

# Rabbinic Parables

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# What are parables?

- From *Webster's 3rd International Dictionary*:
  - (1) comparison, similitude
  - (2) more specifically, a usually short fictitious story that illustrates a moral attitude or a religious principle
- New Testament usage: a broader category of speech figure, from a few words to a story, illustrating a point usually by means of analogy.

# What are parables?

- Normally parables illustrate by having two levels of meaning:
  - (1) the earthly story
  - (2) the heavenly meaning
- These two levels are usually connected by analogy, a similarity between the two levels.
- Sometimes they are connected by the "earthly story" being a concrete example of the "heavenly meaning."

# The Use of Parables

- Parables are still used today, but they were much more common in Jesus' time.
- Most of the parables we have from the ancient world come from:
  - Jesus
  - The Jewish Rabbis
- We will give three examples of Jesus' parables, then a larger number of rabbinic parables.

# Parables of Jesus

- Various commentators have given different numbers for how many parables of Jesus are recorded in the Bible.
- I get about 65, not counting acted parables.
- We'll look at three of different sorts.

# Parable of the Sower

Matthew 13:3-9 (NIV) Then he told them many things in parables, saying: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. 4 As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. 5 Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. 6 But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. 7 Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. 8 Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. 9 He who has ears, let him hear."

# Parable of the Lost Sheep

Luke 15:3-7 (NIV) Then Jesus told them this parable: 4 "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? 5 And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders 6 and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' 7 I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent."

# Parable of the Rich Fool

Luke 12:16 (NIV) And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. 17 He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.' 18 Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. 19 And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'" 20 But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?' 21 This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God."



# Rabbinic Literature

- The Rabbinic literature is the written material that has survived from the oral tradition of the Pharisees and their successors in the first few centuries after the time of Jesus.
- 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.

# Parable of the Dog & Father

A philosopher asked R Gamaliel: It is written in your Torah: FOR THE LORD THY GOD IS A DEVOURING FIRE, A JEALOUS GOD (Dt 4:24). But why is He so jealous of its worshippers, rather than of the idol itself? He said: I will parable to you a parable. Unto what is the matter like? It is like a king of flesh and blood who had a son, and the son reared a dog to which he attached his father's name, so that whenever he took an oath he exclaimed: By the life of this dog, my father! When the king heard of it, with whom is he angry – his son or the dog? Surely he is angry with his son!

B Aboda Zara 54b

# Parable of the Vestibule

- R Jacob said: This world is like a vestibule before the world to come. Prepare thyself in the vestibule that thou mayest enter into the banqueting hall. M

Aboth 4:16

- Note the earthly part: vestibule & banquet hall; these are analogs to the heavenly part: this world (our life on earth) & the world to come (heaven).

# Parable of the Skillful Worker

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 garden conversing 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 the two hours than you have all day." J Ber 2:5

# Parable of the Short Day

The day is short, and the work is great, and the laborers are sluggish, and the reward is much, and the Master of the house is urgent. M Aboth 2:15

# Parable of the Foolish Shipmate

It is said, SHALL ONE MAN SIN, AND WILT THOU BE WROTH WITH ALL THE CONGREGATION? (Num 16:22). R Simeon b Yohai taught: A parable. It is like men who were sitting in a ship. One took a borer and began boring beneath his own place. His fellow travellers said to him: What are you doing? He said to them: What does that matter to you, am I not boring under my own place? They said: Because the water will come up and flood the ship for us all. Lev R 4:6

# Parable of the Blind & Lame Caretakers

Antoninus said to Rabbi: The body and the soul can both free themselves from judgment. Thus the body can plead: The soul has sinned, (the proof being that) from the day it left me I lie like a dumb stone in the grave. And the soul can say: The body has sinned, (the proof being that) from the day I departed from it I fly about in the air like a bird. He said: I will parable to thee a parable. Unto what is the matter like? It is like a king of flesh and blood who had a beautiful orchard which contained splendid figs. And he placed in it two keepers, one lame and the other blind. The lame man said to the blind: I see beautiful figs in the orchard. Come and take me upon thy shoulder, that we may procure and eat them. So the lame man bestrode the blind, procured and ate them. Some time after, the owner of the orchard came and said to them: Where are those beautiful figs? The lame man replied: Have I then feet to walk with? The blind man replied: Have I then eyes to see with? What did he do? He placed the lame upon the blind and judged them both together as one. Also will the Holy One, blessed be He, bring the soul, replace it in the body, and judge them together. B Sanhedrin 91a

# Some Shared Features

- Both the parables of Jesus and those of the rabbis share a number of features that can help us understand them:
  - They both work by analogy.
  - They are often mini-dramas.
  - They make use of caricature.
  - They tend to use stock (standard) metaphors from the Old Testament or Jewish culture.



# Working by Analogy

- Jesus' parable of the sower uses the various types of soil to represent various receptions to the Gospel message.
- The rabbinic parable of the vestibule uses the idea of people putting on their banquet garments in the vestibule to represent our preparing in this life for the life to come.

# Mini-Dramas

- Jesus' parables of the Lost Son, the Unforgiving Servant, and the Tenant Farmers have multiple characters, a plot, and something of a surprise ending.
- So do the rabbinic parables of the Skillful Worker, the Foolish Shipmate, and the Blind & Lame Caretakers.

