Reading Gospel Parables as Jewish Literature

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Abstract
The gospel parables are part of the broader genre of Jewish story-parables found in rabbinic literature. In the first half of this article seven preliminary characteristics of Jewish parables are presented, some of which challenge our widely accepted assumptions regarding gospel parables. For example, although there is near scholarly consensus that Jesus told his parables in Aramaic, we do not have a single Aramaic story-parable in Jewish literature in Roman antiquity. All are in Hebrew. In the second half of the study, an example is given of how twin parables are used to convey a novel idea that emerged in Judaism of the Hellenistic period – the value of the human individual because they have been created in the image of God – to demonstrate that Jesus not only embraced this innovative Jewish humanistic approach, but also how he did so with parables.

The pedagogical use of story-parables is closely associated with the historical Jesus. Joachim Jeremias counted 40 parables in the gospels (1966: 189-91), but the actual number may vary depending upon the criteria one adopts to define what constitutes a parable (Notley and Safrai 2011: 3-6). In any event, the importance of the parables in the gospels is not in their numbers, but in their role in communicating the message of Jesus.

Parables also appear in rabbinic literature, but many scholars question whether they should be used in the study of gospel parables. Their doubts are not unique to parables. Similar concerns have been raised about the use of rabbinic literature in

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the study of the Dead Sea Scrolls (Baumgarten 1995: 14-57) and Second Temple history (Gafni 2010: 43-61). Nevertheless, Geza Vermes cautioned against interpreting the NT *sui generis* and depriving it of its Jewish background – including the use of rabbinic sources.[1]

> I believe it not improper to suggest that for a historical understanding, the age-old distinction between the New Testament and its Jewish background should be abolished and the former looked at deliberately as part of a larger whole (Vermes 1980: 13).

Indeed, the NT is increasingly recognized as a valuable witness to Jewish life in the Second Temple period. At points it provides the first report of religious customs that are not recorded again in Jewish literature until centuries later.[2] If we recognize that the NT belongs to a continuity of historical witness to Jewish faith and practice, should its parables not also be understood as part of the development of a shared literary genre over the same span of time? We would anticipate finding in the gospels characteristics and motifs of early story-parables which continue in the later parables of the Sages. Conversely, fragmentary features in the NT parables (e.g., terminology, structure, motifs) may benefit from the fuller perspective provided by an increased number of examples in later rabbinic literature. Such a literary comparison would expect both generic similarities and differences, reflecting the different periods in which the parables were created and the particular concerns of the communities that preserved them. These developments, however, need not prevent us from taking advantage of reading the individual story-parables as part of a literary continuum, or in the words of Vermes, 'as part of a larger whole' (1980: 13).

Vermes's call for an understanding of the integral relationship of the NT and the Jewish sources can be made with even greater urgency for parables because the literary type only appears in the gospels and in rabbinic literature. If we exclude Jewish parables from consideration, we are left with few literary, philological or religious points of reference with which to inform our reading of the parables of Jesus. The outcome becomes all too predictable. Freed from the moorings of their linguistic and cultural milieu, the message of the gospel parables can morph into little more than a mirror image of the time and predilection of the modern interpreter.

The aim of the present study is a modest one. I will present seven preliminary observations about the genre of Jewish story-parables. Many of these are overlooked or ignored by those who study the parables of Jesus. They are by

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1. On the use of Jewish literature in the study of the NT, see Vermes 1980: 1-17; 1982: 361-76.
2. For example, the naming of a son at his circumcision on the eighth day (Lk. 1.59; 2.21), the reading of the *haftarah* in the synagogue (Lk. 4.17-19), the limit of a Sabbath's day journey, i.e. the *Eruv* (Acts 1.12), and so forth.

no means an exhaustive description of this fascinating genre but are intended as merely a starting-point for reading the gospel parables as Jewish literature. I will then conclude with a look at an innovation in Jewish thought that emerged in the Second Temple period, and how it served as the genesis for a pair of parables found in the NT. I hope to demonstrate that the gospel parables belonged to the warp and woof of emerging Jewish thought, and that if we read them as an integral part of the genre of story Jewish parables, we can better understand their intended message.

