



“Not Like the Rest of the Slaves”?

Slavery Parables in Early Rabbinic and Early Christian Literature



Martijn J. Stoutjesdijk

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Promotores

Prof. dr. M.J.H.M. Poorthuis (Tilburg University)

Prof. dr. A.B. Merz (Protestantse Theologische Universiteit)

Copromotor

Dr. H.L.M. Ottenheijm (Universiteit Utrecht)

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To all those who suffer from oppression and exploitation.

“You remember the old fable of ‘The Man and the Lion,’ where the lion complained that he should not be so misrepresented ‘when the lions wrote history.’
I am glad the time has come when the ‘lions write history’.”

Letter from Wendell Phillips, Esq. (Boston, April 22, 1845) to Frederick Douglass, printed in Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave. Written by Himself* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2009), 11.

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Preface – Acknowledgements

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As a PhD candidate I was affiliated with the Tilburg School of Catholic Theology (TST). This School turned out to be a welcoming and very pleasant working environment for which I would like to thank all my colleagues, from the supporting staff (Natascha, Rob, Agnes, Sanny, Jack, Ad, and Arnold) to the director Ada van der Velden-Westervelt, and its former dean Marcel Sarot. A special thanks to the regular residents of the *Atelier*, most notably Henk Schoot, Harm Goris, and my desk buddy – and future bishop, professor, or both – Anton ten Klooster, as well as to the members of the research group Teaching and Tradition (previously Initiation and Mystagogy), who gave me the opportunity to present and discuss my work at a very early stage.

The TST has provided me with many opportunities to develop myself. Thanks to that, I was able to serve for three years as managing editor of the *NTT Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion*, an experience that taught me a lot about the scholarly craft and the Dutch academic field and made me collaborate closely with chief editor Marcel Sarot, his successor Rick Benjamins, and the living historical memory of the journal, Arie Molendijk. Moreover, the TST has granted me the opportunity to continue working in academia after the finalization of my PhD as policy officer/secretary for the University Center for Chaplaincy Studies, a job for which I was warmly welcomed by its director Jacques Körver.

After entering the PhD Council of the TST, I received the opportunity to represent PhD candidates at many levels: Tilburg PhD Council (TiPP), the University Council and, eventually, the national PhD Network of the Netherlands (PNN). In all these forums I have worked together with many talented fellow PhD candidates. In particular I want to mention here Koen van der Krieken, Eva Zijlmans, and, of course, Anne de Vries with whom I worked together in many constellations. I always enjoyed our conversations, as well as her vivid intelligence and fervor when it came to injustice – whether those injustices regarded bees or bursary PhD candidates.

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Note to the Reader

The transliteration of Hebrew is in accordance with the general-purpose style of the *SBL Handbook of Style. For Biblical Studies and Related Disciplines*, 2nd ed. (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014), with the exception of the ן, which I transcribe as “ch.” For the spelling of the names of the early rabbis, see Appendix III.

All quotations from the Bible are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), unless otherwise indicated (the translation of the New Testament parables are my own). Hebrew and Greek from the Bible is quoted from the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (BHS) and the Novum Testamentum Graece, 28th edition (NA 28).

All texts and translations of Greco-Roman sources are quoted from the Loeb Classical Library-Series (LCL), unless otherwise indicated.

All translations of early Rabbinic and early Christian sources are mine (as is made visible by my initials MS), unless otherwise indicated. For the Hebrew/Greek texts I have used the common scholarly editions (if available), or – in the case of the parables in the Mekhiltot – the edition by Lieve Teugels.¹ For the Babylonian Talmud I have used the Hebrew text of the Vilna edition that is provided in Steinsaltz’s edition,² for the Palestinian Talmud I have made use of the Hebrew text of the Krotoschin edition.³

¹ Lieve Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhiltot. An Annotated Edition and Translation of the Parables in Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael and Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai*, with the assistance of Esther van Eenennaam, Text and Studies in Ancient Judaism 176 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019).

² Adin Even-Israel (Steinsaltz), *Koren Talmud Bavi* (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers Jerusalem, 2012-).

³ *Talmud Yerushalmi according to the Krotoschin edition (1866). Printed according to the Venice first edition (1523) with a short commentary* (Jerusalem: Shiloh, 1969).

I. Introduction: Not like other Slaves?⁴

I have seen him tie up a lame young woman, and whip her with a heavy cowskin upon her naked shoulders, causing the warm red blood to drip; and, in justification of the bloody deed, he would quote this passage of Scripture - "He that knoweth his master's will, and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes." ⁵

Throughout early rabbinic literature, one can find fragmentary passages about the relation between the early rabbinic sage Rabban Gamliel and his slave Tavi. Their relation was unique in several respects and reminisces in some facets another famous relationship between a master and a slave from antiquity, that of Aesop and his master Xanthus.⁶ Not only was Tavi the only slave that is known by name in the Mishnah,⁷ but from the diverse anecdotes in the early aggadic and halakhic literature about the relationship between the master and his slave, it becomes clear that Rabban Gamliel held Tavi in high esteem because of his knowledge of the law and his upright behavior.⁸ In a story from a late midrashic text (Midrash Proverbs 9:2), he is even compared to Abraham. So, it is understandable that when Tavi died, Gamliel was caught mourning over his slave. The following story is told about this moment in m. Berakhot 2:7:

And when his slave Tavi (טבי עבדו) died he [Rabban Gamliel] accepted condolences because of him. They [his disciples] said to him: "Did you not teach us not to receive condolence on behalf of slaves?"

⁴ The research presented in this book has been conducted as part of a sizable Dutch research project called, "Parables and the Partings of the Ways" (no. 360-25-140). This project is led by researchers from Utrecht University, Tilburg University, and the Protestant Theological University (senior scholars: Eric Ottenheijm, Marcel Poorthuis, Annette Merz; postdoc: Lieve Teugels; PhD Candidates: Albertina Oegema, Jonathan Pater, and the author). The question asked in this project is: "Why did the production of parables cease in Christianity whereas this genre remained in use in Rabbinic Judaism?" The project consists of three stages. In the first stage, a scholarly edition of all early rabbinic parables is provided. In the second stage, early Christian and early rabbinic parables are thematically compared. The third stage consists of a reflection on the results of the first two stages and a study of the rise of allegorizing commentaries in early Christianity *vis-à-vis* a further development of the rabbinic parable genre. My own research can be situated in the second stage and pertains to one subgroup of parables that is present in both early Christian and early rabbinic parables: slavery parables.

⁵ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave. Written by Himself*, reprint of the original 1845 text (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2009), 64.

⁶ See for their relation the ancient biography, *Vita Aesopi*. Compare, e.g., Francisco Rodríguez Adrados, *History of the Graeco-Latin Fable. Volume I. Introduction and from the Origins to the Hellenistic Age*, Mnemosyne Supplements 201, transl. Leslie A. Ray, revised and updated by Francisco Rodríguez Adrados and Gert-Jan van Dijk (Leiden: Brill, 1999), especially chapter 4, 647-685.

⁷ Cf. Elizabeth Leigh Gibson, *The Jewish Manumission Inscriptions of the Bosphorus Kingdom*, Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 75 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), 88.

⁸ E.g. m. Sukkah 2:1, b. Yoma 87a, y. Eruvin 10:1, y. Megillah 4:3. It is remarkable that a separate study on the relation between Gamliel and Tavi as represented in the rabbinic writings is still lacking. See for the most complete account of their stories Catherine Hezser, "The Social Status of Slaves in the Talmud Yerushalmi and in Graeco-Roman Society," in *The Talmud Yerushalmi and Graeco-Roman Culture III*, Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 93, ed. Peter Schäfer (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 91-138, especially 117-127.

He said to them, “My slave Tavi was not like other slaves (אין טבי עבדי כשאר כל העבדים): he was a worthy man (כשר היה).”⁹

Gamliel’s disciples might refer to a ruling similar to a *baraita*¹⁰ found in b. Berakhot 16b that is ascribed to Rabbi Eliezer: “Did I not teach you as follows: For (male) slaves and female slaves one does not stand in a row [to console the mourners] (עבדים ושפחות אין עומדים עליהם בשורה) and one does not recite for them the blessing of the mourners and one does not [recite] the consolation of the mourners?”¹¹ Gamliel, however, clearly refutes this ruling in this specific case because his slave “was not like other slaves: he was a worthy man.”¹² As the Babylonian Talmud remarks: “The example contradicts [the rule] (מעשה לסתור)? [It was] because they [the slaves of Rabban Gamliel] were notable (משום דחשיבי)” (b. Berakhot 16b).

Why is this reference to a story about Tavi and Gamliel used in an introduction to a study on slavery parables? Not because it is a parable – it clearly is not. It is because of the phrase, “because he was not like the other slaves.” In a way, this phrase quintessentially summarizes the issue that this book is all about, namely, comparison. In this volume we present a comparative study of early rabbinic and early Christian slavery parables in their Greco-Roman context, with as its main research questions: *how do early rabbinic and early Christian parables respectively construe slavery and slave-master relations, and to what are slavery and slave-master relations compared in the applications of these parables?* So, this volume is first and foremost a study of the imagery of slaves and slavery within early Christian and early rabbinic parables. It wants to investigate what it means that the metaphor of slave-owner is used for God, and what it means that the metaphor of slave is used for humans. On the basis of this investigation this study hopes to discover how slavery parables, as literary constructions, convey certain theological and ideological messages. As such, one could see the present volume as a study on “doulology.” The term doulology has recently been coined by Chris L. de Wet to denote the discourse of slavery “that functioned in the shaping of early Christian thought.”¹³ He argues that “slavery was an indispensable [*sic*] conceptual and intellectual tool for nascent Christianity.”¹⁴ I agree with him, and I think the same is true for “nascent” rabbinic Judaism. De Wet is right to observe that slavery was, as a concept, “good to think with” in antiquity (cf. W. Fitzgerald, J.A. Harrill¹⁵). It is the aim of this study to study the doulology of early rabbinic and early Christian parables, to decipher what the parables meant, how they were used, and what kind of presuppositions they show with regard to theology and social reality.

One of the main assumptions of the present study is that, in order to unbox the meaning of *slavery – parables*, one first has to understand both components: the ancient institution of slavery, and the literary genre of parables. That is why I devote a substantial part of this volume to the discussion of slavery in social reality

⁹ Hebrew text: Manuscript Kaufmann (folio 2v). Shamaï Kanter notices how this section is part of a triad of anecdotes about Rabban Gamliel in which Gamliel “acts contrary to the alleged accepted practice.” In each anecdote, his students question the Rabbi’s behavior and the Rabbi explains why his own situation is excepted from the rule. See Shamaï Kanter, *Rabban Gamaliel II: The Legal Traditions*, Brown Judaic Studies 8 (Chico: Scholars Press, 1980), 7.

¹⁰ A *baraita* refers to a tannaitic tradition which is “outside” from the Mishnah. However, as the existence of pseudo-*baraitot* has been proven a long time ago already, the authority of the *baraita* should be treated with caution. See e.g. Louis Jacobs, “Are there fictitious Baraitot in the Babylonian Talmud?,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 42 (1972), 185-196 and David Kraemer, “On the Reliability of Attributions in the Babylonian Talmud,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 60 (1989), 175-90.

¹¹ Translation: MS. As mentioned in my “Note to the Reader,” all quotations of the Hebrew text of the Babylonian Talmud are from the Steinsaltz edition. Cf. y. Berakhot 2:8, 5b. See also Kanter, *Rabban Gamaliel II*, 6.

¹² Literally, Tavi was kosher, “ritually pure,” “right,” or “pleasing,” probably referring to his halakhic obedience. Cf. Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (Leipzig: W. Drugulin, 1903), s.v. “כשר,” 677-678. Cf. Marion C. Moeser, *The Anecdote in Mark, the Classical World and the Rabbinic*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 227 (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 140.

¹³ Chris L. de Wet, *The Unbound God. Slavery and the Formation of Early Christian Thought*, Routledge Studies in the Early Christian World (London/New York, Routledge, 2018), 8.

¹⁴ De Wet, *The Unbound God*, 8.

