Parables in Changing Contexts

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

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CHAPTER 6

Talking Animals in Parables: a *Contradictio in terminis*?

Lieve M. Teugels

1   Mashal and Parable

And the LORD said to Moses, saying: *Avenge the children of Israel of the Midianites* (Num 31:1–2).... *Of the Midianites*. See, the Moabites were the beginning of the matter, as it is said: *The eldest of Moab and the eldest of Midian went* [... *to Bileam*] (Num 22:7). In their days they never made peace with one another, and when they came to fight Israel, they made peace with one another and fought with Israel. **A parable. To what is the matter similar?** To two shepherds who were with the herd, and they competed with one another. A cattle thief came to take a lamb from the herd, and one of them was fighting against him. His companion said: "If I don't go and support him now, he will kill him, and then he will come after me and kill me." They made peace between them and fought with the thief. **So Moab and Midian**. In their days they never made peace with one another, as is said: *who smote Midian in the field of Moab* (Gen 36:35). But when they came to fight with Israel, they made peace with one another and fought with Israel.

Everyone familiar with rabbinic literature will agree that the above text is a typical *mashal*, a rabbinic parable.[1] The mashal is part of a midrashic exposition of a biblical verse in which a difficulty, an apparent contradiction or a gap, is perceived. The parable contributes to the explanation of that verse by comparing the situation of the biblical text to a different situation that must have been familiar to the intended audience. The text displays the typical dual structure of the rabbinic mashal, consisting of a mashal proper and a *nimshal*

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1 In this paper, the term "parable" applies to both rabbinic and New Testament parables; "mashal" only applies to the rabbinic parables, or, when explicitly mentioned, to other literary forms called "mashal" in Hebrew literature.

(i.e., the application).² Each of these two components is introduced by a ste-reotypical formula, marked here in bold type: The mashal proper starts with the typical *mashal lemah hadavar domeh* (משל למה הדבר דומה; "A parable: to what is the matter similar?"); and the nimshal can be recognized by the signal-ling conjunction *kakh* (כך; "so"). The introductory formulae of mashal proper and nimshal connect the parable to the midrash in which it is embedded, and through the midrash to the biblical text.³ At least formally, therefore, the mashal is presented as a factor in the interpretation of the biblical text.⁴

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2 I only use "mashal proper" when speaking about the two formal parts of the mashal, to dis-tinguish it from the nimshal. When no such distinction is required, "mashal" covers the entire "parable." Some important studies on the rabbinic mashal referenced in this article are: David Stern, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991); Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), esp. 80–92 and 105–16; Yonah Fraenkel, "Ha-Mashal," in *The Ways of the Aggadah and the Midrash* (Hebrew), 2 vols. (Givataim: Yad La-Talmud, 1991), 2:323–93; Arnold Goldberg, "Das Schriftauslegende Gleichnis im Midrasch," *Frankurter Judaistische Beitrage* 9 (1981): 1–90; Alexander Samely, *Forms of Rabbinic Literature and Thought: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 188–92; David Flusser, *Die rabbinischen Gleichnisse und der Gleichniserzähler Jesus*, vol. 1, *Das Wesen der Gleichnissen* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1981); Clemens Thoma, Simon Lauer, and Hanspeter Ernst, *Die Gleichnisse der Rabbinen*, vol. 1, *Pesiqtā deRav Kahanā* (*PesK*): *Einleitung, Übersetzung, Parallelen, Kommentar, Texte* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1986).

3 In this text, a section of midrash precedes the mashal. This midrash starts with *Of the Midianites* and ends with "fought with Israel," just before the mashal. This midrash is repeated literally in the nimshal. The various types of relations between midrash, mashal, and nimshal have not been dealt with carefully in scholarship to date. With respect to tannaitic meshalim, I address these relations in the introduction to my forthcoming edition Lieve M. Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhiltot: An Annotated Edition and Translation of the Parables in Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael and Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019). I distinguish between meshalim that directly bear on the biblical verse (as a form of midrash), and meshalim that bear on the previous midrash, and not directly on the biblical verse (as a sub-form of midrash). About the latter phenomenon in the Tanhuma Midrashim, where the meshalim are often secondary to the midrash, see Ronit Nikolsky, "De functie van parabels (mesjalim) in de Tanchuma," *NTT: Journal for the Study of Theology and Religion* 71, no. 2 (2017): 151–68.

4 This is not to say that this mashal, or any other rabbinic mashal, is "purely exegetical" in our modern sense of the word. To be sure, this is not the case with midrash either: reli-gious, and ethical, even apologetic messages are disseminated in and through the means of midrash, and the same is the case with the mashal, which is usually subordinate to a midrash. A minority of rabbinic meshalim appear outside of the context of midrash, e.g., in the Babylonian Talmud. Even in such cases there is usually some connection to a bibli-cal text, as in the mashal by Rabbi Akiva in b Ber 61b that I will discuss further. Goldberg, "Das Schriftauslegende Gleichnis," 141, distinguishes between "rhetorical" and "exegetical" (*Schriftauslegend*) meshalim and refers to the mashal in b Ber 61b as a rhetorical mashal. He

For scholars dealing with the comparability of parables in the New Testament gospels with rabbinic meshalim—as we do in our "Parables and the Parting of the Ways"-project at Utrecht University—a consensus about the characteristics of the genre "mashal" or "parable" is crucial. In this paper I will investigate what happens when the definitions and categorizations designed in New Testament parable scholarship are applied to a rabbinic parable. The ultimate question is whether the above parable, in its original form, will pass the test to be accepted as a parable. For the purpose of comparative parable research a new, inclusive definition of the parable may prove to be necessary.