Seven Characteristics of Jewish Parables

First, the meaning of the Hebrew term *mashal* (משל) for our literary genre is a post-biblical Hebraism. Language is never static but dynamic and ever-changing. Hebrew language is no different. This was the impetus for a recent work by Avi Hurvitz, who showed that even within the span of the Hebrew canon, one can identify changes in meaning and expression depending upon the period of the composition (2014). For our interests, משל in the Hebrew Bible is never used to designate the literary type of story-parable that we find in the gospels or in the later literature of Israel's Sages. Instead משל signifies an oracle (Num. 24.3, 15, 20), a prophecy (Ezek. 17.2; 18.3; 1 Sam. 24.13) or a wise saying, a proverb (1 Kgs 4.32 [MT 5.12]; Prov. 1.1: משלי שלמה (Koehler and Baumgartner 2001: I, 648).

Since the Tannaitic literary notion of משל as story-parable was unfamiliar to the authors of the Hebrew Bible, it should not surprise us that the term is not used in association with stories that are sometimes reckoned so: 'the Parable of Jotham' (Judg 9.7-18), 'the Parable of Nathan' (2 Sam. 12.1-4) or 'the Parable of the Disappointing Vineyard' (Isa. 5.1-7). In fact, the first time we hear the post-biblical use of משל for a story-parable is by means of its Greek equivalent παραβολή in the NT. As a first-century witness, the Greek NT possesses other post-biblical Hebraisms, even Mishnaic Hebraisms.[3] These are often overlooked for the simple reason that they are preserved in Greek (see Notley 2014: 320-46). So, it seems we witness also with παραβολή in the gospels to signify a story-parable.

Second, in post-biblical Jewish corpora, the use of story-parables is limited to the literature of Israel's Sages. In the Greek Bible, παραβολή occurs 44 times, closely tracking the 42 occasions of the noun משל in the Hebrew Bible, but

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3. For example, the expression σὰρξ καὶ αἷμα (Mt. 16.17) to signify mortal beings is not used in classical Greek literature, nor is the Hebrew equivalent heard in the Hebrew Bible; but it is found in post-biblical Greek Jewish writings that were originally penned in Hebrew (e.g., Sir 14.18; 17.31), and the idiom continued in use in Mishnaic Hebrew (e.g., בשר ודם: *m. Naz.* 9.5; *m. Sotah* 8.1). See Bivin 2013: II, 200.

it never designates a story-parable. Elsewhere, we find no story-parables in Josephus, Philo, the Apocrypha or pseudepigraphical Jewish literature. The noun משל appears 11 times in the Dead Sea Scrolls, but there are no certain story-parables among the Qumran discoveries. I have qualified this last sentence, because there is a question about 4Q302, which Bilhah Nitzan reckons is an Admonitory Parable (1997: 125-49). It does possess some traits of a parable, but in its current condition it is too fragmentary to determine with any certainty. In any event, the term משל does not occur in 4Q302. Even if it were to be concluded that 4Q302 was a parable, it would not necessarily mean that parables were in use by the community. Nitzan has determined that the document was 'non-sectarian' (1997: 127), meaning that it was not a document created by the Yahad.

In light of the use and non-use of story-parables in post-biblical Jewish literature, when we find Jesus described speaking in story-parables, it tells us something about where he is to be identified among the varieties of Jewish thought in the Second Temple era. He belonged to the emerging world of Israel's Sages. Ignoring this reality can lead to puzzling inconsistencies. For example, it is remarkable that C.H. Dodd wrote an entire work on a literary genre that outside of the gospels appears *only* in rabbinic literature, and especially parables pertaining to the Hebraic notion of מלכות שמים (i.e., the kingdom of Heaven), which outside of the gospels *only* appears in rabbinic literature, and he did so without citing a single reference to the literature of Israel's Sages (Dodd 1936).

