

Rabbinic Parables

Parables are "short fictitious stories that illustrate a moral attitude or religious principle." Normally they have two levels of meaning, popularly the "earthly story" and the "heavenly meaning."

1. Frequency
2. Variety
3. Parables as Analogies
4. Parables as Mini-Dramas
5. Caricature
6. Stock Metaphors
7. Function and Audience
8. Comparison with Jesus' Parables

1. Frequency. In the ancient Greco-Roman world parables occur frequently in the teaching of Jesus and the rabbinic literature, but only rarely elsewhere. Over 1500 rabbinic parables survive, though only 324 of these date before AD 200. These earlier parables are given in Johnston (1977). Only three date before the time of Jesus, from R. Hillel in the generation immediately preceding. Thus the 60 parables of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels are among the earliest known. Yet Jesus' audience realized he was speaking in parables (Mt 13:10), so the form was apparently well-known at that time. Perhaps parables were common in the synagogue sermons of Jesus day, as they were later. We have too little information from this early period to be sure.

2. Variety. In Jewish usage, the Greek word *parabolē*, like its Hebrew counterpart *m~š~l*, is broader in meaning than our English word "parable." Both also include proverb and paradox, and *m~š~l* can mean by-word or prophetic poem as well. Here we confine ourselves to parables in the narrower sense, illustrative stories ranging in length from a sentence or two (a "similitude"), to a short story of a few hundred words ("story parable"). These may make a single point or several; they may be rather allegorical or not. To conserve space here, the parables quoted are the shorter ones.

3. Parables as Analogies. Most parables have two levels of meaning. As Sider notes, parables typically make their points by means of analogy or proportion, using some situation in everyday life to picture something in the moral or spiritual realm. "R. Jacob said: *This world is like a lobby before the world to come. Prepare yourself in the lobby that you may enter the banquet hall.*" (J116; *m. 'Abot* 4:16) Here the analogy is:

this world: the world to come = lobby: banquet hall.

The left side of the equation is the reality part (tenor, *nimšal*); the right side is the picture part (vehicle, *m~š~l*). The speaker is making one or more points of comparison through this proportion. His main point here is (1) we need to get ready in the first before we enter the

second. Some other points are probably implied: (2) you have to pass out of the first to get into the second; (3) the second is far more important than the first, or even the (3a) second is what the first is all about.

4. Parables as Mini-Dramas. Young notes that many parables have a structure like that of a miniature drama. They often begin with an introductory formula, followed by the presentation of the main characters and setting. A crisis is developed and then resolved. Finally, the parable is applied. *"Judah ha-Nasi said: 'Unto what is the matter like? It is like a king who was judging his son, and the accuser was standing and indicting him. When the tutor of the prince saw that his pupil was being condemned, he thrust the accuser outside the court and put himself in his place in order to plead on his behalf. Even so, when Israel made the Golden Calf, Satan stood before God accusing him, while Moses remained without. What then did Moses do? He arose and thrust Satan away and put himself in his place.'"* (J267; Ex. Rab. 43:1)

5. Caricature. Parables are typically stories drawn from everyday life, but often they have some unusual character or exaggerated action designed to draw attention to a particular point. The best ones are short and memorable creations of experienced story-tellers. *"It is said, 'Will you be angry with the entire assembly when only one man sins?' (Num 16:22). R. Simeon b. Yohai taught: A parable. It is like men sitting in a ship. One took a drill and began boring beneath his seat. His fellow-travelers said, 'What are you doing?' He responded, 'What does it matter to you? It's my seat I'm boring under!' They said, 'The water will come in and drown us all!'"* (J271; Lev. Rab. 4:6)

6. Stock Metaphors. Parable stories often have characters and actions that are based on common metaphors. Many of these are drawn from the OT, and they help the listener understand what the point is. Among Johnston's 324 early rabbinic parables, by far the commonest metaphor is that of a king (161 times), nearly always standing for God. Other common pictures for God are husband and father. For Israel, the stock metaphors are son, wife, daughter, and servant. Moses is often pictured as a friend, steward or tutor. A banquet is used with some variety, but a common meaning is the age to come. Inheritance sometimes pictures the promised land, sometimes Israelites, and once the future reward. The skillful parable-maker would often weave together a consistent set of these motifs into a story to teach a lesson. *"A philosopher asked R. Gamaliel, 'Why is your God jealous of idol-worshippers rather than of the idol itself?' He answered, 'I will tell you a parable. To what is the matter like? It is like a king who had a son, and his son raised a dog whom he named for his father. Whenever the son took an oath, he said, 'By the life of this dog, my father!' When the king heard of it, with whom was he angry, his son or the dog? Surely his son!'"* (J174; Mek. Bachodesh 6:113ff)

7. Function and Audience. Among the rabbis, parables are commonly used in two ways C as illustrations and as arguments. The rabbi's audience might be his disciples in a teaching situation, a congregation listening to a synagogue sermon, or some outsider in an encounter or debate. We see the last of these in the parable cited in '6, above. The teaching situation is probably the occasion for "4-5, which are explaining Scripture passages, and the setting of '3 is

likely to have been sermonical.

8. Comparison with Jesus' Parables. The sorts of parables used by the rabbis are often similar to those used by Jesus, and each can cast some light on the interpretation of the other. In fact, most of what has been said above applies to the parables of Jesus.

8.1. Fables. One type of rabbinic parable not found in the Gospels is the fable, a story featuring animals or plants acting in human ways. When one rabbi warned R. Akiba for violating the Roman decree against studying the Torah, the latter responded, "*Unto what is the matter like? It is like a fox who was walking alongside a river, and he saw fish going in swarms from one place to another [fleeing the fishermen]. He said to them, 'Would you like to come on to the dry land...?' They said to him, '... If we are afraid in the element in which we live, how much more in the element in which we would die!' So it is with us.... If we go and neglect the Torah [which is our life], how much worse off we shall be.*" (J148; *b. Ber* 61b) This type of parable is occasionally found in the OT (e.g., *Judg* 9:8-15), but is best known in the collection ascribed to Aesop (6th c. BC).

8.2. Sample Parables. A type of parable used by Jesus but not (apparently) by the rabbis is the sample (or paradigm) parable. In these, the story operates only on a single level, being already a moral or religious story without the use of analogy. Instead, a sample of the sort of behavior to be approved or condemned is given (e.g., the parables of the Good Samaritan, *Lk* 10:30-36, and the Rich Fool, *Lk* 12:16-21), and the recipient is expected to generalize the lesson from this concrete example. These have a background in the case law of the OT, and in the sample stories of the Proverbs (e.g., *Prov* 7:6-23).

8.3. Similar Parables. Stock metaphors ('6) are used by Jesus as well as the rabbis, and in a few cases, a similar cluster of such metaphors results in a very similar parable. Compare R. Tarfon's saying, "*The day is short, the task is great, the laborers are idle, the wage is abundant, and the master of the house is urgent*" (*m. 'Abot* 2:15), with Jesus' "*The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field*" (*Lk* 10:2). Or consider the following parable: "*A king had a vineyard for which he engaged many laborers, one of whom was especially apt and skillful. What did the king do? He took this laborer from his work, and walked through the vineyard with him. When the laborers came for their hire in the evening, the skillful laborer also appeared among them and received a full day's wages from the king. The other laborers were angry at this and said, 'We have toiled the whole day, while this man has worked but two hours; why does the king give him the full hire, even as to us?' The king said to them, 'Why are you angry? Through his skill he has done more in two hours than you have all day.'*" (*y. Ber.* 2:5) The story is very similar to that of Jesus in *Mt* 20:1-16, but the lesson is very different.

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