



BRILL

JOURNAL FOR THE STUDY OF JUDAISM 52 (2021) 443–468

Journal for
the Study of
Judaism

brill.com/jsj

Book Reviews



Marcel Poorthuis and Eric Ottenheijm (eds.). *Parables in Changing Contexts*.

Essays on the Study of Parables in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism

(Jewish and Christian Perspectives 35). Leiden: Brill, 2019. Pp. vi + 350.

ISBN: 978-90-04-41696-3 (Hardback). 978-90-04-41752-6 (E-book). €127.00.

This volume unfolds the spectrum of quests and studies that were launched in the research project on rabbinic and synoptic parables at the Universities of Utrecht and Tilburg. The volume reflects the project's activities between 2015 and 2019, and mostly includes a collection of selected papers that were presented in the session of the European Association of Biblical Studies held in Leuven in 2016, namely, at the beginning of this project, which has, meanwhile, produced quite an impressive harvest of publications. As a former participant of this session, but not an author in the volume, I found it interesting to see the trajectories that some of the papers presented then have taken in their written form. The volume represents a broad spectrum of attempts to set up the *Status Quaestionis*, mostly from the participants of the project, as well as giving the readers numerous case studies, some strongly connected to the agenda of the volume, some mostly playing the role of a side dish or an appetizer for the following “feast of parables.” The editors of the collection, Eric Ottenheijm and Marcel Poorthuis, showing great concern for the reader, and thus for the reviewer, prefaced the book with an introduction (“Parables in Changing Contexts: A Preliminary Status Questionis”) explaining the structure of the book, summarizing the articles and ending with a methodological epilogue, so that I will be brief in summarizing the papers, and instead point out their main lessons.

The volume consists of three sections, each discussing one topic: 1. Parables as Religious Practice, 2. Redefining Genre; and, finally, 3. Plots, Motifs, and Characters. Like the project behind it, the volume advocates the comparative research of early Christian and rabbinic parables. The state of the art of this approach is discussed in great detail by different authors of the volume. Thus,

I will skip it here, only noting that despite the self-evident necessity of this approach, it is still new and unusual for many researchers of early Christian parables, and generally lies outside the scope of the interests of traditional students of Rabbinic literature. Even scholars of early Christian literature, highly motivated to compare the first Christian parables with rabbinic ones, find themselves, however, facing an obstacle. Indeed, rabbinic works were redacted considerably later than the NT. Assuming that the parables genre was not static, can parables appearing in anthologies redacted centuries after the first century be useful in studying parables presumably dating back to the time of Jesus? To minimize this discrepancy, the project prefers parables attributed to the Tannaim which are chronologically close and of Palestinian origin. However, this evokes the problem of attribution in Rabbinic literature: tannaitic traditions are cited throughout rabbinic literature in works edited much later than the end of the tannaitic period. This means that the tannaitic parables that have reached us only in post-tannaitic works are usually ignored as comparative study sources. These methodological issues were addressed in Geoffrey Herman's chapter "A Note on Parables in the Babylonian Talmud." Many of the authors of this collection still see themselves as obligated to the above methodological principle to stick to parables in tannaitic works. Still, I note with approval the willingness to compare the early Christian parables with their parallels from the entire midrashic literature.

In the study of ancient texts, there are two necessary trajectories: diachronic and synchronic. The first uses extant sources to posit the necessity of discovering the missing origins of the textual tradition; the other deliberately avoids the assumption that, in addition to the existing story, there were once additional sources, attributing self-sufficiency to the extant sources in seeking to understand their transformation. These trends are not mutually exclusive. Even a reader who prefers to view every parable as a unique realization of metaphors and motifs, as the editors state in the introduction (6), could not be oblivious to the parable's previous life, particularly considering that such metaphors and motifs probably once served a variety of theological discourses. Thus, I would divide the papers of the volume into a relatively small group of articles dealing with the literary evolution of a parable as a literary form and a somewhat bigger group interested in the parable as a product of transformation, but not in its process.

