

Parables in Paul? Parable Research in New Fields – A Test Study on the Epistle to the Romans

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Abstract

The Pauline letters have been largely excluded from parable scholarship. Recent developments in both fields—parable studies, which increasingly situate parables within the broader context of Graeco-Roman miniature narratives such as fables, and Pauline studies, which have re-envisioned Paul as a storyteller—invite this neglect to be reconsidered. This article seeks to explore whether the category of “parable” can yield new insights for interpreting Pauline rhetoric and theology, using the Epistle to the Romans as a test case. The argument unfolds in four steps. First, relevant key passages in Romans (7:1–6; 9:20–23; 11:17–24; 12:4–8) are identified. Second, Rom 7:1–6 as a sample, is shown to fulfil essential criteria of the parable genre. Third, parallels from Jewish and Graeco-Roman traditions—such as the pottery motif (Rom 9:20–23) and body-fables (Rom 12:4–8)—substantiate the proposed genre classification. Fourth, the rhetorical functions of these miniature narratives are explored: in Romans 7:1–6, the “widow” narrative employs bridal imagery to reframe the debate on the Law, while in Romans 11:17–24, the olive tree parable elucidates the tension between divine election, the “hardening” of Israel and the nations. The study concludes that recognizing parabolic forms within Paul’s letters opens new pathways for literary and theological engagement, enhancing our understanding of early Christian narrative theology.

Recognizing parabolic forms within Paul’s letters, the study argues, opens new perspectives for both literary analysis and Pauline theology, and our understanding of early Christian parable discourse.

Keywords: Parables, Paul, Romans, Fables, Olive-Tree-Parable Characterization

1. Introduction*

When we talk about parables in the New Testament, we usually think immediately of the parables of Jesus. Jesus is the parable teller par excellence, indeed he was considered to be the inventor of the parable genre. Even in the most critical phases of historical Jesus research, parables have always been the bedrock of the Jesus tradition. Parables give us access to the “ipsissima vox”¹ of Jesus, according to Joachim Jeremias, one of the leading figures in German-language parable research. Other well-known names such as Adolf Jülicher, Robert Funk, and John Dominic Crossan, and more recently Gerhard Lohfink² also support this close connection between parables and Jesus. This seemingly unquestionable assumption has now come to an end.

1.1. Fundamental Changes in Parable Research

Current research on early Christian parables is characterized by two striking developments, which break with the former tradition: first, the close link between research on the historical Jesus and parables has been challenged and contradicted from different perspectives. In volume V of the “Marginal Jew,” John P. Meier argued that only four parables can be claimed as authentic voice of Jesus according to his strict criteria.³

In contrast to this extreme reduction, the application of memory approaches has expanded the number of parables we can attribute to Jesus. The editors of the “Kompendium der Gleichnisse” have accepted the early Christian tradition of collective memory as a methodologically valid starting point for

* This article grew out of a paper read at the SNTS 79th General Meeting 2025 in Regensburg.

¹ See Joachim Jeremias. *Die Gleichnisse Jesu*. 11th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1998), 18.

² See Gerhard Lohfink. *Die vierzig Gleichnisse Jesu*. 7th ed. (Freiburg i. Br.: Herder, 2023); see fort he other scholars mentioned Ruben Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables of Jesus. Methods and Interpretation*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2015), 58–76.

³ John P. Meier. *Probing the Authenticity of the Parables. A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus 5*. (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2016).

consideration.⁴ Accordingly, parables from the Gospel of John, Thomas, and Agrapha have been included in this handbook. This approach has resulted in the identification of 104 parables. From quite different perspectives this approach still departs from the close link between historical Jesus research and parable research. The identification of parables was based not on the criteria of authenticity but on the criteria of genre, i.e., a specific literary form and mode of speech. This also paved the way for broadening the focus to include other writers and texts. This brings me to my second point:

Literary and comparative studies have widened our perspective on the parables. The formal and thematic similarities between Jewish rabbinic *meshalim*, early Christian parables, and Greek and Roman fables were noticed and studied in depth in various places and, initially, independently of one another. I will mention just a few examples: Mikeal Parsons,⁵ Eric Ottenheijm and his team in Utrecht,⁶ as well as the research project on fables and parables in Mainz.⁷

The results of these research trends can be summarized as follows:

1. Parables are no longer considered to be an invention of Jesus but are seen as part of the wider tradition of miniature narratives in Jewish (*meshalim*) and Greco-Roman (fables) literature.

2. The focus on the term παραβολή as proof of genre can no longer be maintained as it was in the past. In the Gospel of John these texts are named

⁴ See Ruben Zimmermann et al. (ed.). *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu*. 2nd ed. (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlag, 2015).

⁵ Mikeal C. Parsons and Michael Walde Martin. *Ancient Rhetoric and the New Testament: The Influence of Elementary Greek Composition* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2018).