¹⁵ J. Albert Harrill, *Slaves in the New Testament. Literary, Social, and Moral Dimensions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006); Fitzgerald, *Slavery and the Roman Literary Imagination*, 11.

on the one hand (without assuming that the parables are always a truthful representation of reality), and to literary counterparts and the literary context of the parables on the other hand. In line with this bipartite focus, the four dimensions I use for the analysis of the parables (see section 3.4) consist of a socio-historical dimension and of literary dimensions (such as Bildfeld theory and a rhetorical analysis), and the four underlying methodological issues I introduce below pertain to both the socio-historical background and the literary character of the slavery parables. However, it is important to stress here that, from an epistemological point of view, the literary character of the parables has priority over the socio-historical data. Since parables are first and foremost narratological devices used for rhetorical purposes in a greater text (midrash, the teachings of Jesus), the rhetorics of these texts generally dictate if and to what extent they form a reliable representation of social reality. At the same time – and this is part of the (circular) challenges of parable research – one needs a thorough understanding of social reality to discern social realism from the irregularities and absurdities of the parables (see also 3.4.2). Given the priority of the literary character of the parables I have not chosen for an isolated discussion of only the parables themselves (the *meshalim proper*), but I always also engage with their contexts (introduction, application, etc.; see 3.4.3). With the help of a Bildfeld analysis (3.4.5) and a hidden transcript analysis (3.4.4) I try to look at the texts from different sides in order to disclose as many facets of the parables – socio-historical background, use of metaphors, power relations, rhetorical function, theology and philosophy – as possible. Since I cover a lot of terrain in the present volume my discussions of singular parables have, of course, their limitations. For the rabbinic parables detailed discussions of the parables are often still a *desideratum*; for almost each New Testament parable (not the parables outside the New Testament corpus) in depth studies are available, to which I am happy to refer.

As announced above, I have identified four underlying methodological issues that need to be addressed. These issues all relate, on different plains, to the question: “Are they like the other slaves?” from the story on Tavi and Gamliel in the Mishnah:

1. The extent to which ancient Jewish and Christian slaves are like slaves in the surrounding Greco-Roman context.
2. The extent to which slaves in the early Christian and rabbinic slavery parables are like slaves in Greco-Roman literature.
3. The extent to which the slaves in the parables are like actual Jewish and Christian slaves in ancient social reality.
4. The extent to which the slaves in the early rabbinic slavery parables are like the slaves in the early Christian slavery parables.

I will briefly explain these four issues below. After that, I will conclude this introductory chapter by providing an outline of this book. Before doing so, I have to address one comparison this book does not make, and that is the comparison between ancient slavery and early modern (colonial) slavery in the Americas. Although comparative research in this field has turned out to be fruitful (see the next chapter, section 2.3.2.3), time and space have made it impossible to conduct such a study here. However, only a cursory reading of (ego-)documents from American slavery enables the reader to recognize similar behavioral patterns, thoughts, sentiments, and stories in both historical forms of slavery. By way of illustration and as a reminder of the constancy of slavery in world history, as well as the atrocities that go together with it, I open each chapter with a quotation from one of the most famous black, American slaves who has written about his own life: Frederick Douglass (1817/18-1895).

1.1. Early Jewish and Christian Slaves in their Greco-Roman Context

One of the deepest rooted misunderstandings that I find both among “normal” adherents of Judaism and Christianity, but also among fellow scholars, is that slavery in early Christianity and/or early rabbinic Judaism was entirely different (read: better) from slavery in other parts of the Greco-Roman world. Alas, in many cases, translations of Christian and rabbinic literature do not even talk about slaves but about “servants,” “attendants,” or “bondmen,” to use some of the euphemized nomenclature. Many scholars and non-scholars would still subscribe to the following words of the nineteenth-century Jewish scholar Moses Mielziner, who states:

Among the religions and legislations of antiquity none could exhibit a spirit so decidedly averse to slavery as the religion and legislation of Moses; nor could any ancient nation find, in the circumstances of its own origin, such powerful motives to abolish that institution as the people of Israel.¹⁶

Furthermore, many Christian scholars have noted how the abolishment of slavery is the merit of Christianity.¹⁷ One could simply dismiss these statements as remnants of an apologetic past, since contemporary scholarship has shown convincingly that, to quote Dale Martin, “Jewishness itself had little if any relevance for the structures of slavery among Jews.”¹⁸ As Elizabeth Leigh Gibson writes: “The apologists who argue that Jews did not keep slaves in the Greco-Roman period or who assert that Jews were unusually humane slave-owners have receded into the distant past of the historiography of the field.”¹⁹ However, I find that these views are still lingering under the surface of New Testament and Jewish Studies,²⁰ for example, in the vast sea of bible translations. It is in these translations that words that are normally unequivocally translated with “slave,” like the Greek *doulos* (δοῦλος) and the Hebrew *eved* (עֶבֶד), suddenly find themselves paired with the English “servant,” the German “Knecht,” or the Dutch “dienaar,” while a translation with “slave,” “Sklave” and “slaaf,” respectively, would be much more consistent. For more information on this subject, I refer the reader to Anders Martinsen who has elaborately written about this translation issue in his recent dissertation, *Men and Unmen in the Parables of Luke: Reception, Slavery, Masculinity*,²¹ as well as to section 3.2.2 of the present study. Although the present study does not aim for an original comparison of early rabbinic Jewish slavery with early Christian (if there is such a thing) and Greco-Roman slavery as an institute in social reality (its focus is, instead, on slavery *parables*), I do feel it is important to stress that early Jewish slavery is in no way *a priori* different from slavery in the wider Roman world. Therefore, the next chapter will review the progress in the study of ancient Greco-Roman, Jewish, and Christian slavery, and show what the latest advancements in these fields are. If deviations from common Roman practices do appear in my own research of the parables, these will of course be studied and explained.

1.2. The Parables and Greco-Roman Literature

As I will explain more amply in chapter three, one of the core assumptions of this study is that in studying slavery parables, we study both slavery *and* parables, or, to put it differently, we have to take into account the literary dimension of the slavery parables. As William Fitzgerald writes: stories about slaves can be read as “fantasy projections of the free, not so much portraits of slaves as others through whom the free could play out their own agenda.”²² This quotation points us to two important insights, namely: (1) that the slavery parables are in the first place literary fictions, and (2) that while they depict slaves, they are, most of the time, thought of by the free, who have certain agendas. I will explain in chapter three how I will keep track of these agendas (with the theory of hidden transcripts by James C. Scott), but for now it is important to note that in order to assess how these parables function *as literature*, we need other stories to which we can compare them. These comparanda can be found in adjacent popular literary genres from the Greco-Roman world, like the fable, the novella, and the ancient comedy. Over the course of this study,

¹⁶ Moses Mielziner, *The Institution of Slavery among the Ancient Hebrews, According to the Bible and Talmud* (Cincinnati: The American Hebrew Publishing House, 1894), 3-4.

¹⁷ E.g. Franz Meffert, “Urchristentum und Sklaverei,” in *Gesammelte apologetische Volksbibliothek*, ed. Franz Meffert (München Gladbach: Volksverein Verlag GmbH., 1913), 2:274. Cf. Johannes von Walter, *Die Sklaverei im Neuen Testament* (Berlin-Lichterfelde: Verlag von Edwin Runge, 1915).

¹⁸ Dale B. Martin, “Slavery and the Ancient Jewish Family,” in *The Jewish Family in Antiquity*, ed. Shaye J.D. Cohen (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), 113.

¹⁹ Gibson, *The Jewish Manumission Inscriptions*, 61.

²⁰ Compare Hector Avalos’ rather polemic study *Slavery, Abolitionism, and the Ethics of Biblical Scholarship*, *The Bible in the Modern World* 38 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2013) in which he accuses both historical and contemporary biblical scholarship of apologetics when it comes to slavery. See for a critical assessment of his work my review in *NTT Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion* 71, no. 3 (2017), 287-288.

²¹ Anders Martinsen, “Men and Unmen in the Parables of Luke: Reception, Slavery, Masculinity” (PhD Diss., University of Oslo, 2015), especially 51-115.

²² William Fitzgerald, *Slavery and the Roman Literary Imagination*, Roman Literature and its Contexts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 11.

we will regularly compare our parables with standard scenes, *topoi*, and characters from other literary contexts in order to detect to what extent the parables played with the expectations of the ancient Jewish and Christian audiences.

1.3. The Parables and Social Reality

In the previous section, I wrote that studying slavery parables means that one studies both slavery and parables. Of course this evokes the question: To what extent can slavery in the parables be compared to slavery in the “real” world of antiquity, insofar as one can get a grasp of that world at all?²³ As I focus on parables as literature, searching for the “real” world is not the main aim of the present study. However, we will often experience the need for additional information in order to understand what is going on in the parables. Therefore, I will consult both Greco-Roman, rabbinic and Christian sources from different genres – from law to philosophy. Thus, in all chapters, the discussion of the parables is preceded by an introduction of the theme that these parables focus on from a socio-historical perspective. In order to build plausibility, I combine Greco-Roman, Christian and rabbinic sources as much as possible. If available, I will use texts from the same era and region as the parables I study.

1.4. Early Rabbinic Slavery Parables versus Early Christian Slavery Parables

In her book, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, Catherine Hezser has noticed the need for a systematic study of rabbinic parables on slavery and a structured comparison with their New Testament counterparts:

The rabbinic slave parables would merit a more detailed study than is possible in this context. A comparison between Palestinian and Babylonian slave parables and between rabbinic slave parables and the slave parables of the gospels would be very profitable. Besides evaluating the parables’ realia and social context one should compare the images and motifs employed, the ways in which they are used to convey certain messages, the thematic focus, and the redactional adaptation of the originally independent units. Such a study would not only advance the form- and redaction-history of rabbinic literature but also provide important new insights into rabbinic theology.²⁴

As already has been made clear from the discussion of my main research question, this study takes up a part of the comparison Hezser proposes. In this volume, we will not compare Palestinian and Babylonian slave parables (although some remarks on the differences between particular parables in both traditions will be made). Instead, we will focus on the second part of Hezser’s proposal: the comparison of rabbinic slavery parables and the slavery parables in early Christianity. As set out above, in this study attention will be paid to the realia and the social context of the parables – data that we need to correctly understand the parables – but emphasis will be given to the thematic focus, images and motifs, and the redactional embedding (the literary dimension) of the parables. We will come back to these foci in chapter three.

1.5. Outline of the Study

In order to answer the questions set out above, this study will thematically discuss an exhaustive collection of slavery parables.²⁵ The themes that I discuss in my chapters follow roughly the life of an ancient slave. While this book follows the life of slave (from the perspective of masters), it will not offer a complete discussion of slavery in antiquity (that would be redundant, given the great number of publications on ancient slavery in general²⁶). Instead, this study is “under the control” of the slavery parables; it only discusses topics as long as they are relevant to the task at hand.

²³ What we often find ourselves doing is comparing literary texts from one genre (fiction, parables) with literary texts from another genre (law, history).

²⁴ Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 362.

²⁵ Occasionally, parables will be skipped because they show strong similarities with other parables. See Appendix II for a complete overview of slavery parables in early rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity, as well as an enumeration of the sections in which these parables are discussed in the present study.

²⁶ See the bibliography on ancient slavery of Heinen and Bellen: Heinz Heinen and Heinz Bellen, eds., *Bibliographie zur antiken Sklaverei*, 2 vols., *Forschungen zur antiken Sklaverei*, Beiheft 4 (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2003).

Before studying the parables, I will first provide in chapter two a *status quaestionis* of academic research on slavery in the ancient Greco-Roman world, early rabbinic Judaism, and early Christianity. In this review chapter, we will learn that modern scholarship increasingly relativizes the differences between these three worlds when it comes to slavery. In chapter three, the theory and methodology used in this study are set out in more detail; many issues that have been referred to in the present chapter will be taken up again. I will also provide some (statistical) overviews of the occurrence of slavery parables in our sources. From chapter four onwards, the parables themselves will be held under scrutiny. In chapter four, the parables discussed are those that put the beginning of a slave's life at the center (i.e., the purchase of a slave). Chapter five, the longest chapter of this book, discusses one of the core themes with respect to slavery, namely, the theme of *absente ero*: How does the slave behave in absence of the master and how does the master either reward or punish the slave? Connected to the latter, chapter six discusses the treatment of slaves and concentrates on what kind of punishments slaves could receive – and what these punishments signify on a theological plane. In chapter seven, we will explore parables that show or thematize a reversal of roles in the context of meals. These specific parables often underline that God is *not* like a king of flesh and blood. Finally, in chapter eight, conclusions are drawn from the preceding four chapters and suggestions are brought forward for new and further avenues of investigation.

II. The History of Ancient Slavery Research

“[I]f you give a nigger an inch he will take an ell. Learning will spoil the best nigger in the world. If he learns to read the Bible it will forever unfit him to be a slave. He should know nothing but the will of his master, and learn to obey it. As to himself, learning will do him no good, but a great deal of harm, making him disconsolate and unhappy. If you teach him how to read, he’ll want to know how to write, and this accomplished, he’ll be running away with himself.” Such was the tenor of Master Hugh’s oracular exposition; and it must be confessed that he very clearly comprehended the nature and the requirements of the relation of master and slave.²⁷

As Foucault taught us, knowledge is never innocent or objective.²⁸ By providing conceptual frameworks, knowledge helps to structure the world by determining which behaviors and thoughts are legitimate and “normal” and which are not. That axiom is even more true for historical knowledge. As Foucault puts it: “what is most human about man is his history.”²⁹ In the history of ancient slavery research, the truth of Foucault’s dictum becomes evident. Any person who studies the annals of approximately two hundred years of scholarly debate on the origin and character of slavery in antiquity will be struck by the way societal and political developments have influenced the writings of the historians of antiquity. As we will see in this chapter, the birth of the modern discipline of slavery research can be explained by the abolitionist debate on transatlantic slavery. Subsequently, the history of slavery research leads us from the concentration camps of the Second World War and the hostilities of the Cold War to the post-colonial era and women’s emancipation. And, as I will show, methods, sources, terminology, and outcomes may have changed over time, but the discussions between scholars of ancient slavery have always been heated and emotionally charged.