Thus, the chapter "The Invasion of the King: The Virtual Mashal as Foundation of Storytelling" by Marcel Poorthuis, is one of the few in the volume that deal with the parable's diachronic development and aims to perform a sort of archeological dig into this literary form. The author draws attention

to the fact that parables, both in the rabbis' literary works and in the Gospels, often have similar elements of a typological property. This leads him to assume that there were once prototypes of parables, from which the parables in the investigated corpora originated. He calls these prototypes virtual parables, following one of the meanings of virtual as being a hypothetical particle whose existence is inferred from indirect evidence. Thus, Poorthuis suggests creating a taxonomy of the main types of parables and sketching their metamorphoses from the original virtual parables to those in the Gospels and in Talmudic literature. Among Poorthuis' virtual parables, we find "The King Punishes Guests Who Refused to Come to the Wedding Feast," "The King Goes to War," and the like. Poorthuis assumes that the existence of a virtual *mashal*, known to both the narrator and his audience, best explains the great variety of parables containing similar themes. He seems, unfortunately not involved in dialogue with my article from 2014, where I developed a similar theory regarding the metamorphosis of the parable of the royal feast, assuming the presence of an ancient prototype that arose in an eschatological context and spoke about the king.¹ The king, as a prank or a trial, made a feast, filed to inform the guests about the date and time of the event. In my opinion, parables, moving from context to context, carry with them elements of previous their contexts, often making the parables illogical and difficult to explain. At the beginning of this metamorphosis chain lies a specific narrative nucleus or prototype, whom Poorthuis wants to call a virtual *mashal*. The term "virtual" is to my mind unfortunate. I prefer the term "prototype."

Another quite appealing attempt to propose an unexpected way of parable evolution is "Parables, Fiction, and Midrash: The Ten Maidens and the Bridegroom (Matt 25:1–13)" by Peter J. Tomson. This very well-written article is one of the few in the collection that attempts to shed light on the parable's literary form's evolution, using one particular New Testament parable as an example. This parable is one of the most mysterious and strange in the entire Gospel canon, and a lot of ink was spilled explaining the absurdity of its plot. Taking as a basis Flusser's thesis, that the parables in the NT are folk tales mobilized by interpreters for their hermeneutic needs,² the author goes further and, in contrast to the usual opinion, claims and even convincingly proves that the parable of the wise and stupid virgins, whatever it was in its folk prototype, came to

1 R. Kiperwasser, "A Bizarre Invitation to the King's Banquet: The Metamorphosis of a Parable Tradition and the Transformation of an Eschatological Idea," *Prooftexts* 33 (2013), 147–81.

2 D. Flusser, *Die rabbinischen Gleichnisse und der Gleichniserzähler Jesus. 1 Teil Das Wesen der Gleichnissen* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1981).

Matthew from a specific exegetical context which “artfully weaves elements from an intertextual cluster of keywords drawing on Exodus and the Song of Songs into a peculiarly striking and moving parable” (234) the main idea of which is to urge listeners be in the condition of permanent readiness for the arrival of the “bridegroom.”

In “If a nefesh sins ...” (Lev 4:2): Parables on the Soul in Leviticus Rabbah 4,” Lorena Miralles-Maciá aims to demonstrate that the redactor of Leviticus Rabbah 4 selected specific *meshalim* to present a set of complementary ideas about the soul or the soul-body link, in order to align them to the general topic of the chapter. This is a well-written article about the strategy of the editor of Leviticus Rabbah (somewhat inaccurately characterized by the author as a commentary on the book of Leviticus) and how he collected various parables and wove them into a whimsical text. The author presents a reasoned discussion in order to decide whether the resulting literary work becomes an anthropological treatise or an extended exegetical exercise, leaning in favor of the latter.