⁶ Eric Ottenheijm and Marcel Poorthuis (eds.). *Parables in Changing Contexts. Essays on the Study of Parables in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism*. JCP 35 (Leiden: Brill, 2020); Albertina Oegema, Jonathan Pater, and Martijn Stoutjesdijk (eds.). *Overcoming Dichotomies: Parables, Fables, and Similes in the Graeco-Roman World*. WUNT 483 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022); Eric Ottenheijm, Marcel Poorthuis, and Annette Merz (eds.). *The Power of Parables. Essays on the Comparative Study of Jewish and Christian Parables*. JCP 39 (Leiden: Brill, 2024).

⁷ This was funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), see <https://gepris.dfg.de/gepris/projekt/495720705> (Dec 9, 2025); Justin D. Strong, *The Fables of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke: A New Foundation for the Study of Parables* (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

παροιμία, a term that was already used as synonym for παραβολή in the Septuagint (e.g. Sir 39). (By the way: The majority of Jesus' parables in the Synoptic Gospels are also without the paratextual classification of παραβολή). There are different terms in Ancient Greek like logos, mythos, ainos, parrhesia, allegoria, which can be used for the metaphorical narratives at stake.

3. Even in the synoptic tradition, there are indisputable parables that were not spoken by Jesus. For example, there are the parables of John the Baptist (Q 3:9; 3:17) or the centurion (Q 7:8) in the Q tradition;⁸ or the parable of the woman with the seven husbands told by the Sadducees (Matt 22:23–28). Furthermore, parable speech can no longer be limited to only the Synoptic Gospels but must also include other texts such as the Gospel of John, the Shepherd of Hermas, or early church fathers (Justin, Irenaeus, Tertullian).⁹

With a certain logic, we can therefore continue this well-reasoned inquiry and ask:

Did Paul also tell parables? One might object that Paul writes letters in which he argues his case. However, these reflections are by no means merely rational, logical syllogisms. Paul uses many stylistic devices common in *ancient rhetoric*. Within these rhetorical possibilities, the parable has been identified as an important rhetorical tool since Aristotle; one might think, for example, of Quintilian's remarks on exempla in Book V of his *Instructions to the Orator*.

In one of the most recent books on parables,¹⁰ this rhetorical dimension of parables was brought to the fore. The editors write (quote): "Parables are used to persuade an audience to accept particular thoughts or guidelines and to act accordingly. To put it simply, parables are all about rhetoric."¹¹

⁸ See Dieter T. Roth, Ruben Zimmermann, and Michael Labahn (eds.). *Metaphor, Narrative, and Parables in Q*. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 315 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 57–86.

⁹ See Jens Schröter, Soham Al-Suadi and Konrad Schwarz (eds.). *Gleichnisse und Parabeln in der frühchristlichen Literatur*. WUNT 456 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2021).

¹⁰ See Lauri Thurén, Antti Kyytsönen, and Katri Antin (eds.). *Parables as Persuasive Devices. Towards a New Era in Parable Research*. WUNT 2.633 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2025).

¹¹ Lauri Thurén, Katri Antin, and Antti Kyytsönen. "Introduction: From a Proclamation to an Invitation to Dance: Towards a New Era in Parable Research." in *Parables as Persuasive*

In addition, there is a more recent trend in Pauline scholarship that emphasizes the implicit or explicit *narrative elements* in Paul's letters. Several works have drawn new attention to "Paul as a storyteller," which can be positioned on a new methodological basis through narrative theories.¹² Finally, in the past, Pauline scholarship has already classified certain texts as parabolic: individual miniature narratives, such as the speaking body parts (1 Cor 12:12–31) or the olive tree with branches grafted into it (Rom 11:17–24), have been classified as "fables" or "parables" in the scholarship.¹³ Furthermore, these texts have been particularly influential in theology and reception history. This provides the basis for the following research questions: Why should Paul be almost categorically excluded from parable scholarship? Do we gain new insights on both parable scholarship and Pauline scholarship if we start a new chapter investigating parables in Pauline letters? What might be the benefits or problems of talking about parables in Paul?

1.2. Definition of a Parable/Fable

Before we turn to individual texts, I would like to begin with a definition of the genre of fable (Theon) and parable. Theon in his *Progymnasmata* (1st CE) defines a fable (*mythos*) as "a fictitious story that gives an image of truth/reality" (*Prog.* 4 p. 72.28, μῦθος ἐστὶ λόγος ψευδῆς εἰκονίζων ἀλήθειαν).¹⁴ This means that four criteria are considered characteristic of the genre: narrative,

Devices, ed. Lauri Thurén, Antti Kyytsönen, and Katri Antin. *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament* 2.633 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2025), 1–8.

¹² See Bruce W. Longenecker (ed.). *Narrative Dynamics in Paul: A Critical Assessment* (Westminster: John Knox, 2002); N.T. Wright. *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, vol. 4 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (London: SPCK, 2013); or comprehensively Christoph Heilig. *Paul the Storyteller: A Narratological Approach* (Minneapolis: Eerdmans, 2024).

¹³ See, for instance, Matthias G. Hartung, "Die kultische bzw. agrarisch biologische Logik der Gleichnisse von der Teighebe und vom Ölbaum in Röm 11,16–24," *NTS* 45 (1999): 127–40; Dieter Zeller, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther*. KEK 5 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Rupprecht, 2010), 395.

