to rabbinic literature.

9 THURÉN, *Parables Unplugged*, 369.

10 ZIMMERMANN, „Gleichnisse", 25–28.

11 OTTENHEIJM, "Harvest", 315.

12 M. I. BOUCHER, *The Mysterious Parable: A Literary Study* (CBQMS 6), Catholic Biblical Association of America, Washington, DC, 1977, 10.

13 D. DAUBE, *Ancient Hebrew Fables – The Inaugural Lecture of the Oxford Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1973, 5.

14 For the rhetorical function of the parables, see BEAVIS, "Parable and fable", esp. 477. Further discussion on the relationship between parables and fables is provided by B. E. PERRY, *Babrius and Phaedrus* (Loeb Classical Library 436), St. Edmundsbury Press, London, 1965, xx; BEAVIS, "Parable and fable", 476; OTTENHEIJM, "Harvest", 315; and E. OTTENHEIJM and M. POORTHUIS, "Introduction, Parables in Changing Contexts: A Preliminary Status Quaestionis", in E. OTTENHEIJM and M. POORTHUIS, *Parables in Changing Contexts – Essays on the Study of Parables in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism* (Jewish and Christian Perspectives Series, Volume 35), Brill, Leiden, 2020, 1–11 (1–5).

2. A rabbinic fable: *The Quarreling Wheat Plant*

As an example of early Jewish fables, I will focus on the widespread story about the *Quarreling Wheat Plant*, in which different parts of the grain argue about their relative status.[15] This fable has been recently discussed thoroughly by Eric Ottenheijm. Although the earliest preserved version comes from the early fifth century, it may well represent an older type of fable telling. According to its common version, the story goes thus:

> *The wheat, and the stubble, and the straw quarreled with each other. The ear of wheat said: "Because of us the field was sown!" The stubble said: "Because of us the field was sown!" And the straw said: "Because of us the field was sown!" Said the wheat to them: "The hour will come and you will see!" And when the harvest came, the owner of the field took the stubble and burned it, and the straw and scattered it, and the wheat and piled it into heaps. And all started to kiss these.*[16]

The topic recalls Jesus's references to harvest (Mark 4,29; Luke 3,17; Matt 3,12; 24,32; John 4,35)[17] and Mark's parable about the automatically growing wheat (Mark 4,26-29), but the storyline resembles Paul's fable about the body parts (1 Cor 12,14-21), which I will discuss below. The reference to the harvest time, in turn, recalls Jesus's parables about the *Weeds among the Wheat* (Matt 13,24-30) or *Net* (Matt 13,47-48), which both end in final separation of the good and the bad.

The fable and its interpretations offer interesting material for comparison to the biblical narratives. First, this fable as such makes no religious connotations. Second, its credibility and persuasiveness are not based on the storyteller and his position, fame, or *ethos*, but on the narrative itself. Third, although the fable has been utilized for many purposes, the need for allegory is questionable.

According to Ottenheijm, the story was probably first used in inner-Jewish social discussions. Later, it promoted Israel's mission among the nations, anti-Christian polemic, and the superiority of Judaism to Christianity. Moreover, if Mark's parable is a derivate of this fable, it refers to the disciples' mission within Israel.[18] Some of these interpretations are already visible in the manuscripts, where such *nimshalim* are attached to them.

It is not surprising that all the versions have been given allegorical interpretations. Typically, in one version of this fable, Israel and the nations are quarreling, but the

[15] OTTENHEIJM, "Harvest".

[16] GenR 83,4-5 (MS Vatican 30).

[17] Except Matt 24,32 par., these references are discussed by OTTENHEIJM. Overlooking this verse probably depends on the traditional translation of θέρος as "summer," although the word refers to the heat of the harvest time.

[18] OTTENHEIJM, "Harvest", 329–330.

eschatological harvest will show that only Israel will prevail. However, if one identifies the wheat with Israel and the other parts with the nations or the Christians, this will not add to the credibility of the message. Such a syllogistic allegorical reasoning would hardly persuade anybody:

a) Wheat is most important,

b) Israel is wheat,

c) Israel is most important.

The argument that wheat is superior to stubble and that Israel is the wheat while Christians are the stubble could simply be turned around by the latter. Such an interpretation would make more sense, since Israel is not a product of the Christian Church in the way that wheat comes after the stubble, but the opposite.