If one browses through the scholarly literature on the matter, a difference of approach between the two disciplines can be discerned. Rabbinic scholars such as David Stern, Daniel Boyarin, Yonah Fraenkel, and, most notably, Arnold Goldberg and his student Alexander Samely, give formal and functional aspects centre stage in their definitions of the "genre" or "form" mashal. Fraenkel, Goldberg, and Neusner, albeit each in his own way, approach the mashal in an inner-literary, synchronic, explicitly non-historical way.[5] New Testament scholars, on the other hand, usually focus on other matters in their discussion of the genre "parable": not so much the form, the formula, and the hermeneutic function, but rather the topic, the level of "realism," the metaphorical workings, and the exhortatory character are considered to be defining features of the parable. They also tend to focus more on the historical development of the form and

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also states, however, that most rhetorical meshalim are exegetical and vice versa—the main difference is the literary context (*Kotext*) in which they appear. The same distinction is made by Stern, *Parables*, 7: "Most meshalim in rabbinic literature, however, are preserved not in narrative contexts but in exegetical ones, as part of midrash … There is no important formal or functional difference." According to Fraenkel, "Ha-Mashal," passim, rabbinic meshalim are typically "hermeneutical," but they may contain rhetorical embellishments.

5   For the rabbinic meshalim (as well as other rabbinic literary forms), see Goldberg, "Das Schriftauslegende Gleichnis," 192: "es gibt keinen Weg der hinter die Texte zurückführt"; and 193: "Diese haben keinen Sitz im Leben mehr aber nur noch einen Sitz in der Literatur." Against historicizing readings of rabbinic meshalim (by, e.g., Bacher, Lieberman, and Ziegler), and in favour of his own "hermeneutic interpretation," see Fraenkel, "Ha-Mashal," 379–83. For a discussion of Fraenkel's systematic refutation of historical readings of rabbinic texts, in favour of their reading as "closed" literary unites (akin to New Criticism), see Hillel I. Newman, "Closing the Circle: Yonah Fraenkel, the Talmudic Story, and Rabbinic History," in *How should Rabbinic Literature be Read in the Modern World?*, ed. Matthew Kraus (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2007), 105–35. In view of his documentary hypothesis, Neusner sees the parable as a form used for the distinctive purpose of the document in which it appears (Mishna, Sifre, etc.). See Jacob Neusner, "Parable," in *Encyclopaedia of Midrash*, ed. Jacob Neusner and Alan J. Avery-Peck, vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 612–29.

its possible oral origins.[6] Some scholars who engaged in early comparative research between New Testament and rabbinic parables, such as David Flusser, tended to use the same standards as those used in New Testament parable scholarship, and were sometimes criticized for this by rabbinic scholars.[7] Most recent rabbinic scholarship witnesses a new openness towards the historical reality behind the text.[8] In general, however, New Testament as well as rabbinic scholars tend to use descriptions or definitions that only cover the parables in

6   A selection of studies about parables in the New Testament to which I refer in this paper includes: Adolph Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 2 vols. (1910; repr., Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1963); Ruben Zimmermann, ed., in collaboration with Gabi Kern, *Hermeneutik der Gleichnisse Jesu: Methodische Neuansätze zum Verstehen urchristlicher Parabeltexte*, WUNT 231 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), and therein especially Ruben Zimmermann, "Parabeln—sonst nicht: Gattungsbestimmung jenseits der Klassifikation in 'Bildwort,' 'Gleichnis,' 'Parabel,' und 'Beispielerzahlung,'" 383–419; Madeleine I. Boucher, *The Mysterious Parable: A Literary Study* (Washington, DC: Catholic Bible Association of America, 1977); Ruben Zimmermann et al., eds., *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2007). A useful collection of reprints of studies by Jülicher and his followers and opponents can be found in Wolfgang Harnisch, *Gleichnisse Jesu: Positionen der Auslegung von Adolf Jülicher bis zum Formgeschichte* (Darmstadt: Wissenschafliche Buchgesellschaft, 1982).

7   Especially critical of Flusser is Goldberg, "Das Schriftauslegende Gleichnis," 135: "Die neue arbeit Flussers (*Die rabbinischen Gleichnisse*) läßt die Formen der rabbinischen Gleichnisse, so wie sie in den gegenwärtigen Kotexten stehen, faktisch außer acht zugunsten einer Behandlung des 'Sujets' (im Gefolge von M. Lüthi)."

8   See the work of Richard Kalmin and Catherine Hezser, among many others. Specifically on parables, see Catherine Hezser, "Rabbinische Gleichnisse und ihre Vergleichbarkeit mit neutestamentlichen Gleichnissen," in Zimmermann and Kern, *Hermeneutik der Gleichnisse Jesu*, 217–37. In this study, Hezser claims—a priori it seems—an original oral stage (p. 222) for the mashal. See also Carol Bakhos, "Method(ological) Matters in the Study of Midrash," in *Current Trends in the Study of Midrash*, ed. Carol Bakhos (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 161–87, who similarly takes the mashal as an example, against Stern's purely literary approach, and advances an approach "that takes into account the text's socio-cultural and historical situatedness" (167). In the same volume (133–160), see Richard Kalmin, "The Use of Midrash for Social History." See also the conclusion of Newman, "Closing the Circle," 133: "Yet increasingly the methodological boundaries separating the two disciplines [history and literary criticism] are becoming less distinct." A new openness to context (as opposed to only co-text) is also reflected in the recent work of Joshua Levinson, a student of Fraenkel, who announces a "post classical narratology." See Joshua Levinson, "Post Classical Narratology and the Rabbinic Subject," in *Narratology, Hermeneutics, and Midrash: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Narratives from the Late Antiquity through to Modern Times*, ed. Constanza Cordoni and Gerhard Langer (Göttingen: Vienna University Press, 2014).