Chapter 8, “The Redactional Role of Parables in Genesis Rabbah” by Tamar Kadari is dedicated to how certain parables serve the purposes of the redactor of Genesis Rabbah. Analyzing a selection of a few well-known examples, the author concludes that when the redactor is making a list of parables connected to a particular biblical story, each of the parables illuminates another angle of the story. When taken together, they complement one another and encompass a range of reading possibilities of the biblical narrative. The readings of the parables in context are well nuanced; the thesis, though is not new.

Two papers in the volume employ, in quite an interesting and thought-provoking manner, a new theoretical tool for this area of research, the so-called *Bildfeld*, or image-field theory, which deserves a short explanation. This approach is connected to the name of Harald Weinrich and is usually employed in the field of cognitive linguistics. Weinrich refers to an image field (*Bildfeld*) in which the first metaphor originated, and is consequently, turned into a conceptual metaphor. After leaving its first field a metaphor carries aspects of the physical or social source domain into the target domain of its application. The image field appears on an intersection of two semantic fields, one is the image-recipient field, and the other is the image donor. Parables, strictly speaking, are not metaphors; however, they are durable small forms which could be analyzed as literary creations produced by the encounter of two different thematic fields, acquiring meaning *en route*. The *Bildfeld* theory was embraced by two authors: Eric Ottenheim, in his “On the Rhetoric of “Inheritance” in Synoptic and Rabbinic Parables,” using Yonah Fraenkel’s thesis that rabbinic parables could be divided on exegetical and rhetorical lines to create a more

refined understanding.³ He deals with the critical question of this project, namely, why did both Jesus and the rabbis prefer the parable type so endowed with motifs of daily life circumstances? He assumes that the shared motifs and themes in their narratives point out to a regional genre rooted in the social-rhetorical tool box of this storytelling milieu. This brings him to the social rhetoric shared by the rabbis and the early Christians. His assumption is that rabbinic parables serve an intertextually and rhetorically construed lens for reading and understanding both the biblical text and lived reality, and thus become a medium of religious experience. For this reason, both the synoptic and rabbinic parables sometimes lack an explicitly marked *nimshal*, and the interpretive and non-exegetical issues at stake seem almost to fuse in the application. He sees in the telling of parables a meaningful procedure in which the field of engagement for the hearer or reader is opened up: in the light of biblical traditions and social possibilities, the social position the parables inhabit, is mirrored. The motif of inheritance in the parables of Jesus narrate crises in the traditional family household. It focuses rhetorically on alternative households, i.e. the new family of believers, or practitioners of Torah study. The imagery of the social and economic relations within the family is adduced to recount an alternative family-belonging. In telling fictive stories on current reality, both religious authorities offer alternative realities and attempt to recruit members among the traditional households of Galilean society. In Ottenheijm's reading, using a familiar *Bildfeld* such as agriculture suggests a shared experience of the narrators and their audience.

In his paper "From Debtor to Slave: An Explorative Bildfeld Analysis of Debt and Slavery in Early Rabbinic and New Testament Parables," Martijn J. Stoutjesdijk deals with comparatively reading the parables from Sifre Deut 26 and Matt 18:23–35, showing how slavery and debt functioned as core metaphors to express ideas about sins and reward. Stoutjesdijk aims to reconstruct two adjacent image-offering domains (*bildempfangender Bereich*), noticing that some parts of the fields are utilized by two parable traditions differently. The construction of these image fields also makes us aware of the differences between Sifre and Matthew's parables, even as they operate within the same field of metaphors.