In this chapter, the state of research on slavery in the early Christian and the early rabbinic sources forms the main subject of enquiry. The history of research on slavery in these fields of study is, however, intertwined with the history of ancient slavery in general. Books on New Testament slavery respond to pivotal works on slavery in the Greco-Roman world, and results and methods of Classicists are used by Biblical scholars. Furthermore, recent research has increasingly become aware of the importance of Greco-Roman (especially Roman) institutions and regulations to understand ancient Judaism. This makes the discussion of the study of slavery in Greco-Roman antiquity even more worthwhile and, as a result, I have decided to bring several academic (sub)fields together in this chapter. I will start my endeavor by discussing the history of slavery research in the Greco-Roman world (2.1).³⁰ Subsequently, I will discuss the history of slavery research in Jewish Studies (2.2), and New Testament Studies (2.3). The value of this chapter is tripartite: first, it is exceptional for bringing together three research fields in one *status quaestionis*: the study of Greco-Roman slavery, the study of early rabbinic slavery and early Christian slavery. By doing so, I hope to show how these three field are on the one hand very much entangled (a research trend in one field often influences developments in other fields), but are also often very much operating isolated from each other, while early Christian and early rabbinic slavery can

²⁷ Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass. Written by Himself*, reprint of the original 1892 text (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2003), 49-50.

²⁸ See for example, Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir: naissance de la prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), or idem, *Histoire de la sexualité, Tome 1: La volonté de savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976).

²⁹ Translation: David Macey, *The Lives of Michel Foucault* (London: Hutchinson, 1993), 62. Cf. Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits, Tome 1: 1954-1975* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 37.

³⁰ For some of the insights in this discussion I owe gratitude to Rens Tacoma of Leiden University, who kindly allowed me to join a class on the historiography of Greco-Roman slavery.

of course only be understood in the context of each other and that of their influential Greco-Roman equivalent. Second, as I have argued previously and as I will show in this chapter as well, an overview of the current scholarship on ancient slavery is much needed to overcome apologetic assumptions and reflexes in (mostly) Jewish and Christian scholarship. Thirdly, this chapter generates concrete themes, view points and theoretical and methodological devices for our own study of slavery parables.

One question comes up repeatedly in this chapter, a question that, explicitly or implicitly, directs the entire scholarship on slavery in antiquity: *Was slavery in antiquity a negative or a (relatively) positive experience?* Often implied in this question is a comparison with colonial, transatlantic slavery. As we will see, for scholars of Greco-Roman antiquity, sentiments about the supposed humanity of the classical world, or about class struggle and oppression, play a role in their answering of this question. For scholars of Jewish Studies, apologetic motives form an important impetus to stress the positive sides of Jewish slavery. For New Testament scholars, theological considerations have often determined their response. Hence, this chapter is, in a way, not only a description of the academic study of slavery in antiquity, but it is also a short overview of two centuries of Western history. In addition, other questions also play a role in this chapter. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the most notable of these questions are: *Are the early rabbinic and early Christian slaves like the slaves in their surrounding Greco-Roman context?* And, on a more literary level: *Are the early rabbinic and early Christian slaves in the parables like the slaves in Greco-Roman literature?* While the first question will receive a clear answer in this chapter, the answer to the second question is still open, in spite of the fact that a growing number of scholars are interested in fictional and literary texts and their depiction of slaves in Greco-Roman, Christian, and, to a lesser extent, Jewish culture. However, over the course of this study, I will formulate an answer to this second question, albeit only partially.

2.1. Greco-Roman Slavery

2.1.1. The Seminal Phase of Research on Ancient Slavery: Abolitionism

Already before the rise of abolitionism, attention was paid to ancient slavery. Moses Finley, an important scholar on ancient Greco-Roman slavery, traces in his book, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (1980), the study of ancient slavery back to 1608 when the Frisian Titus Popma published a book in Leiden on slavery terminology entitled, *De operis servis liber*.³¹ Both this book and a book by Lorenzo Pignoria (*De servis, et eorum apud veteres ministeriis commentarius*), published only five years later, were reprinted at least twice, which shows the pre-Enlightenment interest in ancient slavery.³² In the following centuries, publications by Joachim Potgiesser (1703), Charles de Brosses (1774), and William Blair (1833) added insights to the new field. Moreover, in the eighteenth century, the subject of slavery became part of a large and sophisticated debate about population growth and demography. Famous scholars like Benjamin Franklin and David Hume contributed to this debate. In an essay from 1742, Hume strongly rejected the institution of slavery, anticipating the American and British debate about the abolition of slavery:

[T]he practice of slavery, being so common in antiquity, must have been destructive to a degree which no expedient could repair. All I pretend to infer from these reasonings is, that slavery is in general disadvantageous both to the happiness and populousness of mankind, and that its place is much better supplied by the practice of hired servants.³³

With Hume's disapproval of slavery in general, we skip roughly a century and arrive at what is often seen as the "real" start of modern research on ancient slavery, Henri Wallon's *Histoire de l'esclavage dans l'antiquité*

³¹ Moses I. Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1980), 23. Cf. Zvi Yavetz, *Slaves and Slavery in Ancient Rome*, trans. Adam Vital (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1988): "The truth of the matter is that from the fourteenth century up to the seventeenth, European humanists took no particular interest in the issue of slavery and slaves (118).

³² See Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology*, 23.

³³ Quoted from: David Hume, "Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations," in *Selected Essays*, Oxford World Classics, ed. Stephen Copley and Andrew Edgar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998 [1742]), 234-235.

(1847).³⁴ Wallon was the winner of a prize that was launched by the Parisian Academie des Sciences Morales et Politiques in 1837. This prize could be won by writing an essay on the decline of slavery in classical times. It was announced 43 years after the liberation of all slaves in the territories under French rule (Wallon would become a member of the commission that took care of the manumission process in the colonies³⁵), and only four years after slavery was abolished in the English colonies. Influenced by the abolitionist *Zeitgeist*, Wallon asserted that slavery in antiquity was the root of all evil and that it had led to ruin and devastation. Since he held that slavery is the same in all countries and all times, Wallon argued that a study of the decline of slavery in antiquity could teach us valuable lessons about the present.³⁶ Wallon's study contained a wealth of literary, juridical, and patristic information concerning slavery, and was widely regarded as a standard work in its own time, despite its clear moral and theological biases.³⁷ Although the book still features sometimes in modern publications,³⁸ Wallon's three volumes (1500 pages) were soon outdated by new epigraphic and papyrological material.

2.1.1.1. *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels*

The next important phase in the study of ancient slavery was initiated by the famous German philosopher, Karl Marx, and his friend and collaborator, Friedrich Engels. In short, Marx's and Engels' theory held that after the primeval classless community, the slave society of antiquity formed the first class society. Engels explained the birth of the slave class in *Der Ursprung der Familie, des Privateigentums und des Staats* (1884) as a consequence of the improved industrial achievements in antiquity, like the working of metals:

Die erste große gesellschaftliche Teilung der Arbeit zog mit ihrer Steigerung der Produktivität der Arbeit, also des Reichtums, und mit ihrer Erweiterung des Produktionsfeldes, unter den gegebenen geschichtlichen Gesamtbedingungen, die Sklaverei mit Notwendigkeit nach sich. Aus der ersten großen gesellschaftlichen Arbeitsteilung entsprang die erste große Spaltung der Gesellschaft in zwei Klassen: Herren und Sklaven, Ausbeuter und Ausgebeutete.³⁹

Only by means of this transition did Greek society gain the possibility to flourish:

Ohne Sklaverei kein griechischer Staat, keine griechische Kunst und Wissenschaft; ohne Sklaverei kein Römerreich. Ohne die Grundlage des Griechentums und des Römerreichs aber auch kein modernes Europa. [...] In diesem Sinne sind wir berechtigt zu sagen: Ohne antike Sklaverei kein moderner Sozialismus.⁴⁰

This slave society would evoke resistance (slave revolts!) and alienation because the slaves were powerless and unmotivated to produce something they had no interest in. Eventually, the struggle of small versus large slave-

³⁴ See, for example, De Wet's overview of slavery research history, which starts with Wallon: Chris L. de Wet, "Antieke slawerny en die vroeë Christendom: teoretiese-hermeneutiese perspektiewe, probleme, en die opkoms van Doulologie," *LitNet Akademies* 11, no. 3 (2014), 317-343.

³⁵ Joseph Vogt, *Ancient Slavery and the Ideal of Man*, transl. Thomas Wiedemann (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 172.

³⁶ "L'esclavage chez les anciens! Il peut sembler étrange qu'on aille le chercher si loin, quand il est encore parmi nous. En prenant cette route nous ne détournons point les esprits de la question colonial; nous voudrions les y ramener, au contraire, et les fixer à une solution." Henri Alexandre Wallon, *Histoire de l'esclavage dans l'antiquité*, vol. 1 (Aalen: Scientia, 1974 [1879]), iv.

³⁷ Yavetz, *Slaves and Slavery in Ancient Rome*, 119. Finley's evaluation of Wallon's work is rather negative: "In sum, far from marking the beginning of modern research into ancient slavery, Wallon's *Histoire* was a dead end." (Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology*, 33.)

³⁸ E.g. Jean Andreau and Raymond Descat, *The Slave in Greece and Rome*, trans. Marion Leopold (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), 5.

³⁹ Friedrich Engels, "Der Ursprung der Familie, des Privateigentums und des Staats," in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke*, Vol. 21 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1975), 157.

⁴⁰ Friedrich Engels, "Herrn Eugen Dühring's Umwälzung der Wissenschaft," in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke*, Vol. 20 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1975), 168. Cf. Geoffrey E. M. de Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek world from the Archaic Age to the Arab conquests* (London: Duckworth, 1981), 546.

owners, combined with Rome's status as a slave society, would lead to something that hostile tribes, mismanagement, famine, and drought could never have brought about: the fall of the Roman Empire.⁴¹

Despite the rather small part of their work that was devoted to ancient slavery,⁴² Marx's and Engels' ideas propelled academic discussions for at least a century. One of the first scholars to respond to their work⁴³ was "an anti-Marxist *par excellence*":⁴⁴ the German ancient historian, Eduard Meyer. It is said of Meyer that he laid "the basis of our contemporary understanding of slavery in Greek and Roman history."⁴⁵ In his 1898 lecture, *Die Sklaverei im Altertum*, Meyer attacked the idea of an economic development through historical stages – an idea that can be found in the works of both Marx and Hegel. Meyer also was the first to reject the idea that the decline of the Roman Empire was related to slavery, and he did so by pointing to the absence of (large-scale) slave revolts. Meyer adopted a cyclical interpretation of history in which ancient slavery was preceded by a period of quasi-feudalism in which serfdom existed. After the decline of slavery, a period of feudalism followed in the Middle Ages, and the modern factory worker can be compared to the ancient slave again:

Nirgends aber tritt der moderne Character der Sklaverei deutlicher hervor als darin, daß es dem Sklaven unter günstigen Verhältnissen ebenso gut möglich ist, wie dem moderne industriellen Arbeiter, zu Wohlstand und Reichtum zu gelangen, während der mittelalterliche Hörige, der spätrömische Kolone, der Vilain der Ritterzeit in seinen Stand hineingeboren ist und mit all seinen Nachkommen niemals aus ihm heraus kann.⁴⁶

2.1.1.2. The Racial Approach: Tenney Frank

The scholar Tenney Frank was in the audience of one of Meyer's lectures during Meyer's second visit to the United States.⁴⁷ Frank represents a stage in slavery research in which overt racism could still be part of academic discourse. Tenney saw an explanation for the decline of the Roman Empire in the influx of "oriental" or "occidental" slaves – "men of more emotional nature"⁴⁸ – who became (in later generations) part of the Roman populace. A single quote from his article "Race Mixture in the Roman Empire" (1916) will elucidate both the main thesis of Tenny's paper and his racism:

[W]hat lay behind and constantly reacted upon all such causes of Roman's disintegration was, after all, to a considerable extent, the fact that the people who built Rome had given way to a different race. The lack of energy and enterprise, the failure of foresight and common sense, the weakening of moral and political stamina, all were concomitant with the gradual diminution of the stock which, during the earlier days, had displayed these qualities.⁴⁹

While Frank is now rarely read, the following scholar, who also was influenced by Eduard Meyer,⁵⁰ still regularly comes up in bibliographies: William Linn Westermann. The American historian Westermann is best known for his work, *The Slave Systems of Greek and Roman Antiquity* (1955). This monograph developed out of a vast and

⁴¹ Karl Marx, "Marx and Engels, 8. März 1855," in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1970), 28:439. Cf. David Konstan, "Marxism and Roman Slavery," *Arethusa* 8, no. 1 (1975), 149; Zvi Yavetz, *Slaves and Slavery in Ancient Rome*, 125.

