

# PARABLES OF THE SAGES

*Parables of the Sages* is a ground-breaking work in the study of parables in late antiquity. For the first time ever, the authors provide a complete annotated collection of narrative parables found in the earliest stratum of Rabbinic Judaism—the literature of the Tannaim. These pedagogical gems are presented in their original Hebrew language with a fresh English translation. The authors' notes consider the historical, social and religious aspects of the individual entries, and when relevant their possible contribution to our understanding of the parables of Jesus.



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A CARTA  
HANDBOOK

NOTLEY  
SAFRAI

PARABLES OF THE SAGES



R. STEVEN NOTLEY • ZE'EV SAFRAI

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JEWISH WISDOM  
FROM  
JESUS TO RAV ASHI



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SELECTED AND ANNOTATED  
BY

R. STEVEN NOTLEY  
ZE'EV SAFRAI



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*On front cover:* Rabban Gamaliel, from a Greek Haggadah, 16th century

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# PREFACE

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The purpose of this work is to provide the reader with a complete anthology of the parables which appear in the literature of the Tannaim and the earliest Amoraim. Parables are among the finest literary creations we possess from antiquity. They are short stories with moral insight and a clear aim. They were thought to possess rhetorical powers and were transmitted mainly in speech. It is conceivable that the earliest narrators lengthened the stories to add details and to change aspects of their literary ornamentation in order to emphasize the speaker's intended message. Indeed, the parable served as an important tool for the sage who felt it important to instruct the public about current life or to present solutions for problems in the interpretation of the Bible.

Rabbinic literature has been the subject of serious study for generations. These efforts were directed mainly at halakhic literature, but in the previous century an increased interest grew in other aspects of the Sages' activities—their use of Aggadah and story. In the current study we wanted to offer the public a selection of these ancient literary gems, pedagogical creations that were the handiwork of those who laid the foundations of Jewish culture. Our goal, however, has not been merely to make accessible this aggadic material. Instead, the hope is that our collection of the earliest examples of rabbinical parables will help to deepen the reader's understanding of this unique genre, its content, its reflection of the trends within emerging Jewish thought and its place within the wider corpus of rabbinical literature.

The idea for this book began over a decade ago in conversations between Professors Chana Safrai (ל"ר) and R. Steven Notley. Steven chaired a graduate program in New Testament studies in Jerusalem and Chana taught a course in that program, "The Parables of Jesus and Rabbinical Literature." At the time they lamented that there existed no resource for students and other modern readers to access easily, and so to better understand the genre of parables in late antiquity. From those casual conversations a rough outline for the book began to emerge. Chana was supposed to contribute from the rabbinical perspective,

while Steven would do likewise from the New Testament. With Chana's death three years ago, her brother Professor Ze'ev Safrai took up the task, in part as a way of honoring Chana's memory. So, this book is dedicated to her.

We saw the initial list prepared by Chana and incorporated it into the final work. It included parables found in talmudic literature, including early Amoraic literature. We chose to focus this study on the literature of the Tannaim with two additional compositions that in our opinion are from the early Amoraic period (i.e., Avot of Rabbi Nathan and Tanna debe Eliyahu). The date of these two compositions remains a matter of scholarly debate, and we have discussed the issues further in the introduction.

We are certainly not the first to deal with parables. On the contrary, it is one of the areas of research that has received intensive study. Neither are we the first to publish a collection of parables. There are various collections ordered around a particular sage, an ancient literary work or specific theme (e.g., "king" parables). In the introduction we have explained how we chose our collection and what makes it unique. To our knowledge this is the first publication of a complete anthology of the parables of the Tannaim. Our criteria and method of collection have allowed us to deepen our understanding of these parables and to gain additional insights. The fruit of these insights has been included in the introduction and the annotations to the individual parables.

Our notes are intended mainly to explain the parables literally—their social, cultural, linguistic and historical background—to allow them to stand on their literary merits. The collective insights from the study are presented in the introduction. We hope that by making this collection available to a wider audience of interested readers, we can encourage further study of early Jewish parables to discover more regarding the thinking of the Sages who created them.

The background for the parables of the New Testament is to be found in the world of Israel's Sages. The parables associated with Jesus are similar to those of the Sages and were created in a Jewish environment—although undoubtedly not in the beth midrash. There is already considerable research on this subject, and the parables of Jesus are not the focus of our study. Nevertheless, when we have found it pertinent we have noted the similarities and differences between these two corpuses.

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We were presented with several options how to order the material (e.g., according to subject, chronology, speakers, etc.). We have chosen to structure the collection according to the literary works in which they appear. The reader will find in the back pages brief introductions to the works from which our parables were drawn and short biographical sketches about the sages to whom the parables are attributed. We would like to thank Mr. Emanuel Hausman and his son Shay for agreeing to publish this work and contributing their wisdom and expertise in shaping its form and content. Special thanks also to Dan Harelevy for his linguistic editing of the introduction, Dina Safrai for her help in organizing the book, Yair Furstenberg for his reading and helpful comments on the English translation and Jeffrey P. Garcia for his assistance in collecting information on the lives of the Sages. Finally, we would like to thank the dedicated staff of Carta Jerusalem and especially Barbara Ball for her tireless efforts in the editing and shaping of the volume.

Fall 2011

**R. Steven Notley**

**Ze'ev Safrai**

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# INTRODUCTION

## PARABLES IN THE LITERATURE OF THE TANNAIM AND THE TEACHINGS OF JESUS

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Parables in rabbinic literature have been examined and discussed more than any other interpretive genre. Part of the reason for this preoccupation lies in the literary charm of these short works. At first glance they appear simple, and their central motifs are repeated. Upon a second reading, however, one discovers remarkably little redundancy in the corpus of parables, except for those parables that appear in Tannaitic literature and then are repeated in the later works of the Amoraim. In addition, a closer examination distinguishes several possible layers of interpretation. The narrator seems intent to conceal the entirety of his message in order to draw the reader (or the listener) to seek out his own solutions.

Without question the parables include the best of early Jewish prose. They are succinct, and their content is of great moral value. From them we learn something of the spiritual world of the Sages, their methods of public engagement and how they promoted their ideological world. Still, a central reason for the widespread attention given to the parables is the fact that parables play such an important role in the teachings of Jesus. The first scholars to examine parables in both the New Testament and the rabbinical sources noticed their great similarity. Further, it is of no small note that for the most part only in these two bodies of literature do we find parables, and in such large numbers, integrated into their rhetoric as a tool for persuasion and illustration. We will return to this point.

The similarity between rabbinical parables and those of Jesus is observed first and foremost in their narrative descriptions. We have called these thematic similarities the parables' settings, such as a man and his workers, a man who is angry with his wife, fools who are not prepared for a banquet, and others. Flusser went one step further and emphasized that the similarity is not only in the narrative details of the parables, but also in their moral message. In both corpuses there is a great deal of discussion regarding God's attitude towards his creatures, the familial relations between God and his people. They likewise convey the effort that must be invested in the observance of God's word in order to live in the kingdom of Heaven. There is also a great deal of similarity in the external style of the parables, for which we will include examples. A considerable number of the parables in rabbinical literature share the same literary style, and at times it seems as if it would have been sufficient simply to change a few words in order to create an entirely new parable.

During the last century, the relationship between the parables of Jesus and those

of the Sages was examined primarily from two starting points that seem ostensibly contradictory. In fact, they are complementary. One group of scholars emphasized the similarity between the two corpora, under the assumption that we have two versions (i.e., that of Jesus and that of the Sages) of the same corpus of parables. This approach assumes a greater number of parables that are available for research. These scholars analyze the quality of the literature of parables in light of a larger and more varied corpus. Their aim is to examine the developments that took place in parables over time.

The other approach has underscored the differences between the two corpora. These differences are examined in order to evaluate the quality of the parables. Consequently, these scholars have suggested that Jesus' parables are of higher literary merit than those of the Sages. It is true that Jesus' parables are generally longer, better developed and more interesting. Some Christian scholars have even presented this fact with an implicit or explicit boasting, as if to say, "Our parables are better than theirs." Flusser,<sup>1</sup> clearly a representative of the former approach, wrote critically of this latter viewpoint. In his opinion all that can be learned from focusing entirely on the differences between the parables of Jesus and the Sages is that before us exists an ancient literary genre, which reached its peak in the final decades of the Second Jewish Commonwealth and later atrophied. However, it should be quickly added that although the literary style declined, the number of parables greatly increased. As with other literary genres, an increase in frequency can sometimes come at the expense of quality.<sup>2</sup>

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## 1. THE PURPOSE OF THIS COLLECTION

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Our aim in this collection is to present all the parables found in Tannaitic literature, to

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- 1 D. Flusser, "The Parables of Jesus and Parables in Rabbinical Literature," *Jewish Sources in Early Christianity: Studies and Essays*, ed. Ch. Safrai (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Poalim, 1979), 150–209 [Hebrew].
  - 2 D. Flusser, *Die Rabbinischen Gleichnisse und der Gleichniserzähler Jesus* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1981); D. Buttrick, *Speaking Parables: A Homiletical Guide* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000); D. Stern, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991); E. Carlston, "Proverbs, Maxims and the Historical Jesus," *JBL* 99 (1980): 87–105; B. Linnemann, *Jesus of the Parables: Introduction and Exposition* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967); H. K. McArthur and R. M. Johnston, *They Also Taught in Parables: Rabbinic Parables from the First Centuries of the Christian Era* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990); J. D. Crossan, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973); J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*. *New Testament Library*, trans. S. H. Hooke (London: SCM Press, 1963); L. Schottroff, *The Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006); M. A. Beavis, "The Power of Jesus' Parables: Were They Polemical or Irenic?" *JSNT* 82 (2001): 3–30; M. I. Boucher, *The Mysterious Parable: A Literary Study*. *Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series* vol. 6 (Washington, D.C., 1977); M. I. Boucher, *Parables*. *New Testament Message* vol. 7 (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1981); H. Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981); R. Bauckham, "Synoptic Parousia Parables and the Apocalypse," *NTS* 23 (1976–77): 162–176; R. I. Longenecker, *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000); S. J. Kistemaker, *The Parables: Understanding the Stories Jesus Told* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002); W. O. E. Oesterley, *The Gospel Parables in the Light of Their Jewish Background* (New York: Macmillan, 1936).