"their" corpus (and their approach).[9] Yet most agree that the synoptic parables and the rabbinic meshalim can indeed be compared.[10]

2 The Parable, the Allegory, and the Fable According to Jülicher

New Testament scholarship on parables has been heavily influenced by the categorization of the synoptic parables that Jülicher introduced in 1886,[11] and even today scholars can still be found wrestling with his legacy. Whether they accept his terms, want to modify them, or reject them altogether, Jülicher remains the point of reference. Jülicher has either oppositional or relational categories: (1) the opposition between parable and allegory; (2) the distinction between similitudes and parables; and (3) the relationship between fable and parable.

2.1 Parable and Allegory

Allegories, according to Jülicher, were never employed by Jesus because they obscure things, whereas parables illuminate them. Any allegory found in parables in the New Testament, can, according to Jülicher, not have been part of Jesus' original speech, but must be a later redactional addition by the evangelists, who themselves already misunderstood the nature of the

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9   Compare, e.g., Samely's "working definition" of the rabbinic mashal in his *Forms of Rabbinic Literature*, 189, with that of Zimmermann, "Parabeln," 409. Samely: "A *mashal* is a text consisting of two parts. The first part presents a typified account of how some character(s), usually defined by their social role or craft, pass through two (or more) sequential stages, or make a choice between two (or more) alternatives. The second part identifies biblical actions or events which exhibit similar stages or choices. The first part is often referred to—confusingly—by the word *mashal* in the narrow sense, the second by the word *nimshal*, usually introduced by 'thus' (*kakh*)." Zimmermann: "Eine Parabel ist ein kurzer narrativer (1) fiktionaler (2) Text, der in der erzählten Welt auf die bekannte Realität (3) bezogen ist, aber durch implizite oder explizite Transfersignale zu erkennen gibt, dass die Bedeutung des Erzählten vom Wortlaut des Textes zu unterscheiden ist (4). In seiner Appellstruktur (5) fordert er einen Leser bzw. eine Leserin auf, einen metaphorisch en Bedeutungstransfer zu vollziehen, der durch Ko—und Kontextinformationen (6) gelenkt wird."

10 Goldberg, "Das Schriftauslegende Gleichnis," 136, admits that the New Testament parables probably come from the Jewish study house or are based in Jewish preaching, and that they share similar motifs and even similar structures, but he abstains from any comparison because they have not only a very different *Sitz im Leben* (which did not interest him) but especially a different *Sitz in der Literatur* (which is the only thing he focused on).

11 Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu.*

parable.[12] Other scholars designated allegory as a non-rabbinical, Hellenistic phenomenon, and thus obsolete in New Testament *and* rabbinic parables.[13] The sharp distinction between parable and allegory has been shaded in most contemporary scholarship.[14] Madeleine Boucher argues that the distinction between parable and allegory is false, because it is illogical: a parable is a literary genre, whereas allegory is not—the latter is rather a mode of tropical speaking that can occur in all literary genres.[15] A parable would entirely fail to make its point if it lacked the double meaning so typical of allegory. In the wake of Ricoeur's theory on metaphors, many other scholars have elaborated on the metaphoric character of parables.[16]

2.2   *Similitude and Parable*

The second distinction initiated by Jülicher is the most influential and also the most contested, namely the division between "similitudes" (*Gleichnisse*) and "parables" in the narrow sense of the term.[17] The difference between these categories has been summarized concisely as follows: "The similitude narrates a typical or recurrent event in real life, usually in the present tense…. The parable tells a fictitious story, or narrates one particular incident which is invented, usually in the past tense."[18] I will not draw here on the modifications of these sub-categories that are suggested by various New Testament scholars. Ruben Zimmermann pleas for their total abolition in his study with the telling title "Parabeln-sonst nichts!"[19] It could be interesting to investigate whether the formal distinction between similitudes and parables would add anything

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12   See also Adolph Jülicher, "Parables," in *Encyclopaedia Biblica*, ed. T. K. Cheyne, vol. 3 (London: Adam and Charles Blac, 1902), 3563–367, esp. cols. 364–465. This article is, in the German translation of Harnish, also found in the collection mentioned in note 6 above.

13   Cf. Johnston, "The Study of Rabbinic Parables," 348. See also further note 23 below.

14   See also Zimmermann, *Kompendium*, 39–40, on the "rehabilitation of the allegory" in, e.g., the *Bildfeldtheorie*. See already P. Fiebig, "Jüdische Gleichnisse und die Gleichnisse Jesu" (1904), reprinted in Harnisch, *Gleichnisse Jesu*, 11–57, esp. 56. He calls the synoptic parables "Mischformen" between "reine Parabeln" and "reine Allegorien."

15   See Boucher, *Mysterious Parable*, 17–25. Similarly, Flusser, "Die wirklichen und die vermeintliche Allegorese," in *Rabbinischen Gleichnisse*, 119–39, argues that allegory can have various meanings and that, according to these meanings, the New Testament parables contain or do not contain allegory. So also Stern, *Parables in Midrash*, 12, on rabbinic meshalim.

