

The Lamp under a Bushel

No one after lighting a lamp covers it with a jar or puts it under a bed, but puts it on a stand, so that those who enter may see the light. (Luke 8:16)

The so-called "Parable of the Lamp" is found in the synoptic gospels (Matt 5:15, Mark 4:21-25, Luke 8:16-18). The best known form of this saying of Jesus has been transcended through the old African American Spiritual¹ that has been intrinsically tied to the civil rights movement. Like the fragile egg that confronts the high wall, the little light is transformed into a rays that punches through darkness to illuminate the world².

While the literal reading of Jesus' sayings has no doubt inspired many, as modern students of the New Testament, it would be irresponsible to just take the text at face value. In a sense, failure to deploy knowledge of contexts, language and exegesis in our understanding of an ancient text is equivalent to leaving the text under a shroud, rejecting its ability to "shine".

The synoptic reading presents a challenge to the reading. Matthew's version fits in the larger context that is considered the sermon on the mount. The progressiveness of the Markan version sets its course in relation to the parable of the sower. Finally, most commentators suggest that Luke's verse shows strong signs of a composite text. To provide a solution to the synoptic problem is not what this short study can, or will, attempt, however, it is in our interest to present a careful reading of the pericopes in Mark and Luke, accompanied by Rabbinic parables that will hopefully shed light on these simple sayings of Jesus. It is also the intent of this study to discover how Jesus' seemingly fragmentative verses could be understood in the context of a broader study of both Jesus' other parables and Rabbinic parallels.

¹ The Song is known as: "This little light of mine".

² Japanese writer Murakami Haruki once wrote: "If there is a hard, high wall and an egg that breaks against it, no matter how right the wall or how wrong the egg, I will stand on the side of the egg. Why? Because each of us is an egg, a unique soul enclosed in a fragile egg. Each of us is confronting a high wall."

<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/culture/2009-02-17/ty-article/always-on-the-side-of-the-egg/000017f-db26-d3ff-a7ff-fba694020000>

Allegorization

Even though Snodgrass has warned against this type, not even commentators could withstand the urge to apply this type of understanding (Snodgrass, 2000, pp. 5), all parables are prone to being understood allegorically. Lenski names the word of God as the light and disciples of Jesus as the lamp, we possess the light to enlighten others. He continues in his exposition of Luke 8:18, stating that those who hear the word in a wrong way will eventually reject the word of God and they will no longer possess the word of God (Lenski, 1946, pp. 453-457). Lenski's interpretation is one that the community of Qumran would be very comfortable with. Yet, the harsh rejection vs acceptance dichotomic rhetoric would hardly be what Jesus had intended for his first century followers.

Eschatological supersessionism

Lenski's dualism is not unique. Others take the allegorization even further, making a comparison, referring to those who had the word but did not hear it properly as Jews. Crossan claims that Luke-Acts is an attack on Judaism, and a challenge to Rome (Crossan, 2013, pp.218). Carson claims the word is a powerful tool during Judgement as it "reveals all secrets". Those who once had the word of God and did not hear it and respond to it properly (AKA, the Jews), will eventually have the word taken from them at Judgement, he goes so far to state that Jews must **repent** and accept the good news in order to obtain salvation (Carson, 2015). Carson is not the first to suggest that the Church has superseded the synagogue, and there are far worse accusations made towards Jews in the name of Jesus.

Supersessionism aside, returning to Jesus' parables, Flusser makes it clear they never speak about the future, nor as Notley states, to conceal secrets. Unfortunately, not all acknowledge and read parables this way, neither does anyone pay attention to parallels of Jesus' parables within Jewish literature. With this in mind, we shall shift our attention to the Markan pericope.

Contradictions in Mark (4:21-25)

While New Testament scholarship has long preferred Mark's Gospel, our pericope in the Markan tradition poses a serious challenge. The parable of the lamp tightly follows Jesus' explanation on his use of parables. A mere ten verses prior, Jesus states: "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables (Mark 4:11)". If the purpose of parable usages was to conceal the secrets and mysteries of the Kingdom of God, then how might Jesus continue with a comparison of a shiny Lamp that can hardly be concealed? Furthermore, he continues: "For nothing is hidden except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret except to come to light (Mark 4:22)".

