

Chapter 1

Contextuality

(Matthew 7:29)

In the fifth century B.C.E, the Athenian politician and military commander Alcibiades testified to Socrates' charisma in public discourse:

If I were to describe for you what an extraordinary effect his words have always had on me (I can feel it this moment even as I'm speaking), you might actually suspect that I'm drunk! Still, I swear to you, the moment he starts to speak, I am beside myself: my heart starts leaping in my chest, the tears come streaming down my face. . . . I have heard Pericles and many other great orators, and I have admired their speeches. But nothing like this ever happened to me: they never upset me so deeply that my very own soul started protesting that my life—my life!—was no better than the most miserable slave's. And yet that is exactly how this [fellow] here at my side makes me feel all the time; he makes it seem that my life isn't worth living! . . . He always traps me, you see, and he makes me admit that my political career is a waste of time, while all that matters is just what I most neglect: my personal shortcomings, which cry out for the closest attention. So I refuse to listen to him; I stop my ears and tear myself away from him, for, like the Sirens, he could make me stay by his side till I die.¹

According to Matthew 7:29 (parallel Mark 1:22), Jesus taught after the manner of a charismatic teller of parables and not in the method of direct teaching as was customary in halakhic style.² The collected testimony of the Gospels points to Jesus' skill as an evocative storyteller; his facility

1. Plato, *Symposium* 215–216 (Nehamas and Woodruff, 67; also in Lamb, 5.221).

2. The claim of Matthew concerning Jesus' skill—"he taught them as a parabolist and not as a scribe"—comes at the end of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, a section particularly packed with picturesque metaphor and parable. It must thus be interpreted to make it fit its preceding context.

with metaphor and his resourcefulness with picturesque speech were sources of his attraction for the general population. It is not so much his stories that were unique, for many of them echo the religious insights of his general culture. Rather, we are told that what made Jesus so compelling was his novel talent for drawing his listeners into his parables and stories as active participants with him. In this manner, his listeners became his partners in the adventure of illuminating new meanings in these simple tales of human encounter and human behavior, a didacticism uncommon in the more "frontal" styles of teaching typical of many educators. For Jesus' listeners, this inspiring and seductive partnership served to acknowledge their individual dignity and intellectual creativity. When a teacher encourages listeners to be partners in the creative process of elucidation, no longer patronizing them, the disciples rise from the role of passive recipients to that of active participants in the pursuit of edification. As Jesus' listeners moved deeper into the revelatory character of each tale, their responses and conclusions became as important as both the tale and its teller.

This mutuality of participation provided an opportunity for each listener to feel secure in the lessons or truths discovered in the details of the story. In common, the listeners brought to the task of listening the symbols, assumptions, and popular wisdom of their Jewish culture. They listened as a faithful community gathered around a charismatic teacher, sharing the same political oppression, the same sense that the various sects of Judaism were competing for their loyalty, and the same cultural heritage and presuppositions. Some listeners were engaged in the fishing trades, others in agriculture; some were single, many others were set in extended families of young and old—all shared associations, references, and allusions.

At the same time the overtones of these parables transported the listeners into a dimension transcending their generally grim daily lives. True enough, each listener differed one from the other. Just as each storyteller is unique, so each listener hears uniquely. Each brings a particular life experience, a particular preparation or need for insight, a particular understanding of the role of faith in everyday life, an individualized way of combining inherited symbols to form whatever perceptual grid by which religious and moral standards are measured.

Listener-response theory seeks to identify both the specific culture in which a story is told and the various meanings that can be heard within that story, based on our knowledge derived from other external sources of the people who lived in that culture. The stories, tales, references, and parables of Jesus were uttered in the complex context of the Second Temple Judaism of Galilee and Judea. Over the past several decades, an increas-

ing amount of information about the inhabitants of those territories—their values and worries, hopes and fears—has become available to students of Scripture. As we know more and more about the mentality of those who listened to the tales of Jesus, we can begin to assess the impact that Jesus' parables had on his listeners, and thereby also hear them freshly in our time.

The Historical Context of the Jewish Jesus

Who is this historical Jesus who attracted crowds with his innovative methods of telling simple tales? As with all questions of ultimate human import, the scholarly community finds itself internally at odds over this question. Scholars as well often find themselves in a very different place from the masses of the faithful. Because the Gospels give us so little information to work with, any specific identification of the personal identity of Jesus will always be highly conjectural.

The shortage of historical details within the Gospels has not prevented repeated searches over the past century to find the historical Jesus. The “quest of the historical Jesus” began some one hundred years ago with Ernest Renan and Albert Schweitzer, but its career may be described as checkered at best. The work of Rudolf Bultmann and his school in demythologizing biblical texts dealt a threatening blow to the scholarly search for records of the earthly Christ. The next generations of scholars had to learn to work around Bultmann's profound criticisms, and to this task an increasing number of both theologians and Bible scholars are re-dedicating themselves. The latest round of such inquiries includes John Dominic Crossan's *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*; A. Roy Eckardt's *Reclaiming the Jesus of History*; John P. Meier's *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*; and E. P. Sanders's *Jewish Law from Jesus to the Mishnah*, to name a handful among the recent flood of books on the subject.³ The Jesus Seminar, a much publicized attempt begun in the mid-1980s to identify the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus, continues to draw both support (attributable to the intellectual weight of its participants) and extremely heated detraction. What the Jesus Seminar and each of the books mentioned above hold in common is their grounding of Jesus and his ministry of teachings firmly within the Judaism of the late Second Temple period.