16   For references, see Zimmermann, "Parabeln," 415.

17   Jülicher reckons with a third category of "Beispielerzählungen," but this is not relevant to our study.

18   Boucher, *Mysterious Parable*, 3.

19   See note 5 above.

to the study of rabbinic meshalim. The above cited mashal, for example, would fall under the category "parable" because it relates a particular incident in the past tense. Other meshalim rather display the features of the category "similitude": they employ the present tense and narrate a recurring event. The latter form is generally found in the meshalim introduced with the formula *derekh basar vadam* (the way of flesh and blood) or *melekh basar vadam* (a king of flesh and blood) and could perhaps be considered a sub-genre among the rabbinic parables, not unlike the similitudes among the New Testament parables.[20] Similarly, Goldberg distinguishes between *Vergleich* and *Gleichnis* with respect to rabbinic meshalim.[21] The question is not whether such structural differences within New Testament parables and rabbinic meshalim can be observed—they definitely can—but what the added value is of making a sub-division according to these differences. This question is not meant to be rhetorical and the answer is not necessarily negative: it may be helpful to have formal features according to which one can gather various kinds of parables.[22]

2.3 *Parable and Fable*

In contrast to most of his followers, Jülicher did not consider "parable" and "fable" to be opposing terms but rather to be related. Indeed, in his categorization of the two kinds of parables discussed above, Jülicher drew on the categories used in classical literary theory. He equates the similitude (*Vergleich*)

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20   This is for example the case in the six meshalim that compare God to a human hero and king in Mek R Ish Shirata 4 to Exod 15:3. To give an example, the first of these reads: "There is a hero in a country, and he has all types of weapons, but he has no strength and no courage and no strategy and no knowledge of warfare. But He who spoke and the world came into being is not so. But He has power and courage, strategy and knowledge of warfare. As it is said: *For the battle is the Lord's, and He will deliver you into our hands* (1 Sam 17:47)" (my translation; see Lieve M. Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhiltot*, ch. 24.). This distinction is also indicated by Robert M. Johnston, "The Study of Rabbinic Parables: Some Preliminary Observations," in *SBL 1976 Seminar Papers* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1976), 337–358, esp. 342.

21   Goldberg, "Das Schriftauslegende Gleichnis," 136–40 and 195, distinguishes between "Vergleich," "Parabel," "Fabel," and "Gleichnis." Among the last category he singles out the "Schriftauslegende Gleichnis" (SG), which is equivalent to the rabbinic mashal (in midrash) and represents the main object of his study. Goldberg's notion of "parable" is somewhat unusual, and he does not elaborate much on this genre; he only refers to some parables in the Hebrew Bible (Judg 9:7–21; 2 Sam 12:1–12; 14:1–22).

22   The best argument for the fact that the distinction is merely formal—which nevertheless does not make it unimportant—is that the "mustard seed" is in Luke 13:19 a story in the past, whereas in Mark 4:31–32 it is a general rule in the present tense. See Flusser, *Gleichnisse*, 201–2. According to Flusser, the form of the parable in Luke is closest to the original: in this form the "parable can be retranslated without problem into Hebrew." This reasoning is in line with Perry, as in note 26 below.

with Aristotle's *parabole* or Quintillian's *similitudo*, and the parable in the strict sense (*Gleichnis*) with Aristotle's *logos* or Quintillian's *fabula* or *fabella*.[23] For examples of *logoi*, Aristotle and Quintillian refer to Aesop's and other antique fables. Hence, Jülicher ascribed to the fable and the parable similar characteristics. It needs to be noted that, like most classical authors and scholars of classical literature,[24] Jülicher did not restrict fables to stories about animals. Conversely, many New Testament scholars draw a firm distinction between parables and fables, and limit the latter to stories about plants or animals. Boucher, for example, states that

> the term *fable* … is best limited to those narratives in which the characters are usually animals, plants, or inanimate objects, and which have a prudential lesson; and the term *parable* for those narratives in which the characters are human beings, which have a religious or moral lesson and which apparently are typically Semitic.[25]

In line with her rather naive view on the Semitic origin of the New Testament parable, Boucher implies that *hoeft niet cursief* are not Semitic.[26] In the same

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23   The reference is to Aristotle's Ῥητορική (Ars Rhetorica) and Quintillian's *Institutio Oratia*. An overview of these equivalents and the classical and modern terminology is found in Boucher, *Mysterious Parable*, 3–4, and the appendix, 86–89.

24   See, e.g., Ben Edwin Perry, *Babrius and Phaedrus Fables*, LCL 436 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), xix–xx. Perry refers to "the rhetorician Theon who, in his *Progymnasmata*, defines the fable in the Aesopic sense of the term in just four words … a fictitious story picturing the truth." Perry adds that a story "must be told in the past tense, as stories normally are, and it must purport to be a particular action or series of actions, or an utterance, that took place once upon a time through the agency of particular characters." Compare Samely's working definition of the rabbinic mashal (note 9 above). See also note 20 above on meshalim in the present tense, that are more easily aligned with Julicher's (and Aristotle's and Quintillian's) *similitudes* or *Vergleiche*, than with his parables or *Gleichnisse*.