¹⁴ See the discussion on the definition by Gert-Jan Van Dijk, *Ainoi, Logoi, Mythoi: Fables in Archaic, Classical, and Hellenistic Greek Literature: With a Study of the Theory and Terminology of the Genre*, (Brill, 1997), 48; Jonas Grethlein, "Die Fabel" in *Die Literatur der archaischen und klassischen Zeit*, ed. Bernhard Zimmermann, *Handbuch der griechischen Literatur der Antike* 1 (München: C. H. Beck, 2011), 349–54.

fictional, metaphorical text, conveying the truth to a reader. This is close to the definition in the *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu*.¹⁵ Here, parable was defined as follows:¹⁶

A parable is a short narrativ (1) fictional (2) text that is related in the narrated world to known reality (3) but, by way of implicit or explicit transfer signals, makes it understood that the meaning of the narration must be differentiated from the literal words of the text (4).

In its appeal dimension (5) it challenges the reader to carry out a metaphoric transfer of meaning that is steered by contextual information (6).

According to the more recent dynamic genre theory, a mixture of fixed and flexible criteria is specified.¹⁷ In this way, it is possible to use the fixed criteria to distinguish the subject matter from related genres. At the same time, however, it is flexible enough to accommodate the wide variety of texts in the sources. Concentrating on attributes, we can name a bundle of six criteria of a parable: Narrativity, Fictionality, Realism, Metaphoricity, Appeal, and Contextuality. There are fixed criteria, such as narrativity or fictionality as well as the metaphorical transfer of meaning, which cannot be disputed.

One might argue that the criterion of “related to known reality” (possible world) still distinguishes between fables and parables. However, if we keep in mind that about one third of the fables in the famous collection of Phaedrus, Babrius, or the Augustana-Collection of Aesop also refer to known reality (without the inclusion of animals) this strict separation between fables and parables cannot be maintained in view of the flexible use of the miniature narratives in antiquity. In other words, if we open the field in this direction, we

¹⁵ Approximately 50 scholars agreed on a definition 20 years ago that was inspired by literary studies. It has been largely approved and has influenced scholars beyond the New Testament to study Jewish meshalim and Greco-Roman fables.

¹⁶ See the English translation in Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables*, 137 based on Zimmermann, *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu*, 25.

¹⁷ See Ruben Zimmermann, *Parabeln in der Bibel: Die Sinnwelten der Gleichnisse Jesu entdecken* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlag; Penguin Random House, 2023), 124–36.

could include, for instance, also the body-fable in 1Cor 12 (where speaking body parts goes beyond known reality) to this area of study.¹⁸

Based on these considerations regarding the parable/fable genre, this article uses the Epistle to the Romans as a sample and test case and develop my argument in four steps. This leads to the more general question what insights the idea of parables in Paul has for literary scholarship on Paul as well as for genre-oriented parable research.

2. Parables in Paul. A Test Study on the Epistles to the Romans

2.1. Overview of Some Relevant Passages: Where Are the Parables in Romans?

Based on the criteria mentioned above, the first question to ask is which passages in Romans can be identified as parables. Or, from the contrary perspective: Which passages are not parables, even though they use metaphors, for example?

Let us begin at the beginning. In Rom 1:13 Paul tells his addressees that he has planned to come to them, so that he may obtain *fruit* among them comparable to the rest of the gentiles (ἵνα τινὰ καρπὸν σχῶ καὶ ἐν ὑμῖν καθὼς καὶ ἐν τοῖς λοιποῖς ἔθνεσιν).¹⁹ The fruit metaphor used for missionary work or ethics is a well-established stock metaphor in early Christianity and also in the Pauline Epistles (e.g., Gal 5:22; Phil 1:11). It can also be found in parables, as well in the Synoptic Gospels (e.g., Mark 4:1–9, 26–30; Luke 13:6–9; etc.) and in John (4:35–38; 15:1–8).

¹⁸ See Ruben Zimmermann. “The Body-Fables in Babrius, Fab. 134 and 1 Cor 12. Hierarchic or Democratic Leadership in Crisis-Management?.” *Hervormde Teologiese Studies/HTS Theological Studies* 77 (2021), 1–8.

¹⁹ Rom 1:13 (NRSV): “I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as I have among the rest of the Gentiles.”

However, the use of the fruit metaphor in Rom 1:13 (also in Rom 6:21; 15:28) lacks a narrative context. According to Blumenberg's definition,²⁰ this is a cold or lexicalized metaphor and is not part of a parable. In order to speak of a parable, narrativity and fictionality must necessarily be added to metaphoricality.

In his pioneering work on "Analogy in the Letters of Paul," Herbert M. Gale lists and classifies seven passages in Romans (Rom 4:4; 5:7; 6:1–14, 15–23; 7:1–6; 9:20–24; 11:16–24) that are relevant to his inquiry.²¹ In his preface, Gale likened Pauline analogy to the parables of Jesus and demanded that the analogous "pictures" be given the same attention as the parables of Jesus.²² Nevertheless, his list makes it clear that though analogy also involves metaphorical transfer (as ... so), the analogy with Abraham (Rom 4:3–4) or with a daring hero (Rom 5:7) does not make these passages parables. However, there are sections in which Paul develops the metaphor narratively and transfers it to another semantic field. According to our definition, such instances constitute a parable in literary terms.