Taken at face value, Jesus' sayings in Mark seem nonsensical and contradictory. While Hooker acknowledges the paradox, she struggles with Mark's placement and resolves to superimposing non-Markan understandings on the text (Hooker, 2000, pp.96). However this does not provide a solution to the Markan contradiction.

Jesus' usage of Parables

Perhaps Notley was correct in suggesting Jesus' explanation on the usage of parables is one of the most commonly misunderstood ideas of Jesus (Notley, *Reimagining Jesus' Parables*, pp.3). While it is not the purpose of this study to redefine, or properly define, Jesus' usage of parables, might I suggest there is simply no reason for Jesus to speak in riddles to the multitudes if his purpose was to spread the word of God, especially when he uses a easily understood story-parable to illustrate his teachings. We shall base our discussion on Notley's logical proposal. Jesus' used parables because the multitudes "seeing they do *not* see, and hearing they do *not* hear." (Notley, *Reimagining Jesus' Parables*, Unpublished, pp.9). In short, parables are not for concealing, rather they illuminate and make simple his messages.

Luke's Fragmented "parable-like" sayings

The fragmented nature of the pericope does not lend itself to parable classification. Longnecker notes that these are "Parable-like" (Longnecker, 2000, pp.131) that Luke has paired with the Parable of the Sower. Indeed many even chose not to include this pericope

in their parabolic studies. Our pericope was intentionally missed by Snodgrass in his volume *Stories with Intent* (2008), and apparently these sayings were too short for Levine's *Short Stories By Jesus* (2014). Fitzmeyer, on one hand, recognizes our pericope as a parable in the title of his chapter, but immediately follows and claims that it is a misnomer, he believes that all three verses were strung together by Luke, he quotes, and probably agrees with, V. Taylor (FGT, 90-92) saying that the artificial arrangements are comparable to proverbs in Ecclesiastes or Sirach (Fitzmeyer, 1981, pp.716). Naturally, the habitual preference and reliance of Mark's gospel has drawn scholars away from the fragmented Lukan Maxims. Nonetheless, Green's observations are among the few that respects the Luke "redactorship" enough to connect our pericope to the parable of the Sower and acknowledges that it is Jesus' concern to "how one hears." (Green, 1997, pp.663). In this we shall direct our attention.

How you hear

Take care then how you hear, for to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he thinks that he has will be taken away. (Luke 8:16)

The word "Hear" in Hebrew is "שמע" (Shema). According to Hebrew Strong's dictionary, it means "to hear intelligently" with implications of attention and obedience. Setting his supersessionist overtone aside, Carson has correctly stated that Jesus demands proper response from his audience with the Parable of the Lamp (Carson, 2015.) As it was custom for Jews to recite the prayer found in Deuteronomy 6:4-9 daily, for first-century Jewish ears, "to hear carefully" is not just simply being attentive, clearly there also must be a sound action that follows. Jesus' usage of the term no doubt was a strong reminder for his fellow countrymen, not just to listen to God's word but also to have the following action.

To Hear and to Do

"To Hear and to Do" is a repeating motif found amongst Jesus' teaching. The parable of the Sower, found just before our pericope, compares one that hears the word of God, holds it fast in his heart is like the seed sown in good soil. If hearing tentatively is equated to sound action then we can see how this parable alludes to this.

The Gospel of Matthew compares an individual that hears and does God's word to a wise builder that sets his house upon firm foundation. On the contrary, one that hears but does not do God's word is compared to a foolish builder that builds on a sandy foundation.

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it. (Matthew 7:24-27)

The early Rabbis have a nearly identical parable, albeit the Rabbis substitute the hearing of God's word with the study of God's word:

Elisha ben Abuyah would say: A person who has done good deeds and has learned a lot of Torah, what is he like? Like a person who builds by placing stones down first and then setting bricks on top. Even if a flood comes, the building will stand firm and not be washed away from its place. And a person who has not done good deeds but has learned Torah, what is he like? Like a person who builds by placing the bricks down first, and then placing stones on top. Even if a little water comes, it will topple the building right away.