25   Boucher, *Mysterious Parable*, 13.

26   Boucher, *Mysterious Parable*, 25, argues that the Semites, unlike the Greeks who recognized the existence of two levels of meaning, "of course did not engage in literary theory" but nevertheless realized that a mashal has a double meaning. They called this double meaning "mystery." Earlier in her study, she already claimed that the Old Testament provides enough background to explain the emergence of parables in the New Testament: "There is no need to go outside the Semitic tradition to the classical tradition" (p. 13). I believe the sharp opposition between the Semitic and classical tradition is as artificial as that between allegory and parable. In sharp contradistinction to this reasoning, Perry, *Babrius and Phaedrus*, xx–xxi, equates the Greek fable and the Semitic parable ("the Graeco-Semitic type"), which has the form of a story in the past and includes metaphor, and opposes this to the Egyptian and West-European type (to which, confusingly, the

way, Zimmermann categorically rejects every association between fable and parable. This is a consequence of his definition of the parable, which includes its being realistic:[27]

> Parabeln unterscheiden sich durch ihren Realitätsbezug deutlich von fantastischen Erzählungen oder apokalyptischen Visionen. Sie unterscheiden sich auch von Fabeln, in denen z.B. Tiere oder Pflanzen in anthropomorphisierten Weise sprechen und handeln.[28]

In contrast to these sharp distinctions between parables and fables, which prevail in New Testament scholarship, Mary Ann Beavis in her study "Parable and Fable" aims to re-establish the connection between the parable and the fable originally made by Jülicher.[29] She quotes from several collections of fables, Aesop's and others, dealing not only with animals but also with human activities and the relations between humans and gods. She concludes that "to anyone familiar with the Synoptic gospels, the similarities between such fables and the New Testament parables should be obvious."[30] Some of the fables she presents in her study are also very similar to rabbinic parables. As an example Beavis quotes a fable of a murderer who flees for his persecutors, meets a wolf, flees for the wolf in a tree, encounters a snake, lets himself down in the river, and is eventually devoured by a crocodile. The repetitive tale in which an actor flees from something and encounters several, often three, things, usually animals, that subsequently threaten him or someone with him, such as his son, has many parallels in rabbinic meshalim.[31]

This oft-neglected similarity between classical fables and rabbinic meshalim is deserving of further attention.[32] To be sure, there are studies, mostly

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Proverbs of Salomon would belong), which includes no story and no metaphor. On p. xxi (note 1) Perry quotes Krumbacher's distinction between the "oriental" and the "occidental" forms of proverb: "Orientalisch is ... die Form 'Einen schenkte man einen Esel und er schaute ihm auf die Zähne', occidentalisch die Form: 'Einem geschenkten Gaul schaut man nicht ins Maul'."

27   Cf. note 9 above.

28   Zimmermann, "Parabeln," 414.

29   Mary Ann Beavis, "Parable and Fable," *CBQ* 52, no. 3 (1990): 473–97.

30   Beavis, "Parable and Fable," 480.

31   See, e.g., only in Mek R Ishmael: Pisha 16 (man escapes from wolf, lion, snake); Beshalach 3 (dove fleeing from hawk and snake); Beshalach 5 (father protects son against robbers, wolves, sun, hunger, and thirst); Bachodesh 2 (king carries son on shoulders to protect him against robbers and wolf).

32   An exception to this neglect is David Daube who devoted an inaugural lecture to this topic: David Daube, *Ancient Hebrew Fables: The Inaugural Lecture of the Oxford Centre for*

in Hebrew and often by students of folklore, that treat rabbinic parables and fables together: these, however, tend to conflate the parable with the fable, which is not my intention. The reason for the confusion is that the Hebrew word "mashal," starting in the Hebrew Bible, covers a wide range of phenomena including "fable." Moreover, for folklore scholars the formal features of the narrative may be less relevant than its content.[33] The next section is devoted to the complex relation between the mashal, the parable, and the fable, and its impact on comparative parable research.

3   Rabbinic Mashal and Fable

The academic study of parables in New Testament scholarship preceded that in Jewish studies; more than that, research on rabbinic parables originated for the larger part from an interest in the *Umwelt* of the New Testament parable. Therefore, the comparative study of New Testament and rabbinic parables often uses the standards set by New Testament parable scholarship to establish what is a parable and what is not. As I noted before, definitions of the parable by New Testament scholars typically contain elements of content. Thus, New Testament scholars such as Zimmermann would theoretically refer a narrative featuring a talking plant or animal to the domain of the fable. However, such stories are absent from the New Testament. What if the New Testament had contained a parable in which an animal or a plant talks? Would it have been excluded from the category parable because it is not "realistic"? The definition of the genre is unavoidably based on the available material.[34]

Postgraduate Hebrew Studies (Oxford: n.p., 1973). On p. 8 he writes: "The fable occupies a place within the wider category of parable, an account of one thing shedding light on another." In his recent PhD dissertation, Justin Strong suggest that fable should be the wider category: Justin David Strong, "The Fables of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke: Their Form, Origins, and Implications" (PhD Diss., Notre Dame University, 2019).

33   See, e.g., Dov Noy, *Ha-Mashal be-Sifrut ha-Aggadah: Tipusim u-motivim* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1960), who deals mostly with fables; Haim Schwarzbaum, *The Mishle Shu'alim (Fox Fables) of Rabbi Berechiah Ha-Nakdan: A Study in Comparative Folklore and Fable Lore* (Kiron: Institute for Jewish and Arab Folklore Research, 1979), and his other studies on rabbinic fox fables; and Aharon Zinger, "Iyun bemishlei shualim be-sifrut haza'l" (Hebrew) in *Mechkarei jerushalaim befolklor yehudi 4* (1987): 79–91 (Zinger treats three rabbinic "meshalim," among which the mashal about the fox and the fish by Rabbi Akiva, but discusses only matters of content and typology, not the fact that this fable is actually integrated in a parable). See also Zinger's "Animals in Rabbinic Teaching: The Fable" (PhD diss., Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1979).