There are four such texts, which I would like to use as examples in this article, each highlighting different aspects:

Rom 7:1–6: on the woman set free after the death of her husband;

Rom 9:20–23: on the potter forming different objects out of the same lump of clay;

Rom 11:17–24: on the olive tree with branches broken out and drafted in;

Rom 12:4–8: the relationship of different parts of the same body

²⁰ See Hans Blumenberg. *Paradigmen zu einer Metaphorologie* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1998), 7–13.

²¹ Herbert M. Gale. *The Use of Analogy in the Letters of Paul* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster, 1964), 173–215.

²² Gale, *Analogy*, 7–8: "The present study was undertaken because of the writer's growing conviction that just as a careful analysis of the use of parables in the Gospels has served to provide criteria according to which the parables must be interpreted, so also a careful examination of the use of analogy in the letters of Paul might produce results that could be helpful in determining the extent to which any given analogy can be employed justifiably as a basis for an understanding of the apostle's theological thought."

2.2. Proofing Romans 7:1–6 as a Parable?

In one of the texts, I would like to examine in detail whether the literary criteria of a parable can actually be verified. Let us briefly recall the text of Rom 7:1–6 and then examine specifically whether the criteria mentioned in my definition are actually fulfilled.

At the center of the passage, we read the following text:

Greek Text (NA 28)	English Translation (NRSV)
² ἡ γὰρ ὕπανδρος γυνὴ τῷ ζῶντι ἀνδρὶ δέδεσται νόμῳ· ἐὰν δὲ ἀποθάνῃ ὁ ἀνὴρ, κατήργηται ἀπὸ τοῦ νόμου τοῦ ἀνδρός. ³ ἄρα οὖν ζῶντος τοῦ ἀνδρός μοιχαλὶς χρηματίζει ἐὰν γένηται ἀνδρὶ ἐτέρῳ· ἐὰν δὲ ἀποθάνῃ ὁ ἀνὴρ, ἐλευθέρα ἐστὶν ἀπὸ τοῦ νόμου, τοῦ μὴ εἶναι αὐτὴν μοιχαλίδα γενομένην ἀνδρὶ ἐτέρῳ.	² Thus a married woman is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives; but if her husband dies, she is discharged from the law concerning the husband. ³ Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man, she is not an adulteress.

1. Narrativity: Is This Text a Narrative Text? A fundamental condition of narrativity is the presence of a story or a change in status. There must also be one or more characters who act in space and time. In Rom 7:1–6, there is a protagonist (the married woman) alongside her husband and another man who is a minor character. The woman is not only characterized as “married,” but also with the traits “adulteress” or “free woman.” The change in status—and thus an action in time—is achieved through her cohabitation with another man or through the death of her first husband. It is therefore a short story told through two “if” clauses with a double outcome. If she commits herself to

another man, she is referred to as an adulteress as long as her husband is still alive. Once he has died, she is free to enter into a new marriage.²³

The conditional structure also highlights the second criterion. This is not a historical story, but a made-up one. According to Genette's distinction,²⁴ it is not a factual story in narrative mode, but a fictional story (2. *Fictionality*). This is also confirmed by the general introduction of the woman, who is not a named character. She is an arbitrarily chosen married woman, which the NRSV translates appropriately as "a married woman."

The parable is a fictional story but remains a part of known reality (possible world) and therefore differs from unrealistic fiction or fantasy. The story told in Rom 7 is undoubtedly realistic (3. *Realism*). It tells of marriage, the death of a husband, and women's attachment to their husbands. There were certainly women who remained unmarried or as widows (in today's terms, "singles"), but this was the exception. Although married men and women were forbidden from having relationships or affairs with other men and women under Jewish law (e.g., the Decalogue), many sources and debates show that this was entirely realistic. Even the phrase "she lives with another man while her husband is alive" gains historical plausibility through the marriage of Herod Antipas to Herodias. Antipas married Herodias even though her husband Philip (Herod Boethus in some sources) was still alive (see Mark 6:17–18²⁵). This was forbidden according to the Jewish Law (Lev 18:16; 20:21). John the Baptist leveled this charge against Herod, and it ultimately cost him his head.

However, the marriage scenario in Rom 7 is not told for its own sake; it is transferred to another semantic field and is therefore metaphorical (4. *Metaphoricity*). This transfer is achieved in Rom 7 by placing the story in a frame (introductory verse 1 and verses 4–7), by means of which a comparison is realized. The connecting link is the comparative particle ὥς which is included in

²³ On narrativity, see also Peter Spitaler. "Analogic Reasoning in Romans 7:2–4," *JBL* 125 (2006), 715–47, here 720–21.

²⁴ See Gérard Genette, "Fictional Narrative, Factual Narrative," *Poetics Today* 11 (1990), 755–74.

²⁵ Mark 6:17–18 (NRSV): "For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. ¹⁸ For John had been telling Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.'"