⁴² Eric Hobsbawm pointed out that Marx never spoke about "the actual economic contradictions of a slave economy," or "why in antiquity it was slavery rather than serfdom which developed." Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction to Marx," in Karl Marx, *Pre-capitalist Economic Formations*, trans. Jack Cohen (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1964), 38-43.

⁴³ Although he did not mention Marx and Engels explicitly.

⁴⁴ Yavetz, *Slaves and Slavery in Ancient Rome*, 121.

⁴⁵ Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology*, 45.

⁴⁶ Eduard Meyer, *Die Sklaverei im Altertum, Vortrag, gehalten in der Gehe-Stiftung zu Dresden* (Von Bahn & Jaensch: Dresden, 1898), 46 (236).

⁴⁷ Meyer Reinhold, Review of *Eduard Meyer. Leben und Leistung eines Universalhistorikers* by William M. Calder III and Alexander Demandt, *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 02.05.05; accessed September 28, 2015, <http://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/1991/02.05.05.html#NT6>.

⁴⁸ Tenney Frank, "Race Mixture in the Roman Empire," *The American Historical Review* 21, no. 4 (1916), 706.

⁴⁹ Frank, "Race Mixture in the Roman Empire," 705.

⁵⁰ S. Scott Bartchy, *First-Century Slavery and the Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7:21* (Missoula, Society of Biblical Literature, 1973), 29.

detailed article on ancient slavery in the famous German-language *Paulys Realencyclopädie der klassischen Altertumswissenschaft*.⁵¹ In his book, Westermann tries to show that slavery in Greece was not of vital importance. He also claims that the Roman Empire was not completely based on slavery labor, and that the decline of the empire was (thus) not caused by slavery either: “The economic approach to the height and decline of ancient civilization customarily exaggerates the numbers of slaves in antiquity and the effects of slavery.”⁵² Although Westermann’s view certainly found support amongst academics,⁵³ there was also critique. For example, Geoffrey de Ste. Croix criticized Westermann for downplaying both the numbers and the horrors of slavery, and for circumventing the real questions.⁵⁴ In Finleyan terminology, De Ste. Croix accused Westermann of “antiquarianism.” But let us take a closer look now to Moses Finley, the man from whom this terminology derives, and to the dispute in which he played such an important role.

2.1.2. Marxists, the Mainzer Akademie, and Moses Finley: The Finley-Vogt Dispute

The conflict between the Mainzer Akademie, East Bloc historians, and Moses Finley might be the most important event of slavery research history. This conflict has given rise to many publications and was, in 2007, still important enough to have a conference organized around it (*Table Ronde on Ancient Slavery*, Edinburgh, September 14-16⁵⁵). Given its lasting impact in the study of ancient slavery, I will discuss the matter at considerable length. But before going into details, I will first introduce the main characters of the debate: Moses Finley and Joseph Vogt.

2.1.2.1. Moses Finley

Moses Finley (1912-1986), born as Moses Isaac Finkelstein, was a member of a family that was deeply rooted in European Jewish history.⁵⁶ Although he was given a Jewish education (sufficient to be admitted to the Jewish Theological Seminary of New York), Finley never published anything on ancient Jewish slavery.⁵⁷ Finley graduated in public law from Colombia University, and enrolled for a doctorate in ancient history under Westermann – who was at that moment writing for the *Real-Enzyklopädie*.⁵⁸ While working for the Institute for Social Research at Colombia University, Finley came into contact with Marxists, and their influence made a mark on his thinking. At the Institute he also developed a preference for short books and provocative statements over long, isolated monographs full of facts and numbers (which he called antiquarianism, or “the numbers game”). Under the supervision of Karl Polanyi, Finley investigated the relation between economy and society, but his successful academic career was disturbed by an investigation of the Senate Committee on Internal Security (associated with Senator McCarthy). He was accused of being part of communist activities during his time at the Institute. When Finley refused to answer questions from the Committee, he was fired by his university in 1952. He found refuge in Great Britain where he landed an academic position and, eventually (1979), a knighthood. According to his necrology, during his time in Great Britain, Finley became “probably the best-known living ancient historian” in Britain and abroad.⁵⁹

⁵¹ William L. Westermann, “Sklaverei,” in *Paulys Realencyclopädie der klassischen Altertumswissenschaft*, ed. August F. Pauly and Georg Wissowa, Supplementband 6 (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1935), 894–1068. Cf. Charles Bradford Welles, Review of *The Slave Systems of Greek and Roman Antiquity* by William L. Westermann, *The American Journal of Philology* 77, no. 3 (1956), 316.

⁵² William L. Westermann, *The Slave Systems of Greek and Roman Antiquity* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1955), 119.

⁵³ Yavetz, *Slaves and Slavery in Ancient Rome*, 134. See also Arnold H. M. Jones, Review of *The Slave Systems of Greek and Roman Antiquity* by William L. Westermann, *The English Historical Review* 71, no. 279 (1956), 273-274.

⁵⁴ Geoffrey E. M. de Ste. Croix, Review of *The Slave Systems of Greek and Roman Antiquity* by William L. Westermann, *The Classical Review (New Series)* 7, no. 1 (1957), 57.

⁵⁵ See the collection of articles edited by Heinz Heinen, *Antike Sklaverei: Rückblick und Ausblick. Neue Beiträge zur Forschungsgeschichte und zur Erschließung der archäologischen Zeugnisse* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2010).

⁵⁶ The Rabbi that was responsible for creating the tale of the Golem in Prague belonged to Finley’s ancestors. C. R. Whittaker, “Moses Finley 1912-1986,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 94 (1996), 460.

⁵⁷ Arnaldo Momigliano, “Moses Finley on Slavery: A Personal Note,” *Slavery & Abolition* 8, no. 1 (1987), 2-3.

⁵⁸ Whittaker, “Moses Finley 1912-1986,” 461.

⁵⁹ Whittaker, “Moses Finley 1912-1986,” 466

Although Finley's writings are numerous and wide-ranging in scope, we will focus now on only two of his works, *The Ancient Economy* (1973) and *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (1980). Finley's main thesis in *The Ancient Economy* is that the economic system of classical antiquity was not governed by rational economic principles, but by status deliberations. So, the keeping of land and slaves was not primarily seen as an investment in order to create profit, but as a way to enhance one's status. In *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology*, Finley focused entirely on slavery, with substantial parts of his book being reserved for a discussion of past scholars on Greco-Roman slavery. One of the important points Finley raised in his book was that the distinction between free people and slaves was rather vague and consisted of many intermediary positions. Also, he stressed the severity of slavery in a typical "Finleyan" way: against the argument that the existence of faithful slaves proves that slavery could be bearable, Finley wrote: "That there were many 'faithful slaves' in antiquity is not to be doubted: that is but one manifestation of a continuing human phenomenon, found even in the Nazi concentration camps."⁶⁰ With respect to the decline of slavery, Finley did not look for an explanation in the influence of Christianity or in a shortage of slaves, but in an increased willingness of "normal" Romans to work under a boss.⁶¹

2.1.2.2. Joseph Vogt

Joseph Vogt's life course (1895-1986) is less exciting than Finley's but was also marked by the great political and economic events of the first half of the twentieth century. Joseph Vogt was a descendant of a family of farmers,⁶² and studied history in Tübingen and Berlin where he was a student of Eduard Meyer.⁶³ As Wiedemann notices, already early in his career Vogt stood out by his willingness to apply contemporary questions to the study of the ancient world.⁶⁴ He connected fears about population decline in the 1920s to classical texts. During the Nazi period he was involved in a project about the "Kriegseinsatz der Geisteswissenschaften" and a member of the "Institut zur Erforschung der Judenfrage," an NSDAP academy meant to produce academic arguments for the racial policy of the Nazis. He was also a member of the Nazi party and adopted its antisemitism in his academic writings.⁶⁵ His scholarly importance only comes to the fore after the Second World War, when he became the founder of a research program on ancient slavery in the *Mainzer Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur* in Mainz. One of the central questions in the historiographic research on the Mainzer Akademie is whether the Akademie was erected as a response to East-European Marxist research on slavery. According to Wiedemann it was not, and Vogt did not wish to involve the project in public controversy either,⁶⁶ a view that is supported by the fact that he was praised by scientific journals of the USSR, and that he stimulated the translation of Russian works into German.⁶⁷ On the other hand, Elisabeth Herrmann-Otto writes in a volume on slavery research: "Allerdings muss man sehr klar sehen, und das hat auch Vogt eindeutig erkannt, dass das Mainzer Projekt von Anfang an mit den marxistischen Studien zu konkurrieren hatte. Das wurde von den Förderern und Geldgebern erwartet und lag im Geist der damaligen Zeit des Kalten Krieges."⁶⁸ Heinz Heinen also notices in the same volume that the research group on slavery in Mainz was founded at the same moment as a research

⁶⁰ Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology*, 104.

⁶¹ Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology*, 148.

⁶² Jürgen Deininger, "Nekrolog Joseph Vogt 23.6.1985-14.7.1986," *Historische Zeitschrift* 246, no. 1 (1988), 219.

⁶³ Karl Christ, *Neue Profile der alten Geschichte* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1990), 107.

⁶⁴ Thomas Wiedemann, "Fifty Years of Research on Ancient Slavery: the Mainz Academy Project," *Slavery & Abolition* 21, no. 3 (2000), 153.

⁶⁵ Diemuth Königs, *Joseph Vogt: ein Althistoriker in der Weimarer Republik und im Dritten Reich*, Basler Beiträge zur Geschichtswissenschaft 168 (Basel: Helbing & Lichtenhahn, 1995), 35; Yavetz, *Slaves and Slavery in Ancient Rome*, 139; Thomas A. Schmitz, "Ex Africa lux? Black Athena and the debate about Afrocentrism in the US," *Göttinger Forum für Altertumswissenschaft* 2 (1999), 60-61. For an example of antisemitism in Vogt's academic writing see: Joseph Vogt, "Unsere Fragestellung," in *Rom und Carthago. Ein Gemeinschaftswerk*, ed. Joseph Vogt (Leipzig: Koehler & Amelang, 1943), 8.

⁶⁶ Wiedemann, "Fifty Years of Research on Ancient Slavery," 153.

⁶⁷ Yavetz, *Slaves and Slavery in Ancient Rome*, 139; Wiedemann, "Fifty Years of Research on Ancient Slavery," 155.

⁶⁸ Elisabeth Herrmann-Otto, "Das Projekt 'Forschungen zur antiken Sklaverei' und der Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur, Mainz," in *Antike Sklaverei: Rückblick und Ausblick. Neue Beiträge zur Forschungsgeschichte und zur Erschließung der archäologischen Zeugnisse*, ed. Heinz Heinen (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2010), 64.

group on the same subject in Moscow.⁶⁹ I am inclined to think that it is impossible not to see the erection of the Mainzer Akademie against the background of the Cold War, but that Vogt and his colleagues tried not to be influenced by ideological differences in their academic work, which is also visible in the lack of a party line.⁷⁰ What does signify the Mainzer Akademie as a whole is its tendency to underscore the more positive sides of slavery,⁷¹ which is clearly visible in the work of Vogt himself.

