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Breaking Down Parables: Introductory Issues

"[Parables in the Hebrew Bible] are not, even indirectly, appeals to be righteous. What is done is done, and now must be seen to have been done; and God's hostile action can be confidently pronounced."

–M.D. Goulder, *Midrash and Lection in Matthew*

"[A] first step when we fail with parables would be to structure the defeat, and to chart the contours of our ignorance."

–John J. Bonsignore, "In Parables: Teaching through Parables"

Nearly 40 years ago, if you asked a Hebrew Bible scholar to define the word "parable," he or she would have most likely replied that it is a genre designation for a type of short story and that it comes from the biblical Hebrew word *mashal* (plural form: *meshalim*). He or she would have cited the story Nathan tells to David in 2 Sam 12:1–4 or Isaiah's song of the vineyard in Isa 5:1–7 as typical examples of this parable genre. For instance, in his influential 1967 article on the so-called juridical parable genre, Uriel Simon includes these texts among his examples (he also cites 2 Sam 14:5–7; 1 Kgs 20:39–42; Jer 3:1–5).[1] Yet, in 1981, George W. Coats responds to Simon by correctly asking, "How can the story in II Samuel 12:1–4 and the song in Isaiah 5:1–7 belong to the same genre?"[2] Coats' question suggests that between the late 1960s and the early 1980s, a number of scholars had begun reconsidering how we should use the term parable (*mashal*).

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, a cluster of articles contended that we should not define a parable as designating a particular genre of narrative with its own particular generic properties. Although we may translate the Hebrew word *mashal* as parable, this same Hebrew word is also

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translated as song, saying, and proverb, depending on its context. This raises a problem for understanding *mashal* as a genre designation since, as Coats observes, songs, proverbs, and parables cannot all belong to the same literary genre. Thus, scholars began to question whether *mashal* serves as a genre designation because it covers such a wide variety of forms of speech.

They noted that *mashal* comes from the root *mshl*, which means similarity or comparison. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, proverbs, sayings, songs, and even statements about specific peoples and cities may all function as different types of comparisons. Scholars began to speak of *meshalim*, or comparisons, in their various forms as proverbial *meshalim*, song *meshalim*, short story *meshalim* (i.e., parables) and so forth.[3] In other words, by the early 1980s, the term parable came to describe a *function* of a short story rather than a genre of a short story. A story from any narrative genre may become a parable if a biblical character uses it to draw a comparison. Thus, nearly 30 years ago, the general scholarly consensus shifted to suggest that we should not define a *mashal* by its type or form, be it a proverb, a parable (i.e., short story), or a song. Rather, we should concentrate on its content and function.[4]

This book reflects the influence of this approach. We define parables in the Hebrew Bible as short stories from any narrative genre that function as explicit comparisons created by a biblical character rather than the reader. Biblical characters create parables by comparing a story with another situation within their immediate context. Parables are speech acts requiring both a speaker and an addressee within the biblical text.

Nonetheless, although this shift from a formal to a functional understanding of parables serves as an important methodological corrective, it does not explain fully what function(s) the parables actually serve in the Hebrew Bible. Within the prose sections of the Hebrew Bible, parables appear exclusively within stories of severe conflict, in which at least one person dies (Judges 9; 2 Samuel 12, 14; 1 Kings 20; 2 Kings 14). In its poetic sections, figures such as First Isaiah and Ezekiel employ parables when announcing a divine judgment against their addressees. Each parable in the Hebrew Bible seems to address a severe conflict in some fashion, but exactly how it does so remains open to debate among scholars.

A number of scholars suggest that parables in the Hebrew Bible aim to evoke a change of behavior or mindset on the parts of their addressees as one way to resolve conflict.[5] Yet this suggestion is not consistent with the effects of the parables that appear in prose contexts. Often, the addressee does not understand the parable as its speaker may intend. We may ask why a speaker would choose to communicate in parables if the addressees do not understand the intended point(s) on a routine basis. If a speaker hopes to convince his or her addressee of a point or set of points, why would he or she use a form of speech that is constantly misunderstood, especially if the parables supposedly function primarily to change the opinions or behaviors of their addressees, as some other more explicitly didactic examples of *meshalim* may do (cf. Psalm 49, 78; Job 27, 29–31)? In other words, the prose contexts of Hebrew Bible parables call into question scholarly assumptions about their function.