We would be mistaken to assume that Dodd was an aberration in the previous generation of scholarship. His approach remains more the rule than the exception. One needs to look no further than John Dominic Crossan's most recent work on gospel parables (2013), which also includes a chapter on the kingdom of God. Once again, we meet an NT scholar who feels free to write an entire work on the parables of Jesus without a single reference to Jewish parables.

Third, all Jewish story-parables are told in Hebrew. None is in Aramaic. There is no reason to suggest that Jesus was an exception, other than the continued insistence in many quarters of NT scholarship that Hebrew was a dead (or virtually dead) language in the first century CE. Archaeological discoveries over the last century should have long since laid to rest this outdated, mistaken idea. James Barr rightly scored NT scholarship's dogged persistence in maintaining that Hebrew did not continue to be spoken during the Second Temple period (1989: 82-83). Roman Judea in the first century CE was a multilingual environment in which Hebrew, Aramaic and, to a lesser extent, Greek were widely known and spoken.[4]

Those who propose to reconstruct Jesus' parables in Aramaic must ignore a small, but important, sociolinguistic detail about the story-parable. In Jewish

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4.   See Fassberg 2012: 263-80; Buth and Notley 2014.

custom one does not tell story-parables in Aramaic. In a recently published collection of the earliest Jewish story-parables (Notley and Safrai 2011), all 456 parables are in Hebrew and not one in Aramaic. Therefore, the burden of proof must fall on those who would desire to continue in the steps of Dalman (1909), Black (1967), Jeremias (1955), Vermes (1993) and Casey (1998) to insist that Jesus was an outlier in his day and told his story-parables in Aramaic (or Greek).

Fourth, as previously noted, story-parables belong to the world of Israel's Sages. Yet, in what might seem to be a contradiction in terms, the literary components of the parable – both in the gospels and in the parables of the Tannaim – are not 'Jewish'. In other words, the characters, the setting and the story lines are not culturally specific to the Jewish people. We hear of a father and son, a landowner and his workers, weddings, feasts, brothers, construction, fishing, farming, etc. However, there are no synagogues or rabbis, no mention of the temple in Jerusalem. It is true that among the parables of the Tannaim there are a handful that touch indirectly on halakhic matters,[5] but these are exceptions. By definition, story-parables belong to the Jewish classification of haggadah and not halakhah. They were not intended to address legal matters. Instead, they are literary instruments meant to communicate theological ideas or sublime notions by way of examples drawn from everyday life – whether real or imagined.

Fifth, in Jewish tradition parables are conduits of wisdom. They speak to matters of life and how it should be conducted. They are meant to explain, to make simple. Jewish story-parables are neither esoteric nor intended to keep secrets. Obviously, this presents a challenge to the traditional reading of the pericope, 'The Reason for Parables' (Mt. 13.10-11; Mk 4.10-12; Lk. 8.9-10), but there is little reason to see Jesus differ from Jewish practice on this point. Instead, what we witness in this fragmented saying is the evangelists' struggle with a genre that is quintessentially Jewish and Palestinian,[6] and which thrived on verbal plays in the Hebrew language. Each of these aspects of the story-parable was foreign to the evangelists. It is to be expected that Jesus' meaning and method of communicating parables was sometimes unclear to the authors of the gospels.