Vogt's main work on slavery was the book, *Sklaverei und Humanität: Studien zur antiken Sklaverei und ihrer Erforschung* (1953), better known in its English translation as *Ancient Slavery and the Ideal of Man* (1975). Two aspects of this book deserve our attention: the fact that Vogt emphasizes the positive aspects of slavery – from the fact that slave rebellions were rare Vogt concludes: “So a slave’s life must have been tolerable (‘ein[...] lebbare[r] Zustand’)”⁷² – and the connection Vogt makes between slavery and humanity. In his book, Vogt notices how antiquity is both the source of modern humanity (in an Humboldtian sense) and how humanity was denied to the ancient slave: “The problem which I propose to discuss here is how the existence of this institution was compatible with Greek respect for human dignity. Hegel was surely right to say that in the servility of the serf his master also loses his humanity.”⁷³ At the end of the first chapter, Vogt already comes up with an answer to his question: “Slavery and its attendant loss of humanity were part of the sacrifice which had to be paid for this [i.e., Hellenism/Greek culture] achievement.”⁷⁴ It is especially this last statement that has been fiercely criticized by Finley. In a review (1975) on the English translation, Finley objects to Vogt’s concept of humanity (“A mitigated evil remains an evil”⁷⁵), rejects his examples and arguments concerning positive aspects of slavery, and accuses Vogt of fighting windmills (“Who, one may well ask, ever held such a crazy notion?”⁷⁶). However, for the beginning of the animosity between Finley and Vogt, we have to go back in time to the legendary Stockholm incident. Before doing so it might be good to notice that Vogt was influential in some circles of Biblical scholars. According to the South-African scholar Chris de Wet, it was especially Vogt’s idea of the “faithful slave” that was popular among these scholars because it could be used to bring supposedly positive aspects of ancient slavery forward.⁷⁷ De Wet seems to agree, however, with Finley that “positive aspects of slavery are only the fruits of a poisonous tree.”⁷⁸ He draws a comparison with the South-African apartheid regime, which also may have produced (at least to some extent) obedience amongst the black part of the population, but this obedience only stemmed from despair and oppression.⁷⁹

2.1.2.3. A Combat-Zone in Stockholm

In 1960, the Eleventh International Historical Congress was organized in Stockholm. It was a big conference with 150 speakers from most European countries, including West Germany, Poland, Hungary, and the Soviet Union.⁸⁰ A special session on ancient slavery was provided, with so-called “rapports” that could be discussed during the meetings. A hostile atmosphere emerged with the paper of the West-German scholar Lauffer who

⁶⁹ Heinz Heinen, “Aufstieg und Niedergang der sowjetischen Sklavereiforschung. Eine Studie zur Verbindung von Politik und Wissenschaft,” in *Antike Sklaverei: Rückblick und Ausblick. Neue Beiträge zur Forschungsgeschichte und zur Erschließung der archäologischen Zeugnisse*, ed. Heinz Heinen (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2010), 121-125.

⁷⁰ Wiedemann, “Fifty Years of Research on Ancient Slavery,” 154.

⁷¹ Niall McKeown, *The Invention of Ancient Slavery?* (London: Duckworth, 2007), 33ff.

⁷² Vogt, *Ancient Slavery and the Ideal of Man*, 5 (German version: Joseph Vogt, “Sklaverei und Humanität im klassischen Griechentum,” *Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur. Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaftlichen Klasse* 1953, no. 4 (1953), 161-183. He also mentions good interpersonal relations between masters and slaves (see also Yavetz, *Slaves and Slavery in Ancient Rome*, 139).

⁷³ Vogt, *Ancient Slavery and the Ideal of Man*, 4.

⁷⁴ Vogt, *Ancient Slavery and the Ideal of Man*, 25.

⁷⁵ Moses I. Finley, “The Necessary Evil,” *The Times Literary Supplement*, November 14, 1975, 1348.

⁷⁶ Finley, “The Necessary Evil,” 1348.

⁷⁷ “Een van Vogt se kernpremissie was die beeld van die ‘gehoorsame slaaf’ (sien Matt. 24:45-51//Luk. 12:35-48), wat na sy mening ’n teken was van die menslikheid wat weggesluit is in slawerny, en hoe die beeld en tradisie gebruik kon word om iets positief na vore te bring.” De Wet, “Antieke slawerny en die vroeë Christendom,” 321.

⁷⁸ De Wet, “Antieke slawerny en die vroeë Christendom,” 321.

⁷⁹ De Wet, “Antieke slawerny en die vroeë Christendom,” 322.

⁸⁰ Daniel Tompkins, “What happened in Stockholm? Moses Finley, The Mainz Akademie, and East Bloc Historians,” *Hyperboreus* 20 (2014), 436-437.

suggested that the slave revolts were not revolutions, and that there was no antithesis between slave and master. But things really escalated when the West-German scholar Vittinghoff claimed that only after 1953 did Soviet scholars put serious efforts into using primary sources. In a second paper, Vittinghoff offered an even “far more sweeping condemnation of Soviet scholarship.”⁸¹ According to Finley, this confrontation was not “spontaneous.” He spoke about a congress “full [of] bitterness” and called the session on ancient slavery the “main combat-zone.”⁸² Arnaldo Momigliano, who was also present during the conference, said that “[w]e learned more about modern Europe than about ancient Greece or Rome.”⁸³ Finley was shocked by the lack of respect shown by the West-German scholars and blamed the Mainzer Akademie for it.⁸⁴ Finley saw that the Eastern European historians produced work of good quality, and that the critique by the West Germans was often biased and not based on knowledge of the work itself. Without being a Marxist, Finley respected Marxist scholarship and openly admitted that he had something to learn from, for example, the East Bloc historian Istvan Hahn of Budapest.⁸⁵ Furthermore, Finley critiqued the Mainzer Akademie for their methodology (again “antiquarian”) and its use of the term “humanism.”⁸⁶ In his work, especially in *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology*, he boldly dismissed the Mainzer Akademie, which damaged the reception of the Akademie. Niall McKeown, for example, testifies that his view on the Mainzer Akademie (as “a product of dubious post-war German right-wing politics”⁸⁷) was hugely indebted to his reading of Finley’s work, and that this was a prejudice that he passed on to his students, without having read any of their work. After eventually reading Kudlien and Vogt, McKeown discovered that their work was actually very challenging and of high quality. During his research he also discovered the “pain of some German scholars who have felt that work under the umbrella of the *Forschungen* was never given the reception it deserved in the English-speaking world.”⁸⁸ One might ask how the 1960 incident could leave such lasting scars on the Mainz project, and why Finley was so destructive in his judgment. A possible answer to the first question is, according to Heinz Heinen, the silence of Vogt on Finley’s accusations, combined with the prestige of Finley, that stretched beyond the borders of ancient history.⁸⁹ A speculative answer to the second question is given by Momigliano who asserts that Finley’s passion and acumen were caused by his roots in Judaism, in which the experience of slavery still played an important role.⁹⁰ A third possible explanation for the bitter clash between Finley and Vogt might go back to the Second World War: given that Finley was Jewish and Vogt was a former active Nazi member, the memory of the war might have consciously or unconsciously influenced their scholarly relations.

⁸¹ Tompkins, “What happened in Stockholm?,” 439.

⁸² Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology*, 60-61.

⁸³ Momigliano, “Moses Finley on Slavery,” 5.

⁸⁴ Although Deissler notices that Vittinghoff was not even a member of the Mainzer Akademie. See Johannes Deissler, “Cold Case? Die Finley-Vogt-Kontroverse aus deutscher Sicht,” in *Antike Sklaverei: Rückblick und Ausblick. Neue Beiträge zur Forschungsgeschichte und zur Erschließung der archäologischen Zeugnisse*, ed. Heinz Heinen (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2010), 86.

⁸⁵ Other notable East European authors are, for example, Shtaerman and Trofimova. The problem with most of the East European scholarship is that it had never been translated and, hence, was denied a reception (Shtaerman and Trofimova’s work was only translated to Italian in 1975; cf. McKeown, *The Invention of Ancient Slavery?*, 54).

⁸⁶ Tompkins, “What happened in Stockholm?,” 449.

⁸⁷ McKeown, *The Invention of Ancient Slavery?*, 31.

⁸⁸ Niall McKeown, “Inventing Slavery: Switching the Argument,” in *Antike Sklaverei: Rückblick und Ausblick. Neue Beiträge zur Forschungsgeschichte und zur Erschließung der archäologischen Zeugnisse*, ed. Heinz Heinen (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2010), 45.

⁸⁹ Cf. Heinz Heinen (“Einführung,” in *Antike Sklaverei: Rückblick und Ausblick. Neue Beiträge zur Forschungsgeschichte und zur Erschließung der archäologischen Zeugnisse*, ed. Heinz Heinen [Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2010], 3): “Finleys Prestige, auch weit jenseits der Grenzen der Alten Geschichte, und Vogts Schweigen zu den gegen ihn und sein Projekt erhobenen Vorwürfen haben viel dazu beigetragen, die Mainzer *Forschungen* zur antiken Sklaverei international als ein restauratives und politisch verdächtiges Unterfangen erscheinen zu lassen.”

⁹⁰ Momigliano, “Moses Finley on Slavery,” 2-3.

2.1.3. Towards a Negative View on Ancient Slavery: The French and the Finleyschüler

Aside from the Mainzer Akademie, there was yet another research group that was devoted to the study of ancient slavery, namely, the French Besançon Group. Their work is best visible in the conferences of GIREA, the Groupe Internationale de Recherche sur l'Esclavage dans l'Antiquité. Just like the Mainzer Akademie, the Besançon researchers did not form a cohesive body of scholarship. However, their work was characterized by some common traits: most of the works stressed the more negative sides of slavery, they “leaned towards theories,”⁹¹ and many of them worked with an indexing system, the “Index Thématique,” to make their findings more transparent and to allow for statistical analysis. Similar to the Mainzer Akademie, the Besançon Group never received a real reception in the Anglophone world because it published only in French (the Mainz group only in German). Famous exponents of the group are Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet; but more representative for the approach of the Besançon Group is the work by Garrido-Hory (*Martial et l'esclavage*, 1981). What Garrido-Hory observes in the work of Martial is, among other things, an “antagonisme de classes,”⁹² a permanent battlefield between a suppressed slave and a fearing master, which sometimes leads to rebellion of slaves on the one hand, or to extreme violence from masters to their slaves on the other. It was also an antagonism of classes because, as Garrido-Hory asserts, the slaves in Martial are foremost a luxury product, which confirms their owners in their status and, automatically, widens the gap with the have-nots.⁹³ We find the same idea in a book by Austin and Vidal-Naquet (1972), in which they say about the Greek point of view on slavery: “[T]he freedom of some could not be imagined without the servitude of others and the two extremes were not thought of as contradictory, but as complementary and interdependent.”⁹⁴

2.1.3.1. Geoffrey Ernst Maurice de Ste. Croix

Before going into the so-called “Finleyschüler,” we first have to discuss an important opponent of Finley, the British Marxist historian, Geoffrey Ernst Maurice de Ste. Croix. According to Yavetz, De Ste. Croix took up the challenge that was proposed by Finley to write a synthesis of the history of ancient slavery – as a history of Greco-Roman society.⁹⁵ In 1981 De Ste. Croix published, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*. In this book, De Ste. Croix understands class as a relationship of exploitation, although the members of any class do not have to be aware of their common identity. De Ste. Croix argues for a broad use of the term slavery as unfree labor in different forms.⁹⁶ He states: “I believe that the significant thing we have to concentrate on is not the overall role of unfree compared with free labour, but the role played by unfree labour in providing the dominant propertied classes with their surplus [...]”⁹⁷ De Ste. Croix also stressed that although evidence is often lacking, we must not deny that slavery in antiquity was a widespread phenomenon.⁹⁸ Furthermore, he underlined the hardships slaves in antiquity had to suffer – a misery that, De Ste. Croix argued (see 2.3.1), was not mitigated by the rise of Christianity.

2.1.3.2. Keith Hopkins and the Literary Turn

We continue our journey through slavery studies with Keith Hopkins. Keith Hopkins was a student of Finley (one of the so-called “Finleyschüler”) and owed to him an interest in bringing methods from the social sciences to ancient history.⁹⁹ He applied those methods enthusiastically in *Conquerors and Slaves* (1978). In this work, Hopkins posed the question: Why did the Romans not use free laborers? He tried to answer this question sociologically, combining the processes of conquering and enslavement, as his title shows. He argued that the

⁹¹ McKeown, *The Invention of Ancient Slavery?*, 42.

⁹² Marguerite Garrido-Hory, *Martial et l'esclavage* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1981), 219.

⁹³ Garrido-Hory, *Martial et l'esclavage*, 215-218.

⁹⁴ Michel M. Austin and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Economic and Social History of Ancient Greece: An Introduction*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977, 19.

⁹⁵ Yavetz, *Slaves and Slavery in Ancient Rome*, 148. Finley was not happy with De Ste. Croix's solution to his challenge. As Deborah Kamen rightly notices, Finley refused to take up the term “class” because there is no consensus on its meaning, and the Marxist definition does not work for antiquity either. Deborah Kamen, *Status in Classical Athens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 2; Cf. Yavetz, *Slaves and Slavery in Ancient Rome*, 152.

⁹⁶ De Ste. Croix, *The class struggle in the ancient Greek world*, 133.

⁹⁷ De Ste. Croix, *The class struggle in the ancient Greek world*, 133.

⁹⁸ De Ste. Croix, *The class struggle in the ancient Greek world*, 133-134.