As was typical of other itinerant teachers of the time, including those within the Pharisaic movement, Jesus gathered around himself a group of

3. For additional resources, see my “What's Left to Believe in Jesus.”

students,⁴ men from small villages on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. To these disciples, he imparted certain esoteric interpretations of faith and halakhah, and on occasion imparted to larger crowds of people a more public, exoteric set of teachings. Like certain other itinerant teachers, especially from that subset of the Pharisees known as Hassidim,⁵ he was perceived by his followers as performing healings and miracles, thereby confirming his particularly close relationship with God, whom certain types of Pharisees designated by the honorific “abba,” meaning both “daddy” and “father,” indicating both intimacy and tremendum.⁶

4. For further information on the classical and rabbinic models of the relationship between a teacher and his pupils, see Milavec, *To Empower*, 105–150, and Lee Levine, chap. 2 and the extensive bibliography there. On the antiquity of “learning under the trees,” see for example BT Pesahim 50b, and in novel form, Steinberg. To learn in a shady place is a synonym for studying intensely, as is the Hebrew *tiyyul* in the sense of the Greek *peripateo*; see BT Sukkah 18b, Shabbat 40b; Tos. Shabbat 3:3 (Lieberman, 12) and 16:18 (Lieberman, 79); Tos. Betzah 2:10; Kohut, 3.367 and 4.28, 34; Banitt, *Rashi* to the word “esbanoyer”; Ginzberg, *Palestinian*, 3.27 n32; Lewis and Short, 1927 to *umbra* and *umbraculum*.

5. See Vermes, *Jesus the Jew*, 80ff.; Safrai, “Hassidim ve-Anshei Maaseh.”

6. See Mark 14:36, Rom. 8:15, and Gal. 4:6. The phrase “Father who is in heaven” appears in Matt. 6:9 and elsewhere in the New Testament. We must reject the claim of Schillebeeckx (266–68) and many others, who assume that the relationship of intimacy that led Jesus to call God “abba” was a unique revelation unprecedented in earlier Judaism. When we speak of the Church *Fathers* and of Pirquei *Avot*, we are speaking with this same combined sense of intimacy and awe, just as when we call the Bishop of Rome *Il Papa*. For the rabbinic phrase “father in heaven,” see M. Kelayim 9:8, Yoma 8:9, Rosh ha-Shanah 3:8, Sotah 9:15, Sanhedrin 7:10; JT Maaserot 3.2,50c; Shabbat 16.1,15c; Sanhedrin 10.1,28d; Qid-dushin 1.7; Tos. Hagigah 2:1 (Lieberman, 380, lines 10–13); BT Taanit 23b; *Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael* (Horowitz and Rabin, 7, line 15; 156, line 13; 227, line 10; 244, line 17); *Bereshit Rabbah* 71 (Theodor and Albeck, 2825); *va-Yiqra Rabbah* (M. Margulies, 42, line 5; 735, line 8); *Midrash Tannaim* (Hoffman, 2.164, beginning line 3); *Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimeon Bar Yohai* (Epstein and Melamed, 104, line 15; 157, line 2); *Sifrei ba-Midbar* (Horowitz, 90, line 13); *Sifrei Devarim* 48 (Finkelstein, 113), 232 (Finkelstein, 265), 306 (Finkelstein, 341), 352 (Finkelstein, 409); *Sifra* Qedoshim 8, perekh 11:6 (Weiss, ed., 95a), Qedoshim 2, perekh 4 to Lev. 19:19, perekh 10 to Lev. 20:16; *Seder Eliyahu Rabbah* (Friedman intro. 80–82, pp. 17, 46, 61, 84, 91, 110, 112, 115, 121, 128, 173). For further information on the subject, see Lerner; “Abba” in Kutscher, *Milim*, 1–7 (where it is clear that *avinu* carries every bit of the sense of intimacy that *abba* does in Aramaic); Sadan; Barr, “Abba Isn’t Daddy”; D’Angelo; and on a related subject, see R. Brown, “Does the New Testament Call Jesus God?” Eckardt, 19–20, provides enough documentation for me to suggest that the centurion’s cry at Mark 15:39 should be translated “Truly this man [Jesus] was a good Jew.”

Most of the teachings of Jesus are surely lost to us, though those retained in the Gospels are generally within the broad spectrum of interpretation that has come to be identified as Pharisaism. Specific interpretations within this broader Pharisaic tradition appear to be peculiar to Jesus.⁷ For example, his saying about two masters, that no one can serve both God and Mammon, seems to reflect a Pharisaic philosophy expressed in Essene terminology.⁸ But for the most part the teachings attributed to Jesus are clearly within the complicated and diverse Pharisaic tradition known to us from Pirquei Avot and elsewhere in the early rabbinic literature, emphasizing the intent and motivation compelling halakhic observance, rather than dry external obligations.⁹ About one-third of Jesus' teachings have to do with a human being's relationship with material goods, about one-third have to do with a human being's relationship with other human beings or with God, and about one-third have to do with the kingdom of God, though the specific definition and location of that kingdom is not clear in Jesus' teachings as they have been received.

Although the point can be argued, it seems Jesus was more egalitarian in his teachings than were some other Pharisaic teachers. He emphasized more strongly the plight of the suffering, the disenfranchised, and the social outcast, and he consistently called for a radical focus on allegiance to God, unsullied by any earthly political allegiance or by inauthenticity of human character and behavior.¹⁰ Some of his teachings are halakhic in nature, concerning the specific ways in which Jews are called to respond to God's grace, and many of his teachings are aggadic in nature, often delivered in the form of parable, or *marshal*, so important to many other teachers in the Pharisaic tradition.¹¹ These parables proved quite memorable, and were much loved by his disciples as his esoteric message and by the larger crowds as his exoteric message. He was at times misunderstood by his disciples, teaching in a provocative manner calculated to

7. A summary of attempts to identify Jesus as a Pharisee can be found in my "Reclaiming the Matthean Vineyard Parables."

8. See Flusser, *JOC*, 173–85, on these Essene influences.

9. See Flusser, *ibid.*, 469–508. On the competition between kerygma and halakhah within the earliest church, see Koester, especially chap. 2, and on the lost halakhic content of the sayings of Jesus, see Pines.