Sixth, Jewish story-parables are not a product of scholarly erudition. In their early setting, they do not belong to the world of the *beit midrash* (i.e., house of study). Parables in the gospels are likewise told in popular contexts. Few have noted that Jesus is not depicted telling parables in the synagogue. Instead, he tells them at meals, in casual conversations, and in encounters in public. It is true that the historical settings for the sayings reported in the gospels are not always

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5.   For example, *t. Nid.* 2.8; 3.5; *Midrash Tannaim* 21.23; see Notley and Safrai 2011: 16.
6.   The story-parable is a uniquely Palestinian phenomenon and does not belong to the Jewish diaspora. Even the spiritually rich community in Babylonia, which gave us the Babylonian Talmud, did not add a single contribution to our treasury of Jewish parables. See Flusser 1981: 17-18.

certain, but it seems more than a coincidence that the evangelists present a pic-
ture consistent with the Jewish sources about the place of parables in Jewish life.
Story-parables are short popular works, and not the results of Torah study. This
is the reason why the parable was not held in high regard in rabbinic estimation.
Anyone – even the unlearned – can tell a story.

Along the same lines, the early parables reflect a spiritual approach that did
not accord fully with the priorities and the perspectives of the rabbis. In the wake
of the destruction of the Temple, the Torah took on an increasingly important role
in unifying society. In that setting knowledge was power, and in the reorganiza-
tion of Jewish society in the Yavneh period and beyond the emerging rabbinical
class held a virtual monopoly (Levine 1989: 43-47). It is during this time that
we witness a transformation in the literary form of the parable, most markedly
the use of parables in midrash and their coupling with the Hebrew scriptures. By
contrast, earlier Jewish parables were not midrashic, and, like their earlier Jewish
counterparts, gospel parables appear almost entirely without citations from the
Hebrew Bible.

Finally, the message of many of the early Jewish parables reflects the values
and the priorities of the early Hasidim,[7] a peripheral group within the world of
the Sages that emerged in the century before the Common Era. These men were
primarily in the Galilee and were often associated with miraculous deeds, heal-
ings and exorcisms – all activities in which the rabbis never participated. The
Hasidim were described as very strict, primarily about the observance of laws
between a man and his neighbor (דרך ארץ), praying a great deal, and favoring
poverty as an ideology. They valued deeds over wisdom and charity over knowl-
edge of the Torah. The movement waned in the second century CE and eventually
disappeared. While these Galilean pietists shared much in common with the rab-
bis, there were points of disagreement.

In light of these differences, it is not helpful that all the information we have
about the Hasidim has come through the literature of the Sages – their ideological
competitors. Moreover, some of the parables, which clearly originated in Hasidic
circles, and even some of their outstanding figures, have been refashioned to
conform more closely with rabbinic perspectives. Earlier points of disagreement
have been diminished. In time, the Hasidic parables and their purveyors were
assimilated into the world of the Sages. Yet, with a careful reading, it is not
impossible to identify the earlier intent of the parables and where the biblical
verses that accompany them have been added in a manner that is ill suited (see
Notley and Safrai 2011: 49-50).

Like other literary works, not every characteristic of a specific genre is dis-
played in each example, meaning that the seven features described above should

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7.   Vermes 1981: 58-82; Safrai 1965: 15-33; 1994: 3-22; Safrai and Safrai 2003: 59-78.

not be read as a checklist for determining a potential parable. Instead, they serve as a basis for our beginning to read gospel parables as part of a wider literary genre that also included rabbinic parables. Of course, each of these features needs to be explored more thoroughly. However, for the purposes of this study and in the limited space remaining, I will consider an innovation from early Jewish thought and consider how it contributed to a specific pair of gospel parables. I will demonstrate that this development of a revolutionary Jewish notion – the value of one – is embodied in the two parables.

The task of reading the gospel parables as Jewish literature is not a simple one. It requires intimate engagement with the language(s) and the literature of the Jewish people in Roman antiquity and a familiarity with the ideas that belonged to that time. Nevertheless, by examining the parables juxtaposed with Jewish texts, we will witness that these parables of Jesus were not made from whole cloth but were part of a complex fabric of religious ideas that belong to the vibrant days of the Second Temple.