Rom 7:4 (ὥς + τε → ὥστε²⁶) and frequently used in parables of the synoptic tradition (e.g., Mark 4:31 ὥς κόκκῳ σινάπεως,²⁷ see also ὥσπερ in Rom 12:4).

According to the literary scholar R. Zymner, a parable has an “appeal dimension.”²⁸ This means that the parable is directly addressed to the reader and aims to lead them to a new insight. This address to the recipients could hardly be clearer than in Rom 7. At the beginning of this chapter, Paul addresses his readers: “Do you not know, brothers (and sisters)” (Rom 7:1), and he repeats this direct address in the transfer signal: “in the same way, my brothers” (v. 4). Thus, criterion 5 *appeal*, is also fulfilled here. Finally, the text is integrated into the broader discourse on the law in Rom 3–7, so that criterion 6, the criterion of *contextuality*, is also definitely met.

In summary, we can see that all six criteria of the parable definition are fulfilled in Rom 7 and that the text can therefore be considered a parable based solely on a literary analysis.

In the following, however, I would like to ask additional questions as to whether other aspects of the parable can be identified in Romans that reveal the value of examining these passages explicitly as parables.

2.3. Parallel Fable/Parable-Tradition with Romans 9 and 12 as Examples

If we want to talk about genre – as opposed to mere literary stylistic devices – then a comparative analysis is necessary. A single text cannot form a genre on its own. Rather, there needs to be a familial resemblance to other texts from other corpora. This can be demonstrated both formally (using criteria, see my definition) and in terms of content.

²⁶ Though ὥστε mostly functions as a conjunction of result/consequence, introducing consecutive clauses, the etymological origin from the comparative particle ὥς is still there when combined with the enclitic particle τε → ὥστε.

²⁷ See also Mark 4:26: οὕτως ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ ὥς ἄνθρωπος; Mark 14:34 etc.

²⁸ Rüdiger Zymner. *Uneigentlichkeit: Studien zur Semantik und Geschichte der Parabel* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1991), 60–62; see for details Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables*, 147–48.

Since miniature narratives such as fables and parables are characterized by a wide and varied range of examples (Konstan speaks of “open texts”²⁹), it is neither possible nor reasonable to reconstruct an original form (in German: *Urform, Ausgangsform*). Instead, the aim is to compare similar variations in an intertextual analysis. I would like to do so by referring to two Pauline parables in Romans:

2.3.1. Romans 9:20–23: Pottery-Parables in Jewish Tradition

First, the “pottery-parable” in Rom 9 will be examined. In a series of rhetorical questions, Paul compares the relationship between God and man to a potter who makes vessels out of clay.

At the center of these questions we read:

ἢ οὐκ ἔχει ἐξουσίαν ὁ κεραμεὺς τοῦ πηλοῦ ἐκ τοῦ αὐτοῦ φυράματος ποιῆσαι ὃ μὲν εἰς τιμὴν σκεῦος ὃ δὲ εἰς ἀτιμίαν;

Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one object for special use and another for ordinary use? (Rom. 9:21 NRSV)

We could ask whether this is actually a parable, since it is formulated in the form of a question. However, several well-known parables of Jesus, such as the lost sheep in Matt 18:12–14, or the blind leading the blind (Luke 6:39), are also formulated (entirely) as questions.³⁰ Questions even play a central role in the parables of Jesus, as I have pointed out elsewhere.³¹

²⁹ David Konstan. “The Alexander Romance: The Cunning of the Open Text.” *Lexis* (1998): 123–38, 128.

³⁰ See Luke 6:39: “Εἶπεν δὲ καὶ παραβολὴν αὐτοῖς· μήτι δύναται τυφλὸς τυφλὸν ὁδηγεῖν; οὐχὶ ἀμφοτέρω εἰς βόθυνον ἐμπεσοῦνται;” “He also told them a parable: ‘Can a blind person guide a blind person? Will not both fall into a pit?’”; or the first part of Matt 18:12–14: “What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?”

³¹ Ruben Zimmermann. “Form und Funktion der Frageparabeln des erinnerten Jesus,” in *Gleichnisse und Parabeln in der frühchristlichen Literatur: Methodische Konzepte, religionshistorische Kontexte, theologische Deutungen*, ed. Jens Schröter, Konrad Schwarz,

What interests me here, in particular, is the realistic source domain of the image (work of the potter), or rather the stock metaphors, which are essential elements of the parable. And here we see that the motif of God as a potter is firmly rooted in Jewish tradition. The commentaries on Rom 9:20–23 mostly refer to Isaiah. In Isa 29:16, as in Romans, rhetorical questions emphasize the difference between the potter and the clay, transferred to God and the people of Israel, with the speech of the clay or work to the potter clearly including narrative elements.³² The scene in Jer 18:1–17, in which the potter's work is described in detail, is even more clearly elaborated as a narrative. Once again, the potter is an image for God and the work of the potter for Israel; the narrative indicates a transfer of meaning, similar to a parable.