However, the fable is more cunning than this. Instead of allegorization, it invites the audience to focus on the storyline. It provides a marvelous example of a general principle: the importance of different things cannot always be assessed immediately but will be obvious at some point. While the wheat, the stubble, and the straw use identical expressions when quarreling, one cannot tell by just listening to them who will win in the end. To be sure, the audience has secret knowledge from the beginning—they know that the wheat will overcome—but the wheat's superiority is not yet visible, and it is hard to prove until the harvest time. When applied to the question of the priority of Israel among nations, the reasoning can be described by using Stephen Toulmin's famous model for modern argumentation analysis:[19]

Backing: The fable of the *Quarreling Wheat Plant*

▼

Warrant: The superiority is not always imminently visible

Or: Time will tell who is most important

▼

Data: Israel and the nations quarrel for superiority ► *Claim*: Israel's superiority will not be evident until the last day

[19] According to TOULMIN, any human reasoning can be presented with the following elements. *Data* provides the accepted particular starting point. *Claim* is the particular opinion put forward, which the audience ought to accept. *Warrant* is a general rule combining *Data* and *Claim*, while *Backing* supports the *Warrant* with generally accepted items, such as statistics, expert opinions, or acceptable examples. See closer S. TOULMIN et al., *An Introduction to Reasoning*, Macmillan, New York, ^{2}1984, 29–69; THURÉN, *Parables Unplugged*, 30–32.

This reasoning is more compelling than simply claiming that the world was created for Israel. Instead of direct allegory, it draws on the storyline, focusing on the last sentences or *punch line*. The Jewish *qal wachomer* principle is used: If the importance of the wheat compared to other parts of the plant will not be evident until the harvest time, how much more this holds true when comparing Israel to the nations. The fable does not prove that the world was created for Israel and that all the nations are secondary. Any hearer could simply claim that the opposite is true. Instead, the fable offers a general example, to which it is hard to object: One may know already who is most important, but convincing others is difficult right now. Only time will tell.

This general principle has been applied to several questions, as the history of the interpretation of the fable shows.[20] Certain social groups within Israel may appear unimportant, Israel may seem to be just another tiny nation among others, and the superiority of Israel compared to Christianity (or vice versa) cannot easily be proven. However, the truth will be revealed in the end.

The *Quarreling Wheat Plant* is not theological either, but it has been used for numerous religious purposes during the history of its interpretation. The story as such may convince any reader, but allegorizing details easily blurs its persuasive potential. It thereby becomes meaningful and persuasive only for insiders, those who already accept the claim that the fable seeks to support. A similar development can be seen regarding Jesus's parables. Thus, the analysis of the fable of the *Quarreling Wheat Plant* as a non-religious and non-allegorical persuasive narrative *per se* also encourages the reading of Jesus's parables as stories with a punch line instead of basing their interpretation on allegorized details.

3. Paul's fable: *The Quarreling Body*

Another early Jewish fable, closely resembling the *Quarreling Wheat Plant* but carrying an opposite message, is presented in First Corinthians. There, Paul tells a fable about different body parts hypothetically quarreling about which of them is necessary (1 Cor 12,14-21). Moreover, Paul adds a non-hypothetical description of the body parts' roles and honor (12,22-26). Interpreters seldom read this fable allegorically; the different body parts are not interpreted as cover names for certain historical or theological entities. Instead, the somewhat hilarious imagery simply exemplifies a principle, which is applicable in the Pauline congregation.[21]

[20] OTTENHEIJM, "Harvest", 319–322.

[21] See for example C. WOLFF, *Der erste Brief des Paulus an die Korinther*, Zweiter Teil (ThHK 7/II), Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, Berlin, 1982, 106–110.

Backing: The story of quarreling body parts

▼

Warrant: Every member is equally important, irrespective of status

▼

Data: The members of your group ► *Claim*: Everybody is just as important

have different duties

When Paul in 1 Cor 12,27 returns to his standing image of the congregation as the body of Christ (already in 10,17; 11,27-29), this does not indicate that the body parts in the fable are identical with certain individuals. Instead, it is the principle illustrated by the fable that is important.

The fable and its additional description give non-theological, common-sense backing to a general principle according to which all members of a system are necessary for the whole. Paul seeks to prove that all body parts are eventually just as important, despite their fame, appearance, or the shame connected to them. This principle should then be applied to the life and theology of the congregation in Corinth.