- *b. Avot d'Rabbi Natan 24, The William Davidson Talmud, David Kasher, 2019.*

For the Rabbi, the study of the Torah accompanied by acts of good deeds is like the wise builder that builds first with stone, and the study of the Torah that is not accompanied by acts of good deeds is like the foolish builder that builds first with brick. As we can see the parables are almost identical:

	Wise	Foolish
Jesus	Hear and Do	Hear but Does NOT do
Rabbi Elisha ben Abuyah	Torah with Deeds	Torah without Deeds

In a nutshell, both Jesus' and the Rabbinic parable emphasize hearing the word of God followed by correct action. Might this be our window into unlocking the "secrets" behind the parable of the Lamp? Another parable in Rabbinic literature provides further insight into our pericope.

...Have you acquired torah? Have you done good deeds? And it is said, "for lo, he who forms the mountains..."(Amos 4:13). From whence it is said that there are two types of toil. One toil is in the words of the Torah and the other is in proper behavior (*derekh eretz*).

The one who desires to toil in proper behavior [the responsibilities of] proper behavior will be placed upon him. Concerning him the scripture says, " But man is born toil" (Job 5:7).To what may he be compared? To a leather pouch filled with water after [the water] is poured out and gone there is nothing left in the pouch.

To what may he be compared? To a leather pouch filled with water after [the water] is poured out and gone there is nothing left in the pouch. The one who desires to labor in the words of the Torah, [the responsibilities of] the Torah will be placed upon him. Concerning him the Scripture says, "A worker's appetite [or: soul] works for him" (Prov. 16:26). To what may he be compared? To a doorsill on which everyone steps; to the plank over which everyone passes; to the tree in whose shade they sit; to the lamp that provides light for the eyes of many.

- Seder Eliyahu Rabbah 14, *Parable of the Sages*, Notley & Safari, 2011, pp. 237-238.

Once again, we see the Rabbis paring the words of the Torah to action, in this instance action is represented with "proper behavior". The man that only has preference on conduct is compared to a vessel that has its liquids emptied, after which it is rendered useless. On

the other hand, the one that desires the words of Torah is like a useful doorsill, a shade providing tree and a lamp that illuminates for many.

While the rabbinic parable does not concern the combination of the Study of Torah with Good deeds, it does seem to show preference of study over deed. Notley & Safari note that this is an opinion that the earlier Tannaim opposed while later Amoraim embraced (Notley & Safari, 2011, pp.238). It seems to me, Jesus' opinion was in line with the earlier Rabbinic understanding.

Parable in a Parable

If we agree with Wolter's assessment of the nature between our pericope and Jesus' explanation of the parable of the sower, then we are indeed looking at a sensical reinforcement of the parable that Jesus previously (Wolter, et al, 2016, pp.342). In a sense, Jesus was using a parable to explain another parable! The compound usage of metaphors was also a technique that the Rabbis often deployed.

Combining our understanding of Jesus' notion of "Hearing and Doing" within his usage of parables as a means of transmitting the idea, with the light that rabbinic parables have shed upon the New Testament, Jesus' utterances are no longer shrouded under a blanket. If we superimpose the rabbinic parable formula on our pericope, like the layers of an onion, Jesus' parable of the Lamp could be reconstructed as follows:

A person who has heard the word of God, what is he like? Like a person who lights a lamp and puts it under his bed, when the night comes, the room remains dark. And a person who has heard the word of God and does the word of God, what is he like? Like a person who lights a lamp and puts it on a stand, when the night comes, the room remains illuminated, those who enter may see the light; to what may this be compared? Like a seed that is planted in good soil and bears fruit with patience.

Conclusion

Luke further confirms our understanding when he records Jesus stating that "My mother and my brothers are those who **hear** the word of God and **do** it."(Luke 8:21)

As we can see, it was not Jesus' intent to conceal mysteries of the Kingdom of God, nor was he making nonsensical contradictions. His parables were not enigmatic, rather they were carefully crafted to explain and transmit his ideas. Jesus was emphasizing a contemporary Jewish idea that accompanied knowledge of the word of God with correct and sound action. In a sense, our old Spiritual was not too far off Jesus' intent. In any case, we as Christian are called to live a Godly life, to study the word of God and perform correctly and justly in our societies. Only if we follow suit, our light will be a light among the nations.

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