10. See, for example, J. Sanders, *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text*, 175–91.

11. I have also addressed this subject in my "The Pharisaic Jesus and His Gospel Parables"; see also Thoma and Wyschogrod; Young; and Flusser, *JOC*, esp. chap. 9. The volume of recent work in this field of New Testament parable criticism is enormous, and the majority of it remains ignorant of Judaism. Even the classics, such as Jeremias's *The Parables of Jesus*, exhibit now-indefensible errors; see for example the exchange of opinion between Meyer and E. P. Sanders in *JBL*, 1991.

confuse his hearers even further. Our earliest extant reference to the parables in Jesus—Mark 4:33—sets forth how few of Jesus' listeners understood what he was conveying to them. But throughout his teachings, it is undeniably clear that he held Jewish tradition and halakhah in the highest respect and never questioned the continuing relationship of the Jewish people to the God of the ancestral covenants nor questioned the sacred character of the land of his birth as a continuing sign of God's special love for the Jewish people.¹²

The value of summarizing such research is to place Jesus within a quite specific historical context. But no such summary can capture whatever may have been unique about Jesus nor explain what was so urgent about his life, teaching, and death that would compel the writing of more than four different gospels and ultimately affect the course of world history. What has been handed down to us is a collection of some of the sayings in the name of Jesus, however sketchy and contradictory even this minimal record might be. At least from that record we can claim that Jesus was an unusually effective storyteller, or *aggadist*, whose parables also have sufficient halakhic reference to suggest valuable behaviorist norms to his listeners. To grasp the import of such a claim, we must first understand both the simple character and the complicated function of the literary form called parable.

Parable: Form and Symbol

The considerable influence of literary criticism on our present readings of the New Testament parables—compelling us to focus on the written text—seems at times to obscure the contextually complex responses by those who were listening to Jesus' oral stories. In addition, the homiletic and exegetical traditions of the church have accumulated as a burdensome interpretive weight that makes it difficult to hear the parables in a fresh manner. An exaggerated emphasis on Jesus' divine nature or his own intentions as a teacher,¹³ including the contention that he spoke allegorically, have sidetracked our appreciation of his skill as a rhetor—one who

12. On covenant, see my "New Christian Theologies of Covenant." On Jesus and the Land, see Davies, *The Gospel and the Land*, and Brueggemann.

13. Psychoanalyzing Jesus is the quickest way to fulfill the apocryphal saying of Albert Schweitzer, that "we look down the well of history and see our own faces reflected." Schubert Ogden (49–59) is correct to caution those seeking the historical Jesus to avoid the temptations of psycho-history; we can conclude nothing more about Jesus' emotional or psychological health than the Gospel records provide, including whether Jesus was *homo authenticus*.

uses words not simply to tell, but to “do,” to change the values and responses of his listeners. A fresh appreciation of the parables necessitates our understanding them as a complicated emotive genre.

Few of the parables of Jesus are easy to understand, and Scripture indicates that they are often intentionally obscure: “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables, so that ‘they may indeed look but not perceive, and may indeed listen but not understand’” (Mark 4:11–12a, quoting Isa. 6:9–10 LXX). Even the disciples seem not to have understood all that Jesus was teaching them. It may be that the parables were taught in an obscure form; it may be that they are made obscure by the historical process of transmission; it may be that the disciples were quite humanly obtuse.

Whatever the explanation, it is also certain that parables are made obscure when alien or universalized categories are applied to them. For example, Jacob Neusner has defined the literary genre of parable as follows:

A parable is different from a story in that its author presents a totally abstract tale, not mentioning specific authorities nor placing the action in concrete time and setting nor invoking an authoritative text (for example, a proof-text of Scripture). Like a story, a parable does not prove a point of law or supply a precedent. But while a story centers on a sage’s exemplary actions as the point of tension and resolution, a parable ordinarily focuses on wisdom or morality, which the parable’s narrator proposes to illustrate. A parable teaches its lessons explicitly; a story about a sage is rarely explicit in specifying its lesson, and the implicit lesson is always the exemplary character of the sage and what he does—whatever it is, whatever its verbal formulation as a lesson. . . . The parable in its narrative traits is the opposite of a historical story, such as we find told about the sages. The one is general, universal, pertinent to humanity wherever and whenever the narrated event takes place. The other is specific, particular, relevant to a concrete circumstance and situation and person.¹⁴

Neusner has failed to analyze correctly the philosophy of the genre, as supported repeatedly through biblical and postbiblical sources. He attempts to distinguish “parable” so severely from “story” that he destroys the meaning of “parable” altogether. If a parable is so abstract, listeners cannot identify with it; it is the parable’s concreteness that reminds the empathic listener of his or her own experience.¹⁵ Parables do cite scriptural

14. Neusner, *Invitation to Midrash*, 191–93.

15. Compare BT Sanhedrin 92b, in which R. Judah speaks of *emmet mashal hayah*, that is, “truth in the form of a parable.” And see R. Loewe, 173–74.

texts on occasion, or at least use scriptural verses as a “package” before and after the body of the mashal (one obvious example from the New Testament is the use of prooftexts in Matt. 13). In claiming that “a parable does not prove a point of law or supply a precedent,” Neusner thereby dismisses altogether the important category of midrash halakhah, particularly as I develop it in chapter 3. More important, Neusner insists that a “parable teaches its lesson explicitly,” yet it is at the same time “general, universal, pertinent to humanity wherever and whenever the narrated event takes place.” The fact that parables need morals or *nimshalim* to direct the listener’s attention to their meaning proves both that they do not teach explicitly but rather implicitly, and that their meaning is not universally applicable.¹⁶ Because the component parts of his premise are incorrect, the conclusion he reaches in the final two quoted sentences is *de facto* incorrect.

The parable is a universal literary genre. Parables are known in many cultures and in many religions, frequently in a parallel form. But within the larger and universal framework of the parable, there are identifiable cultural differences, contexts, and purposes behind the telling of parables. For instance, “fox” is a concept that may be understood even by those who have never actually seen a fox; but the relation of a fox to a vineyard—in that a fox raids a vineyard for food—is known only to those who are closely tied to viticulture, such as Israelite society. When Jesus used parables, he used them from within the Jewish localized experience, rather than from within some universalized pancultural tradition. His facility with parables was such that he earned the reputation of an expert: “And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as a parabolist, rather than as a scribe.”¹⁷

Apples of Gold in Silver Settings

For decades scholars have tried to apply hellenistic forms of analysis and structure to the parables of Jesus, failing to recognize that Jesus’ para-

16. See for example Ezek. 17:3–10; 20:45–48 [Heb. 21:1–4], and 24:3–5. In each case, the prophet attaches a *nimshal* in order to direct the recipient’s reception of the prophet’s intended point. Without the *nimshal*, Ezekiel cannot be sure his message will be understood correctly. And see Landes, 145–46.