Scholars of literary history often use methods of cognitive linguistics in their work, often with noticeable success. Though scholars of the NT, especially in the German-speaking academic community, have been working with these tools for a while, the scholars of rabbinic parables have still not

3 Y. Fraenkel, "Hamashal," in Fraenkel, *Darkhe ha-aggadah vehamidrash*, 2 vols. (Givataim: Yad letalmud, 1991), 323–93.

been introduced to it. It would be interesting to see if this introduction to the *Bildfeld* theory will be useful and fruitful. Thus, the rabbinic parables, like the early Christian parables, are representatives of an ancient genre, the primary period of which is hidden in centuries that have left no textual evidence. This genre receives its fullest development in the early anthologies of the tannaitic and amoraic Midrash. They are clearly the most tangible evidence for this genre. The Babylonian Talmud, the latest compilation of rabbinic literature, contains, accordingly, the latest metamorphoses of this genre. However, as the studies that will be discussed below show, it has many surprises for the parable scholar.

Two authors deal with parables and parable-like traditions from the Babylonian Talmud. Tal Ilan, in her “A Fable on Two Mosquitoes from the Babylonian Talmud: Observations on Genre and Gender,” introduces the reader to a previously almost unexplored narrative tradition from b. Ḥullin about a married couple of mosquitoes with problems in their family and sexual life. In this plot, she sees an anti-Mehoza (a Babylonian place name) satire filled with not very good-natured irony. Within the framework of the analysis proposed by the author, this astonishing example of Talmudic humor turns out to be a model of Talmudic self-reflection, subjecting an ironic rethinking to the halachic norm of a woman who rebels. Since Talmudic culture is very fond of parables, this evokes the question whether this narrative should be tested as a parable. The author reflects on the possibility of a parabolic use of this plot. Still, the laconic nature of the context in which this fable appears does not allow reaching an unambiguous conclusion.

Geoffrey Herman, in “A Note on Parables in the Babylonian Talmud,” traces the specific Babylonian coloring of parables by comparing the Babylonian versions of the earlier Palestinian ones. He traces specific additions and transformations that betray a social background specific to Babylonia and special cultural features typical for the Babylonian rabbis’ milieu. He concludes that the parables from the Babylonian Talmud had been adopted and adapted by the rabbis for the purpose of conveying a specific message. The unusual example from b. Avod. Zar. 65a analyzed in the second part of this paper highlights one direction in which the parable style was revised in a sophisticated manner to convey a political and theological message. This very remarkable text was read in light of the Manichean literary tradition, which was also very fond of parables and promises new insights for comparative reading. Interestingly, this rabbinic tradition, like the one discussed by Ilan, does not have the typical parabolic features of the Palestinian *meshalim*, but is rather some form of *ma’ase* (exempla) employed as a parable.

Now to some other methodological inquiries in the matters of parables: Lieve M. Teugels, in her “Talking Animals in Parables: a *Contradictio in terminis?*,” discusses the long-standing problem of NT researchers: is it possible to consider some of the Jesus parables as fables, as Jülicher once proposed it,⁴ or should scholars, as Ruben Zimmerman suggests, completely abandon this definition, because plots with talking animals are absent in the NT;⁵ or, alternatively, should one search for something in common between early Christian parables and fables? Teugels describes how this debate was started more than a century ago and still causes confusion. She shows that, on the one hand, fables should not be limited to animal stories, and on the other hand, animals can feature in parables that are still distinguishable from fables. Without getting involved in solving the problem of early Christian parables, Teugels claims that the *mashal* in Talmudic literature includes parables and fables, which therefore testify to the closeness and even identity of these forms. From here, she attempts to provide a new formal definition of the structure of the *mashal*. She concludes about the nature of early Christian parables and rabbinic parables, that rabbinic parables were constituted for exegesis and NT parables probably not (which is not novel). This, of course, could be debated, as in Tomson’s paper discussed above.