To be sure, the Divinity is mentioned in the middle of the Paul's story: "God has put the body together and has given special honor to the parts that lack it…" (1 Cor 12,24). This, however, recalls his role in the synoptic parables *Birds* and *Lilies* (Matt 6,26.28-30 par.): "God" refers to a natural phenomenon, not necessarily a personal or religious character.

Both the Pauline *Quarreling Body* and the rabbinic *Quarreling Wheat* fable describe a fictitious discussion between the parts of a whole about who is most important, but the punch line of the rabbinic fable is different. It shows that the importance of the different parts cannot be known until the forthcoming harvest. Some parts have extreme value, while others will be destroyed. Paul claims the opposite. Moreover, from his point of view, the rabbinic fable could be criticized: without the stubble and the straw, there would be no wheat either.

4. The Sadducees' parable: The Woman with Seven Husbands

Turning to another genre, an interesting early Jewish parable is found in Mark 12,18-25 par.[22] This narrative, not told by Jesus but by the Sadducees, is not called a "parable" but an inquiry (ἐπηρώτων αὐτὸν λέγοντες).[23] Thus, it could be called an halachic question. However, the Sadducees' story closely resembles one of Jesus's best-known parables, the *Good Samaritan* (Luke 10,30-37), which also

[22] For the Lukan version (Luke 20,29-32), see THURÉN, *Parables Unplugged*, 44–47. Cf. Matt 22,23-30.

[23] In addition to the *Woman with Seven Husbands*, the synoptic gospels contain some parables that are not told by Jesus alone but co-narrated with his audience, such as *Tenant Farmers* (Matt 21,33-41).

ends with a question, supported by a story. Since this narrative is commonly referred to as a parable, the Sadducees' parable must be treated in the same way.

The synoptic gospels present several Sadducees telling a story about a woman with seven husbands with the aim of demonstrating that the idea of an afterlife is ridiculous. Interestingly, the storyline is not supposed to be true, or even possible. It does not convey any new information from God, nor does it depend on any interpretation of the Scriptures. The parable's argumentative function by no means depends on the authority of those presenting the story. Although it is told by Jesus's antagonists, it may still appear compelling even for modern readers.

Biblical scholars seldom read the Sadducees' parable as an allegory. For example, the woman is not identified with Israel, and the husbands are not foreign deities, even if such an interpretation would be easy to develop on the basis of the Hebrew Bible. Instead, the parable is simply read as the Sadducees' proof for their thesis, according to which there is no afterlife. In the context, the parable is aimed at persuading Jesus.

Backing: The example of a woman with seven husbands

▼

Warrant: The idea of resurrection may result in an impossible situation

▼

Data: Life after resurrection

resembles life on earth ► *Claim*: The idea of resurrection is impossible

Jesus does not question the argumentation implied by the parable but responds with new, prophetic information about the afterlife: "For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage but are like the angels in Heaven" (Mark 12,25).[24]

Both the Sadducean parable and the rabbinic and Pauline stories are somewhat comical. The main difference between these parables and fables is that the fables are surrealistic. While it is at least theoretically possible for a woman to have seven husbands in a row, speaking body parts or wheat plants hardly exist. Common to both narratives, however, is the fact that they are commonly read as persuasive argumentation, not as prophetic proclamation. Scholars seldom find in them any allegories or direct theological connections.

[24] Unlike the Sadducees' almost self-evident narrative, the validity of Jesus's response can easily be questioned. The credibility of his statement completely depends on whether one believes that he has the authority to convey such theological information. In other words, here Jesus acts as a prophet, mediating divine information, unlike the Sadducees, whose parable refers to common sense.

5. A rabbinic parable: *The Rotten Fish*

Common characteristics found in the rabbinic and Pauline fables and the Sadducees' parable can also be found in rabbinic parables.[25] They, too, are typically self-supporting: their persuasive force rests on the story itself, not the teller's authority, which is typically downplayed. Instead of proclaiming "I say to you," a rabbi says: "They tell this parable…"[26]

Lieve M. Teugels has studied a rabbinic midrashic parable of the *Rotten Fish*, which provides an interesting example.[27]