17. Matt. 7:29. In Ezek. 20:49 [Heb. 21:5], we find the term “maker of *meshalim*” [parabolist]; see also Landes, 141, 150, 155 n60. According to Klausner, 264–65, the first source for this interpretation is Hirsch Peretz Chajes in *Markus Studien*, 10–12; yet cf. Schechter, *Studies in Judaism*, 117, 123, and Lapide, 30; see also the panel discussion appended to Petuchowski, 148. The term should also be compared with *logopoiios*; see Perry, *Babrius and Phaedrus*, Intro., xxxv; and Beavis, 45.

bles are conditioned by the Arameo-Hebraic religion and culture out of which they proceed and thus cannot be forced into Greek categories of mentation. To understand the parables of Jesus, we must also appreciate the philosophy of parables unique to Judaism, as opposed simply to grasping the more universal function of the parable as a literary genre. Though written many centuries later, perhaps the most skillful articulation of Judaism's particular philosophy of parables comes from Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*:

"The Wisest of All Men" [King Solomon; vide 1 Kgs. 4:31] has said: *A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings [maskiyyot] of silver* (Prov. 25:11).¹⁸ Let us try to understand what he is saying here! *Maskiyyot* denotes latticework openings, that is, a covering pierced with extremely tiny holes, like the filigree work of a silversmith. They are so called because they admit scrutiny, just as the targum indicates when it translates (Gen. 26:8) and [*Avimelekh*] looked [out of the window] as "and he espied."¹⁹ Solomon thus likened *a word fitly spoken*²⁰ to an apple of gold overlaid with particularly fine silver filigree. See how marvelous is this dictum in its description of a sagacious parable! For in this manner he indicates that a saying offers ambiguous meaning—its exoteric sense (*peshat*) and its esoteric sense (*sod*).²¹ The exoteric meaning should be as becoming as silver, thereby magnifying the even more beautiful character of the esoteric meaning, as is the case when gold is compared to silver. It also should be obvious that the exoteric meaning is constructed in such a way as to point to its esoteric implication, as would a silver overlay of fine filigree molded around an apple of gold. When seen from a distance or with a clouded comprehension, it would be possible to assume it to be an apple of silver, but to a perspicuous observer looking with trained com-

18. The phrase is popular with Maimonides, who uses it in four places—*Sefer ha-Mitzvot* 179 (Kafih, 269 n3); Commentary to M. Miqvaot 4:3 end (Kafih 1957, 346); *Moreh Nebukhim*, preface (Pines, 11–12); and the opening of Epistle to Yemen (*la-Am*, 10.16 n55, where the editor claims, "By this phrase, Maimonides wants to indicate a clear statement," that is, its fullest depth and significance).

19. See Jastrow, 989, *sekhi*. On the meaning of the Hebrew behind Prov. 25:11, see Appendix 1.

20. According to Kafih, "Here Maimonides uses an Arabic translation of a Biblical word indicating a double meaning, i.e., that a parable and its moral should interweave skillfully. He understands *ofenav* either as two meanings or two facets, after *ibn-Janah*. In his *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*, Injunction 179 [Kafih, 269 n3] and in his *Perush ha-Mishnah* to Miqvaot 4:3 it appears to refer to "someone's grasp of a speaker's exact intention." See Appendix 1.

21. According to Kafih, "Here *ibn-Tibbon* added the words 'both overt and covert,' upon which David *Qimhi* built his analysis of the root alef-pey-nun [see *Qimhi's Sefer ha-Shorashim*, 25, and his compendium *Mikhlol*, 151b, under *poel*]."

prehension, its contents are obvious: he recognizes it as an apple of gold. Similar are the parables of the prophets, peace be upon them. Their wisdom is efficacious in so many ways, including the amendment of human social intercourse, as is shown by the exoteric sense of the Book of Proverbs and similar wisdom literature. Yet within them lies wisdom even more efficacious for one's spiritual formation in accordance with their inherent [esoteric] truth.²²

Maimonides goes on to say that turning a parable into an allegory, by seeking parallel meanings for each word, tends frequently to obscure further the meaning of the parable, for parables are ordinarily not meant to be allegories.

You should not inquire into all the details occurring in the parable, nor should you wish to find significations corresponding to them. For doing so would lead you into one of two ways: either into turning aside from the parable's intended subject, or into assuming an obligation to interpret things not susceptible of interpretation and that have not been inserted with a view to interpretation. The assumption of such an obligation would result in extravagant fantasies such as are entertained and written about in our time by most of the sects of the world, since each of these sects desires to find certain significations for words whose author in no wise had in mind the significations wished by them. Your purpose, rather, should always be to know, regarding most parables, the whole that was intended to be known.²³

Allegorization of a parable often leads one farther away from the "apple of gold," the truth that lies inside the parable. If Maimonides' philosophy of parables is an accurate extension of Second Temple Jewish thought, we can assume that to seek an allegorical meaning to the parables of Jesus is generally a violation of the spirit of those parables.²⁴

22. Maimonides, *Moreh Nebukhim* 6b–7a. Pines's translation modified by the author; compare Kafih, 10.

23. Maimonides at 8b, trans. Pines, 14. Rose (392) claims that the first Greek philosopher to use the term "allegory" was Kleantes, a Stoic of the third century B.C.E. Among useful works on the history of allegory in Greek philosophy and early rabbinics are Wolfson's *Philo*, esp. vol. 1, chap. 2; Edmond Stein, *Philo*, 162–85; Heinemann, "Scientific Allegorization"; and ibn-Parhon, 2b–c on metaphor.