⁹⁹ Robin Osborne, “Keith Hopkins,” *Past and Present* 185 (2004), 3-4.

conquest of the Romans led to enormous growth of the capital, to such an extent that the agricultural system had to be transformed to provide enough food for Rome's inhabitants. Therefore, a new and large-scale way of farming was invented: the *latifundia*. For the work on the *latifundia* slaves were needed; free men were unwilling to work as subordinates and unavailable to do so, since they served as soldiers. Thus, the rise of Rome put into movement a complex series of interacting processes that led to a higher demand for slaves and more conquests.¹⁰⁰

Hopkins did not only use sociological methods, but also reflected on the value of fictional narrative material. As I explain below, one very important paper he wrote is entitled, "Novel Evidence for Roman Slavery" (1993). In this paper he discussed *Vita Aesopi*, a slave biography that serves as a fictional satire. The underlying premise of Hopkins' article is that if one tries to understand a culture, fiction is as good a source as the descriptions we find in ancient history books and legal texts. He states:

We have here not the "true" history of a single exceptional slave, who would not be typical. Instead we have an invented, generalized caricature of a slave, whose relations with his master, and his master's wife, guests, friends, other slaves and fellow citizens, reflect the central tensions in the relations between masters and slaves. We see the conflicts of interest, the pressures towards unthinking and therefore unquestioning obedience, towards loyalty and sabotage, seduction and infidelity, hard work, violent punishment and shirking. This fictional biography runs along the raw nerves of slavery, the same raw nerves which Roman comedies repeatedly touched, but never had the time or interest thoroughly to explore.¹⁰¹

With his paper, Hopkins – together with Bradley and Fitzgerald (both 2000)¹⁰² – put literary sources on the agenda as important sources for knowledge of ancient slavery. For the purpose of the present study, the importance of this – what I call a "literary turn" – cannot be overstressed. Just as it was discovered in postcolonial studies before, students of antiquity realized that resistance, tensions, and critique could be found in literary texts, even if these phenomena were not directly visible. As Michael Chapman writes about the "literary turn" in postcolonialism: "meaning emerges in the textual palimpsest, deconstructively, or against the grain of full intent, in the slippages, in the 'in-between,' the 'liminal,' or 'Third Space'."¹⁰³ We will come back to this in the next chapter when we discuss the theory of hidden transcripts by James Scott.

2.3.2.3. Keith Bradley: Resistance of Slaves

It can be said that Keith Bradley came as close to being Finley's successor as the authority on ancient slavery as one can come. McKeown describes Bradley's work as "the foundation of the current Anglophone understanding of the topic."¹⁰⁴ Although Bradley does not see himself as a Finleyschüler ("this is not true in any formal sense," he stated in 2008¹⁰⁵), he has often been described as such, and he does build in many ways on Finley's critique of the Mainzer Akademie.¹⁰⁶ Bradley has published several books on slavery in antiquity. I will set out the main thesis of three of Bradley's works: *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire: A Study in Social Control* (1984), *Slavery and Rebellion in the Roman World, 140 BC - 70 BC* (1989), and *Slavery and Society at Rome* (1994). In all of his works Bradley responds in a certain way to scholars like Vogt who claim that ancient slavery was relatively humane. One of their arguments is the rarity of slave revolts: apparently, slaves were not so unhappy in their situation that they rebelled against their owners. However, in his work on slave revolts and rebellion, Bradley argues for a broader understanding of the term "resistance." He claims that, given the complex and

¹⁰⁰ Keith Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves*, Sociological Studies in Roman History 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 1-11.

¹⁰¹ Keith Hopkins, "Novel Evidence for Roman Slavery," *Past & Present* 138 (1993), 12.

¹⁰² Keith R. Bradley, "Animalizing the Slave: The Truth of Fiction," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 90 (2000), 110-125; William Fitzgerald, *Slavery and the Roman Literary Imagination*, Roman Literature and its Contexts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). See also Roberta Stewart, *Plautus and Roman Slavery* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), and Kathleen McCarthy, *Slaves, Masters, and the Art of Authority in Plautine Comedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

¹⁰³ Michael Chapman, "Postcolonialism: A Literary Turn," *English in Africa* 33, no. 2 (2006), 10.

¹⁰⁴ McKeown, *The Invention of Ancient Slavery?*, 77.

¹⁰⁵ Keith R. Bradley, "Roman Slavery: Retrospect and Prospect," *Canadian Journal of History* 18 (2008), 477.

¹⁰⁶ J. Albert Harrill, "Slavery and Inhumanity: Keith Bradley's Legacy on Slavery in New Testament Studies," *Biblical Interpretation* 21, no. 4/5 (2013), 507.

diverse population of slaves in the Roman Empire, a unified revolt would seldom have been an option. So, resistance must have been sought in other forms. In *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire*, Bradley distinguishes individual acts of violence by slaves, the tendency of slaves to flee (of which we have many attestations), and “the type of dilatoriness and poor work performance,” which also can be interpreted as a form of resistance, “in the sense of deliberate sabotage by slaves of their masters’ property and economic interests.”¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, in all of his works Bradley stresses the negative sides of slavery. He speaks about the sexual imbalance and abuse of slaves, the fact that slave families (if permitted) could always be torn apart, the low life expectancy of slaves, the humiliation and corporeal punishments to which slaves were subjected, and the total lack of legal protection of the slave. In sum, he focuses on “the essential brutality of the slave experience in the Roman world and especially the kinds of harsh pressures to which slaves were constantly exposed as a normal part of their everyday lives.”¹⁰⁸ What is characteristic for Bradley’s approach, too, is his way of bringing in comparative material to enlighten situations in antiquity. For him, the scarcity of slave rebellions in colonial slavery substantiates his claim that the rarity of slave revolts in antiquity says nothing about the supposed humanity of ancient slavery. “Modern” terms like *marronage* (escaping slavery and forming communities of runaway slaves) help Bradley to understand slave rebellions and slave communities in ancient Italy.¹⁰⁹ Like Hopkins earlier, Bradley reaches out to literary fiction as well.¹¹⁰ His paper, “Animalizing the Slave: The Truth of Fiction” (2000) is a fine example of this. In this paper, he claims that in Apuleius’ ancient novel *Metamorphoses*, the fortunes of the ass Lucius – who is sold from one owner to another and is beaten and sexually abused – form ironic references to the lives of slaves who were often seen as a kind of cattle, an *andrapodon* (ἄνδράποδον; man-footed creature) instead of a *tetrapodon* (τετράποδον; four-footed creature).¹¹¹

Before we continue our survey of scholarship on classical slavery, let us briefly summarize our findings. What we have seen in the previous pages is how the study of ancient slavery is intertwined with transatlantic slavery, the Cold War, and apartheid, but also with concepts like humanity, class, and different views on how to do research. Moreover, we have seen how academic giants like Finley and Bradley dominated the field and set the agenda for future research. But perhaps most importantly, we have learnt how the pendulum of time has slowly moved in favor of a more negative view on ancient slavery. According to this view, the lack of slave revolts is not proof of slaves being happy with their status, but a sign of successful “divide and rule”-policy by slave-owners. Furthermore, there is a growing awareness that different readings and different sources are necessary to uncover the experiences of the ancient slaves themselves. In what I call the “literary turn,” scholars like Hopkins and Bradley have discovered literary (fictional) texts as a source of information and criticism with respect to the ubiquitous slavery system of Greco-Roman antiquity.

2.3.2.4. A Sidestep: Orlando Patterson

Before discussing the next generation of scholars, I would like to mention briefly the work of a scholar who made a lasting impact on slavery studies in general, including the study of ancient slavery: Orlando Patterson. Orlando Patterson is a Jamaican-born cultural sociologist who mainly works on race issues in the United States. Patterson’s most important work on slavery is his 1981 monograph, *Slavery and Social Death*. In this book, he tries to redefine slavery with the help of the concept of social death. Generally, Patterson observes, one of the constitutive elements of slavery is property. But Patterson sees that property relations are not confined to slaves. The custom of bride selling in Africa, or the trading of professional athletes in the major football leagues also entail the idea of human property. What, then, is the difference? Choice? Debt slaves and serfs did not have a

¹⁰⁷ Keith R. Bradley, *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire. A Study in Social Control* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 32. Cf. Keith R. Bradley, *Slavery and Rebellion in the Roman World, 140 B.C.-70 B.C.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 18-45.

¹⁰⁸ Bradley, *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire*, 13-14.

¹⁰⁹ “The object, it must be stressed, is not to try to prove a direct equation between the Roman rebellions and later episodes of servile behavior; it is only to suggest that the ancient events, once set out in detail, can be seen to carry something of a maroon character.” Bradley, *Slavery and Rebellion in the Roman World*, 17.

¹¹⁰ In the work of Peter Garnsey, we hit on another interesting literary genre: the (philosophical) rhetorics of slavery (see Peter Garnsey, *Ideas of Slavery from Aristotle to Augustine* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999]). We will come back to this in chapter three.

¹¹¹ Bradley, “Animalizing the Slave,” 110.

choice either. The main difference is the degree of power that can be exercised.¹¹² Patterson discovered that in many societies, slavery formed a substitution for the death penalty. As a consequence, slaves could not appeal to any legal rights. Not only were slaves deprived of any legal rights, they were, in most of the societies, cut off from all kinship relations. The slave was in all dimensions an outsider, which made him/her socially dead. Thus, Patterson states, “you are not a slave because you were the object of property, but because you could not be the subject of property.”¹¹³ On the basis of these insights, Patterson formulates the following definition of slavery: “slavery is the permanent, violent domination of natally alienated and generally dishonored persons.”¹¹⁴ Finally, Patterson emphasizes that the primary purpose for keeping slaves was often not driven by economic reasons but by status-enhancing rationales. Patterson’s ideas turned out to be so influential in Biblical scholarship that, in 1998, a complete edition of *Semeia* was devoted to them.¹¹⁵ A lesser known work by Patterson deserves mentioning here as well. In his 1991 *Freedom. Volume I: Freedom in the Making of Western Culture*,¹¹⁶ Patterson claims that the birth of our concept of freedom is the dialectical outcome of the experience of chattel slavery.¹¹⁷ The rise of Christianity, the first world religion that placed (spiritual) freedom and redemption at the center of its theology, further contributed to the rise of the “uniquely Western chord of freedom.”¹¹⁸ Even though this claim is of greatest interest, it falls outside the scope of the present study. Instead, we turn to the modern study of Greco-Roman slavery.

2.1.4. Modern Scholarship: Scientific Approach and Gender Studies

In *Slavery and Society at Rome* (1994), Bradley writes that he wants to draw the attention of the historian to “the voiceless and the disempowered.”¹¹⁹ Although this desire is not new in slavery studies per se, his terminology is clearly (post)modern, and influenced by comparable endeavors in postcolonial studies.¹²⁰ We will see that in modern research of ancient slavery, perspectives from postcolonial studies, gender studies, and other disciplines come together. But there is still another “modern” approach we first have to explore, which is called “the scientific approach” by McKeown. The main authors in this field are William Harris and, more prominently, Walter Scheidel.

In the works of Hopkins, Bradley, and others (Fitzgerald, McCarthy), we have observed a growing interest in literary sources – from comedy to novella.¹²¹ At the same time, scholars like Harris and Scheidel are more interested in statistics and probabilities. They try to combine demographic methods with ancient data to answer the big questions of ancient slavery, which results in papers like Scheidel’s “Quantifying the sources of slaves in the Early Roman Empire” (1997). In this article, Scheidel argues that natural reproduction made the biggest contribution to the slave supply in the Roman Empire. He comes to this conclusion based on life expectancy rates, rates of manumission, and on estimations of the possible import of foreign slaves.¹²²

¹¹² Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death. A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 26.

¹¹³ Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 28.

¹¹⁴ Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 13.

¹¹⁵ Allen Dwight Callahan, Richard A. Horsley and Abraham Smith, ed., *Slavery in Text and Interpretation*, *Semeia* 83/84 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1998).

¹¹⁶ Orlando Patterson, *Freedom. Volume I: Freedom in the Making of Western Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

¹¹⁷ Patterson, *Freedom*, xiii.

¹¹⁸ Patterson, *Freedom*, xvi, 5.

¹¹⁹ Bradley, *Slavery and Society at Rome*, 180.

¹²⁰ Ashis Nandy, “History’s forgotten doubles,” *History and Theory* 34, no. 2 (1995), 44-66; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271-313.

¹²¹ See also Lawrence M. Wills, “The Depiction of Slavery in the Ancient Novel,” in *Slavery in Text and Interpretation*, ed. Allen Dwight Callahan, Richard A. Horsley and Abraham Smith, *Semeia* 83/84 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1998), 113-132.

¹²² Walter Scheidel, “Quantifying the Sources of Slaves in the Early Roman Empire,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 87 (1997), 156-169.