This is a parable designed to explain the halakhah, and it is almost an ordinary parable. However, it portrays the setting of a shepherd, a subject about which the Sages did not typically tell parables. Moreover, this is not an ordinary parable, because it lacks a narrative structure.

In the Jerusalem Talmud there are only a few parables (17). Four of them are incidental to a halakhic discussion, including the parables from tractate *Niddah* that we cited above from the Babylonian Talmud (*y. Ter.* 6, 2, 44b; *y. Mo'ed Qat.* 3, 7, 83c; *y. Sanh.* 1, 1, 18b; *y. Nid.* 2, 2, 49d). The examples are not all connected to halakhic discussion, but are only incidentally related. For example, “R. Ami said: Anyone who does not connect redemption to prayer, to what may he be compared? To a man who loved the king and came to knock on the king’s door; [the king] came out to see what he wanted and discovered that he had left” (*y. Ber.* 1, 1, 2d).

Elsewhere it is recorded, “R. Yohanan said: All seven days the sword is drawn, until [after] 30 days it becomes weaker, and after 12 months it returns to its scabbard. To what may it be compared? To a dome of stones, when one of them becomes loose, all of them become loose” (*y. Mo'ed Qat.* 3, 7, 83c). The parable is on a subject of halakhah, but at most it explains the idea of the need for mourning. Finally we hear, “R. [E]liezer ben Jacob says...A parable is told. To what may the matter be compared? To one who stole a *seah* of wheat and brought it to a baker and separated hallah and fed it to his children. He says a blessing, but it is actually blasphemy” (*y. Sanh.* 1, 1, 18b). This is a parable on halakhah, which provides a basic ethical explanation for the halakhah.

The almost total absence of the use of parables in halakhic discourse began in Tannaitic times and continued in Amoraic literature. The absence continued in the Jerusalem Talmud, and somewhat less in the Babylonian Talmud. Nevertheless, the laws of *niddah* constituted a kind of exception even in Mishnaic times, and all the more so in Babylonia. The same Sages created the halakhah, the midrash and the parables. We learn that these Sages, when they came to discuss halakhah, rarely used parables. On the other hand, in their interpretations of Scripture they used parables frequently. The absence of parables for the purpose of studying or explaining halakhah requires some explanation, and in our conclusions we will try to make some suggestions about the subject.

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## 6. PARABLES ABOUT HASIDISM AND THE FEAR OF SIN

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A relatively large number of parables are related to the early Hasidic movement and its values. Before beginning the discussion, we should explain the nature of the type of Hasidism with which we are dealing.<sup>36</sup> The Hasidim were a group to whom excep-

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36 Sh. Safrai, “Teaching of Pietists in Mishnaic Literature,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 16 (1965): 15–33;

tional piety and miracles were attributed.<sup>37</sup> The Hasidim operated in a manner similar to that of the holy men known in Christian society generally, and in rural Christian society in Syria in particular. They healed the sick, brought rain and rescued people from various troubles. Although they are mentioned in rabbinical literature, they were not actually sages. They did not study Torah, nor did they teach. They had special laws. For example, in Tosefta Berakhot (*t. Ber.* 3:20) there is a story about Hanina ben Dosa in which he does not stop praying even when a serpent is wound around his heel—in contradiction to Jewish law. He relies on a miracle, and he does not accept the instruction of the Sages regarding *pikuah nefesh* (i.e., preserving life in a life-threatening situation). They also have a special instruction—*Mishnat Hasidim*—regarding the handing of people over to the authorities (*y. Ter.* 8, 4, 46b, etc).

They are occasionally described not observing the details of the halakhot that the Sages demanded (e.g., ARN Ver. A 12; Ver. B 27 [Schechter 56]). Typically, they are not called “Rabbi,” although from time to time the original versions have been distorted. Their unique customs are emphasized in the sources.<sup>38</sup> The Sages recognize their power as miracle workers and do not refrain from turning to them in time of trouble. However, in the literature there is criticism of the Hasidim with a rejection of them and their deeds, combined with admiration for them and their powers.

The Hasidim are described to be very strict, mainly about the observance of laws between a man and his fellow man, praying a great deal and favoring poverty as an ideology. Hasidism was at its height during the early Tannaitic period (i.e., the period of the Second Temple and the Yavneh generation), whereas during the Amoraic period there is less information about them. On the other hand, we read about several sages who are described both to be a sage and a Hasid, such as R. Pinhas ben Jair and R. Joshua ben Levi. These were already sages for all extents and purposes, but “Hasidic” behavior is also attributed to them.

Evidence about the Hasidim must be read and studied from a variety of perspectives. Hasidism constituted an alternative expression of the worship of God. The Sages preferred worshipping God along with meticulous, individual and normative observance of the commandments.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, the traditions about the Hasidim often convey a subtle criticism. The general attitude was not to doubt the powers of the Hasidim, but

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idem, “Mishnat Hasidim in the Literature of the Tannaim,” *The Land of Israel and Its Sages in the Period of the Mishnah and Talmud: Collected Studies* (Jerusalem: Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishing, 1983), 144–160 [Hebrew]; idem, “Hasidim and the Men of Deeds,” *Zion* 50 (1985): 133–154 [Hebrew]; idem, “The Pharisees and the Hasidim,” *Sidic* 10 (1977): 12–16; Ch. Safrai and Z. Safrai, “Holy Men and Rabbis in Talmudic Antiquity,” *Saints and Role Models in Judaism and Christianity*, eds. M. Poorthuis and J. Schwartz (Leiden: Brill 2004), 44–58.

37 Among the most prominent figures: Honi the Circle-Maker, Hanina ben Dosa, Abba Hilkiah, etc.

38 See especially Safrai and Safrai, *op. cit.*

39 This component is emphasized in Safrai and Safrai, *op. cit.*

to emphasize that Torah study is a condition for righteousness. We suggest that a substantial number of the references to the Hasidim share this perspective. Nevertheless, rabbinical literature also preserves reliable information and Hasidic traditions lacking any hint of opposition. This is one indication of the degree to which rabbinical literature contains information about groups that constituted a certain opposition to the philosophy of the Sages and to their leadership.

All of the information, deeds and halakhot that have been preserved about the Hasidim are found in portions of rabbinical literature, although it is possible to identify entire chapters of the teaching of the Hasidim that have become embedded within the literature of the beth midrash (i.e., house of study).<sup>40</sup> Yet, this is not the same as an independent voice belonging to the Hasidim. The situation contrasts with the literature of Jewish mysticism, which occurs within rabbinical literature, but independent writings of the mystics themselves have also been found.<sup>41</sup> All of the traditions about the Hasidim come to us only by way of the literature of the Sages.

We reiterate, independent testimony is not the same as writings that have been adopted (and adapted) by a competing and triumphant group. It is difficult at times to identify the tensions, and even harder to distinguish and assess their full social significance, when we have only the rabbinical perspective. However, from the material that has been preserved we can discover a number of key words and descriptions that are typical of its members, two of which we have already mentioned: "Hasidim" and "Men of deeds." Other clear expressions that typify them are, "sin-fearers," and "*derekh eretz*" (i.e., the way of the land, right behavior). On certain occasions there is no question these expressions reflect Hasidism; however, on others they express qualities valued by the beth midrash and describe social contexts that have nothing to do with the Hasidim.