24. The dilemma of the early church is obvious here. The Epistle of Barnabas, approximately contemporaneous with Matthew and Luke, admits that Christians can see Christ in the Old Testament only if they have been given a special gnosis, an esoteric secret knowledge (6:9; 9:8; 10:10; 13:7 in Lake, 1.361, 373, 377). The same thought is typical of Clement of Alexandria, who claimed that Christianity is

The Radical Character of a Parable

The Hebrew word *mashal* means “to compare,” and evolves from an ancient semitic stem.²⁵ The nuances of the word suggest the equation of two things that are alike enough that a lesson can be learned by setting them side by side and then using the similarities and differences between the two to define the distinct character of each. Our English word “parable,” from the Greek prefix *para* plus the stem *bol-*, does not carry nuances identical to the semitic root. To define the Greek word *para-bole* is complicated. It may be a story; it may be the deposit made to a court when lodging an appeal; some sources suggest that it can mean to teach “through deceit” (*para-bolos*).²⁶ It is perhaps kinder and gentler to explain the meaning applicable here as to “throw down a decoy near someone whom you wish to catch,” or to “lay down a fiction as a foundation upon which to build.” When the term “parable” is used in English, even in its narrowest definition it carries a certain sense of surprising reversal, even entrapment. A parable is often intended to topple expectations and norms. Unlike the word “parable” as it is usually understood in English, the

primarily a collection of secret gnosis, not intended to be obvious to the public; see R. Brown, *Sensus Plenior*, 39–40. Theodore of Mopsuestia was convinced that only four psalms had anything to do with Christ—surprisingly, they were not ones common to our present liturgical tradition, but rather 2, 8, 45, and 110 (Zaharopoulos, 100 n28). For many patristic writers, the fatal error of the Jews (Barnabas 4:7 in Lake, 1.351) was to read their own Scriptures as though they meant what they said. See Bennett and Edwards, 51; also Hellwig, 175; and Kelly, 32, 65–66. In other words, Christ could not be found in scripture unless it was read allegorically; such a reading at the same time violated the spirit of the “plain” meaning of Christ’s words.

25. See “New Akkadian Witnesses,” by Chaim Cohen, where he explores the etymological history of the word, concentrating in particular on its confusion with a similar word meaning “to exercise political dominion.” See McKane 1970, 22–33, and Landes, 137–58. On parable and analogy, see Frank, esp. 148–82, and Fromm, *The Heart of Man*; see also Haran in *Biblical Encyclopedia*, 5.548–554. Clearly neither God nor revelation can be known without the use of parabolic comparisons, given our limited human capacities for perception.

26. In this sense, the Greek is perhaps more closely related to the Hebrew *hiddah*, or enigma, as it is used in Ps. 78:2. Landes (154 n32, 156 n63) observes that *hiddah* and *mashal* are often found in combination in the Hebrew Bible, underlining the intentionally enigmatic character of a *mashal*; see e.g. Hab. 2:6–19. For the sake of simplicity in this chapter and elsewhere, however, I will use *mashal* and parable as though they were synonymous, though any number of articles point out that the parallel is not exact.

Hebrew word *mashal* carries a larger definition than simply an illustrative story or fable; it can also mean any kind of enigmatic, mystical, or dark saying, as well as a proverb, a maxim, or an ancient saw. A *mashal*, then, is any comparison in which an abstract idea and a real-life (whether fictional or not) situation are set side by side. The “decoy” occurs in the minds of the listeners, as they discover new truths illuminated by the activity of side-by-side comparison. Such side-by-side, or whole-to-whole, abstract comparison differentiates a parable from an allegory, at least as the latter form became a technical term for one-to-one comparisons in medieval exegesis.

Parables generally have a specific form—the body of the story, which in Hebrew is called the *mashal*, and a stated application or point or moral, which is called the *nimshal*. Even when the body of the parable, the *mashal*, is the same between parables originating in two different cultures, the *nimshal* may vary. This variation can be illustrated by two examples, the first from the fables of Aesop, and the second from a rabbinic commentary on Qohelet (Ecclesiastes):

A half-starved fox, who saw in the hollow of an oak tree some bread and meat left there by shepherds, crept in and ate it. With his stomach distended he could not get out again. Another fox, passing by and hearing his cries and lamentations, came up and asked what was the matter. On being told, he said: “Well, stay there till you are as thin as you were when you went in; then you’ll get out quite easily.”

This tale shows how time solves difficult problems.²⁷

It is like a fox who found a vineyard which was fenced in on all sides. There was one hole through which he wanted to enter, but he was unable to do so. What did he do? He fasted for three days until he became lean and frail, and so got through the hole. Then he ate [of the grapes] and became fat again, so that when he wished to go out he could not pass through at all. He again fasted another three days until he became lean and frail, returning to his former condition, and went out. When he was

27. *Fables of Aesop*, in Handford, 3. Another parallel is found in *Babrius and Phaedrus*, Perry, 107 #86, though his *nimshal* is, “You’ll not get out of here until your belly is the same size as when you entered,” and thus more like that of the second example. The same parable exists in various forms in the folk literature of the world; for example, in classical Indian literature it takes the form of a jackal trapped inside the hide of a dead elephant. In the sixth-century Christian collection *Historia Francorum* by Gregory of Tours, it is a snake trapped in a bottle of wine. For another example of a *mashal* with two different *nimshalim* (one by Phaedrus, one by R. Itzhak Nafha), see Schwarzbaum, “Talmudic-Midrashic Affinities,” 441.

outside, he turned his face and gazing at the vineyard, said, "O vineyard, O vineyard, how good are you and the fruits inside! All that is inside is beautiful and commendable, but what enjoyment has one from you?"

As he had come naked from his mother's womb, so will he return as he came (Qoh. 5:14).²⁸

The mashal in Aesop's "The Swollen Fox" and in the parable of the fox from *Qohelet Rabbah* are the same: the hungry fox eats too much in the vineyard (or oak tree) and cannot get out again without fasting. But each has a different nimshal: For Aesop, the point of the parable is that "time solves difficult problems."²⁹ For the author of *Qohelet Rabbah*, the nimshal is quite different—"As one enters (this world at birth) so one leaves (this world at death)—you can't take it with you!"