Some may not view the present prose contexts of parables in the Hebrew Bible as a serious problem since they may not accurately reflect how parables actually functioned or how addressees actually reacted to them within ancient Israel. General scholarly confidence in the capacity of the historical books (Joshua–2 Kings) to provide a window into the daily customs or practices of ancient Israelites has shifted considerably since the early 1980s.[6] In her influential study from 1982 on traditional sayings in the Hebrew Bible (which include some proverbial *meshalim*), Carole R. Fontaine argues that in the historical books "we are likely to find a more accurate representation of the way [traditional] sayings were actually used in [ancient Israelite social] interactions . . . our contention is that the saying must be used in a comprehensible way which approximates the way in which such interactions actually occurred in daily life."[7] In contrast to this position, however, more recent scholarship has raised doubts that the historical books provide much historically reliable material. We cannot say with absolute certainty whether the biblical accounts reflect the way that the short stories actually became comparisons or parables or whether these accounts accurately reflect ancient Israelite uses of speech genres. Nonetheless, the biblical authors or editors present the parables within prose settings that reflect what they understood as typical situations in which one would speak a parable, regardless of whether these situations reflect how ancient Israelites actually used these short stories as

comparisons, if they used them at all. Thus, the fact that parables do not result in a significant change of behavior among their biblical addressees requires a serious reexamination of how they function within Hebrew Bible conflicts.

In order to reexamine the function of parables, we contend that Hebrew Bible scholars must reconsider the relationship of genre and parable. For reasons explained earlier, scholarship has not focused seriously on issues of genre in the study of Hebrew Bible parables over the last few decades. This book recasts the question of how parables address conflicts in the Hebrew Bible by reconsidering the role of genre in parabolic interpretation. We argue later that the recent preference for understanding the term parable as a function instead of a genre comes partly from a reaction to older scholarly understandings of the term genre. Further attention to recent developments in genre theory may lead to a more rigorous examination of how parables function in the Hebrew Bible.

By attending to issues of genre, this book moves the study of parables in the Hebrew Bible beyond the widely held notion that they function primarily to change their addressees' ways. Instead, the parables help create, intensify, and justify judgments and hostile actions against their addressees. Speakers do this by comparing a curse, a petition, a taunt, and so on, with the addressees' current situation. This book's essays demonstrate this thesis mainly through close readings of the parables appearing in the Former Prophets as well as the conflicts that surround these parables.

In preparing for the studies of specific parables in the following chapters, this chapter addresses the definition and function of parables in the Hebrew Bible. We examine the following issues: (1) the relationship between parables (short story comparisons) and other types of comparisons in the Hebrew Bible (song comparisons, proverbial comparisons, and so on); (2) the relationship between genre and the rhetorical use(s) of parables in the context of Hebrew Bible conflicts; (3) whether the parables embedded in prose originally existed independent of their larger narrative surroundings; (4) the label parable in connection to related labels such as fables, allegories, riddles, and taunts; and (5) the rhetorical function of parables within Hebrew Bible prose. Finally, we give brief overviews of essays in the upcoming chapters.

THE DEFINITION OF PARABLES AND OTHER *MESHALIM*

Although *meshalim* may appear in a variety of forms (e.g., songs, proverbs, parables), they all evoke some type of comparison. A problem is that few biblical comparisons outside the book of Proverbs (titled *meshalim* in Hebrew) include the specific label *mashal* (only 1 Sam 10:12; 19:24; 24:14; Jer 31:39; Ezek 12:22; 17:2; 18:2; 24:3). Thus, we have difficulty trying to identify *meshalim* based on their form or label alone. Instead, we must examine the way that they function as comparisons to determine whether they qualify as *meshalim*.