Sometimes distinguishing between these two groups (the Sages and the Hasidim) is difficult or almost impossible, and there is more doubt than certainty. Two sayings will illustrate the problem well. The first appears in an Amoraic discussion in the Babylonian Talmud in the name of R. Samuel ben Nahman from the Land of Israel: "Woe to the enemies of the scholars who study Torah and are not God-fearing" (*b. Yoma* 72b). The second is the saying by R. Hoshaiah, another sage from the Land of Israel: "Anyone who has knowledge and does not fear sin has nothing. Any carpenter who does not have his tools is not a carpenter, because the storehouses of Torah are in the fear of sin. As it is written, 'The fear of God is his treasure house'" (*Exod. Rab.* 40:1). Were these sayings originally an anonymous part of the teaching of the Hasidim that attacked the world of the Sages, a world of Torah that lacked fear of God and fear

40 Safrai and Safrai, op. cit.

41 See the Appendix to Tractate *Hagigah*.

of sin? Or was it a call by the Sages to behave with fear of God and fear of sin? Or perhaps it reflects an influence of Hasidism on the literature of the Sages?

It is difficult to know to what extent the Hasidim were found among the social elite in Jewish society. They were a consolidated, distinct and unique group, but not necessarily a group of leaders. Nevertheless, in some of the sources we see that in fact some considered them comprised of leaders who taught their philosophy to the masses. For example, “The Holy One blessed be He saw that Moses lacked understanding. So, [the Lord] showed him the coming generations and its sages, its prophets, its interpreters, its leaders of the community and its *men of deeds*. [Through these examples, like the fruit] he showed [Moses his] intention for this world and [his] intention for the world to come...” (*S. Eli. Zut.* 6 [Schechter 183; No. 358]). The list actually includes contemporary groups of religious leadership, and the Hasidim (i.e., *men of deeds*) are among them. Tanna debe Eliyahu Zuta shares affinities with Hasidism, or at least includes many of their sayings. Therefore, it is unclear whether one should consider the quoted sentence to be a realistic description of Jewish society, or a demand on the part of the Hasidim to be included among the community’s leaders.

The Hasidim were a defined group with influence in the Jewish community in the late Second Temple period. Here is a summary of their traits: the Hasidim emphasized *derekh eretz* in their teachings; in other words, giving attention to the needs of society and concern for those in need.<sup>42</sup> Their social philosophy is undoubtedly in deliberate contrast to that of the Sages, who encouraged the promotion of Torah and Torah study. The Hasidim advocated charity as the primary expression of the worship of God.<sup>43</sup> We have no words of teaching or halakhah from the Hasidim, but rather, examples of righteous practices, ethical philosophy and acts of healing and great devotion. Torah study was of secondary importance in their world, although we do not hear of any specific rejection of it.

In a number of stories the Sages emphasize that the “men of deeds” (who are also referred to as “those who are sin-fearers” and “Hasidim”) are capable of achieving their aims only through Torah study: “A boor cannot be a sin-fearer, nor can an ignoramus be a Hasid” (*m. Avot* 2:5).<sup>44</sup> The Hasidim’s response was: “R. Hanina ben Dosa

42 Such as *t. Pe’ah* 3:8; ARN Ver. A 3 (Schechter 16–17); *b. Ber.* 18b; *y. Sheqal.* 5, 1, 48c, etc.; Sh. Safrai, “Teaching of Pietists,” 32–33; Safrai and Safrai, *op. cit.*

43 This same emphasis on charity underlies a saying of Jesus: “Do not think I have come to abolish the law and the prophets, I have not come to abolish but to establish them... Unless your charity (δικαιοσύνη) exceeds the scribes and the Pharisees you can not enter the kingdom of Heaven” (Matt 5:17–20). We witness in the logion influence of the post-biblical Hebrew idiom נקצ upon the Greek δικαιοσύνη to mean charity (cf. Matt 6:1–2; Tob 1:3). Implicit in Jesus’ statement is a preference for charity over study (exemplified in “the scribes and the Pharisees”). These words suggest the affinity of Jesus’ spiritual world and that of the Hasidim.

44 ARN Ver. A 12 (Schechter 56–57). The same is demonstrated by another saying attributed to R. Simeon ben Yohai: “An ‘am ha’aretz, even if he is righteous, even if he is honest, even if he is holy and faithful,

says: He whose fear of sin comes before his wisdom, his wisdom will endure! But he whose wisdom comes before his fear of sin, his wisdom will not endure! As it is said, 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom' [Prov 9:10; Ps 111:10]" (ARN Ver. A, ch. 22).

Other stories tell of Hasidim who practiced very strict rules, but erred because they had not studied enough and did not understand the words of Torah. Such is the story about the Hasid from Ramat Bnei Anat, which is an expansion upon Mishnah Avot 1:13.

"He who does not serve the Sages deserves to die." The story is told of a priest who was a Hasid in Ramat Bnei Anat. R. Joshua went to speak to him, and they discussed the halakhot of the Hasidim. When it came time for the meal, he told his wife, "Put a drop of oil in the lentils." She went and took the container from the stove. [Joshua] asked, "Rabbi, is the stove ritually pure?" He responded, "Can there be an impure stove and an impure oven?" He replied, "It says, 'Whether oven or stove, it shall be broken in pieces; they are unclean' (Lev 11:35). That means that there can be an impure oven and an impure stove. If one used them and served and did not study, he deserves the worst kind of death." [The Hasid] acknowledged, "Rabbi, this is what I have done all my life." [Joshua] said to him, "If you have done this all your life, you did not eat sacred foods properly." The Sages said, "He who does not serve the Sages deserves to die" (ARN Ver. B 27 [Schechter 56–57]).<sup>45</sup>

Such expressions by the Sages demonstrate that the Hasidim were not known for their knowledge of Torah. They were strict about observing Jewish law, and some of them were even stricter than the Sages demanded, but they were accused of not attending the beth midrash. The Hasidim have additional traits, which are enumerated in the literature we have mentioned. We have cited only a few of them, especially those that are important for our discussion.

In Shmuel Safrai's opinion, Jesus is described as if he were a Hasid.<sup>46</sup> He does not emphasize halakhah, and he is involved minimally in studying Torah for its own sake. On the other hand, he preaches and does good deeds and many holy acts (primarily

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is cursed by the God of Israel" (*Pirkei Rabbeinu HaKadosh*, Sheinblum Edition, 21a).

45 Note that at the beginning of the story, R. Joshua turns to the Hasid with an honorific reserved for a teacher, "Rabbi!" and the Hasid addresses him without an honorific. At the end of the "lesson," when the ignorance of the Hasid has become apparent, the language shifts. The Hasid addresses the sage as "Rabbi," and the sage addresses him without an honorific. Incidentally, the Hasid was mistaken, but his mistake is understandable, since according to the customary rules, if the oven or the stove are connected to the ground, it does not become ritually impure, but the Sages decided otherwise. Safrai, "Teaching of Pietists," collected a series of incidents that attest to the fact that the Hasidim were not careful in the observance of mitzvot, and to their ignorance of the stringencies and leniencies decided by the beth midrash.

46 See footnote 35 and Sh. Safrai, "Jesus and the Hasidim," *Jerusalem Perspective* 42–44 (Jan–Jun 1994): 3–22.

healing the sick). His ambivalent attitude towards halakhah also accords with the ties that the Hasidim had with the rabbinical beth midrash, characterized by identification as well as a certain tension. As we know, the study of the New Testament is divided between scholars who search for the historical Jesus and scholars who consider the New Testament descriptions as only literary creations. The former will be inclined to say that Jesus saw before him a Hasidic model of behavior, but consolidated a group of disciples that also had the characteristics of a study group (*havura*). The representatives of the second opinion will say that Jesus is described as if he were a typical Hasid with secondary elements of a scholar.

As we have demonstrated, vestiges of Hasidic philosophy remain in rabbinical literature, and this is likewise true for parables. Passages that might be read simply as part of the Sages' philosophy—when read critically—reveal the remnants of a debate within them between the Sages and the Hasidim.

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### 6a. HASIDIC PARABLES

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Among the parables is a relatively large number of Hasidic parables, or anti-Hasidic ones. We begin with a parable from Mishnah *Avot* (No. 5).

R. Eleazar ben Azariah says...He used to say: Everyone whose wisdom is greater than his deeds to what may he be compared? To a tree whose branches are many, but whose roots are few. The wind comes, uproots it and topples it. As it is said, "He will be like a bush in the wastelands; he will not see prosperity when it comes. He will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives" (Jer 17:6). But everyone whose deeds are greater than his wisdom to what may he be compared? To a tree whose branches are few and its roots are many. Even if all the winds in the world come and blow against it, they will not remove it from its place. As it is said, "He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit" (Jer 17:8) (*m. Avot* 3:17).

The saying is attributed to a sage, but it stresses that fearing sin precedes wisdom and is a precondition for it. The parable recognizes the importance of Torah, and in that sense is not really Hasidic. However, it sees deeds as a condition for study, in the spirit of the Sages who appropriated Hasidism for themselves. In a parallel text the moral is attributed to a well-known Hasid.