> *They tell this parable. To what is the matter similar? To one who said to his servant: "Go out and bring me a fish from the market." He went and brought him a rotten fish. He said: "By decree, you eat the fish or you will be struck with a hundred lashes (makkot), or you will pay a hundred maneh." He said: "See, I will eat it." He began to eat, but could not finish it, saying: "See, I will be struck (with lashes)." He was struck with sixty [or] seven[ty] but could not undergo any more, eventually saying, "See, I will pay (the hundred maneh)." The result was that he ate some of the fish, was struck with lashes, and paid a hundred maneh. Thus it was also for the Egyptians: They were struck, they let (Israel) go, and their money was taken.*

The parable's persuasive structure can be described as follows:

Backing: The story of the *Rotten Fish*

▼

Warrant: It is best to face the unavoidable immediately

▼

Data: The Pharaoh or the audience facing an unavoidable situation ► *Claim*: They should (have) react(ed) immediately in the correct way

[25] Essential discussion of and sources for the rabbinic parables are presented by OTTENHEIJM, "Harvest", 4, note 11. Some of the most important studies are D. STERN, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, and C. EVANS, "Parables in Early Judaism", in R. N. LONGENECKER, (ed.), *The Challenge of Jesus's Parables*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2000, 51–75.

[26] L. M. TEUGELS, "Between Hermeneutic and Rhetoric: The Parable of the Slave Who Buys a Rotten Fish in Exegetical and Homiletical Midrashim", in K. SPRONK and E. VAN STAALDUINE-SULMAN (ed.), *Hebrew Texts in Jewish, Christian and Muslim Surroundings*, Brill, Leiden, 2018, 50–64.

[27] L. 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), Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen, 2019. I have slightly edited the translation.

The *Rotten Fish* resembles the Sadducees' parable, Paul's fable, and the rabbinic fable in several ways:

- The effect does not depend on the storyteller. On the contrary: The Sadducees' parable is told by the antagonists; in the *Mekhiltot*, the personality of the narrator is blurred by using the pronoun "they"; and the rabbinic and Pauline fables could be told by anybody.
- None of the narratives aims at conveying any new historical or theological information; they are all somewhat comic stories. God is not mentioned, and no religious affiliation is needed to understand them.
- The narratives require no extra historical information to be effective. No knowledge about ancient fish markets, punishment practices, agriculture, or human anatomy are required, even if such interesting information could be found. The rabbinic parable is an absurd and comic demonstration of someone failing to face the obvious—such as the Pharaoh's imprudent strategy (referring to Exod 10,7 and 14,5). Likewise, the Sadducees' parable demonstrates the impossibility of the afterlife, and body parts or parts of wheat do not speak. Only very general background information is needed.

In all cases, any direct allegories would be improper. The people of Israel should not be identified with the rotten fish, the pitiable woman, nor the wheat. Instead, in each case, the storyline and especially their ending punch lines convey the messages.

6. Jesus's parables are not so different

Despite the formal diversity of the early Jewish fables and parables, they appear to share a common coherent rhetorical function. The same applies to Jesus's parables, even though their external variation may be even greater than between parables and fables. The synoptic Jesus tells both brief, self-evident rules and long, almost unbelievable narratives,[28] but they all share the same basic function: they exemplify and support some message or principle, which applies to some issue in the context, typically discussed by Jesus and his antagonists or disciples. Instead of proclaiming some absolute, general theological or ethical principles, the parables always make sense within their framework story.

My comprehensive scrutiny of the argumentation of all the parables of Luke and Matthew indicates that in order to fulfill their function, they share two particular and

[28] For example, Matt 5,14, the *City on a Hill* consists of seven Greek words and presents a statement that cannot be objected to. Very different is Matt 22,2-13, the *Wedding Banquet*, which contains 206 words and a highly peculiar storyline.

interrelated features: they are typically non-theological and non-allegorical. Each of them is based on experience of how ordinary people—or sometimes strange strongmen—do or at least may behave. The effect of Jesus's parables is based on their appeal to the audience's reason or emotions, never on Jesus's divine or prophetic authority. This is especially important when the parables are told to his (or the evangelist's) antagonists.[29]

Telling non-religious parables has a purpose: while the issue discussed is theological, the use of an earthly parable moves the discussion to an easier level. After solving the problem there, the solution can then be transferred to the original issue.[30] The alternative, allegorical interpretation cuts corners by making the parable itself already religious.[31]

Is a limited, controlled use of allegory unfeasible? Several scholars argue that certain *stock metaphors* derived from the Hebrew Bible invite a direct theological interpretation. Thus, for example, a shepherd, king, judge, or father in Jesus's parables must be understood as God or Jesus.[32] Identifying these metaphors would avoid some of the problems connected with an uncontrolled use of allegories.