Some *meshalim* contain internal comparisons. Terms such as "like" or "just as" appear within the *mashal* itself. For example, Gen 10:9 contains the saying, "Just like Nimrod who was a mighty hunter before YHWH." In this case, the saying establishes Nimrod as the model or exemplar of a great hunter. One may praise a given hunter by using this proverbial *mashal* to evoke a comparison to Nimrod.[8] We find these types of comparisons throughout the book of Proverbs, as well as in other biblical poetic literature.[9]

At other points, the *mashal* becomes the basis of a comparison that the speaker or addressee creates. In other words, instead of containing a comparison, the *mashal* brings about one.[10] For example, in 1 Sam 10:12b, the narrator notes that the question, "Is Saul also among the prophets?" became a *mashal* in Israel. For this question to function as a *mashal*, one must create a comparison between Saul's activity among the prophets and another person's activity in another circumstance. Along these lines, the short stories that serve as parabolic *meshalim* (parables) do not contain explicit comparisons. Rather, as with 1 Sam 10:12b, they become comparisons when a character relates them to what he or she understands as a corresponding situation.

Following our definition of Hebrew Bible parables based on their function as comparisons rather than their particular form of speech, a number of texts in prophetic and wisdom literature may qualify as parables depending on how broadly we define the term short story (e.g., Isa 5:1–7; 28:23–9; Ezek 15:1–28; 16:1–58; 17:1–10; 19:2–14; 23:1–29; 24:3–14; Amos 5:18; Prov 9:1–6; 24:30–32; Job 33:15–33). In addition, some texts from the Former Prophets, such as Judg 14:14 or 1 Kgs 20:11, may imply a larger narrative or a short story to function as a riddle *mashal* (Judg 14:14)

or a proverbial *mashal* (1 Kgs 20:11). Nonetheless, the Hebrew Bible labels a small number of these texts as *meshalim* (only Ezek 17:1–10; 24:3–14), even though they all may function as comparisons.[11] This fact suggests that a short story does not need to carry a specific label to qualify as a parable.

Nonetheless, the problem remains that no short stories within the prose portions of the Hebrew Bible receive the label of *mashal*, although many nonbiblical stories receive this label in later rabbinic writings.[12] In fact, the sages discuss whether entire biblical books or characters, such as Job, are parables (*b. B. Bat.* 15a). Similarly, some contemporary scholars argue that we should understand the entire book of Jonah as a *mashal* even though the book does not contain this label.[13] Although it remains possible that Job or Jonah functioned to evoke a comparison in some ancient circles, one biblical character (a speaker) does not tell these stories to another biblical character (an addressee) within a larger narrative. In other words, although they contain short stories, these books do not function as parables embedded within an ongoing narrative.

To be sure, through the repetition, contrast, or juxtaposition of words and motifs, a particular text or character within a biblical book may invite the reader to draw a comparison with another text or character or even with a situation external to the biblical text. This may allow an individual text to participate in the Bible's larger discourse, or reflection, on particular matters. For example, Jotham's parable in Judges 9 may participate in the book of Judges' discourse on kingship (we will return to Judges 9 in chapter 2). In this sense, every narrative may function as a parable (cf. *Song. Rab.* 1:8).[14] Yet, only the readers of the narrative have access to this type of parabolic discourse. The biblical characters who speak or hear parables do not show an awareness that they function as characters within the Bible. Thus, they do not have the same access to the narrative comparisons that the reader may create. For purposes of the current project, not every biblical narrative qualifies as a parable. Only those narratives in which the characters may access the comparison qualify as parables. The object of the comparison remains something within the particular narrative and not something within a different text or biblical book.