R. Hanina ben Dosa says: Anyone whose fear of sin precedes his wisdom, his wisdom endures; but anyone whose wisdom precedes his fear of sin, his wisdom does not endure. He used to say: Anyone whose deeds are greater than his wisdom, his wisdom endures; but anyone whose wisdom is greater than his deeds, his wisdom does not endure (*m. Avot* 3:9).

to the masses at specified times, mainly on festivals, fast days and in eulogies, before a large audience. The sermon began with a symbolic halakhah but was mainly words of aggadah, ethical teachings, the explanation of verses and the principles of ethics. The parable is related to the sermon, and without noticing it the preacher links the parable and the old rag, teaching Torah to the masses with the more popular sermon. We assume that the popular sermon is the *Sitz im Leben* for the use of parables in Jewish society. Even in Jesus' parables we hear about the reaction from the crowds, and parables were probably used in his public sermons. Later, in the more closed meeting, Jesus discussed the explanation, i.e., the *nimshal*, the moral of the parable.

## 8. FOX PARABLES

In rabbinic literature the knowledge of parables is presented as an integral part of the curriculum of a great scholar. "It was said of Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai that he did not neglect Scripture or Mishnah, Gemara, Halakhah, Aggadah, or the Tosefot...or any of the Sages' rules of interpretation—not a single thing in the Torah did he neglect to study..." (ARN Ver. A 14 [Schechter 57]; Ver. B 28 [Schechter 58]). In the Babylonian Talmud's version of this tradition, the editor adds the expression, "parables about foxes" (*b. Sukk.* 28b; *b. Sanh.* 38b; *b. B. Bat.* 134a). The reference is probably to parables that mention the fox. The terminology is reminiscent of Aesop's fables, in which the fox plays a central role. In Aesop's collection the fable is the reason for the story. Each story may have a social message, or a lesson that can be learned from it, but the story stands on its own. In the work as we have it today a social message is attached to each parable. However, it is a later, self-righteous addition, and its literary quality is inferior to that of the parable itself.

In Tannaitic literature there are no parables about foxes,<sup>64</sup> and in the Amoraic literature there are also few such parables. The Talmud mentions that R. Meir knew 300 parables about foxes, but in the entire Amoraic literature only three of them remain. It is not clear whether the number—300—is a historical tradition or a literary expression. Whatever the case, these parables were not preserved, or perhaps at most the three that we have. In the response of the Geonim<sup>65</sup> they tried to reconstruct or preserve those two or three stories.

We hear of parables about foxes in another, amusing story.

R. Simeon ben Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi married a woman. Rabbi [the happy father] invited all the Sages [for the wedding feast] but did not invite Bar Kappara. [Bar Kap-

64 There may be one parable about foxes in the Mekhilta: "And when he tells a parable about Egypt he compares them to foxes, as it is written: 'Catch the foxes for us' (Cant 2:15)" (Mek. R. Ishmael, Tractate Shira Beshallah Parasha 6 [Horovitz 137]). It is possible that this was what the Sages were referring to, but this is not a parable in the sense that we are discussing. It is only a metaphor.

65 *Teshuvot HaGeonim*, ed. A. E. Harkavy (Berlin, 1887; repr. Jerusalem, 1966), no. 362; *Iggeret R. Sherira Gaon* ("[The] Epistle of R. Sherira Gaon").

para] wrote on [Rabbi’s] front door: “After your celebration, you will die, and what is the benefit of your celebration?” Rabbi came out, looked at it, and said: “Who is it that we didn’t invite, who wrote these words?” They told him, “Bar Kappara.” He said, “Tomorrow, I will make another feast.” [Rabbi] made another meal and invited [Bar Kappara]. When they ascended [to their sofas] they sat to eat. When the dish arrived, [Bar Kappara] told 300 parables about foxes and the food got cold and the guests did not eat at all. Rabbi asked the servants, “Why are the dishes coming out and not being [eaten]?” They told him, “There is an old man, who when the food is served, tells 300 parables about the fox, and the food gets cold and we remove it.” Rabbi came to him and said, “Why don’t you allow the guests to eat?” He replied, “So you won’t say that I came to eat, but my actions are because you didn’t invite me with [my] colleagues” (*Lev. Rab.* 28:2).

The first banquet was meant for the Sages, but to that meal Bar Kappara was not invited. The second meal was intended for Rabbi’s tenant-farmers. Bar Kappara was thus invited in the status of a tenant-farmer and not as a colleague.<sup>66</sup> Bar Kappara took steps to make the meal a failure, so that on the one hand he would not be accused of being a gourmand who just wanted to eat, and on the other hand to punish Rabbi. When Bar Kappara told parables about foxes, the guests listened but did not eat. It is difficult to know if it was because they were so interested or out of respect for the old scholar, who was apparently scorned by Rabbi, but not by the public.

These parables are not the ones we have in hand. They are called fox parables and are a different genre. As we mentioned, the Amoraic literature contains a small number of fox parables. One of the few is the compelling parable by R. Akiba, which is found in Midrash Tanhuma and the Babylonian Talmud, but is probably Tannaitic by its nature.

Tanhuma, Ki Tavo 4 (Buber ed.)	Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 61b
Once there was a decree against studying Torah. R. Akiba went, sat and studied Torah. Pappus ben Judah came and found him. He said to him, “Rabbi, you’re endangering yourself by violating the king’s decree.”	The Rabbis said: Once the evil kingdom decreed that Israel could not study Torah. Pappus ben Judah came and found R. Akiba gathering audiences in public and studying Torah. He said to him, “Akiba, aren’t you afraid of the authorities?”
R. Akiba replied to him: I’ll tell you a parable. To what may the matter be compared? To a fox who walks on the river bank, where he sees fish.	He explained: I’ll tell you a parable. To what may the matter be compared? To a fox that used to walk on the river bank, and saw fish gathering from place to place. He said to

66 It is not clear whether Rabbi originally intended to invite him to another meal or to punish him.

Tanhuma, Ki Tavo 4 (Buber ed.)	Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 61b
<p>He said to them, "Come to me, and I will hide you in the niches in the rocks, and you won't be afraid."</p> <p>They said to him, "You are the cleverest of all the animals, but you're nothing but a fool. All of our lives we have been only in water, and you invite us now to go onto dry land?"</p> <p>In the same way, the entire life of Israel is only in the Torah. As it is written, "Because it is your life and the length of your days" (Deut 30:20)....</p>	<p>them, "What are you fleeing from?" They said to him, "From the nets that people place over us."</p> <p>He said to them, "Would you like to come up to dry land, and you and I will live the way my forefathers lived with yours?"<sup>67</sup></p> <p>They said to him, "Are you the one who is called the cleverest of all the animals? You are not clever, you're foolish! If we are afraid in the place where we live, how much more so in the place where we die!" We too, now we are sitting and studying Torah. As it is written, "Because it is your life and the length of your days" (Deut 30:20). If we neglect it, how much worse off shall we be!</p>

The Babylonian parable is longer and more developed, but the subject is similar and the lesson is identical. The parable is characterized by a blatant lack of balance. According to the parable, the enemy is the fisherman, but the true enemy is the fox who plans to trick the fish and the fisherman in order to eat the fish himself. In the moral the fish are aware of this danger. Their explanation is only an excuse. The truth is that they understand the fox's intention, which is not for their own good. In the Babylonian Talmud, Pappus ben Judah is unjustly compared to a fox. He is portrayed as the great enemy, even though he really does have good intentions. This is the greatness of the parable, that it makes it possible to change the purpose of the story, to emphasize details that are not actually correct. The Sages are afraid of the decrees, but they are even more concerned about those who are tempted by the decrees, those who are weak-willed and may give in to them. Many will be killed because of the decrees, but if the failure of will increases, Israel will lose the Torah. The imbalance between the parable and its moral is not an accident. The imbalance is between the parable and the reality, and the moral restores the balance to reality, pointing to the real enemy—the enemy within the naïve.

There are also a few fox parables in late Midrashic literature:

Geniva said: It is like the fox that found a vineyard, which was fenced all around, and it could not enter. In the end it found a hole, it tried to enter but was unable. It

67 This is an allusion to Hesiod's creation story about the ancient days when the animals of prey lived with the others in peace and quiet. It is interesting that the memory of the Greek myth was preserved in the Babylonian Talmud, since Babylonia was not exposed to Greek culture. See below for the connection between Greek culture and the parables.

fasted for three days until it became thin [enough to] go through that hole. It ate and was satisfied, and became fat. It tried to exit from the same hole but was unable. It fasted again for three days until it became [thin] as before, then it exited from the vineyard. The fox said: Vineyard, vineyard, how beautiful are your fruits, but what enjoyment is there? Just as a person enters you, so he exits from you. Such is this world! (*Kohelet Zuta* 5, 14).

The parable is taken from one of the famous fables of Aesop, but the Jewish author changed the *nimshal*. The Greek moral is, “time solves difficult problems.” It must be admitted that the Jewish moral is far more clever. In fact, the solutions (*nimshalim*) in Aesop’s fables are considered a later addition with little literary value, in comparison to the beautiful and sophisticated parables. Here, too, it is amazing that it was the Babylonian tradition that preserved the Greek parable, in a work that was edited in the early medieval period.