Furthermore, there is a rabbinic parable referring to God as a potter in the Talmud Yerushalmi, Rosh Hashanah 1.3.57c: Rabbi Eleazar said, “In the way of the

world (בְּהֵגֶגְ שִׁבְעוֹלָם) what is more pleasing to the potter: to make a hundred jars, or to observe them? Is it not to observe them?”³³ Here also we find the mashal proper formulated as a question.

In summary, the motif of God as a potter and the people as his work is frequently used in Jewish tradition and also attested in the form of parabolic texts (meshalim).

2.3.2. Romans 12:4–8 (1Cor 12): Body Fables in Graeco-Roman Tradition

and Soham Al-Suadi. *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament* 456. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021), 99–117.

³² See Isa 29:16: “You turn things upside down! Shall the potter be regarded as the clay? Shall the thing made say of its maker, ‘He did not make me’; or the thing formed say of the one who formed it, ‘He has no understanding?’” In the prayer form, Isa 64:7–8 states: “Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.” Furthermore T. Naph 2:2–4 and Gen Rab 32:3, where the question is raised, why God puts the righteous people on trial more often than the sinners, and the answer is that it is like a potter who checks his strong pottery more often than his weak vessels.

³³ The rabbinic Text refers to Ps 33:15. The introductory formula is בְּהֵגֶגְ שִׁבְעוֹלָם (“in the way of the world”), can be used as synonym for the genre term מִשָּׁל. I am grateful to Reuven Kiperwasser for drawing my attention to the rabbinic texts here.

My second example deals with the parable of the body and its parts. Paul refers extensively to this parabolic text in 1 Cor 12, in which he has the parts of the body enter into dialogue with one another. Here, the foot or the ear, for example, can speak like people, breaking with known reality so that this text should be classified rather as a fable than a parable. However, Paul draws on this fable not only in 1 Cor 12, but also in Rom 12:4–8.

καθάπερ γὰρ ἐν ἐνὶ σώματι πολλὰ μέλη ἔχομεν, τὰ δὲ μέλη πάντα οὐ τὴν αὐτὴν ἔχει πράξιν, οὕτως οἱ πολλοὶ ἐν σωμᾷ ἐσμεν ἐν Χριστῷ, τὸ δὲ καθ' εἷς ἀλλήλων μέλη.

For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. (Rom 12:4–5 NRSV)

By addressing both the diversity of the members and the interconnectedness and belonging to one body in Christ and referring to the different spiritual gifts, Romans reads like an abbreviated reminiscence of the longer story in 1 Cor 12.

Once again, the fables of the body and its limbs applied to different social groups is found in many Greek and Latin texts in ancient discourse.³⁴ Fable scholars (like Nøjgaard, van Dijk, or Adrados) differentiated two branches of the tradition: one establishing an opposition between head and limbs and one between belly and limbs.³⁵ Well known – also in reception history – is the fable told by Menenius Agrippa. During the first secession of the plebs in 494 BCE, a major social and political crisis in early Republican Rome, the Roman

³⁴ Greek versions are known in the Augustana collection of Aesop's fables *Aes.* 130, see Ben Edwin Perry, *Aesopica. Vol. 1: Greek and Latin Texts* (Arno Press, 1952. Repr. Arno Press, 1980), 371–72; in Plutarch's biography of Caius Marcus Coriolanus (*Cor.* 6.1–4), Dionysius of Halicarnassus in his *Roman Antiquities* (*Ant. Rom.* 6.86.1–5), and Babrius, *Fab.* 134; Latin version in Quintilian (*Inst.* 5.11.19) and a longer Latin version in Livy (*Hist.* 2.32.7–33.1, and Maximus Tyrius *Dissertationes* 15.5).

³⁵ See Morten Nøjgaard, *La fable antique* (Copenhagen: NYT Nordisk, 1967), 425 and Gert-Jan van Dijk, *Ainoi, Logoi, Mythoi: Fables in Archaic, Classical, and Hellenistic Greek Literature: With a Study of the Theory and Terminology of the Genre*. (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 312; similarly, Francisco Rodríguez Adrados, *History of the Graeco-Latin Fable*. Vol. 1–3. MnemSup 201. Leiden: Brill, 1999–2003, 2:106–07, listing of this fable in the various sources.

patrician and consul Agrippa told the fable of the “stomach and the limbs” to successfully mediate and calm the revolting people.

The sources also agree that the text is a fable. Quintilian speaks of “fabella” (*Inst.* 5.11.19) and Dionysus of Halicarnassus explicitly assigns the fable to the Aesopic tradition³⁶, using one of the major Greek words on fable since Aristotle.³⁷

I do not wish to go into the details of a comparison at this point. Rather, I can draw the following preliminary conclusion: as exemplified in Rom 9 and Rom 12, when Paul argues by means of metaphorical analogy he draws on material that in ancient discourse can clearly be classified as fable or parable literature.

2.4. Rhetorical Function and Theological Significance with Romans 7:1–6 and 11:17–24 as Examples

In the following section, I would like to ask what possible added value there could be in perceiving individual passages in Romans as parables. I would like to briefly illustrate this using examples from Rom 7 and Rom 11.