In at least five cases, a character in the Hebrew Bible tells a story that a character then compares to a situation in the surrounding narrative

(Judges 9; 2 Samuel 12, 14; 1 Kings 20; 2 Kings 14 [cf. 2 Chronicles 25]).
These cases form the basis for the studies in this book. These parables
provide the best examples of a story told by a character that becomes a
comparison created by a character within the ongoing narrative.[15] That
these parables all appear within the Former Prophets is a coincidence.
At the same time, their function to intensify messages of hostile divine
actions fits well with certain themes emphasized throughout the Former
Prophets and other popular locations for parables, such as First Isaiah
and Ezekiel.

USE OF THE TERM GENRE IN THIS BOOK

In the Hebrew Bible, characters create parables by comparing narratives
that invoke a variety of genres to corresponding conflicts. Throughout
this book, we pay close attention to the specific genre(s) invoked by the
narrative in order to understand better how the parable relates to the
surrounding conflict. Thus, we should explain how we use the term
genre throughout this book in more detail.

Thirty years ago, many biblical scholars approached genre as a means of
classifying texts. According to this approach, a text or speech act belongs
to a given genre when it exhibits some minimally required number of
properties or features that make up that genre in its hypothetically pure
or ideal form. The notion that genres have pure or ideal forms, which can
become impure when altered, has been popular in Hebrew Bible form
criticism since at least the time of Hermann Gunkel near the turn of
the last century.[16] If we understand the term parable as a genre, then we
would investigate whether a particular text possesses enough requisite
features of the parable genre in its pure form to qualify as belonging to
this genre. This type of approach influenced the study of New Testament
parables in the 1970s and 1980s, whereas Hebrew Bible scholars at that
time began to emphasize function over form in the study of *meshalim.*
Although distinctions among some form(s) of *meshalim* remained part
of the discussion (e.g., wisdom sayings from admonitions), Hebrew Bible
scholars focused more on how *meshalim* "performed" within the context
in which they arose.[17]

Yet, since the early 1980s, biblical scholarship has witnessed major
developments in its approach to genre theory. Whereas traditional

approaches to genre focus on how it classifies a text for its readers, more
recent approaches focus on how it provides a rhetorical orientation for its
speakers. Writing in the early part of the 21st century, Carol A. Newsom
observes, "Over the past quarter century, however, genre theorists [such
as Alastair Fowler or Jacques Derrida] have become increasingly dissatis-
fied with an approach that defines genres by means of lists of features."[18]
Such theorists suggest that although the term genre may refer to various
modes of speech (including curses, taunts, wisdom sayings, and so on),
we should not think of the term only as a means of classifying types
of speech or texts. Rather, the term genre also relates to the rhetorical
orientation of a text or speech act.[19] It is a manner of speaking as much
as a manner of classifying. A text or speaker within a text may employ a
particular mode or genre of speech to help structure a message or convey
meaning.

In long similar lines, Marvin Sweeney and Ehud Ben Zvi suggest that
"[the 21st century] form-critical scholars will no longer presume that
genres are static or ideal entities that never change. Rather . . . they will
study the means by which genres are transformed to meet the needs of the
particular communicative situation of the text."[20] A text or speech does
not belong to a given genre simply because it exhibits some minimal
requirement of elements that make up that reconstructed genre in its
ideal form. Instead, as Newsom explains, "rather than referring to texts
as belonging to genres one might think of texts as participating in them,
invoking them, gesturing to them, playing in and out of them, and in so
doing, continually changing them."[21]

Newsom's observation fits well with the way speakers in the Hebrew
Bible employ various narrative genres when creating parables. Speakers
of parables do not attempt to duplicate some ideal form of a narrative
genre. Instead, they invoke elements that recall and use particular modes
of speech to provide their parable with a particular rhetorical orientation.
Thus, in comparing their addressees' situation to a narrative invested with
a certain rhetorical orientation, a speaker supplies additional rhetorical
intensity to his or her point(s) regarding a corresponding situation. For
example, we will find that Jehoash does not duplicate an idealized form
of an ancient Near Eastern disputation text in his story of the plants and
animals of Lebanon. Nonetheless, he invokes or plays with elements of
this genre or mode of speech to emphasize the insulting nature of his
reply to Amaziah (2 Kings 14). We may appreciate more precisely the

rhetorical function of the comparison by paying greater attention to the particular narrative genre or manner of speech invoked in it.