In any case, the fox parables do not belong to the parables we are discussing. Incidentally, we repeat a difference between the parables of the Sages and those of Jesus. Jesus’ parables are at the center of his sermon, and in effect are the sermon itself. The same is true of Bar Kappara’s fox parables. The Sages’ parables are almost always part of the sermon, and only constitute a small part of it. Jewish society was probably familiar with dozens of fox parables, but they were lost, perhaps because they were solely a literary creation. Nevertheless, the genre of parables was preserved.

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## 9. TYPES OF PARABLES

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Modern research has identified three types of parables:

**Secret speech.** As we have discussed at some length above, according to some explanations of the New Testament, a parable can be a kind of secret speech designed to conceal information from the public. Jesus’ parables are understood to belong to this type.<sup>68</sup> However, we have explained that Jesus’ parables do not in fact contain secrets, and their applications are quite obvious. Therefore, it might be preferable to call such a parable, “a challenging parable.” It is not meant to conceal information but to challenge the listener to invest effort in the explanation of the parable. The parable serves to initiate learning, and the effort given by the hearer is rewarded with the acquisition of knowledge. On other occasions, the parable might hide part or all of the information from part of the listening public, because of what is perceived to be a dangerous or controversial situation.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Kermode, op. cit.

<sup>69</sup> Stern, op. cit., 49–50. Jesus also used parables in what were perceived to be dangerous situations. However, their meaning was only thinly veiled, as evidenced by the fact his opponents rightly, “perceived that he had told this parable against them” (Luke 20:19).

A real king would probably have been interested only in the material work of his servants. No servant would have been required to learn to read and to study Mishnah. The ideal Jewish setting of Torah study, which of course was not the experience of most, was transferred to the regal atmosphere of the estate of the rich man or to a royal estate.

There are dozens of examples of parables of this type.<sup>87</sup> The parable, therefore, is occupied with painting familiar pictures, which were not necessarily realistic. This is reality in the way peasants tell stories about the wonders of the royal court, a “reality” composed of a combination of the conditions from their own lives and stories about the wonders of the court with the addition of a bit of imagination.

By contrast, there is a dearth of parables which describe everyday life. There are almost no parables about life in the beth midrash, and parables that discuss a lifestyle in observance of the mitzvot are also rare.<sup>88</sup> If we had to describe Jewish society in light of the parables, we would conclude that the Jewish community was in daily contact with government officials and wealthy Romans, while barely observing the mitzvot. There are even parables that contradict Jewish law, such as the parable that describes in a very realistic manner the meal of the *havura*, but the meal includes meat and cheese (i.e., No. 322). There is no doubt that the mitzvah for separating meat and milk was observed. While the picture for the meal is realistic, in one detail the narrator unconsciously deviated from reality without fearing that this would undermine the credibility of the whole parable. The same is true of another parable (i.e., No. 138).

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## 11b. THE KING PARABLES

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It is clear that the style of “king parables” was widespread. On the other hand, Jesus’ parables are about ordinary people, even though at least in some cases the figure of the “king” might have been more fitting. For example, the Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen speaks about a wealthy landlord who inspects his fields only by means of caretakers (Matt 21:33–41; Mark 12:1–9; Luke 20:9–19). Had the figure been replaced with a king, it would have been more natural. This is even more blatant in the Parable of the Talents (Matt 25:14–30; Luke 19:11–27). It concerns a wealthy master who had the authority to punish. In the Matthean account he rewards the good servant with a great deal of money, while according to Luke the good servant receives control over ten cities and the mediocre servant five cities. Only a king could grant control over cities. By the way, the reference is apparently not to *polises* (i.e., Greco-Roman cities). Instead, the Hebrew idiom behind our parable presents five or ten large rural estates (*villa rustica*). This type of settlement was likewise called ‘*ir*’ (i.e., literally,

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<sup>87</sup> See, for example, Nos. 11, 49, 50, 62 and many more.

<sup>88</sup> Such as Nos. 9, 13, 162.

city) in the Hebrew language of the rabbis, and in the plural *'ayarot* (i.e., towns). Even an extraordinarily rich man did not have so many estates to distribute. The parable is, therefore, far more logical if it concerns a king. In any event, for the most part Jesus deliberately deals with the ordinary person and rural culture, not with fanciful settings.

The Jewish king parables can be divided into three or four types, in terms of their realism.

- Parables about ordinary life—such as a man who hired workers, a person who is angry at his wife, etc.
- Parables that are almost impossible to attribute to a king—such as the man who while traveling is attacked by wolves and protects his son. A king would certainly have had a guard unit that was not disturbed by wolves.<sup>89</sup> Or the parable about a king who asked his sons to wake him (Nos. 44, 74), which describes a family atmosphere rather than a king's court.
- Parables about the life of a rich man.
- Parables that involve actual royal behavior—such as the conquest of lands and the appointment of officials.

It may be that the third type did not exist by itself and that all the deeds related to wealth should be attributed to the emperor. Since Jesus' parables deal with ordinary people, the argument has been advanced whether all the most ancient parables in rabbinical literature were about ordinary people rather than a king. It is hard to accept this assertion. Although the parables in the Mishnah refer to an ordinary person, we are actually talking about only one such parable (No. 2), in which even if the king had appeared in it, it would have been quite natural. On the basis of only one relevant parable it is impossible to state that all the parables in the Mishnah deal with ordinary people rather than a king. In the Tosefta there are only 14 relevant parables, which could have discussed an ordinary person or a king. Nine are about an ordinary person and five about a king. In the Halakhic Midrashim, which are also Tannaitic, there are a large number of "king" parables. Therefore the evidence from late antiquity is not unequivocal. In addition, it is doubtful whether parables can be dated on the basis of the book in which they are included. We know that often books were redacted, or collected and preserve earlier sources. The claim, therefore, that the "king" parables in the rabbinic literature are late, while the parables about ordinary persons represent an earlier version are without evidentiary foundation.

In conclusion, the two arguments we have presented merge and lead to the conclusion that most of the parables in the rabbinic literature do not purport to describe a

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<sup>89</sup> Parable No. 72 from the Mekhilta of R. Simeon ben Yohai. However, in the parallel from the Mekhilta of R. Ishmael, "To a man who was walking on a road..." (No. 42).

realistic situation, but rather a remote one, a setting of the imaginary rich, about whom the narrator and his audience knew very little in reality. On the other hand, Jesus' parables are realistic: a sower, a buyer, a bridegroom, a king (or wealthy man) who puts his servants in charge of vineyards (cities) and other such details. Nevertheless, it seems that during the transition from their original Hebrew language environment to their preservation in Greek in the New Testament, some details in the parables may have become distorted, but this subject is beyond the scope of the present study.

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### 11c. CONFORMING THE PARABLE TO ITS *NIMSHAL*

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Often the parable has been shaped to suit the *nimshal* (i.e., its application). However, at other times the parable is ill-suited, or its appropriateness is forced.<sup>90</sup> In the course of our present discussion, as well as in our individual comments on many of the parables, we have emphasized this. We will make do with one example. Parable No. 9 is about a servant who does not know how to change his owner's shirt. The comparison is to an ignoramus who is unable to observe the commandments due to his ignorance. As we commented in the entry, changing a shirt is a very simple activity, since the shirt was a very simple item of clothing. Had the parable spoken about putting a *tal-lith* (i.e., prayer shawl) around the body, this required knowledge and expertise. The example in the parable could actually lead to an opposite conclusion, that there is no need for great knowledge in order to observe the commandments.

In another series of parables we find one forced to suit its application.

All [seven] days of consecration Moses served in the high priesthood. He slaughtered, he tossed, he sprinkled, he consecrated, he poured, he made atonement (cf. Lev 8:14–15). Thus, it is said, “Moses slaughtered and he took” (Lev 8:15). A parable, to what may the matter be compared? To the daughter of kings who married when she was still young, and they made an agreement with her mother that [the mother] would serve [the husband] until the time that [her] daughter learned [what was required]. So also Aaron in the beginning was a Levite. As it is said, “Is not your brother Aaron a Levite?” (Exod 4:14). When he was chosen to be high priest, the Holy One blessed be He said to Moses, “You will serve until Aaron has learned” (Sifra Tsav—Mek. DeMilu'im Parasha 1, 14, 41c [No. 100]).

The daughter was unable to meet all her husband's wishes, but her mother could fulfill her role only partially. The mother could not provide the main “service” required of a wife. The unsuitability of a parable and its *nimshal* is true in many other

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<sup>90</sup> For example, Nos. 9, 43, 44, 45, 61, 159, 163, 191, 172, 188. This phenomenon becomes stronger in the Amoraic literature. For an extreme example see *Devarim Rabbati Parasha Vezot ha-Brakhah* (Lieberman, p. 128).

bles, enlightening narratives that could be developed in various directions. Most of the parables were characteristic of elite Hellenistic-Roman society. It also included rural parables, but not necessarily describing village life in the Land of Israel. The collection includes very few parables with a Jewish (rabbinical) background (i.e., the beth midrash or observance of mitzvot)—usually the background was religiously neutral. A number of parables with a Jewish background were added by the Jewish authors of the parables. The rabbis and Jesus, when they used the parables, interpreted them in the spirit of Jewish thought that the Sages preached.