Contextual Determination of the Nimshal

That nimshalim vary from culture to culture and from situation to situation, even in relation to the same basic mashal, is of extreme significance. According to listener-response theory, a listener's application of a

28. Qohelet Rabbah 5.14, 1. Schwarzbaum ("Talmudic-Midrashic Affinities," 430) points out how familiar the rabbinic sages were with the Aesopic tradition. On 433, he suggests that the biblical nimshal led the sages to add the Aesopic mashal, rather than vice versa. For an extensive and fascinating history of this parable, see Schwarzbaum, *Mishlei Shu'alim*, 210–218. On the influence of Greek literature and thought on rabbinic literature in general, see Mack, *Aggadica*, 84–87.

29. It should be noted that this almost trite aphorism appears here as a nimshal, but often stands on its own, as it does in Philo, *On Joseph* 10–11 (Colson, 6.145–146 to Gen. 37:9), and in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Act I, Scene 3, line 146; and see Davidson, *Otzar*, 119 #1924 and Savar, 1215. However, the nimshal here attached by *Qohelet Rabbah* is nicely nuanced by comparing this mashal with a very similar text in *Semaḥot* 3.3 (Higger, 221–22), and see Ps. 49, esp. v18. Another nimshal added on occasion to this mashal, particularly by medieval Jewish writers, is "re-buke thy lust that it persuade thee not, and guard thee from diseases occasioned by changes of habit" (see, for example, ibn-Zabara). R. Nissim gives the far-fetched nimshal, "In a similar way the wicked will not cease repenting of their past deeds, without securing any good acts. Their penitence will, however, be of no avail!" ; in a Spanish version, the nimshal is given: "If your sense were as long as your beard, you would look for exits as well as entrances." For other examples of Qoh. 5:15 as a nimshal, see Abramson in ibn-Shu'eib intro p. 9; ben Yatzliah 53a–b (105–106); Duran to Avot 4.21; *Sefer ha-SMa*"Q of Isaac of Corbail, 20, Mitzvah 19 to "Do not covet."

parable to one's own life generates in turn an emotional reaction unique to that person. Such individualized applications are themselves variant *nimshalim*, particularly when the teller of parables does not provide the listeners with a ready-made *nimshal*. In this sense, a *nimshal* is the concretization of a listener's emotional response to the *mashal*. The range of emotional responses to a given *mashal* is determined by the manner in which a *mashal* is narrated. A parabolist chooses carefully the details in the crafting of each *mashal*, so that the elicitation of a variety of responses functions as an exhibition of the skill and agenda of the teller (though is not intended to focus attention on the teller). A parable used for illustration will generate a response different from one used for concretization. A parable that has a human situation will generate a response different from a fable about animals, even though the two may have identical structures. A parable about a king will generate a response different from a parable about a beggar. A parable about a king will be told and will be heard differently in a kingdom, a conquered land, or a democracy.

Among the theorists of catharsis as the generative power by which an individual produces a personalized *nimshal* are Aristotle, Friedrich Schiller, and Erich Auerbach. For Aristotle (*de Poetica* 1448b), the pleasure of tragedy is that it teaches us to imitate the ultimate good, and then to experience the reward of self-respect when we recognize the results of that good within ourselves. This imitation becomes possible only through the clear depiction of the tragedy that has befallen another, such as "the forms of the lowest animals, and dead bodies." To the insightful, such depictions yield catharsis as opposed to pride, that is, a firmer resolve to rededicate oneself to higher values. Friedrich Schiller, in his essay "Of the Cause of the Pleasure We Derive from Tragic Objects," observes that we continue to attend tragedies in the theater because of the affirmative catharsis we experience when we reflect back upon the moral triumph of the suffering, no matter how bitter their end. For example, "When Timeleon of Corinth puts to death his beloved but ambitious brother Timophanes, he does it because his idea of duty to his country bids him to do so. The act here inspires horror and repulsion as against nature and the moral sense, but this feeling is soon succeeded by the highest admiration for his heroic virtue, pronouncing, in a tumultuous conflict of emotions, freely and calmly, with perfect rectitude." In other words, the personal *nimshal* which a viewer derives from seeing a tragedy well presented is the product of the viewer's subsequent reflection upon what was earlier witnessed. The tragedy itself may present no *nimshal*, but if it has been effective, it will of necessity produce a *nimshal* post facto among those whose sense of moral propriety has been affected. To this end, claims Schiller, we do not attend the theater to enjoy the plot of a tragedy but rather to individualize and digest the

moral point of the drama, then to use it to affirm again our own optimism that life has a higher meaning, thus leaving the theater more pure and more focused than we were when first viewing the tragedy. Auerbach's seminal essay "Odysseus' Scar" explores the difference between classical and biblical narratives. Homer's *Odyssey* is full of ever-present detail ("of the foreground"), while the Sacrifice of Isaac narrative speaks powerfully in its silences and in the vast number of details ignored by the writer ("fraught with background"). In the biblical narrative it is the silences, the absence of specificity, that force the listener to provide the interpretation, and ultimately to frame the nimshal as a way of staking a claim to the authoritative truth of the story.³⁰

We must also hold out the possibility of a "pseudo-nimshal" in certain instances. As Mary Ann Beavis points out in her comments on the parable collection known as *Babrius and Phaedrus*, compiled at approximately the same time as the canonical gospels, "According to Babrius (Prologue), Aesop told stories so that his hearers might 'learn and understand'; however, Phaedrus (3, Prologue) explains that the fable is an obscure form of speech that allowed the slave [Aesop] to escape punishment for his opinions."³¹ In other words, if the slave Aesop told a certain mashal, omitting the nimshal, and his master through the process of listener response added his own nimshal, the result could be the death of the slave in that the master reached an insulting conclusion from his own associations with the figures of the mashal. In this sense, a storyteller might even attach a certain nimshal to a mashal to confuse or deceive the hearer, or to mask the point more intended by the parabolist. Clever Aesop could make his own personal point in telling an acerbic mashal, but then mask that very point with a nimshal that saved his life by confusing his master. We can designate that masking process as a "pseudo-nimshal," the true nimshal remaining implied but unstated within the directionality of the mashal.