The *Imago Dei* and the Value of One

In Gen. 1.27 we read that God created man in his own image: 'So God created man in his own *image*, in the *image* of God he created him'. This profound declaration is repeated on only one other occasion in the Hebrew Bible, 'Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in his own *image*' (Gen. 9.6). After these two occasions, the idea is not heard again until the beginning of the second century BCE, when it is revisited shortly prior to the Hasmonean Revolt (167–64 BCE):

> The Lord created man out of earth, and turned him back to it again. He gave to men few days, a limited time, but granted them authority over the things upon the earth. He endowed them with strength like his own, and made them in *his own image* (Sir. 17.1-3).

This attribution was not universally held,[8] and it is poignantly absent from the anthropology assumed in the writings of the Yahad.[9] However, it does figure in

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8. See the dispute between Hillel and Shammai in *Avot R. Nathan* Ver. B ch. 33.
9. The Hebrew expression 'the image of God' (צלם אלהים) does not appear in the Dead Sea Scrolls. This absence is no accident. Its lack is reinforced by the community's verbiage used to describe human existence. When speaking of the origins of human life, the Qumran authors studiously avoided the verb 'to make/be made' (עשה), which was used in Gen. 1.26-27 to describe the creation of man in the image of God. For example, the Thanksgiving Hymns consistently prefer the verb 'to form/be formed' (יצר), which appears in the second creation narrative in Gen. 2.1-9, where there is no mention that man was made in God's image, 'Then

rabbinic literature and can be seen implied in the rabbinic Parable of the Twin Princes.

> 'For *a hanged man is an affront to God*' (Deut. 21.23). One might ask, why was he hanged? On account that he blasphemed God, and the name of Heaven was profaned. R. Meir says: A parable is told, to what may the matter be compared? To twin brothers who looked alike and [lived] in the same city. One was designated king, and the other became a robber. The king ordered for [his brother] to be hanged. Everyone who saw [the brother] said, 'The king has been hanged'. So, the king ordered to take him down (*Midrash Tannaim* on Deut. 21.23).

The idea that a human being can bear the likeness of the King of the universe is undoubtedly also the germ for Jesus' parable in Mt. 25.31-46, and the phrase repeated by the king, 'as you did it to one[10] of the least of these my brethren, *you did it to me*'.

The first hint we have of Jesus' view of humanity is his reasoned approach to a man in need of healing on the Sabbath. The story occurs in all three Synoptic Gospels (Mt. 12.9-14; Mk 3.1-6; Lk. 6.6-11). Among those present that day were some who wanted to see how Jesus would act on the Sabbath. Would he risk breaking the Sabbath to heal? By means of a rhetorical question, Jesus directed his questioners to the broader question of Jewish humanism. 'I ask you, is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, *to save a soul or to destroy it*?' (Lk 6.9). The last phrase echoes key wording from a saying in *m. Sanh.* 4.5:

> Therefore, *a single man* (אדם יחיד) as created in the world, to teach that if anyone *destroys* a single *soul* (נפש), it is reckoned to him as if he destroyed the whole world, and if he *saves* a single *soul* (נפש), it is reckoned to him as if he saved the whole world.

The verbal association between Jesus' statement and the rabbinic saying is indicated by the collocation of the terms, *to save* (σῴζω = קום), *to destroy* (ἀπόλλυμι = אבד) and *soul/life* (ψυχή = נפש).[11]

The universal appeal of the mishnaic estimation is likely what led to its adoption in the Qur'an 5.2, 'Whoever kills a person [unjustly] … it is as though he has killed all mankind. And whoever saves a life, it is as though he has saved all mankind'. So, we find that this humanistic innovation concerning the intrinsic

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the Lord God *formed* (וייצר) man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being' (Gen. 2.7). See García 2016.

10. As we will see below, the pleonastic use of ἑνί in the moral (*nimshal*) of the parable may have been intended to lend added significance.