It may be that during Jesus' time the collection of parables was more rural in nature (or that those were the parables with which Jesus was familiar or selected). Whatever the case, in rabbinic times it is more a reflection of elite society, and even more so a semi-realistic description of the court of the Roman emperor. Parables from everyday life were transferred, sometimes in an artificial manner, to the king's court. We don't know if this transfer was made by the Jewish preachers, or whether it was already included in the original collection. The collection included stories from Hellenistic literature and history. We are not certain whether the collection was Jewish in nature or represented Greco-Roman society in the East. In any case, this collection was also "evolving" and was subject to changes, additions and omissions.

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## 15. BETWEEN JESUS' PARABLES AND THE RABBIS: A SUMMARY

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In the course of our discussion, we have seen that there are close connections between Jesus' parables and those of the Sages, along with quite a number of differences. Below we summarize these observations. In the subsequent table we list the parables of Jesus that appear in the Synoptic Gospels with selected parallels.

Subject	Jesus' parables	Rabbinic parables
Content of the parable	Rural life about ordinary people.	Deals with a king, and few with village life.
Location	The parable stands on its own as the center of the sermon.	The parable is part of a sermon (with a few exceptions).
Application ( <i>nimshal</i> , moral)	Some of the parables have an application (some of which are original).	Almost always there is an application that is understood from the context.
Length	The parable is longer.	The parable is shorter.
Style	The parable is highly stylized.	Sometimes the parable is stylized and sometimes not.

Subject	Jesus' parables	Rabbinic parables
Scholarship	There is no demonstration of a scholarly objective.	Usually a biblical verse is added that testifies to a scholarly objective.
Settings	Identical.	
Details of the parable	There is a similarity in a large percentage of the details.	
The <i>nimshalim</i>	Belongs to the same ideological sphere, with differences in specific objectives.	

Parables in the Synoptic Gospels

No.	Setting	Matthew	Mark	Luke	Selected Parallels
1	Seed Growing Secretly		4:26–29		
2	Two Debtors			7:41–43	No. 213
3	Lamp under a Bushel	5:14–16	4:21	8:16	No. 309
4	Good Samaritan			10:29–37	
5	Importunate Visitor			11:5–8	
6	Rich Fool			12:16–21	<i>Gos. Thom.</i> 63
7	Wise and Foolish Builders	7:24–27		6:47–49	Nos. 349, 382
8	New Patch on Old Cloth	9:16	2:21	5:36	
9	New Wine in Old Wineskins	9:17	2:22	5:37–39	No. 405
10	Strong Man	12:29	3:27	11:21–22	
11	Sower	13:1–9	4:1–9	8:4–8	Appendix Nos.8, 9, 36, 38 <i>Gos. Thom.</i> 9
12	Tares	13:24–30			No. 357

dedicated it and prepared a banquet. Only afterwards did he invite the guests.

The setting of a king who builds a palace and afterwards invites the guests—that is to say he acts according to the proper order of things—is repeated in additional parables, e.g., No. 11. Our parable belongs to an extensive family of parables concerning the building of a palace by the king. The parables emphasize that the Omnipresent built his palace (i.e., the universe) differently than do humans: from above to below, out of nothing, etc.

## 27. Tosefta Ohalot 16:8 (Zuckerman 614)

R. Joshua says: He who learns and does not labor [to accomplish it] is like a man who sows but does not harvest.\* He who studies Torah and forgets [it, to what may] he be compared? To a woman who gives birth and buries [her infant].

## 27. תוספתא, אהלות טז ח

ר' יהושע אומר: השונה ואינו עמל, כאיש זורע ולא קוצר. והלמד תורה ושוכח, דומה לאשה שיוולדת וקוברת.

\* Once again we hear the emphasis upon deed together with study. The parable's message of the importance of deeds illustrated by the agricultural setting of the lack of laborers at the time of harvest may also be reflected in a saying of Jesus: "The harvest is great, but those who labor are few" (Matt 9:37–38; Luke 10:2). See Appendix No. 2 and our note on the saying of R. Tarfon in *m. Avot* 2:15.

The moral is from the world of the Sages (i.e., study of the Torah), and the parable from the world of agriculture and family. The parable possesses considerable literary exaggeration. Forgetfulness is a mistake and unfortunate, but by itself it bears no resemblance to the burying of a small child. Instead, the parable is intended to embolden the message. Hyperbole was a well-known and important literary tool.

## 28. Tosefta Parah 1:1 (Zuckerman 630)

R. Simeon said: The sin-offering, to what may it be compared? To an advocate (παράκλητος) who enters to seek favor [from the judge]. When the advocate has gained favor, the gift [i.e., the bribe] is brought in.

## 28. תוספתא, פרה א א

אמר ר' שמעון: חטאת, למה הוא דומה? לפרקליט שנכנס לרצות. רצה פרקליט ונכנס הדורון [מתנה=שוחד]. (וכן ספרא מצורע פרק ג ה"ד, עב ע"ב).

There is in the parable and the moral some disparaging of the Temple. The sin-offering is portrayed as a bribe to the Master of the universe. The author certainly had no intention to attack the honor of God or belittle the importance of the offerings. Instead, he desired to ridicule the Roman legal system. However, if we read the parable in a literalistic fashion, it is imbued with anti-Jewish sentiment. This is an example where there is a need not to read a parable literally, and one in which not every detail possesses significance. See below No. 102, which corresponds to this parable, and the discussion there about a parallel in the New Testament. In the introduction we have dealt with these and whether one should read such details literally. See No. 205 in which an advocate appears in a parable with a different moral.

Israel is more precious than everything, so it was created before all. As it is said, “Before he had made the earth with its fields, [and first the dust of the world]” (Prov 8:26). (“Earth” [means] the rest of the nations. “Fields” [means] the deserts. “Dust” [means] the Land of Israel.)\*

תבל זו ארץ ישראל).

\* The explanation is the homily itself and is not connected to the parable.

The parable is neither practical nor logical. A man does not build two dining rooms, and certainly not an ugly one. He does attempt to ensure that the dining room is beautiful, but sometimes he is unsuccessful. In the ancient world the accepted view was that the older something was the better. Therefore, the Land of Israel is presented as being built before the whole world. There are many parallels for this in rabbinical and other non-biblical literature. Of course, likewise in the Greek and Roman world this claim is transferred to other holy cities. The parable is built upon the theological model of the application, even though it does not fit nor is practical. There is no direct parallel for the parable.

### 173. Sifre on Deuteronomy 37 (Finkelstein 71)

### 173. ספרי דברים לז

R. Simeon ben Yohai says: He was a fool\* and did not know how to entice. A parable. [To what may the matter be compared?] To a man who went to marry a woman. He said to her, “Your father is a king, and I am a king. Your father is rich, and I am rich. Your father serves you meat and fish to eat, and gives you aged wine to drink. I will serve you meat and fish to eat, and aged wine to drink.” This is not enticing. How should he have spoken to her? “Your father is a commoner, but I am the king. Your father is poor, but I am rich. Your father serves you vegetables and beans to eat, but I will serve you meat and fish. Your father gives you new wine to drink, but I will give you aged wine to drink. Your father takes you to the bathhouse on foot, but I will take you in a litter.” Is this not a matter of reasoning *a minore ad maius*? If one who has come to speak in praise of his own land can not speak critically of the Land of Israel, *a minore ad maius* [the verses] speak in praise of the Land of Israel.

רבי שמעון בן יוחי אומר: שוטה היה זה ולא היה יודע לפתות. משל לאדם שהלך לישא אשה. אמר לה: 'אביך מלך ואני מלך, אביך עשיר ואני עשיר, אביך מאכילך בשר ודגים ומשקך יין ישן ואני מאכילך בשר ודגים ומשקך יין ישן'. אין זה פתוי. כיצד אומר לה? 'אביך הדיוט ואני מלך, אביך עני ואני עשיר, אביך מאכילך ירק וקטנית ואני מאכילך בשר ודגים, אביך משקך יין חדש ואני משקך יין ישן, אביך מוליכך למרחץ ברגלך ואני מוליכך בגלגטיקא'. והלא דברים קל וחומר, אם מי שבא לומר שבחה של ארצו לא אמר גנייה של ארץ ישראל. קל וחומר לשבחה של ארץ ישראל.

\* The fool is Sennacherib, the king of Assyria.

מצליחים וסופם לתהות באחרונה,  
שנאמר "כי לא תהיה אחרית לרע"  
גור' ואומר...