Given the vast variety of the world's literature, not every mashal is followed by a nimshal, as the following familiar quotation illustrates:

"Well, goodbye, if you're sure you won't have any more."

"Is there any more?" asked Pooh quickly.

Rabbit took the covers off the dishes, and said, "No, there wasn't."

"I thought not," said Pooh, nodding to himself. "Well, good-bye. I must be going on."

30. On the importance of silences in shaping the meaning of a text, see also Bergson, 187–89; Williams, 65.

31. Beavis, 45 n57.

So he started to climb out of the hole. He pulled with his front paws, and pushed with his back paws, and in a little while his nose was out in the open again . . . and then his ears . . . and then his front paws . . . and then his shoulders . . . and then—

“Oh, help!” said Pooh. “I’d better go back.”

“Oh, bother!” said Pooh. “I shall have to go on.”

“I can’t do either!” said Pooh. “Oh, help *and* bother!”

Now, by this time Rabbit wanted to go for a walk too, and finding the front door full, he went out by the back door, and came round to Pooh, and looked at him.

“It all comes,” said Rabbit sternly, “of eating too much. I thought at the time,” said Rabbit, “only I didn’t like to say anything,” said Rabbit, “that one of us was eating too much,” said Rabbit, “and I knew it wasn’t *me*,” he said. “Well, well, I shall go and fetch Christopher Robin.” . . .

Christopher Robin nodded.

“Then there’s only one thing to be done,” he said. “We shall have to wait for you to get thin again.”

“How long does getting thin take?” asked Pooh anxiously.

“About a week, I should think.” . . .

And at the end of the week Christopher Robin said, “*Now!*”

So he took hold of Pooh’s front paws and Rabbit took hold of Christopher Robin, and all Rabbit’s friends and relations took hold of Rabbit, and they all pulled together . . .

And for a long time Pooh only said “Ow!” . . .

And “Oh!”

And then, all of a sudden, he said “Pop!” just as if a cork were coming out of a bottle.

And then Christopher Robin and Rabbit and all Rabbit’s friends and relations went head-over-heels backwards . . . and on top of them came Winnie-the-Pooh—free!³²

Here the same basic motif as we have seen in previous meshalim has no explicit moral appended.

32. Milne, *The World of Pooh*, 37–43. Accordingly, we read in Lewis Carroll (*More*, 110): “Perhaps it hasn’t one,” Alice ventured to remark. “Tut, tut, child!” said the Duchess. “Everything’s got a moral, if only you can find it.”

Some rabbinic parables have *nimshalim* and some do not; some of the parables of Jesus have *nimshalim* and some do not. It is then obvious why early Jewish Scripture commentaries forbid the “veneration” of any given *nimshal*; the point of a parable is the *mashal*, the narrative story itself. The *nimshal* must of necessity be left up to each listener to determine, unless, or even when, the teller specifically attaches a *nimshal* so as to clarify unequivocally the teller’s point in relating the *mashal*. The existence of a *nimshal* underlines the contextual relativity of the *mashal*’s usage; even if the body of the *mashal* may seem at first to be universal, the *nimshal* proves that more than a universalized human problem is being addressed here. Even a preexisting *mashal* is particularized in its application to the aspirations and disappointments of a specific time, a specific culture, or a specific person by the addition of an explicit or implicit *nimshal*. Because, as in the examples above, some of the gospel parables of Jesus have *nimshalim* and some do not, and some *meshalim* appear in more than one gospel but with variant *nimshalim*,³³ we are forced to ask in relation to each parable: who attached the *nimshal* extant in the gospel text to the *mashal*? Did Jesus? the gospeller? Christian tradition? or is it accidentally misplaced from a different *mashal*?

Combinations of Agglutinate Symbols

Parables ordinarily draw on a repertoire of stock figures.³⁴ They are short and have no time for extensive character development. Rather, they rely on the cultural associations brought by the hearers to the evocation of these stock figures. In this sense, the figures in a parable are archetypes or symbols, particularly in the Jungian sense,³⁵ though as has been stated, the allegorization of parables is not generally an accepted part of the rabbinic tradition. With the passage of centuries, we have lost our grasp of the cultural definitions automatically associated with the stock figures common to first-century Jewish parables. For example, the parable of the fox from *Qohelet Rabbah* contains three stock figures or clues in the first sentence: fox, vineyard, and fence. Each of these words has strong associations in the literature of the Second Temple and early rabbinism; their

33. See for example the Parable of the Rich Fool in Luke 12:16–20; some manuscripts include v21 as a *mashal*, and some (such as the Gospel of Thomas #63) omit the verse altogether. And see Fitzmyer, 2.971.

34. Scott, *Jesus*, 49–50; Goulder, 55.

35. For an exercise in the application of archetype and symbol to Scripture, see Fromm, *The Forgotten Language*, esp. chaps. 2 and 6.

very mention, particularly in combination, would dredge up associations, other traditional tales, stereotypes, mind-pictures, and expectations for the outcome of the story.

The fox is a very common figure in rabbinic parables, and even more fox stories were known than have survived: "Rabbi Meir had three hundred parables of foxes, and we have only three left."³⁶ The image of the fox suggests craftiness and danger of exploitation. A fence is also a common figure in both rabbinic parables and sayings; for example, "Be deliberate in judging, and raise up many disciples, and make a fence for the Torah."³⁷ The fence suggests a safeguard, and particularly in relation to Torah, suggests safeguards of behavior. Vineyard is a word with a long and unquestionable association in Hebrew Scripture, the best example of which is also one of the finest parables in Scripture, Isaiah 5:1–7. Vineyard suggests the house of Israel, the people Israel. Foxes and vineyards are connected with each other in the traditional literature, such as Song of Songs 2:15 (the little foxes that spoil the vineyards) and *ba-Midbar Rabbah* 20.14 (shall the vineyards be sold like foxes?). Thus in three simple words—fox, vineyard, fence—a whole set of associations emerges in the minds of the listener.