However, inside the story world described by the evangelist, the idea of *stock metaphors* is misleading. It is based on the assumption that the audience reads Jesus's stories as a holy text in an intertextual relation to the Hebrew Bible. This is not how the parables are presented in the text. There, Jesus is not dictating the forthcoming New Testament but telling stories about everyday phenomena to people who often do not regard him as a holy prophet. If real sheep are visible when Jesus speaks of sheep, an intertextual reference to the metaphorical sheep in the Holy Scriptures is but a secondary option.

Moreover, Jesus never presents God appearing in a cameo role. On the contrary, such a reading is often made difficult. For example, the corrupt judge in Luke 18,1-6 hardly represents God. The hesitating king in 14,31-32 cannot represent the Almighty. It is seldom noticed that the shepherd seeking his lost sheep in Luke 15,4-7 is, according to Jesus, "one of you," namely, Pharisees and scribes, not Jesus himself. The father of the *Prodigal Son* in Luke 15,11-32 is often identified with either God or Jesus, although the boy is explicitly said by Jesus to have sinned "against Heaven and you" (v. 18, 21), using different words about his father and divinity. The same

[29] THURÉN, *Parables Unplugged*; THURÉN, *Matthew Unplugged* (forthcoming).

[30] THURÉN, *Parables Unplugged*, 362–364.

[31] Not even the parable of the Sower (Matt 13,3-8) persuades the audience through allegory, even though an allegorical explanation is attached to it (13,18-23). Jesus does not urge the stony ground to do something impossible, to change itself into good soil. Instead, he argues that if for a sower 25% success more than suffices, a disciple should not be too worried about the success of his preaching.

[32] R. ZIMMERMANN, *Puzzling the Parables of Jesus – Methods and Interpretation*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2015, 155.192.198–200.

applies to other characters in the parables too, commonly seen as representing God. Thus, the imprudent behavior of a landowner in Matt 21,33-41 or the king acting in absurd ways in Matt 22,1-13 do not encourage the reader to identify their protagonists with God. Nonetheless, this is precisely what is usually done axiomatically.

Using a *stock metaphor* means resorting to allegory, even if not all imaginable connotations are allowed. Such a limited use of allegory also deprives the parable of its essential persuasive function. The effect of any allegorical story depends on the credibility of the storyteller. If Jesus says, "A father accepts his prodigal son" and that "father" means God, this does not suffice to persuade the audience about God's mercy, unless they believe that Jesus is a prophet, which they hardly did because the audience of Luke 15 consisted of Pharisees and scribes criticizing him. A non-allegorical interpretation is much more persuasive, irrespective of who poses the question, "If you as a father would receive gladly your lost lamb, coin, or son, how much more God?"[33]

In Matthew, God is not mentioned as a character in any longer parabolic narratives. Only the two brief references to nature mention God as continuously taking care of the *Birds* and *Lilies* (Matt 6, 26.28-30), but instead of referring to a personal divinity, one could use the word "nature" as well. The same goes for the parallel Lukan *Ravens* and *Lilies* (Luke 12,23.27-28). Moreover, Luke only once presents God as a personal actor, telling a rich man about his imminent death (12,16-21). Actually, this is God's only explicit comment in the whole New Testament. However, the story is fictitious, and even this message is not very religious.

But isn't Jesus's description of the relationship between *Father* and *Son* theological? According to him, "No one fully knows the son except the father, and no one fully knows the father except the son and the person to whom the son chooses to reveal him" (Matt 11,27).

If Jesus here uses the titles "Son" and "Father" about himself and God—as many translators believe—this passage is not a parable at all. In that case, Jesus simply repeats his postulation in the previous verse. If, however, the traditional axiomatic capitalization of the words 'father' and 'son' is misleading, the verse is certainly a parable. Like its sister parable in Luke 10,22, it describes the relationship of any father and his son. Such a parable is neither religious nor allegorical. It states that any son typically knows his father better than anybody else does and has a special ability to reveal his father's secrets. This general observation can then be applied to Jesus: as God's child, he must have a similar ability. This in turn indicates that his teaching about God is trustworthy.

[33] For a closer analysis, see THURÉN, *Parables Unplugged*, 77–106.