# Caricature

- The use of caricature – exaggeration for rhetorical effect – can be seen in both the parables of Jesus and those of the rabbis.
- Consider Jesus' parables of the Tenant Farmers, and Eye Surgery.
- Consider the rabbinic parables of the Blind & Lame Caretakers and the Foolish Shipmate.

# Stock Metaphors

- Both Jesus' parables and those of the rabbis use items that are metaphors in the OT and Jewish culture.
  - God represented as king, husband or father
  - Humans represented as servants
  - Israel represented as wife or child
  - World to come as a banquet
- Sometimes very similar combinations of metaphors produce rather similar parables.

# Stock Metaphors

- Sometimes very similar combinations of metaphors produce rather similar parables.
- Compare Jesus' parable of Harvest Workers with the rabbinic parable of the Short Day.
- Compare Jesus' parable of the Day Laborers with the rabbinic parable of the Skillful Worker.

# Harvest Workers & Short Day

- Luke 10:2 (NIV) He told them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."
- The day is short, and the work is great, and the laborers are sluggish, and the reward is much, and the Master of the house is urgent. M Aboth 2:15

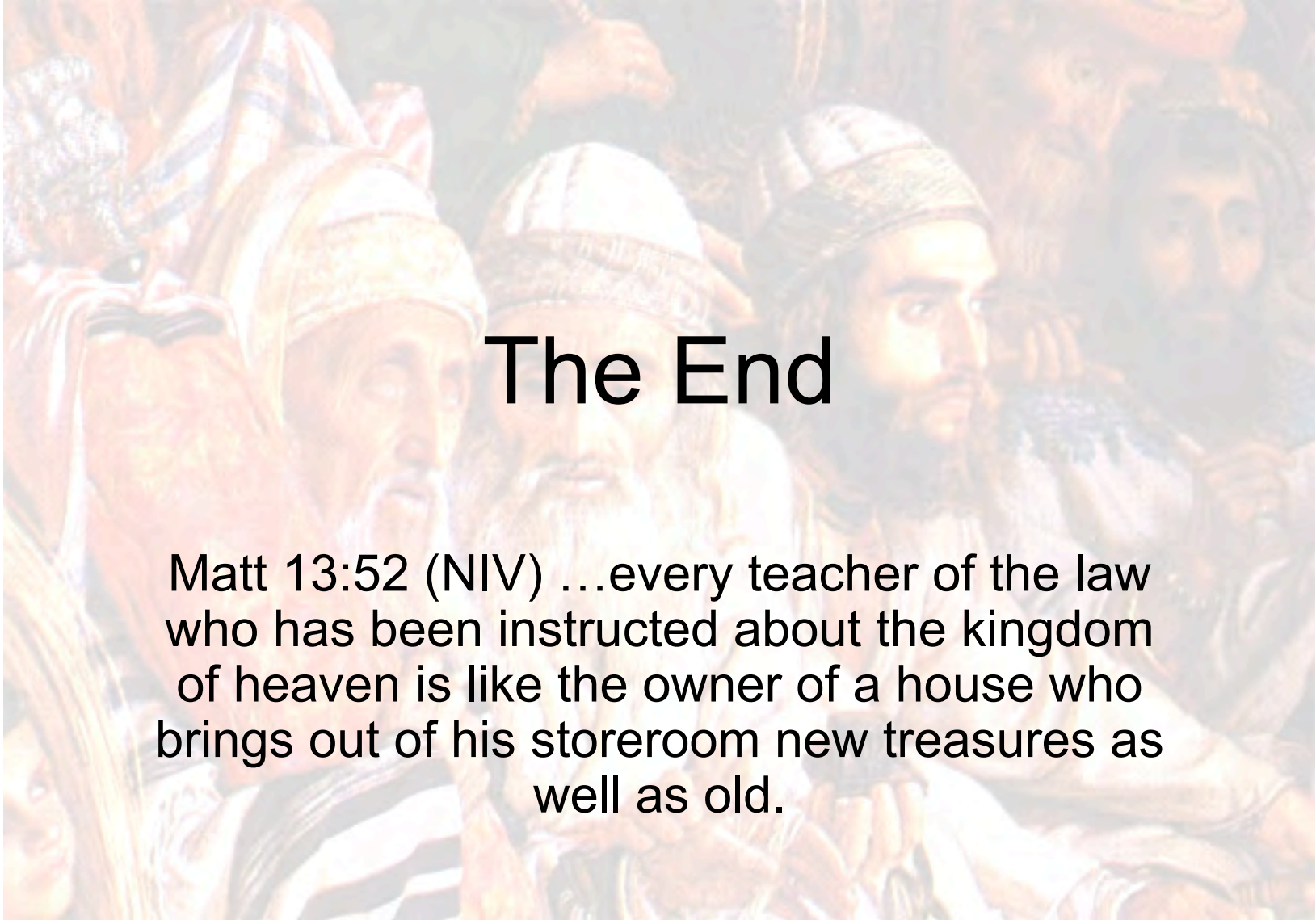
# Day Laborers

Matt 20:1 (NIV) For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. 2 He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard... 6 About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, "Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?" 7 "Because no one has hired us," they answered. He said to them, "You also go and work in my vineyard." 8 When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, "Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first." 9 The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. 10 So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. 11 When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. 12 "These men who were hired last worked only one hour," they said, "and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day." 13 But he answered one of them, "Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? 14 Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. 15 Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

# Parable of the Skillful Worker

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 garden conversing 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 the two hours than you have all day." J Ber 2:5





# The End

Matt 13:52 (NIV) ...every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old.