34   So also, cynically, about the fact that the New Testament does not contain "fables": Daube, *Ancient Hebrew Fables*, 7: "If it were the other way around, we should never hear the end

The reason that rabbinic scholarship has tended not to put the connection between mashal and fable aside so easily may be that a talking animal or plant does indeed appear, occasionally, in rabbinic parables.[35] A famous parable—which is in fact often called a "fable"—is that ascribed to Rabbi Akiva, pronounced just before his martyr's death. The parable is preserved in the Babylonian Talmud, but its attribution to Rabbi Akiva, and the presence of reference words (*tanya*, "it has been taught"; *tanu rabanan*, "our rabbis taught") indicates a tannaitic source (*baraita*). Since tannaitic texts are, within the rabbinic corpus, chronologically the closest to the New Testament (third century CE), they are considered particularly relevant in the comparative study of the two corpora. Despite its appearing in a narrative context in the Bavli, the midrashic embedding of the mashal is clear: it functions in Akiva's personal interpretation of the first part of the Shema prayer—i.e., the biblical text of Deuteronomy 6:4–9—of which sections are quoted throughout the mashal and the midrash in which it is embedded.

> *Mishna* (in b Ber 54a).
> It is incumbent on a man to bless [God] for the evil in the same way as for the good, as it says*, and thou shalt love the lord thy god with all thy heart, with all thy soul and with all thy might* (Deut 6:5)
> …
> *Gemara* (b Ber 61b).
> R. Akiva says: *With all thy soul*: even if He takes away thy soul. Our Rabbis taught: Once the wicked Government issued a decree forbidding the Jews to study and practice the Torah. Pappus b. Judah came and found R. Akiva publicly bringing gatherings together and occupying himself with the Torah. He said to him: Akiva, are you not afraid of the Government? He replied: **I will explain to you with a parable**. A fox was once walking alongside of a river, and he saw fishes going in swarms from one place to another. He said to them: "From what are you fleeing?" They replied: "From the nets cast for us by men." He said to them: "Would you like to come up on to the dry land so that you and I can live together in the way that my ancestors lived with your ancestors?" They replied: "Are you the

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of it: Jesus's *Naturnähe*, nearness to nature, in contrast with rabbinic aridity. As it is this way around, the fact has escaped notice."

35   Daube, *Ancient Hebrew Fables*, 22–32, discusses six fables occurring in rabbinic literature. One of these, Gen Rab 85 (on Gen 36:43) features talking plants. On the same parable, 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, Marcel Poorthuis et al., Jewish and Christian Perspectives 31 (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 314–33.

one that they call the cleverest of animals? You are not clever but foolish. 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 such is our condition when we sit and study the Torah, of which it is written, *For that is thy life and the length of thy days* (Deut 30:20), if we go and neglect it how much worse off we shall be![36]

To be sure, thematically this parable is related to the fox parables known from Aesop. The use of fox fables/parables by the rabbis seems to have been common, even though this is the only extant one: according to Leviticus Rabbah 28:2, Bar Kappara recited three hundred fox meshalim during each course of a dinner party. At close reading, the Akivan fox mashal displays a very creative use of the traditional fox fable to fit the historical situation of the Jews under Roman rule, around the time of the Bar Kochba revolt. The fox has no explicit counterpoint in the nimshal, but it is implied. It is not equated with the Romans but rather with those Jews who ask Akiva whether he is not afraid. Because of the stereotypical image of a fox, who is a threat to small animals including fish, the audience of this mashal must have inferred that Jews questioning Akiva's pious and consequent behavior in fact represent a danger for other Jews. A political message lies hidden here: Jews who do not defend their religion (possibly to the point of death), or those who question others who do fight for the Torah, are compared to dangerous foxes. Yet eventually the clever fish are smarter than "the one they call the cleverest of animals." Eli Yasif comments on this creative use of the fox mashal:

> Here the process of Hebrew fable creation seems to peak with regard to the Greek parable: no more retooling of readily available fables, but invention of new ones which fully reflect the Sages' religious and social perceptions, with a clear connection to the form and character of the Aesopian fable.[37]

The parable told by Rabbi Akiva complies with all the formal criteria of the mashal: the mashal proper is introduced with the stereotypical אמשול לך משל (I will tell you a parable); a nimshal, introduced with אף אנחנו (we too), is present; the nimshal contains a biblical verse (Deut 30:20) that is traditionally

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related to the recitation of the base text, the Shema.[38] As has already been said, the embedding of this mashal in the midrash is clear. In the continuation of the passage, another relevant part of Rabbi Akiva's midrash on Deuteronomy 6:4–5 is quoted:

> When R. Akiva was taken out for execution, it was the hour for the recital of the *Shema*, and while they combed his flesh with iron combs, he was accepting upon himself the kingship of heaven. His disciples said to him: Our teacher, even to this point? He said to them: All my days I have been troubled by this verse, *with all thy soul*, [which I interpret,] "even if He takes thy soul." I said: When shall I have the opportunity of fulfilling this? Now that I have the opportunity shall I not fulfill it? He prolonged the word *ehad* (Deut 6:4) until he expired while saying it. A bath kol went forth and proclaimed: Happy art thou, Akiva, that thy soul has departed with the word *ehad*!