Backing: A son knows his father better than anyone else does

▼

Warrant: Close kinship to an individual confers trustworthy knowledge

▼

Data: God has revealed secrets to little children

Data[1]: Jesus too is God's child ► *Claim*: Jesus's message about God is trustworthy

Even though the parable itself is not religious, its application is undoubtedly theological.

7. Conclusions

In summary, the early Jewish tradition of telling these stories provides the primary literary and rhetorical context in which the parables of Jesus also ought to be understood. By this I am referring to the earliest empirical version of Jesus's parables, the literary narratives as they can be found in the gospel documents, not any historical reconstructions or revamped Christian versions.[34] The non-biblical and the biblical and parables and fables share several common features:

- Credibility does not depend on the speaker. Even when Jesus is named as the narrator, the text-internal audience in the framework story does not regard him as the Messiah, son of God, or even a prophet, especially when Jesus is telling the parables to his adversaries. Their credibility does not depend on the audience's adherence to his authority, but on the stories as such.
- The stories do not convey any novel theological information. Even Jesus's parables are *per se* earthly narratives, and the principle highlighted by the parable is not pious either. Only when it is applied to the topic at hand does the parable become theological.
- Little if any external sociohistorical information is required.[35] Although peculiar habits and historical details may be referred to, they are no harder to understand than correspondingly peculiar details in common fairy tales.
- To fulfill its function, the narratives require no allegorical explanations. The general principle they support can be applied to a theological discussion as such.

All these stories, the parables of Jesus and the other early Jewish parables and fables, were soon allegorized. Although there are several traditional explanations for

[34] Reconstructing the original parables told by the historical Jesus is too risky and complex a task to be discussed here. For my detailed attempt to do so, see THURÉN, "The Jesus of the Text".

[35] For discussion, see THURÉN, *Parables Unplugged*, 23–26.41–42.

the rapid rise of allegory in the early Church, one must bear in mind that a corresponding development can be found among the other early Jewish narratives, too. Thus, it would be important to discover the actual reasons for such a development.

Common to all the stories is that they were later distanced from their original contexts. When the gospel authors wrote their texts, or when the rabbinic narratives were copied and retold, the situations were not identical with the original ones. However, the gospel authors and other scribes assessed the same narratives as meaningful for their own audiences. To this end, however, some re-interpretation was necessary.

In later centuries, when the audiences of the gospels consisted of hardcore Christians, they were tempted to understand the parables as allegorical, divine proclamation, even more than before. Likewise, the rabbinic fables could be applied to new situations, including the encounter with the rising Christianity. Correspondingly, the interpretation of the Psalms developed toward new theological levels.

Another explanation could be the general need for religious authority. With regard to Jesus's parables, the early interpreters perhaps began to read them as allegories since they perceived Jesus as divine. Consequently, his parables became valuable as such, irrespective of their context, rhetorical situation, or argumentative technique. Probably the same applied to the traditional Holy Scriptures, the Hebrew Bible, the LXX, pseudo-canonical writings—and even other related texts as well, such as the rabbinic parables and fables. The more classical and well-known a story becomes, the easier it is to use allegory to apply it to new situations, irrespective of its original function.

How, then, should current scholarship interpret the early Jewish narratives? If the goal is to understand what they mean in their original literary context or before it, allegory is not an option. In order to perceive Jesus's parables as intended by their author, the evangelist, one must respect their existing literary context. In this article, I have suggested that an even wider context must be taken into account, including other types of early Jewish persuasive parables and fables. Scrutiny of some of these indicates that they, too, were originally designed to be understood as functional tools in a particular context, even if they were later heavily allegorized. A more comprehensive study would be necessary to validate this thesis.

To be sure, if purely religious issues are of interest, many allegorical interpretations may offer more inspiring material than the original documents. In addition, as pieces of literary art, the early Jewish narratives, parables of Jesus included, have given impetus to several literary and artistic trajectories, and they may continue to do so.[36]

[36] ZIMMERMANN, *Puzzling*, 166–174, describes the wide possibilities offered by the parables as "polyvalent interpretation" or "interpretive diversity."

Nevertheless, one must bear in mind that the author meant something particular and aimed at a certain rhetorical effect when telling his parable or fable. Thus, any subsequent interpretations beyond the setting of any early Jewish storyteller, the gospel author, and his protagonist, Jesus, included, are of little exegetical value, despite their religious, philosophical, or artistic beauty.

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