11. Compare also Jas 4.12: εἷς ἐστιν ὁ νομοθέτης καὶ κριτὴς ὁ δυνάμενος <u>σῶσαι καὶ ἀπολέσαι</u>.

value of the individual, because they have been created in the image of God, entered the sacred writings of all three monotheistic faiths: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Today the intrinsic worth of the human being is the cornerstone of civilization's efforts on behalf of human dignity and social justice.

In the gospel account, Jesus implies that the worth of the man that stood before him justified the risk involved in his healing on the Sabbath. Notwithstanding Jesus' line of reasoning, it should be noted that neither Jesus nor the man is described as doing anything that could be considered a violation of the Sabbath – either according to the biblical commandments or rabbinic precepts. In any event, Jesus' claim of the moral priority to meet human need on the Sabbath is affirmed by the man's healing. According to Luke, those who questioned Jesus were baffled,[12] because God upheld Jesus' opinion about the supreme value of a human being in a way they did not anticipate – the man was healed on the Sabbath.

Jesus' approach to human need on the Sabbath bears the marks of the Galilean spirituality often associated with the early Hasidim.[13] Like his contemporaries, Jesus gave priority to the moral aspects of the commandments – without neglecting their requirements.

> Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, *justice and mercy and faith*; these you ought to have done, *without neglecting the others* (Mt. 23.23).

The Hasidim ascribed importance to the care for one's fellow (צדקה: *tzedeqah*, i.e., charity), which was often expressed in terms of the importance of a single person. This approach was even deemed 'the teaching of the Hasidim' (*mishnat hasidim*: משנת חסידים). We hear mention of it in a story about the Roman pursuit of a suspected criminal.

> Ulah ben Koshav was sought by the (Roman) government; he fled, and went to Lydda to Rabbi Joshua ben Levi (a Hasid). They came and surrounded the city. They said to them: 'If you do not give him up to us, we shall destroy the city'. Rabbi Joshua ben Levi went to him, appeased him and handed him over. And Elijah, who had periodically appeared to him [Rabbi Joshua ben Levi], ceased to do so. He fasted several times and Elijah appeared. He said to him, 'Shall I appear to betrayers?' [Rabbi Joshua ben

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12. The Greek word *anoia* (ἄνοια) never has the meaning of 'anger, fury rage' in Greek literature. Instead, it means confusion or bafflement. The English translators of Lk. 6.11 have been unduly influenced by the more injurious reaction described in Mt. 12.14 and Mk 3.6, and so have read into Luke's wording a meaning that is not present. See Liddell and Scott 1996: 145.

13. In a story from *Eccl. Rab*. 9.7 a Hasid, Abba Tahnah, faced a similar dilemma when he met a man in need on the outskirts of his village as the Sabbath was about to begin. Like the approach of Jesus, the Hasid recognized that human need takes precedence over the Sabbath.

Levi] replied, 'Have I not acted according to the Mishnah?' Elijah responded, 'Is this *the teaching of the Hasidim* (משנת חסידים)?' (*y. Ter.* 8.46b).

R. Joshua ben Levi decided that it was preferable to hand over one man (Ulah ben Koshav) so that he might preserve the city's population. Interestingly, his reasoning regarding 'the one versus the many' is precisely the justification of the Sadducean high priest Caiaphas to hand Jesus over to the Romans. 'You do not understand that it is expedient for you that *one man should die instead of the people, and that the whole nation should not perish*' (Jn 11.49-50). The actions of Rabbi Joshua and Caiaphas squarely contradict the teaching of the Hasidim, who placed inestimable value on the individual.

What is important in the rabbinic story for our purposes are the concluding words attributed to the prophet Elijah, namely that Joshua acted in a manner which contradicted the teaching of the Hasidim. Joshua should have considered the imperative 'to save a single human soul' – just as we hear in the estimation of Jesus in his approach towards the man in need of healing on the Sabbath.