Reverting to Rabbi Akiva's story about the fox and the fishes, I see no reason to call this a "fable" instead of a "mashal" only because talking foxes and fishes occur in it. In comparison with other rabbinic meshalim, no formal and functional difference can be found.[39]

4   The Talking Dog

In tannaitic midrash, there is at least one other parable in which an animal is presented, anthropomorphically, as a thinking and talking actor. It is now time to reveal the unadapted version of the mashal that I quoted in the beginning of this paper. This "real" text is found in Sifre Numbers:

> And the LORD said to Moses, saying: *Avenge the children of Israel of the Midianites* (Num 31:1–2).... *Of the Midianites.* See, the Moabites were the beginning of the matter, as it is said: *The eldest of Moab and the eldest*

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38   כִּי הוּא חַיֶּיךָ וְאֹרֶךְ יָמֶיךָ (Because He is your life and the length of your days). This is not part of the Shema itself but a variation on this is included in the second blessing pronounced before the Shema in the evening: כִּי הֵם חַיֵּינוּ וְאֹרֶךְ יָמֵינוּ (Because they are our life and the length of our days).

39   Goldberg, "Schriftauslegende Gleichnis," 140, states about these and similar "fables" in rabbinic literature that they are "usually subordinated to the *Gleichnis*" and "lost the original function of fable." Similarly, Johnston, "The Study of Rabbinic Parables," 343, refers to "mashalized" fables.

of Midian went [*... to Bileam*] (Num 22:7). In their days they never made
peace with one another, and when they came to fight Israel, they made
peace with one another and fought with Israel. **A parable. To what is the
matter similar?** To two dogs that were with the herd, and they competed
with one another. A wolf came to take a lamb from the herd, and one of
them was fighting against him. His companion said: "If I don't go and
support him now, he will kill him, and he will come after me and kill me."
They made peace between them and fought with the wolf. **So** Moab and
Midian. In their days they never made peace with one another, as is said:
who smote Midian in the field of Moab (Gen 36:35). But when they came
to fight with Israel, they made peace with one another and fought with
Israel.[40]

The only differences between this and the fake parable that featured "shep-
herds" and a "cattle thief" are the identities of the actors. In the actual mashal
these are in fact animals, and one of them, a dog, talks—at least to himself.
He is presented as weighing his options and calculating the actions he needs
to take. These are advanced intellectual activities not usually associated with
dogs. In other words, we have here a clear case of animal anthropomorphism.
It is not a realistic story. Yet no rabbinic scholar would doubt that this is a
mashal, no less than the fake mashal about the shepherds, because formally it
has all the features of a mashal and also functions as is expected of a mashal.[41]

   The surrounding midrash in Sifre Numbers deals with the end of Moses'
mission and life: he needs to avenge the Israelites from the Midianites before
he can die in peace. This refers back to the struggles between the Moabites
and Midianites, on the one hand, and between these two nations and Israel
on the other, as related in Numbers 22–25. The role of the Moabites is more
prominent than that of the Midianites in the biblical story: in Numbers 22
it is related how the king of Moab asks the king of Midian to make a pact
against the Israelites whose presence is threatening them both. They go to the
prophet Bileam (of whom it is not clear whether he is a Midianite, a Moabite,
or neither) to ask him to curse Israel (which he does not, according to the

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40   Sifre Num 157, ed. Kahana 1/2:72 (my translation).
41   Goldberg, *Schriftauslegende Gleichnis*, 150, identifies this mashal, interestingly, as a "typi-
     cal" example of a regularly structured mashal. He refers to Schwarzbaum, *Mishle Shu'alim*,
     xv, who defines this text as a "fable." Goldberg comments on this, quite correctly in my
     opinion: "Die Fabel ist aber im Zusammenhang der Form SG nur noch 'Stoff' des Relats"
     ("Relat" is the term used by Goldberg for the mashal proper). Cf. ibid., 152: "Dass er in
     Wirklichkeit eine rezipierte Fabel ist, davon kann hier abgesehen warden."

well-known story which, incidentally, also features a talking animal).[42] The darshan refers back to these events and correctly states that not the Midianites, but the king of Moab took the initiative here. The midrash draws further on the allegiance between Moab and Midian, who were known enemies before these events, as assumed from the prooftext Genesis 36:35 given in the nimshal: *who smote Midian in the field of Moab*. From this it is inferred that Moab did not come to Midian's defence when they were attacked by Hadad, the king of Edom. Therefore, the conclusion is drawn that Moab and Midian only made peace in order to fight Israel. The mashal is brought in here to illustrate this course of events with a story about two rival dogs who team up to fight a wolf. The analogy is transparent. The comparison of Israel with a hunting animal is exceptional; often Israel is compared to a dove, a typical prey. Ideologically or rhetorically, we learn from this nimshal that Israel, compared to the wolf, is presented as a stronger entity than the two "dogs" Moab and Midian.[43]

Like the mashal of Rabbi Akiva, so too this parable testifies to the creative reworking of classical fable motifs by the rabbis to state their own message. Hermeneutically, the mashal functions in the midrash on Numbers 31:1–2, and the form of the mashal, including the nimshal, serves this function, as explained in the beginning of this paper.