\* The motif of the two ways is a foundation of religious thought for the Sages that expresses the right and the opportunity of choice for humanity. The idea of the two ways appears in parables and in other forms. The accompanying meaning for this notion is that for every man there is an impulse for good and an impulse for evil; and there is open before him a way of repentance. This contrasts with the ideology of the members of the Dead Sea Sect, whose spiritual dualism was thoroughly deterministic (e.g., 1QS 3:15–4:26). Jesus makes use of the contrasting image of two ways in a saying reported in Matthew 7:13–14 (see W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, Jr., *An Exegetical and Critical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew. International Critical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988–1997), 1: 695–701). Subsequently, a Christian composition, The Didache, preserved and adapted a pre-existing Jewish work, "The Two Ways," into its first six chapters. See the discussion by H. van de Sandt and D. Flusser, *The Didache: Its Jewish Sources and Its Place in Early Judaism and Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 55–70.

### 187. Sifre on Deuteronomy 53 (Finkelstein 121)

### 187. ספרי דברים נג

R. Joshua ben Korha says: A parable. [To what may the matter be compared?] To a king who made a banquet and invited the citizens, including a friend. While he was dining, [the king] would signal discreetly for [his friend] to take the choice portion, but [the friend] did not understand. So it says, "I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you" (Ps 32:8). When [the king] saw that [the friend] did not understand, he took his hand and placed it upon the choice portion. So it says, "The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; thou holdest my lot" (Ps 16:5).

רבי יהושע בן קרחה אומר: משל למלך שעשה סעודה והזמין את האורחים. והיה אוהבו מיסב ביניהם והיה רומזו ליטול מנה יפה, ולא היה בו דעה. וכן הוא אומר "אשכילך ואורך בדרך זו תלך, איעצה עליך עיני". כיון שראה שלא היה בו דעה, אחז את ידו והניחה על מנה יפה. וכן הוא אומר "ה' מנת חלקי וכוסי, אתה תומיך גורלי".

### 188. Sifre on Deuteronomy 305 (Finkelstein 324)

### 188. ספרי דברים שה

A parable. To what may the matter be compared? To a mortal king who had a son that was not worthy of the kingship. He took the kingship from him and gave it to his friend's son.\* He said to him, "Although I have bestowed your greatness upon you, stand at the doorway of my son [to honor him]." Thus said the Holy One blessed be He

משל למה הדבר דומה? למלך בשר ודם שהיה לו בן ולא היה ראוי למלכות. נטל המלכות ממנו ונתנו לבן אוהבו. אמר לו: 'אף על פי שנתתי לך גדולה לך ועמוד על פתחו של בני'. כך אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא ליהושע: 'אף על פי

from the ten [kinds of] foods and went home.\* So, when a man goes to the synagogue or to the house of study, he may learn [from the other nine who are gathered] a single verse, a single interpretation, a single halakha. Learning from each other, together each takes home ten halakhot, ten verses and ten interpretations.

של עופות, אכילה אחת. הביאו על שולחנו, כל אחד ואחד נטל עשר אכילות והלך לתוך ביתו. כך כיון שבא אדם לבית הכנסת ולבית המדרש ולמד מהן פסוק אחד, דבר אחד, הלכה אחת, כל אחד ואחד נוטל עשרה הלכות, עשרה פסוקין, עשרה דברים וה[ו]לך לתוך ביתו.

\* According to the School of Shammai, it is forbidden to consume meat and milk together, but it is permitted to place them on the table side by side (*m. Hul.* 8:1). On the other hand, according to the School of Hillel it is forbidden even to place them together on the same table. In any event, the parable ignores the law, because the needs of the story are the overriding concern. In reality little meat was included in rural meals, and if it was, it would have been purchased together with milk. However, the constraints of our story prove to be more important.

The parable describes the dinner of a band of colleagues, a phenomenon that was very popular in the Jewish world. On the other hand, in the Greek world there was generally a host who supplied the needs for the meal, and he is described in other parables as, “the king who arranged a banquet.” Our parable describes a rural setting. It seems their study of the Torah was without a rabbi and only egalitarian study by simple colleagues, among whom none was the student of a real sage. As such our saying resembles the caution by Jesus, “But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher (i.e. God), and you are all brothers” (*Matt* 23:8). See Flusser and Notley, *op. cit.*, 13–14.

### 323. Seder Eliyahu Rabbah 18 (Ish-Shalom 97)

### 323. סדר אליהו רבה יח

A parable is told, to what may the matter be compared? To a mortal king who had an orchard near his house. He fertilized it with manure at the proper time, dug it and watered it from the ditch. Each and every tree possessed more beauty than when it was younger. Thus to each and every Sage from Israel who sincerely has the words of the Torah in him. The days of his old age are more pleasing for him than those of his youth. As it is said...

משלו משל, למה הדבר דומה? למלך בשר ודם שהיתה לו גינת עצים סמוכה לתוך ביתו, ומזבלה ומעדרה ומשקה מים (מהשקה) [מהשוקת], ונותן לה זבל בזמנה. כל עץ ועץ שיש בה, ימי זקנותו יפין לו מימי בחורותיו. כך כל חכם וחכם מישראל שיש בו דברי תורה לאמיתו, ימי זקנותו יפין לו מימי בחורותיו, שנאמר....

In regular parables about a kingdom, the king has an orchard and not a garden. He maintains it with the help of tenant-farmers, laborers or servants. This parable relocates the royal parable to the countryside (similar to parables attributed to Jesus). We have already seen this phenomenon regularly in Tanna debe Eliyahu, but not in all the parables.

**356. Seder Eliyahu Zuta 5 (Ish-Shalom 181)****356. סדר אליהו זוטא ה**

*Dal* [means] that one is lacking property. To what may he be compared? To a mortal king that issued an edict concerning his son that he should no longer come to his dining table, [even though] the king knew that his son was hungry and thirsty. Nevertheless, he said, “Blessed is he who brings my son into his house, gives to him a morsel of bread and [provides for him] to eat and drink. For everything I have is his [and he will be repaid].” As it is said, “He who is kind to the poor [*dal*] lends to the Lord” (Prov 19:17).

דל שנידלדל מנכסיו, למה הוא דומה? למלך בשר ודם שגזר על בנו שלא יכנס לתוך סעודתו. והמלך יודע בבנו שהוא רעב וצמא. ואמר: ‘אשרי מי שיכניס את בני בתוך ביתו, ויתן לו פת לחם ויאכל, וישתה. וכל מה שיש לי שלו הוא’, שנאמר “מלוה ה’ חונן דל” וגומר.

The setting of a king who is angry with his son appears a number of times. See our notes for No. 41. The parable answers the religious question, “Why should one help the poor? If poverty is punishment, why should humans interrupt, as it were, divine justice?”

**357. Seder Eliyahu Zuta 5 (Ish-Shalom 182)****357. סדר אליהו זוטא ה**

[“When I called was] there no one to answer?...” (Isa 50:2). Go and learn the proper conduct (*der-ekh eretz*). Does any man plant a vineyard except to eat grapes from it or to drink wine from it? Does he fill it with weeds? If it is filled with weeds, he will say to [the laborers], “Go and set it on fire.” However, if there remains [within the weeds] a hundred grapevines or two hundred grapevines, he will say to them, “Go and fertilize it, hoe it, prune it and irrigate it on account of the vines that are in it.” So it is with the righteous. When they enter and stand within the world, they are like the pillars of a house. All of the world is upheld by them. Thus it is said, “For the foundations of the earth are the Lord’s; upon them he has set the world” (1 Sam 2:8).

‘ואין עונה’ וגומר. צא ולמד מדרך ארץ. כלום אדם נוטע כרם אלא על מנת שיאכל ממנו ענבים ולשתות ממנו יין, או למלאות אותו עשבים? אם נתמלא עשבים, ואמר להם: ‘לכו והציתו בו את האור’. ונשתיירו בו מאה גפנים או מאתים גפנים, (ואמר) [יאמר] להם: ‘לכו וזבלוהו ועדרוהו וכסחוהו והשקוהו מים, בשביל גפנים שבו’. אף כך הצדיקין דומים. בשעה שהן נכנסים ועומדין בו בעולם (בעומדין) [כעומדין] בתוך הבית, וכל העולם נשען עליהם. לכך נאמר “כי לה’ מצוקי ארץ וישת עליהם תבל”.

Already during the period of the Tannaim, in scores of midrashim and parables, Israel is compared to a grapevine (Sifre Deut 323 [p. 373], and tens of other Amoraic sources); but the comparison specifically to the righteous only appears here. There is room to argue that this is a later development,

pared in this world? To a tree that stands entirely in a place of purity, and its limb hangs over a place of impurity; when its limb is cut off—it stands entirely in a place of purity. Thus the Holy One blessed be He brings afflictions upon the righteous in this world, in order that they might inherit the world to come. As it is said, ‘And though your beginning was small, your latter days will be very great’ (Job 8:7). To what may the wicked in this world be compared? To a tree that stands entirely in a place of impurity, but its limb hangs over to a place of purity. When its limb is cut off, it stands entirely in a place of impurity. Thus the Holy One blessed be He causes blessing for the wicked in this world in order to destroy them and consign them a place below. As it is said, ‘There is a way that seems right to a person, but its end is the way to death’ (Prov 14:12)” (*b. Qidd.* 40b). However, this is the direction for the development of the parable and not its interpretation.