Although his paper breaths a certain precision and exactness (with corresponding charts and graphs) not often found in research on ancient slavery, McKeown rightly remarks that Scheidel's whole argument depends on which premise one starts with:

[I]f the slaves made up 10% of the population of the empire, it is highly probable that breeding was the source of the clear majority of slaves and that female slaves were unlikely to be freed while they could produce children. [...] But the "if" in the first sentence of this paragraph is crucial. If only 5% of the empire's inhabitants were slaves, the proportion of home-bred slaves *may* have been much lower than Scheidel suggested.¹²³

With the data that is available to us now, it remains a guess which percentage is more accurate until we find new evidence – if (if!) there is such evidence at all.¹²⁴ But McKeown continues a page later more positively:

Whatever its advantages and disadvantages, [...] the demographic approach at least operates by debating the limits of uncertainty, and as such it acts as a good metaphor for how the history of slavery *ought* to be written, even if it isn't.¹²⁵

I agree with McKeown that it is good to debate and to be transparent about what we can and cannot know with certainty. In the parables, it is often an issue of whether we should explain their (sometimes bizarre) narratives from either social reality, from a comparison with other fictional genres, or from the demands of their applications. The honest answer would be that we often do not and cannot know for sure. I will try to acknowledge these uncertainties whenever they occur in my own research.

2.1.4.1. Female Slavery and Intersectionality

After many decades of male scholarship, a new generation of female scholars stood up,¹²⁶ some of whom I describe below. Amongst them a sensitivity can be found for the fact that women and slaves shared a particular subservient position. Sheila Murnaghan and Sandra Joshel write in their introduction to a volume on women and slaves in the Greco-Roman world (1997):

Whatever their particular forms, ancient Greek and Roman societies always combined slaveholding and patriarchy, and this combination promoted a constant process of comparison and differentiation. Women and slaves were similarly distinguished from free men by their social subordination and their imagined otherness.¹²⁷

When both roles come together in one person, as in an *ancilla*, a female slave (woman and slave), or in a foreign male slave (foreigner and slave), we speak of intersectionality. The idea of intersectionality is already an older one based on Marxist theory ("Aber das menschliche Wesen ist kein dem einzelnen Individuum inwohnendes Abstraktum. In seiner Wirklichkeit ist es das ensemble der gesellschaftlichen Verhältnisse"¹²⁸). The idea is that "[i]nstead of examining gender, race, class, age, and sexuality as separate categories of oppression,

¹²³ McKeown, *The Invention of Ancient Slavery?*, 139.

¹²⁴ McKeown, *The Invention of Ancient Slavery?*, 139.

¹²⁵ McKeown, *The Invention of Ancient Slavery?*, 140.

¹²⁶ Some male scholars could be mentioned who share the above mentioned interest in gender difference, like e.g., Richard Saller, "Women, slaves, and the Economy of the Roman Household," in *Early Christian Families in Context*, ed. David L. Balch and Carolyn Osiek (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 185-204 (also in his earlier work an interest for slave women is visible; cf. Richard Saller, "Slavery and the Roman Family," *Slavery & Abolition* 8, no. 1 [1987], 65-87).

¹²⁷ Sheila Murnaghan and Sandra R. Joshel, "Introduction: Differential Equations," in *Women and Slaves in Greco-Roman Culture: Differential Equations*, ed. Sheila Murnaghan and Sandra R. Joshel (London: Routledge, 1998), 3.

¹²⁸ Marx's sixth thesis on Feuerbach. Karl Marx, "Thesen über Feuerbach," in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1975), 3:5.

intersectionality explores how these categories overlap.”¹²⁹ Although they do not all use it, I think the term intersectionality fits the ideas that are present in the works of scholars like Joshel and Murnaghan, and Page DuBois, since these scholars pay special attention to the double degradation of female slaves in ancient society, partly as a consequence of their interest in the more bodily aspects of slavery.¹³⁰ However, what should not be overlooked is that what intersectionality shows with regard to the overlapping of two negative or oppressing roles might also help to understand how someone in a (formally) low position can nonetheless exercise power, for example, because of one’s profession (a slave doctor), one’s wealth (a rich woman), or one’s patron or owner (the slave of the king). We will see examples of this in our own research as well.

In her *Slaves and Other Objects* (2003), DuBois takes up the challenge by Bradley to research art and other forms of material culture to enlarge our knowledge of ancient slavery.¹³¹ In her writing, we also stumble upon another term from modern discourses: “anxiety.”

I have thought that slaves seemed often like furnishings of Greek life: useful objects for the conduct of everyday life, yet often difficult to manage and incessantly reminding the free of the possibility of their own enslavement – a fact of life sometimes impossible for their masters and for latter-day scholars to recognize, precisely because of the anxieties it raises concerning the practice of slavery.¹³²

So, we see that in more recent publications on ancient slavery, old truths and approved methods are replaced by new interests and methods. The more numbers-based methodology developed by Harris and Scheidel shows the growing discontent with the older, as subjectively experienced studies.¹³³ In the work of gender specialists, we find an implicit and explicit critique of the male-dominated and male-centered studies of the past centuries. We also saw how scholars turn to more literary sources (and, like DuBois, to material objects) to penetrate the feelings and thoughts of ancient slaveholders and slaves, and as a way to avoid the “legal fallacy” – that is, to take the extensive legal literature on slavery as a mirror for social reality – a fallacy that we also often find in the study of Christian and Jewish slavery. These new directions in slavery studies put the epistemological question again on the agenda: what can we honestly know about slavery?

2.1.4.2. Meta-discussion

This brings me to the work of McKeown, who tried to move the discussion on ancient slavery to a meta-level. In 2007, McKeown published a book with the title *The Invention of Ancient Slavery?* The term “invention” is used here by McKeown to designate the process of creating new narratives to fill the gaps of the ancient evidence on slavery.¹³⁴ Although he does not really argue that the history of ancient slavery is invented,¹³⁵ McKeown does show in a series of chapters that in all the debates on ancient slavery he discusses (starting with Tenney Frank), scholars often read their own histories and ideological debates into the texts, instead of drawing the history from them. As a matter of fact, often, ancient historians have argued for exact opposite positions on the basis of the same material. Although his book is “written in the shadow of the postmodern challenge,”¹³⁶ McKeown sees himself not as a postmodernist. What he wants to show is how professional historians are led by “historically constructed boxes” that force them into particular readings of the material. He argues for a use of our imagination to see the “plot lines” when the sources are silent, *but* to remain, at the same time, careful “not to ‘rescue’ the voice of the ancient slave by making it a distorted version of our own.”¹³⁷ With his work, McKeown challenges

¹²⁹ Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, *Destabilizing the Margins: An Intersectional Approach to Early Christian Memory* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2012), 15.

¹³⁰ De Wet states about their work that it shows “hoe die verskynsel van slawerny opgesuig is in die sosiale materie van die tye, en hoe hierdie materie, op sy beurt, slawerny verder beïnvloed en gevorm het [...]” De Wet, “Antieke slawerny en die vroeë Christendom,” 323).

¹³¹ Bradley, “Roman Slavery: Retrospect and Prospect,” 489.

¹³² Page DuBois, *Slaves and Other Objects* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), xii.

¹³³ It is one of the ironies of history that this “new” scientific approach is not as much an innovation as it is a revival of what Finley has discarded as “the numbers game.”

¹³⁴ Cf. McKeown, *The Invention of Ancient Slavery?*, 162-163.

¹³⁵ McKeown, *The Invention of Ancient Slavery?*, 136.

¹³⁶ McKeown, *The Invention of Ancient Slavery?*, 8.

¹³⁷ McKeown, *The Invention of Ancient Slavery?*, 163.

historians to reflect on their work and on the history of ancient slavery research, which is, I think, a very useful challenge. With those warnings we also leave the realm of the Greco-Roman world and continue with the work on Jewish-Christian slavery.¹³⁸

2.1.5. Summary

Before we shift our focus to slavery in early rabbinic Judaism (2.2) and early Christianity (2.3), let us first briefly summarize this section. We have learned that the scholarly attention on ancient antiquity goes back a long way, even to the early seventeenth century. The debate in the nineteenth century is led by the abolitionists on the one hand – who wanted to show how slavery corrupted the Greco-Roman world – and by Marxists on the other hand – who showed how slavery was necessary for ancient society to accumulate wealth. In the twentieth century, the main debate was between Finley and the Mainzer Akademie over the question of whether or not ancient slavery was a humane institution. Finley turned out to have history on his side; scholars increasingly emphasized the horrors of ancient slavery: the brutality of physical punishments and sexual exploitation, and the complete loss of identity and self-determination. These tendencies will, as we see in the next sections, also influence the study of Jewish and Christian slavery. Furthermore, in twentieth-century scholarship, an interest grew in the experiences of slaves themselves. However, as Katherine A. Shaner once noticed: “There were no Greek or Roman Frederick Douglasses. It is notorious that the few writers of antiquity who had a personal background of enslavement show no trace of that experience in their surviving works, not a scrap to distinguish them from the overwhelming majority of writers, whose background was in the slave-owning classes.”¹³⁹ To pervade slave experiences nonetheless, scholars started to study fictional texts and to read those and other texts “against the grain,” something we will attempt with the slavery parables in this study too. Another interesting aspect of modern scholarship on Greco-Roman slavery is its attention to the concept of intersectionality. I find this a rich concept, especially to explain the complex hierarchies of ancient societies and the sometimes positive or high status of slaves. Finally, I would like to draw inspiration from the search for new sources, perspectives, and methods that has guided the study of Greco-Roman slavery for as long as it exists, as well as the reflection on the discipline that has been performed continuously over the past few decades.

2.2. Slavery in Early Judaism

The scholarly discussion about slavery in early (rabbinic) Judaism and early Christianity is at least as ideologically (theologically) influenced as the discussion of ancient slavery amongst the Classicists. Originally, the discussion on slavery was entirely based on the Old Testament laws concerning slavery,¹⁴⁰ which were (and often still are¹⁴¹) quite naively interpreted.¹⁴² We find those laws on slavery in the biblical books of Exodus, Deuteronomy, and Leviticus. Much scholarly work is done with respect to the question of how those laws relate to each other.¹⁴³ For now, it will suffice to give a brief overview of the most important laws concerning slavery,

¹³⁸ For those who want to have a more complete list of publications on slavery in the Greco-Roman world, I again am happy to refer to Bellen and Heinen’s bibliography: Heinz Heinen and Heinz Bellen, ed., *Bibliographie zur antiken Sklaverei*, 2 vols., *Forschungen zur antiken Sklaverei* 4 (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2003). For a very critical, but refreshing discussion of biblical scholarship on slavery see Hector Avalos, *Slavery, Abolitionism, and the Ethics of Biblical Scholarship*, *The Bible in the Modern World* 38 (Sheffield, Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013), and my critical review of his work in *NTT Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion* 71, no. 3 (2017), 287-288.

¹³⁹ Katherine A. Shaner, *Enslaved Leadership in Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), xxv.

¹⁴⁰ It surprises me that there is – as far as I know – no complete study on slavery in the Old Testament.

¹⁴¹ For example: Thomas Schirrmacher, ed., *The Humanisation of Slavery in the Old Testament* (Bonn: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2015).

¹⁴² “It has been said very often that slavery in Israel, or in the Near East as a whole, should not be put in line with classical Greek and Roman slavery. Slaves were not too numerous and their position was very often that of (unfree) house servants.” Johannes P. M. van der Ploeg, “Slavery in the Old Testament,” in *Congress Volume Uppsala 1971*, ed. Pieter A. H. de Boer (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 83.

¹⁴³ The main debate is about the question of whether the Hebrew slave law in the Book of the Covenant precedes the versions in Deuteronomy and the Holiness Code (which seems to be the opinion of the majority of the scholars), or if it is the other way round. See for example: Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997 [1958-1960]), 80-90; Neils P. Lemche, “The ‘Hebrew Slave’. Comments on the Slave Law Ex. xxi 2-11,” *Vetus Testamentum* 25, no. 2 (1975), 129-144; Neils P. Lemche, “The Manumission of

which often form the point of departure for studies on slavery in Christianity and early rabbinic Judaism as well (as we will see below).

First, we find in Exodus 21:2-6 on the Hebrew slave:

When you buy a male Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, but in the seventh he shall go out a free person, without debt. If he comes in single, he shall go out single; if he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him. If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall be her master's and he shall go out alone. But if the slave declares, "I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out a free person," then his master shall bring him before God. He shall be brought to the door or the doorpost; and his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him for life.