2.4.1. Romans 7:1–6: The Parable on the Woman with the Dying Husband

It has always been observed in commentaries that this section contains inconsistencies. For example, it is stated at the beginning that the law rules over man as long as he lives (v. 1). This principle would suggest an example in which man becomes free from the law through his (own) death. Accordingly, there is also evidence in rabbinic literature that a dead person is no longer bound by the law, i.e., that he may wear mixed fabrics as a corpse³⁸, or the statement by R. Johanan (d. 279) who interprets Ps 88:6 (“free among the

³⁶ See *Ant. Rom.* 6.83.2: “a fable [μῦθος] composed after the manner of Aesop”; Plutarch also speaks of μῦθος, *Cor.* 6.2).

³⁷ On terminology, see Adrados, *History*, 3:172.

³⁸ See bNid 61b contrary to Lev 19:19.

dead”) that the dead are free from the Torah and the commandments (bShab 30a³⁹).

According to Rom 7, however, it is not the deceased who becomes free, but the wife of the dead man. She is also only indirectly freed from the law, but rather from her bond to her husband including the marriage contract. Wolter comments that this is “obviously suboptimal” in the argument and that one would be compelled to accept this “logical inaccuracy.”⁴⁰ However, the problem arises above all when one expects a strict logical conclusion in Paul’s argumentation.⁴¹ If we consider the passage as a parable, then a certain vagueness is inherent in the genre of the parable; indeed, as I have shown repeatedly elsewhere, the parable even thrives explicitly on the polyvalence of interpretations.

Accepting that this is a parable opens the horizon of interpretation even further.

In *Puzzling the Parables*, I have referred to the connection between parables and image fields or stock metaphors. For example, the parable of the lost sheep can only be adequately understood if one recognizes that it evokes the image field of God or the Messiah as the shepherd of Israel.⁴²

Similarly, in Rom 7, the stock metaphor of God as the bridegroom and Israel as his bride is evoked. That Paul is aware of this image field is particularly evident in 2 Cor 11:1–4, where he describes himself as the bride’s father who guards the virginity of the bride.⁴³ The bride is the (Corinthian) church, which is to be led to Christ as her bridegroom.

³⁹ bShab 151b: “As soon as a person dies, he is free from the Torah and the commandments.”

⁴⁰ Michael Wolter, *Der Brief an die Römer. Teilband 1: Röm 1–8*. EKK VI/1 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2014), 411.

⁴¹ The most comprehensive interpretation along these lines is presented by David Hellholm.

⁴² See Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables*, 198–204.

⁴³ See my analysis in Ruben Zimmermann. *Geschlechtermetaphorik und Gottesverhältnis. Traditionsgeschichte und Theologie eines Bildfelds in Urchristentum und antiker Umwelt*. WUNT 2.122 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 300–325. In his commentary, Dieter Zeller also recalls bridal imagery as a possible background of Rom 7:1–7; see Dieter Zeller. *Der Brief an die Römer übersetzt und erklärt von Dieter Zeller*, RNT (Regensburg: Pustet, 1985), 132.

Within the imagery that has been widespread since the prophecies of Hosea and Isaiah, the Sinai Covenant has been regarded as the reference event for the marriage of YHWH and Israel, especially in rabbinic texts since the Tannaitic period. Moses is the bride's escort, and the Torah is considered the marriage certificate or marriage contract.⁴⁴

In reference to Rom 7:2–4, the debate about the law is thus placed in a traditional metaphorical framework. The Torah binds the bride or wife in a manner comparable to a marriage contract. However, with the death of the husband, this marriage contract is no longer valid. The community associated with the metaphor of the bride – whether in Corinth or Rome – can thus enter into a new bond with Christ as the bridegroom. The incongruity seen by many interpreters, namely that the death of the husband does not invalidate the law, can be overcome in this way. It is the Torah as a marriage contract that becomes invalid with Jesus's death. The marriage with the one “who has been raised from the dead” (Rom 7:4) gets a new contract, it is made “under grace” not “under the law” anymore (Rom 6:14: οὐ γάρ ἐστε ὑπὸ νόμον ἀλλ’ ὑπὸ χάριν).

2.4.2. Romans 11:1–24: The Parable on the Olive Tree

Finally, I would like to comment on the passage about the olive tree. Without going into the complex line of argumentation in Rom 9–11, I would like to point out the possible added value we gain by interpreting Rom 11:24–27 as a parable.

There is little doubt that this is also a metaphorical, fictional narrative about the ingrafting of an olive tree. Michael Theobald and Klaus Haacker refer to it as a “figurative expression” or “parable.”⁴⁵ The linguistic peculiarity lies in the fact that the source domain (the olive tree cultivation) is immediately

⁴⁴ According to mTaan 4:8, Rabbi Shimon b. Gamliel II (ca. 140 CE) interprets the “day of the wedding” (Cant 3:11b) as the giving of the Torah; see further ShirR 6:3; ShemR 52:5; BemR 2:25; as well as references in Zimmermann, *Geschlechtermetaphorik*, 311 n. 399, as well as 208–214 on the Sinai Covenant as a wedding.