The idea of the value of one is also present in Jesus' parabolic riposte to criticism by the Pharisees: 'Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them"' (Lk. 15.1-2). This is not the only occasion in which questions were raised about Jesus' associations (Mt. 9.11; 11.19; Mk 2.16; Lk. 5.30; 7.34; 19.2-8). Often misunderstood in these reports is the reason for the criticism. Jesus is not accused of putting himself in a morally comprising situation. Instead, he is accused of '*eating* with sinners', a concern that touches on Jewish purity laws pertaining to food. When his accusers are identified, they are uniformly Pharisees (Mt. 9.11; Mk 2.15; Lk. 5.30).

The scholarly debate about who the Pharisees were, what ideas they represent, and even the etymology of their appellation, is well known (Baumgarten 1983: 411-28). Flusser revisited the question in his consideration of the phrase מי שפרשו (i.e., those who separate themselves) in the second-century CE Jewish chronograph *Seder Olam*.[14] The term *parush* (i.e., 'one separated' or 'Pharisee') can carry a pejorative connotation in Hebrew when used by an opponent, or approval when applied by one sympathetic. In general, scholarship has identified those called Pharisees in Josephus and the NT with the forerunners of the rabbis (Schürer 1995: II, 388-403). So, it is no surprise to hear a positive estimation of them in rabbinic literature: 'A *parush* [Pharisee] is one who separates himself from all forms of impurity and from improper food and from ignoramuses who are not strict regarding dietary restrictions'.[15] At the same time, we elsewhere hear criticism of the Pharisees, even in the Talmud where the list of seven types

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14. See Flusser 2007: 70-118; Milikowsky 1981: 230, 458.
15. *Aruch Completum* 6.452, as cited by Flusser 2007: 98.

of Pharisees is a fivefold variation on the theme of hypocrisy (*b. Sot.* 22b; *y. Ber.* 14b).

Jesus' relationship with the Pharisees was similarly a complicated one. On the one hand, he affirmed their authority to establish precepts (Mt. 23.2), while on the other he criticized aspects of their teaching and behavior (Mt. 23.13-33). His *in familia* criticism of the Pharisees bears likenesses to the well-known disagreement with the Pharisees by a Hasid in the first century BCE. Honi Ha-Me'aggel was numbered among Israel's Sages, but according to the report of his death by Josephus (*Ant.* 14.22-24), he differed with them and was stoned by the Pharisaic supporters of John Hyrcanus II (see Rainey and Notley 2014: 334). On both occasions, Jesus and Honi Ha-Me'aggel embraced the approach of the Pharisees, but differed with them when they considered it warranted.

In their discussion about the rabbinic emphasis on the practice of ritual purity, Chana Safrai and Ze'ev Safrai highlighted a point of disagreement between Israel's Sages and the early Hasidim that is relevant to our topic.

> One of the outstanding characteristics of the Rabbinic world in the first centuries CE is the development of purity laws. [Stories of the Hasidim] demonstrate that the [Hasidim] among others, did not participate in this pursuit of the Rabbis. In addition, their reservations regarding the renewed purity laws expedited their involvement with the poor and the wretched. This was so because anyone strictly observing these laws had to take care in his or her contacts with the lower socio-economic echelons of society, while the [Hasid] felt obligated to care for anyone who was in need. *Their abstention from the purity laws was a factor in their acknowledged standing among the popular classes as healers of the sick and the impure* (Safrai and Safrai 2003: 63).

Shmuel Safrai likewise underscored this distinction among the Hasidim: 'Among the austerities practiced by the Hasidim there is no trace of austerity in halakhot concerning ritual purity' (Safrai 1965: 26). The refusal by the Hasidim to accept the social limitations that accompanied the rabbinic emphasis on purity laws is precisely the point of difference between Jesus and the Pharisees in Lk. 15.1-2. Jesus' refusal to accept these limits is one of the clearest signs of the influence of Hasidic Galilean spirituality on his words and behavior. Like the Hasidim, Jesus refused to separate from 'the sick and the impure', because 'those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick [do]' (Mk 2.17).