These differences in approach to the study of genre represent more of a shift in emphasis than a new understanding of genre. Multiple emphases exist in genre study, some addressing the speakers within texts and some addressing the readers of texts. Genre may provide a speaker with a way of communicating and framing his or her perception of a situation or a reality. Genre may also provide a reader with a way to classify and frame his or her perception of a text. Even though biblical scholars have traditionally emphasized a text's formal properties when studying genre throughout the last century, they have often tried to reconstruct how genres operated within a particular situation in life in the ancient Near East (setting-in-life or *Sitz im leben*). In this sense, such studies do not ignore the rhetorical functions of a genre even when trying to isolate its pure or ideal form. Thus, we should not press the distinction between form and function to contrast traditional and more recent approaches to genre within biblical scholarship. For purposes of this book, we follow recent developments that emphasize genre as a means of rhetorically orienting a biblical speaker's message(s) within the present text. Our approach to genre may not represent an entirely new use of the term as much as a renewed emphasis on its function.

Due to this emphasis on genre as providing a rhetorical orientation for a text or speech rather than as the categorization of a text or speech, the following chapters will not attempt to reconstruct a pure or ideal form of the genres under consideration. It is more important to show how the particular narratives invoke and recall particular genres in order to supply additional force to the speaker's point(s). Thus, the following chapters spend more space discussing the rhetorical use of particular genres or modes of speech in the ancient Near East than they do showing how the discussed narratives conform to an idealized structure of a genre. For example, when discussing the parables in 2 Samuel 14 and 1 Kings 20, we consider the situations in which people in the ancient Near East invoked the petitionary narrative genre instead of the precise form of the petitionary narrative. To be sure, we do not discuss genres in an ahistorical manner. Rather, we understand genres as products of particular sociohistorical settings that biblical authors would have recognized or at least imagined and tried to re-create, whether accurately or not.

Our approach to genre helps clarify the function(s) of parables in the Hebrew Bible. In the prose sections of the Hebrew Bible, none of the genres of the narratives that become parables represents modes of speech whose primary rhetorical orientation is didactic (unlike the *meshalim* in Psalm 49, 78; Job 27; 29–31).[22] Judges 9 creates a parable out of a curse, 2 Samuel 14 and 1 Kings 20 out of a petitionary narrative, and 2 Kings 14 and 2 Chronicles 25 out of a disputation text. These genres have a variety of rhetorical orientations. Since a parable is a function rather than a genre (such as a wisdom saying), we cannot argue that the rhetorical orientation of parables remains primarily didactic or aims to resolve conflicts through commonly acknowledged wisdom simply because they are parables. Nor do the parables clarify a particular lesson by way of comparison. Instead, we must examine the rhetorical orientation of the specific genre that the parable invokes to understand how it relates to the corresponding situation or addresses a conflict in the surrounding narrative.

The following chapters contain case studies that focus on close readings of selected parables. These studies focus on the particular genres invoked in the short stories that a speaker turns into parables (e.g., curses, petitions, taunts, and so forth). The study of these genres becomes central to understanding the way a parable helps communicate its speaker's message. To understand the relationship between a parable and the conflict it addresses, we must examine why and how a speaker invokes a particular genre as the basis for his or her parable and how a particular genre meets the needs of the communicative situation of a particular parable, to use Sweeney and Ben Zvi's words. Biblical scholars have paid little attention to the contribution made by the genre invoked by the short story that becomes a parable. Often, however, its speaker employs a particular genre to facilitate or intensify his or her rhetorical point(s).

did the parables ever exist as independent narratives?

In the early part of the 20th century, scholars who studied parables as a genre assumed that to uncover their sociohistorical settings, we must recover their setting in life prior to their present literary location.[23] Yet this method resulted in an unfortunate focus on the question of whether