⁴⁵ Michael Theobald, *Römerbrief: Kapitel 1–11*. SKK 6/1 (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk 1992), 298; Klaus Haacker, *Der Brief des Paulus an die Römer*. ThHK 6. 4th ed. (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2021), 276: “Ein Gleichnis aus der Landwirtschaft”; 277: “Der neue Abschnitt ist eine Bildrede.”

mixed with the target domain (Israel and the church). However, this does not necessarily prevent the attribution of a genre.

Two aspects seem worth mentioning here:

1. The Use of Metaphor:

The commentaries often point out that Paul overuses his experience of agricultural practice or that his use of metaphor is unsuccessful.

It is true that it is common practice to graft noble branches onto wild roots and not vice versa, as Paul describes (although there have been exceptions, as Columella reports).⁴⁶

Even more problematic is the idea that the branches cut from the good olive tree are grafted back at a later date (Rom 11:23–24), which goes beyond the bounds of what is biologically possible. But does this show that Paul had no idea about arboriculture, or that his metaphor has gone awry, as Marc Nanos suggests?⁴⁷

Parables fundamentally require a realistic horizon. However, the boundaries between reality and the world of fables are more permeable than was long thought in parable research.

Even the synoptic parables sometimes go beyond the bounds of reality, for example, when an enormous amount of flour is used in the parable of the leaven, the shepherd leaves 99 sheep unprotected, or all the messengers and finally the son of the vineyard owner are murdered. This is all the more true when the realm of fable is crossed, as in the case of the speaking body parts in 1 Cor 12.

Crossing boundaries is therefore consistent with the genre of parables. Playing with, blending, and exaggerating the imagery only becomes a problem

⁴⁶ See Columella, *De re rustica* 5.9.16; *De arboribus* 26–27; see also A.G. Baxter and J.A. Ziesler, “Paul and Arboriculture: Romans 11.17–24,” *JSNT* 24 (1985): 25–32.

⁴⁷ See Marc Nanos, “Broken Branches: A Pauline Metaphor Gone Awry? (Romans 11:11–24).” in *Between Gospel and Election: Explorations in the Interpretation of Romans 9–11*. Eds. Florian Wilk and J. Ross Wagner. WUNT 257 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 339–76.

when viewed against the backdrop of strict rhetoric. If we assume that Paul also tells parables, then these ambiguities are entirely legitimate and common.

2. The Genre of Parable in the Structure of Romans 9–11

The long section of Rom 9–11 offers enough material for much study and dissertations in terms of its arguments and sophisticated rhetoric.

However, it may come as a surprise that Paul ends the long discourse with three genres that lie beyond the strict argumentation. At the end is a prayer of praise, a doxology (Rom 11:33–36). Before that, at penultima position, the apostle shares a mysterion (vv. 25–27) with his audience. And then, as a third genre in the final section, he offers a parable (vv. 17–24).

Paul thus deliberately departs from pure argumentation because, in my view, the subject cannot be fully grasped by such means.

Or to put it positively: Paul knows about the power of images and other forms of speaking, such as the *meshalim*.

And that is precisely how he does not fail to have an effect. Without being able to prove this empirically, I would venture to suggest that the mysterium and the olive tree parable from Rom 9–11 probably have the most intense impact in reception history of Rom 9–11. It is the parables that particularly captivate readers by means of the literary aesthetics and appeal character. Their openness for multiple interpretation simultaneously sets in motion processes of reading (or, in semiotic terms, infinite semiosis) across time. One cannot come to terms with them – and that is a good thing.

3. Conclusion/Research Question: Parables in Paul?

With this article, I wanted to float a trial balloon that asks the question: Is not only Jesus but also Paul a parable teller in early Christianity? Or to express this in a more academic manner: Does it make sense to include Paul's letters in parable research?

Recent developments in parable research as well as in Paul research suggest that this question can be or even should be asked. At the same time, we must ask: What do we benefit by interpreting individual narrative passages in Paul

as parables? Is there added value and a gain in knowledge? Or is it just old wine in new wineskins?

My analyses, which are only sketched out here, have yielded the following initial answer:

1. There are passages in Paul's letters that can be identified as parables according to the literary criteria of the parable genre.

2. Specific features of parables open up new horizons of interpretation:

For example, the tradition of *stock metaphors* can be incorporated more strongly into the interpretation, even if there are no direct quotations or allusions.

Polyvalent Interpretation is not a lack of comprehension but a chance to diverse reading.

The elements that characterize the parables – *narrativity*, *metaphoricity*, and *fictionality* – also shed new light on the theological art of reflection in Paul.

3. The perspective provided by parable research can overcome interpretative dead ends (e.g., logical problems in Rom 7).

4. The letters of Paul can be integrated more deeply into the literary and religious-historical context, since parables and fables enjoyed widespread popularity across cultural boundaries.

More specifically: if we accept Paul – the pharisee and stoic influenced thinker – as a parable teller it might be easier to link early Christian parables and both the many (later) rabbinic parables as well as the Greco-roman fables.

5. Pauline scholarship which opened up toward narrational elements in Paul's letters can be specified by including micro-narratives such as parables/fables, in addition to the primarily interest in the meta-narratives behind the letters up to now.

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