If we have rightly understood the reason for the Pharisees' protest over Jesus 'eating with sinners', then the twin parables which follow in Lk. 15.3-10 form his answer to their complaint. The message in his rebuttal is couched in two story-parables that assert the incalculable value of the sinner to God.

The parables of The Lost Sheep (Lk. 15.3-7) and The Lost Coin (15.8-10) are presented as a doublet, a structural feature that we find also in Lk. 13.18-21 (= Mt. 13.31-33) and Mt. 13.44-46. In this case, the literary ties between the

twin parables are strengthened by the repetition of key terms (i.e. one [εἷς]; to lose [ἀπόλλυμι]; to find [εὑρίσκω]; to rejoice [συγχαίρω]; joy [χαρά]), and more importantly, their shared message: the value of one. Another interesting feature, which these two parables have in common, is the rarity of their settings. We have few Jewish story-parables about shepherding, and the same can be said of parables in which the main character is a woman (Notley and Safrai 2011).

Both parables are meant to assert that the worth of an individual cannot be reduced to the sum of her or his numerical value. So, the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine sheep to seek the one that has gone missing, and the woman is not satisfied with the nine coins in her hand but seeks diligently to find the one that is lost. According to Jesus, even one sinner is worth the risk of eating among those who may not have given sufficient attention to matters of food purity. His table fellowship with those living on the margins of the religious community was intended to encourage, strengthen and restore them in their faith, because 'there is joy before the angels of God over even *one* sinner who repents'.

Conclusion

I have tried to demonstrate that the gospel parables belong to a larger landscape of emerging Jewish thought. These didactic short stories give voice to the hopes and concerns that one can hear elsewhere in Second Temple Jewish literature. They also exhibit the early literary developments of a genre that is evinced only in the NT and rabbinic literature. I opened my study with a consideration of seven characteristics of Jewish parables. These were not intended to be exhaustive nor did I expect to see all of them in every example. However, many of the features mentioned have been seen in the gospel parables we considered.

None of the settings for the three gospel parables (e.g., Mt. 25.31-46; Lk. 15.3-7; 15.8-9) is distinctively Jewish or concerns points of halakhic deliberation. Nevertheless, the message intended by each of these parables belongs to contemporary Jewish ideas heard in the final two centuries of the Second Temple era – the *Imago Dei* and the increasing value assigned to the human individual. The idea of the *Imago Dei* was first revived in The Wisdom of Ben Sira, but it was later championed in the teachings of the Sages, which we read in the Hebrew parable from *Midrash Tannaim*. Different from our rabbinic illustration, however, none of the gospel parables is midrashic, or reflects the Torah-centered world of Israel's Sages. This is an indication that the gospel parables belong to an earlier stage of literary development, before these features were imposed by the rabbis on their parables.

In fact, the message of the value of the one is closely identified with the teaching of the Hasidim (משנת חסידים), an early movement of Galilean spirituality that differed at times with the Pharisees. Our twin gospel parables were intended by Jesus to rebut the Pharisaic critics of his table fellowship with the less religiously

devoted. This point of disagreement is a familiar one between the Hasidim and the Pharisees. Out of concern for ritual purity, the Pharisees attempted to place strict social limits on fellowship at meals. Yet, like the Hasidim, Jesus refused these constraints, because they would have prevented his engagement with those who needed to hear his message most.

Although the scope of this study has been limited, I hope that I have been able to show the value of reading the gospel parables as Jewish literature. The task is not a simple one. Yet, if we listen carefully, we can gain a better understanding of the intended message in the parables and a fresh insight into the lives of those who told them.[16]

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16. This paper is written in memory of my teacher, David Flusser, זכרונו לברכה. It was presented during the week of the centennial of his birth in Vienna on 15 September 1917.

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