### 390. Avot of Rabbi Nathan Ver. A 41      390. אבות דרבי נתן נוסחא א מא (Schechter 131)

That same day R. Simeon entered into his great house of study and taught: Let a man always be supple as a reed, and let him not be rigid as a cedar. The reed, when the winds come and blow on it, bends back and forth with them. When the winds are still, the reed again stands upright. What is the end for the reed? It attains the opportunity to be the pen that writes the book of the Torah. However, the cedar does not [continue to] stand in its place; when the south wind blows, it uproots [the cedar] and topples it over. What is the end for the cedar? Loggers come, cut it up and use it to cover the rooftops of houses. What remains is thrown into the fire. This is why it is said, “Let a man be supple as a reed and not rigid as a cedar.”

אותו היום נכנס רבי שמעון לבית המדרש הגדול שלו ודרש. לעולם יהא אדם רך כקנה ולא יהא קשה כארז. מה קנה זה כל הרוחות באות ונושבת בו הולך ובא עמהם. דממו הרוחות חוזר הקנה עומד במקומו. ומה סופו של קנה זה זכה ליטול הימנו קולמוס לכתוב ספר תורה. אבל ארז אינו עומד במקומו אלא כיון שנשבה רוח דרומית עוקרתו והופכת על פניו. ומה סופו של ארז באים עליו סתתין ומסתתין אותו ומסככין ממנו בתים והשאר משליכין אותו לאור. מכאן אמרו: 'יהא אדם רך כקנה ואל יהא קשה כארז'.

See *b. Ta'anit* 20a. The setting for the parable (i.e., “That same day”) is the conclusion of an episode in which a sage offended a man who then refused to be reconciled. It is unclear who the homily is against, the poor man who refused to be reconciled or the sage who caused the offense. In either event the continuation is another homily entirely. The parable of the oak and the reed is an unrelated parable, and it likely does not belong to the story itself. The imagery of the reed and the cedar in our parable shares some affinity with Aesop’s fable of “The Oak and the Reeds,” *Babrius and Phaedrus*, 52 [No. 36]. Moreover, the literary complex may be echoed in the witness concerning John the Baptist that is attributed to Jesus. “What did you go out into the wilderness to behold? A reed shaken by the wind?” (*Matt* 11:7). See Flusser and Notley, *op. cit.*, 30 n. 26.

able (*m. Avot* 4:16; Appendix No. 6), “Prepare yourself.” In rabbinical literature, the primary aim is to encourage a man to prepare himself for the Day of Judgment.

It is important to note that the parables in Matthew and Luke are not identical. “In Matthew’s version the invited guests not only stayed away but some of them ‘seized the servants’ of the king who were sent to them, ‘attacked them brutally and killed them.’ This illogical, brutal behavior of ‘the others’ is taken from the Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen (*Matt* 21:35), which Matthew understood as a hint of the condemnation of Israel and the election of the Gentiles. So the meaning of the following Matthean sentence is clear enough: ‘The king was furious; he sent troops to kill those murderers and set their town on fire’ (*Matt* 22:7). The destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans is the punishment for the wickedness of Israel. If so, it seems that the men who came to the feast were Gentiles. All these new elements are lacking in the parallel parable in Luke, which is similar to other parables in rabbinic literature” (Flusser, “Two Anti-Jewish Montages,” *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity*, 559). Unfortunately, Matthew’s version has unduly influenced Christian interpretation of the parable of Jesus. In other words, the Church has read in the Parable of the Great Feast that the children of Israel missed their chance and now divine election has passed to the Gentiles.

However, Crossan has countered in his discussion of the preceding parable (*Matt* 21:33–41; *Mark* 12:1–9; *Luke* 20:9–16) that this line of development for Christianity at this stage is too early. It is not possible, because in the Gospels the audience that heard Jesus and his message was Jewish (J. D. Crossan, “The Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen,” *JBL* 90 [1971]: 451–465). According to the Gospels the populace of Jerusalem supported Jesus (e.g., *Luke* 19:48; 20:19, 26; 22:53). If Jesus had mentioned, or hinted to a belief in the annulment of the status of the people of Israel as the chosen people, or the cessation of their election and its transfer to the Gentiles, the multitudes would certainly not have supported him. Yet, there is no need to read the original words of Jesus to signify the transfer of election to the Gentiles. The original intent of the parable, which is preserved by Luke, has no hint of such a polemic. Instead, Jesus’ parable is another example of the exhortation heard from Israel’s Sages for a man to be prepared to give account before God on the Day of Judgment.

#### 411. Semahot of R. Hiyya 3:2\* (pp. 220–221)

How do the righteous enter [this world]?<sup>†</sup> In love. They uphold the world by their good deeds. How do they depart [from this world]? In love. R. Simeon ben Eleazar used to tell a parable, to what may the matter be compared? To a king who hired two laborers. One worked all day, and he gave him a *dinar*. The other worked [only] one hour, and he gave him a *dinar*. Which of them was favored? Was it not he that worked [only] one hour and [to whom the king] gave a *dinar*?! Thus, Moses, our teacher, served Israel a hundred and twenty years, and Samuel fifty-two years, but both of them are considered the same before the Omnipresent. As

#### 411. שמחות דרבי חייא ג ב

והצדיקים כיצד הן באין? באהבה. שהן מעמידין את העולם במעשיהן הטובים. וכיצד הן נפטרינ? באהבה. היה רבי שמעון בן אלעזר משלו משל, למה הדבר דומה? למלך ששכר שני פועלין. אחד עשה כל היום ונטל דינר, ואחד עשה שעה אחת ונטל דינר. אי זה מהן חביב, לא זה שעשה שעה אחת ונטל דינר?! כך משה רבינו שימש ישראל מאה ועשרים שנה, ושמואל חמשים ושנים שנה, ושניהם שווים לפני המקום. שנאמר “ויאמר ה’

a reality similar in approximate style: “From the day the temple was destroyed the sages served as school teachers, school teachers as synagogue custodians, and synagogue custodians as the unlearned (*‘am ha’aretz*)” (*m. Sotah* 9:16). This passage probably is not Mishnaic, and was added from *b. Sotah* 49a. The mishnah, of course, does not use the same imagery, but it is similar in structure and in rhythm to our midrash.

### 34. Avot of Rabbi Nathan Ver. A 28

### 34. אבות דרבי נתן נוסחא א כח

(Schechter 86)

R. Eleazar ben Shammua says: There are three types of disciples of the Sages: the hewn stone, the cornerstone and the polished stone.\* The hewn stone, how so? A disciple who has studied [only] Midrash, when [another] disciple of a sage comes to him and inquires, he is only able to answer him from the Midrash. He is [like] a hewn stone that has only one side exposed.† A cornerstone, how so? A disciple who has learned Midrash and Halakhot, when [another] disciple of a sage comes to him and inquires, he is able to answer him with Midrash and with Halakhot. He is [like] a cornerstone that has only two sides exposed. A polished stone, how so? A disciple who has studied Midrash, Halakhot, Aggadot and Tosefta, when [another] disciple of a sage comes to him and inquires, he is able to answer him with Midrash, Halakhot, Tosefta and Aggadot. He is [like] a polished stone that has [all] four sides exposed.

רבי אלעזר בן שמוע אומר: 'שלש מדות בתלמידי חכמים: אבן גזית. אבן פינה. אבן פסיפס'. אבן גזית כיצד? זה תלמיד ששנה מדרש. בזמן שתלמיד חכם נכנס אצלו, שואלו במדרש אומר לו. זהו אבן גזית שאין לה אלא פה אחת. אבן פינה כיצד? זה תלמיד ששונה מדרש והלכות. בזמן שתלמיד חכם נכנס אצלו, שואלו במדרש אומר לו בהלכות אומר לו. זהו אבן פינה שאין לה אלא שתי פיות בלבד. אבן פסיפס כיצד? זה תלמיד ששונה מדרש והלכות ואגדות ותוספתות. כשתלמיד חכם נכנס אצלו, שאלו במדרש אומר לו, בהלכות אומר לו, בתוספתות אומר לו, באגדות אומר לו. וזו היא אבן פסיפס שיש לה ארבע פיות מארבע רוחותיה.

\* Among the parables of Jesus is his image of a stone that the builders rejected, which becomes the cornerstone (Matt 21:42; Mark 10:12; Luke 20:17–18). See No. 32 in our table of New Testament parables in the introduction. In fact, this is the same image for the sage (i.e., Jesus himself according to his own words). The good sage is the sage who is the hewn stone or cornerstone. In a parallel to the parable of Jesus in *Midrash Psalms* 118:20 a similar comparison appears, but its aim is different and related to the three Patriarchs. *Midrash Psalms* (which is not a parable) combined with the parable from Sifre on Deuteronomy 312 (No. 200) comprises a parallel or perhaps an answer to the parable that is associated with Jesus.

† In other words, chiseled on one side.

For a series of different comparisons of the disciples of the Sages, see Appendix Nos. 8, 9, 35, 36. This fourfold structure parallels the Parable of the Sower, as we noted above in Appendix No. 8.