5   Towards a Working Definition of the "Parable"

Where do we stand when it comes to a definition of the parable that would work in comparative research between New Testament and rabbinic parables? I hope to have demonstrated in this paper that a definition that includes elements of content will not work. So too qualifications such as "realism" are not helpful, as shown by the two examples of rabbinic parables that include conversing animals.[44] On the other hand, even though a direct or indirect reference

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42   Daube, *Ancient Hebrew Fables*, 14–16, convincingly argues that the story of the ass of Bileam was originally a Moabite or Mesopotamian fable, addressing the king in defence of the prophet, the faithful but stubborn ass standing for the prophet. In the Bible this fable was historicized into an actual event.

43   Daube, *Ancient Hebrew Fables*, 27–29, holds that this "fable" originally was meant to convey a different, even opposite, message, whereby the two dogs stood for Jewish factions and the (evil) wolf for the Romans. This is confirmed by the fact that the parable does not quite fit the biblical episode it comes to illuminate, as in the end Israel defeats Midian. Daube also refers to a later parallel of this mashal, in b Sanh 105a, which mitigates the behavior of the wolf (now in the role of Israel), in that it attacks one of the dogs and not an innocent lamb.

44   Cf. Zimmermann's definition in note 9 above.

to a biblical text can probably be discovered in many synoptic parables, their exegetical function is not so obvious as in the majority of rabbinic meshalim. Including stereotypical introductory formulae in the definition will exclude many New Testament parables, and even some rabbinic meshalim. The same holds for the requirement of a nimshal, as there are even rabbinic meshalim that lack an explicit application. In view of all this, a definition might not be the right way to go. It is important, however, to have a consensus about certain features that make a parable a parable. Judging from the ample literature on the matter and from the existence of a "parable project," that consensus does exist, at least intuitively. Let me therefore try to formulate or set out the characteristics of the parable/mashal that underlie this consensus:

> (1) A parable contains a comparison between two situations; (2) one of these is the "base" situation that will be explained by the other; (3); the second situation is the one with which the "base" situation is compared; (4) The second situation is chosen for its capacity to shed light on the "base situation"; and (5) the second situation is presented in the form of a short fictional narrative.

These five elements suffice to describe the consensus underlying the notion "parable." As to (2), the "base" situation can be a biblical verse;[45] something related in a biblical text; a midrash on a biblical verse that precedes the mashal;[46] a situation, such as a conflict, in real life; or a vision of a future or better life. These situations are merely examples: to enter them in a definition would exclude other possibilities of "base" situations that could be illuminated by a parable. As to (4), the second situation can be "realistic"—such as a king having a fight with his son and reconciling; or a younger son running away from his father and returning—, but it can also be "unrealistic"—such as a dog weighing his decisions and "reconciling" with his rival; a fox talking to fish; or ten virgins finding a store to buy oil at midnight (Matt 25:10).[47] Including specifications of what is allowed and what is not (e.g., anthropomorphism) would exclude situations that in one cultural setting might be considered realistic and in another not—consider a god impregnating a human woman disguised as a swan; a

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45   In rabbinic midrashic mashal I tend to speak of a "base verse." Others use the term *'inian*, or "lemma" (so Goldberg).

46   See note 3 above.

47   Cf. Daube's definition of the "parable," for which he identifies the fable as a sub-genre. See note 32 above.

prophet alighting on a horse and ascending to heaven; or a human being dying and resurrecting. Moreover, something that is impossible in real life, such as a talking dog, can still be imagined by most audiences and therefore works as a point of comparison for the "base" situation to be explained.

A final note on form: I have no intention to claim that the specific formal characteristics of New Testament and rabbinic parables should not be honored. To the contrary, with respect to the rabbinic midrashic parables, their form is subordinate to their hermeneutic/exegetical function and therefore extremely important. I believe the classical rabbinic mashal received its typical dual form because that form best serves its function in midrash.[48] This implies that most rabbinic meshalim were composed for the sake of midrash and that they did not circulate independently before being entered in a midrashic context. I do not express myself on orality here, as also midrash may have been transmitted orally.[49] To be sure, many meshalim have been transferred from one midrashic context to another, illuminating different biblical base texts, and some may contain elements borrowed from existing narratives, even classical fables. But this does not take away from their hermeneutic origins. Most New Testament parables, on the other hand, are not so obviously exegetical and were designed to illuminate a different "base situation," such as a conflict with the Pharisees, the need to convince people to repent, or to accept the message of Jesus and the kingdom of God. But it is not because they have other functions, and hence different formal characteristics, that they cannot be compared with each other. The occurrence of the five features outlined above suffices to make this comparison possible and yet to keep the individual characteristics of both corpora intact.

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48   This is why Goldberg refers to "Funktionale Formen."

49   This relates to the ongoing discussion about the origins of midrash: in the synagogue or in the rabbinic academy, as literary compositions or as orally delivered homilies. For a critical overview (in favor of the academy), and bibliography, see Richard S. Sarason, "Toward a New Agendum for the Study of Rabbinic Midrashic Literature," in *Studies in Aggadah, Targum and Jewish Liturgy*, ed. Jakob J. Petuchowski and Ezra Fleischer (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1981), 55–73. Cf. also Newman, "Closing the Circle", 118–21. Historically, the *Sitz im Leben* of the midrash may also have shifted. Ronit Nikolsky (see note 3 above) convincingly argues that the setting of midrash evolved from the *Beit midrash* to the synagogue, in the time of the origin of the Tanhuma Midrashim, and that the mashal had a function in this.

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