Marcel Poorthuis, “The Transformative Creativity of Islamic Storytelling: Jewish and Christian Sources of Parables in the Ḥadīth,” compares parables contained in three collections of *ḥadīth*, as collected by Bukhārī, by Muslim, and by Tirmidhi, with their Jewish and Christian predecessors and concludes that the Islamic parables are not an “organic” continuation of early Christian literature, but are quite distant creations understood by Islamic formulators either as moral incentives (“Evil like a Mountain or a Fly,” “The Hole in the Ship”), or as evidence for a polemic against Judaism or Christianity, by denying automatic salvation to Poorthuis, adopted by Islam—perhaps orally—from Greek to Arabic when Islam had already long parted ways with Judaism and Christianity.

“It Is Like a Woman Who ...? Women in Early Rabbinic and Early Christian Parables” is a collective work penned by three young scholars of the parables project, Albertina Oegema, Jonathan Pater, and Martijn Stoutjesdijk, who are eager to oppose one notion among NT feminist researchers. These feminists assume that in the New Testament parables, a woman received an important

4 A. Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu (I & II)*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1899).

5 R. Zimmermann and G. Kern, eds., *Hermeneutik der Gleichnisse Jesu: Methodische Neuansätze zum Verstehen urchristlicher Parabeltexte* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 383–419.

role, and her place in society was radically rethought. The authors aim to address how to evaluate the role of women in early Christian parables by comparing the portrayal of women in these parables with their image in early rabbinic parables. This comparative study sheds light on the extent to which women in early Christian parables are depicted in stereotypical roles and how they are placed in the framework of social structures. For that reason, they create a short but persuasive taxonomy of female images in parables: brides, housewives, slave girls, and widows and analyze each in the two literary traditions, showing that the claim that the early Christian parables are exceptionally revolutionary and that women in these texts play a strikingly prominent role cannot be sustained. In both textual traditions, women are found in similar, often stereotypical roles. In both, the evaluation of these roles takes place from a patriarchal perspective, which determines the images' possible application. These parables of women are first and foremost a reflection of a shared cultural context.

Ronit Nikolsky, in "Parables in the Service of Emotional Translation," is puzzled by the well-known fact that parables are often abundant in details that are not important for the transferred meaning of the plot. Her proposition is—contrary to the accepted explanation that sees in these details additions of transmission or a cumulative effect of twisting the logic of the narrative, or intentionally adding unnecessary details—to see in these the storytellers' authentic attempt to adjust the parable to the emotional conventions of his audience. This approach, so Nikolsky, makes the commentator free to match every part of the parable to a specific exegetical or rhetorical context. Commentators must look for the change in the attitude of the altered version of the parable, or as she terms it, the difference in the philosophy of emotional translation. In the peculiarities of the plot, and in some of the protagonists' unexpected moves, she identifies the focal point of the parable story. This point is a poetic weapon of the narrative which affects the listener, whose emotionality brings about the change in attitude. She identifies the new emotional value of Tanhuma Yelamdenu parables in "pious intrepidity," which she argues are more frequent in this literary corpus.

Emotional undertones hidden in the plot of parables are also under the examination of Marc Bregman, in his chapter: "From Midrash to Mashal: The Sacrifice of Isaac as Misunderstanding," which deals with some curious parables meant to illuminate the Akedah. Bregman aims to reconstruct elements of the hidden protest in the Divine arbitrariness in making Abraham sacrifice his only son behind the peculiarities of the plot. Here the parable functions as protest and as a pressure valve for suppressed emotions.

All the chapters of this collection contribute explicitly to the understanding of the complex phenomenon of the parable form's transformation as a whole and to different trajectories of literary metamorphoses of selected literary traditions. Although they focus on different themes and use different methodologies, each one demonstrates the multiple ways in which the rabbinic and early Christian parables could be studied. This volume bears witness to a new stage in the critical study of parables and portrays its initial steps. It will be most exciting to follow the dynamics of many of these promising endeavors. The volume will be particularly useful for scholars of parables in rabbinic and early Christian literature, as well as for students of biblical exegesis and researchers of late antiquity in general.

Reuven Kiperwasser
Ariel University, Ari'el, Israel
reuven.kiperwasser@gmail.com