These associations would be quite different from the associations brought by Aesop's contemporaries to his version of the mashal. To illustrate: A combination of bear, honeypot, and stuck-in-a-hole automatically conjures up associations with Winnie the Pooh, but only for those listeners who have been raised in a family or culture in which Pooh is a familiar figure. For listeners from another culture, one may wind up with the same story, but without the richness of our associations with Winnie the Pooh as a developed character. Nearly 150 years ago, Anglican linguist R. C. Trench recognized the indispensability of contextuality in reading parables:

The proverbs are so frequently [a culture's] highest bloom and flower, while yet so much of their beauty consists often in curious felicities of

36. The reference at Sanhedrin 39a is to only three of Rabbi Meir's since there are many fox parables scattered throughout the Talmud and Midrash. *Ad loc.*, Rashi tells the three parables. The literature of "fox fables" became a highly developed populist form, the most famous collections of which can be found in the thirteenth-century *Mishlei Shu'alim* of R. Berekhiah ha-Naqdan (the introduction by Schwarzbaum to the English translation is itself a treasure); the twelfth-century *Sefer ha-Sha'ashuim* (The Book of Delights) of R. Joseph ben Meir ibn-Zabara; and the eleventh-century *Hibbur Yafe* of R. Nissim Gaon. See also Baba Batra 134a, in which it is recorded that the study of the fox fables was an integral part of the education of Yohanan ben Zakkai, along with Scripture and Halakhah. See also *va-Yiqra Rabbah* 28.2 (M. Margulies, 3.56 n4). On the claim of 300 parables, see Musafia, 4–5 and 13 at *lamed*; Harkavy, 183 and 371; Hazzan, 6a–b.

37. M. Avot 1.1. See also Isa. 5:1–7 in relation to a vineyard, and Siegfried Stein.

diction pertaining exclusively to some single language, either in a rapid conciseness to which nothing tantamount exists elsewhere, or in rhymes which it is hard to reproduce, or in alliterations which do not easily find their equivalents, or in other verbal happiness such as these—[there] lies the difficulty which is often felt . . . of transferring them without serious loss, nay, sometimes the impossibility of transferring them at all from one language to another.³⁸

So for the rabbinic audience, the combination of fox, vineyard, and fence, while telling a story on the “silver filigree” level, at the same time (without allegorization and without needing interpretation) tells a story about Israel and the Torah being endangered by an intruder. The two stories are told simultaneously, rather than sequentially, though the hearer may at first be conscious only of the primary level. Unless we can recapture the associations, taken for granted by the author of *Qohelet Rabbah*, we can hear only the “silver filigree” story; the “golden apple” story will be lost to us completely. So too with the parables of Jesus; if we cannot grasp the associations that were automatic to the original hearers, we cannot grasp the full richness of those parables. They remain for us one-dimensional, seeming to offer little beyond the level of popular entertainment.

The problem remains of identifying the associations with stock figures that would have been common to Jesus and his hearers. In a provocative article, C. H. Cave claims that “the ‘original context’ of the parables was always a sermon, and that we have lost the point which the parable was originally intended to enforce because we have lost the sermon.”³⁹ On the basis of Cave’s hypothesis, if we cannot rediscover the original sermons of Jesus, which were the contextual settings of the parables, then we cannot ever hope to understand what Jesus was teaching in his parables. The only other possible source for definition, it would seem, is Jewish literature of the period as close in time as possible to the life of Jesus: the parables contained in the Mishnah, Midrash, and Talmud. There remain serious problems for the scholar, for without extensive form and text criticism of rabbinic materials, we are on shaky ground in deciding what associations belong to what period. But we do have evidence supporting the tenacity of oral tradition in Judaism, and it is quite possible that the rabbinic parables shed important light on the parables of Jesus simply because oral tradition

38. Trench, 31, writing in 1858. He cites as an example of an untranslatable proverb the German “Stultus und Stolz/Wachset aus Einem Holz.” A similarly cryptic epigram, to any but an American in the 1970s, would be “Only Nixon could go to China.” One untranslatable phrase is *ve’ahavta le-reikha kamokha*; “you shall love your neighbor as you love yourself” is not a truly accurate translation (see chaps. 3 and 8 of this book).

39. Cave, 376.

would have kept stock figures and automatic associations alive for several generations.⁴⁰ It therefore seems appropriate in a search for meanings in the parables of Jesus to seek out whatever illumination is possible from the rabbinic parables retained in traditional Jewish literature.

Attempts have been made by Christian exegetes to prove that Jesus did not draw on this common Jewish repertoire but that he used stock figures to mean something very different from what his contemporaries did. The obvious problem with this reasoning, usually offered in an attempt to prove the uniqueness of Jesus, is that his listeners would never have understood his parables had he altered the meaning of the stock figures, for the listeners would have brought such contrary associations. Furthermore, the attempt by some Christian scholars to shift the symbolism of stock figures is unconvincing because there is so little literary support for their contention.

Listener Response and Historical Specificity

In principle, it is not surprising that Christians have found alternative meanings in their inherited Jewish texts. Augustine praised joyfully the diverse meanings heard by Christians within the same texts foundational to the Christian faith. For him, this was an integral part of the great richness of Scripture:

For as a fountain within a narrow compass is more plentiful, and supplies a tide for more streams over larger spaces than any one of those streams which, after a wide interval, is derived from the same fountain; so the relation of [Moses] that dispenser of Thine, which was to benefit many who were to discourse thereon, does out of a narrow scantling of language, overflow into streams of clearest truth whence every man may draw out for himself such truth as he can upon these subjects, one, one truth, another, another, by larger circumlocutions of discourse. . . . So when one says, "Moses meant as I do"; and another, "Nay, but as I do," I suppose that I speak more reverently, "Why not rather as both, if both be true?" And if there be a third, or a fourth, yea if any other seeth any other truth in those words, why may not he be believed to have seen all these, through whom the One God hath tempered the holy Scriptures to the sense of many, who should see therein things true but divers? For I certainly (and fearlessly I speak it from my heart), that were I to indite

40. Perry Dane refers to the Oral Torah as "a textless text," thereby emphasizing that oral tradition has cadence, structure, and intention, a specific content, and internal methods to protect its own integrity.