This law entails that after six years of slavery (the seventh year is a Sabbatical or Jubilee Year), the Hebrew slave must be released, and his wife (if he has one) with him. What is striking here is the idea that a slave-owner has the obligation to set his slave free (a Hebrew slave, and a male slave, we must emphasize) – which means that slavery is not a permanent state, and that slave-owners lose their "investment" after six years.¹⁴⁴ Notice also that "homebred" slaves (the children of the slave's wife) are not released, but remain the property of the master. If the slave wants to remain a slave (because his family still is), his ear must be pierced. In Deuteronomy 15:12-15, it is even stated that one must not let a released slave go empty-handed, with a reference to the slavery experience of the people of Israel.¹⁴⁵

However, the same rules do not apply to gentile, non-Hebrew, slaves: "You may keep them [gentile slaves] as a possession for your children after you, for them to inherit as property. These you may treat as slaves, but as for your fellow Israelites, no one shall rule over the other with harshness" (Leviticus 25:46). Aside from the fact that treating a gentile slave with harshness is allowed, the rule about releasing slaves in their seventh year does not apply to gentile slaves. The Torah apparently makes a strict and far-reaching distinction between gentile and Hebrew slaves. The Torah also makes a distinction between male and female Hebrew slaves (Exodus 21:7-11).¹⁴⁶ A few other regulations might catch our attention: if a master beats his slave and the slave dies, the master should be punished (Exodus 21:20-21); and if the master destroys the eye or the tooth of his slave, the slave must be released (Exodus 21:26-27). Furthermore, a slave who has escaped from his master must not be returned to him (Deuteronomy 23:15-16).

Slaves – the Fallow Year – the Sabbatical Year – the Jubel Year," *Vetus Testamentum* 36, no. 1 (1976), 38-59; Innocenzo Cardellini, *Die biblischen "Sklaven" – Gesetze im Lichte des keilschriftlichen Sklavenrechts* (Bonn: Peter Hanstein Verlag, 1981); Gregory C. Chirichigno, *Debt Slavery in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993); John Van Seters, "The Law of the Hebrew Slave," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 108 (1996), 534-546; Adrian Schenker, "The Biblical Legislation on the Release of Slaves: The Road from Exodus to Leviticus," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 78 (1998), 23-41; Anthony Philips, "The Laws of Slavery: Exodus 21.2-11," in *Essays on Biblical Law*, ed. Anthony Philips (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 96-110; Jeffrey Stackert, "Revision in the Pentateuchal Seventh-Year and Slavery Laws: *Šēmitā*, *Šabbāʾôn* and *Yôḥēl*," in *Rewriting the Torah. Literary Revision in Deuteronomy and the Holiness Legislation*, ed. Jeffrey Stackert (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 113-164.

¹⁴⁴ An idea that was in itself not unique in the Ancient Near East. The Code of Hammurabi states that in the case of debt-slavery the period of forced labor was limited to three years. See, for example, Isaac Mendelsohn, "Slavery in the OT," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible. An Illustrated Encyclopedia*, ed. George A. Buttrick, vol. 4, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 388).

¹⁴⁵ "If a member of your community, whether a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you and works for you six years, in the seventh year you shall set that person free. And when you send a male slave out from you a free person, you shall not send him out empty-handed. Provide liberally out of your flock, your threshing floor, and your wine press, thus giving to him some of the bounty with which the Lord your God has blessed you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you; for this reason I lay this command upon you today."

¹⁴⁶ "When a man sells his daughter as a slave, she shall not go out as the male slaves do. If she does not please her master, who designated her for himself, then he shall let her be redeemed; he shall have no right to sell her to a foreign people, since he has dealt unfairly with her. If he designates her for his son, he shall deal with her as with a daughter. If he takes another wife to himself, he shall not diminish the food, clothing, or marital rights of the first wife. And if he does not do these three things for her, she shall go out without debt, without payment of money."

It is important to notice that even in the Old Testament we do not find traces of the application of the above-mentioned slave laws. The only references to large scale manumissions (in Jeremiah 34:8-20 and Nehemiah 5:1-13) can at best be seen as “once-only measures,” without clear references to the older laws of the so called Jubilee and Sabbatical Year.¹⁴⁷

Aside from the slavery laws, another important element of the way slavery is conceptualized is the “slavery experience” of ancient Israel. In Exodus 13:3 we read: “Moses said to the people, ‘Remember this day on which you came out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, because the Lord brought you out from there by strength of hand [...]’.” As we already saw (Deuteronomy 15:15), the slavery experience of the people of Israel might have encouraged Hebrew slave-owners to treat their own slaves well, or as Catherine Hezser puts it rather firmly: “The Exodus experience serves as a motivating force for morally guided behaviour here.”¹⁴⁸ The slavery experience is relived every year in the Passover meal, during which “in every generation a person is obliged to see him/herself as if he/she came forth out of Egypt him/herself” (m. Pesachim 10:5; see 7.1.3).

Finally, it is valuable to remark that slavery became a dominant metaphor in the Bible (see also the next chapter, 3.2.2.). Kings and prophets could be “slaves” of God (e.g., Jeremiah 7:25, 2 Kings 21:10, Amos 3:7, 2 Samuel 7:5-8, 1 Kings 8:66). Furthermore, in Isaiah, Israel as a collective is called a slave of God (Isaiah 41:8), and Moses is called a slave of God several times as well (e.g., Nehemiah 10:29).¹⁴⁹

2.2.1. Assimilation and Apologists

At the end of the nineteenth century, the first works on slavery by Jewish Studies scholars appear. Those works often depart from the Biblical laws on slavery (see the previous section) and try to combine those laws with rabbinic regulations. I will discuss a few notable authors among those early scholars.¹⁵⁰

One of the first Jewish Studies scholars ever to write on slavery is Moses Mielziner, who published in 1859 in Copenhagen, *Die Verhältnisse der Sklaven bei den alten Hebräern* (better known from its 1894 English translation). The first sentence of this work sets the tone of the rest of the book:

Among the religions and legislations of antiquity none could exhibit a spirit so decidedly averse to slavery as the religion and legislation of Moses; nor could any ancient nation find, in the circumstances of its own origin, such powerful motives to abolish that institution as the people of Israel.¹⁵¹

Although Mielziner continues by stating that in the time of the Mosaic legislation slavery was too deeply rooted in ancient societies to be abolished, he claims that the laws by Moses did remove the inhumanity of the system as it occurred in neighboring nations. It is important to realize that Mielziner was part of – or at least a direct heir of – the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*.¹⁵² The *Wissenschaft des Judentums* was the attempt of some German-Jewish intellectuals in the nineteenth century to transform the study of Judaism into a respectable field of academic study, next to other disciplines. They believed that full emancipation of Jews in western societies could only be completed when such a transformation succeeded. This led to the founding of several German institutes of Jewish scholarship.¹⁵³ Mielziner was one of the scholars who moved from Germany (and German writing) to the United States, taking new insights from Europe with him.

In Farbstein’s “Das Recht der unfreien und freien Arbeiter nach jüdisch-talmudischem Recht verglichen mit dem antiken, speciell mit dem römischen Recht” (1896), we find a pioneering comparison made between

¹⁴⁷ Lemche, “The Manumission of Slaves,” 54-55.

¹⁴⁸ Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 365.

¹⁴⁹ Catherine Hezser, “Slavery and the Jews,” in, *Cambridge World History of Slavery, Volume 1: The Ancient Mediterranean World*, ed. Keith R. Bradley and Paul Cartledge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 450.

¹⁵⁰ See for a longer list, Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 4 and especially Catherine Hezser, “The Social Status of Slaves in the Talmud Yerushalmi,” in *The Talmud Yerushalmi and Graeco-Roman Culture*, ed. Peter Schäfer, vol. 3 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 91n3-4.

¹⁵¹ Moses Mielziner, *The Institution of Slavery among the Ancient Hebrews, According to the Bible and Talmud* (Cincinnati: The American Hebrew Publishing House, 1894), 3-4.

¹⁵² Christian Wiese, “Inventing a New Language of Scholarship: The Transition from German *Wissenschaft des Judentums* to American-Jewish Scholarship in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” *Studia Rosenthaliana* 36 (2002-2003), 290.

¹⁵³ Wiese, “Inventing a New Language of Scholarship,” 275-276.

Jewish law and Roman law.¹⁵⁴ This comparison turns out very positively for Judaism: according to Farbstein, Jews could only be debt servants and not “real” slaves (at least, not of their fellow Jews).¹⁵⁵

A third contributor to the field, Samuel Krauss, published an article on slavery in the *Jewish Encyclopedia* (1906) and wrote extensively on slavery in his *Talmudische Archäologie*.¹⁵⁶ Krauss finds that the slave laws from the Torah “breathe a common spirit of humanity and brotherhood,”¹⁵⁷ but observes at the same time that those laws seem to conflict with other passages (for example, 2 Kings 4:1-7) from the Hebrew Bible.¹⁵⁸ As representative of the rabbinical literature, Krauss discusses a work on slavery by Maimonides (*Yad ha-Chazakah*). This still often quoted work¹⁵⁹ does not denounce the practice of slavery but tries to keep the system humane – especially for Hebrew slaves. Maimonides claims that “cruelty is found only among idolatrous nations, not among the seed of Abraham.”¹⁶⁰

Generally speaking, the early works by Mielziner, Farbstein, and Krauss are all very apologetic in character (possibly influenced by the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*),¹⁶¹ displaying Jewish slavery as a humane institution. Hezser finds an explanation for this in the fact that these German-Jewish scholars lived at the time of Jewish emancipation and integration. They sought acceptance as a minority amongst Christians, and did so by arguing “that the Jewish tradition was not inferior to early Christian teachings on slaves and slavery, that it was even more advanced and a precursor of the modern abolition movement.”¹⁶²

After these first contributions to the field of Jewish slavery studies, we encounter a period of relative silence on the matter.¹⁶³ Only more than ten years after the Second World War did a scholar decide to devote an essay to the subject again.

2.2.2. Post-War Jewish Studies Scholarship on Slavery

The history of more recent critical scholarship on Jewish slavery in antiquity starts in 1959 with the paper Ephraim Urbach wrote on slavery in the period of the Second Temple, in which he took halakhic (legal) material as his departure point.¹⁶⁴ He claimed that the Jubilee years were still held in the Second Temple Period, that debt slavery occurred (although not recognized by law), and that there did not exist substantial numbers of foreign slaves in Judea. Only the elite had a multiplicity of slaves, while many households had a few slaves.¹⁶⁵ Based on

¹⁵⁴ David Farbstein, “Das Recht der unfreien und freien Arbeiter nach jüdisch-talmudischem Recht verglichen mit dem antiken, speziell mit dem römischen Recht,” (PhD diss., University of Bern, 1896).

¹⁵⁵ Comparable ideas can be found in Richard Grünfeld’s “Die Stellung der Sklaven bei den Juden nach biblischen und talmudischen Quellen,” (PhD diss., University of Jena, 1886), 7–8.

¹⁵⁶ For the latter: Samuel Krauss, *Talmudische Archäologie. Grundriss der Gesamtwissenschaft des Judentums* (Leipzig: Buchhandlung Gustav Fock, 1911), 2:83-111 (chapter “Sklaven und Lohnarbeiter”).

¹⁵⁷ Samuel Krauss, “Slaves and Slavery,” in *The Jewish Encyclopedia, a descriptive record of the history, literature, and customs of the Jewish people from the earliest times to the present day*, ed. Isidore Singer (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1901-1906), 11:403.

¹⁵⁸ According to Exodus 22:2, selling a man into slavery without his consent is only possible when he is not able to compensate for stolen goods. However, in II Kings 4:1-7 we read how the sons of a dead debtor were sold for their father’s debt.

¹⁵⁹ See, for example, this article on the website of the Chabad-Lubavitch Hasidic movement: Tzvi Freeman, “Torah, Slavery and the Jews,” accessed September 28, 2015, http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/305549/jewish/Torah-Slavery-and-the-Jews.htm.

¹⁶⁰ Krauss, “Slaves and Slavery,” 406.

¹⁶¹ The term “apologetic” is used by Elizabeth Leigh Gibson, *The Jewish Manumission Inscriptions of the Bosphorus Kingdom* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), 58-59.

¹⁶² Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 5.

¹⁶³ Hezser, “The Social Status of Slaves in the Talmud Yerushalmi,” 91 (note 4), mentions: Morris H. Bell, “Slavery in the Talmud and the Tractate Abadim,” (PhD diss., HUC New York, 1949); S. Chonowitz, “Das Arbeitsrecht im Talmud,” (PhD diss. University of Berlin, 1933); Isaac Mendelsohn, *Slavery in the Ancient Near East: A Comparative Study of Slavery in Babylonia, Assyria, Syria and Palestine from the Middle of the Third Millennium to the End of the First Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949); Robert Salomon, *L’esclavage en droit compare juif et romain* (Paris: Librairie Ernest Leroux, 1931); Solomon Zucrow, *Women, Slaves and the Ignorant in Rabbinic Literature and The Dignity of Man* (Boston: The Stratford Company Publishers, 1932).

¹⁶⁴ Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Laws Regarding Slavery* (New York: Arno Press, 1979).

¹⁶⁵ Urbach, *The Laws Regarding Slavery*, 32.

Jewish laws he also asserted that manumission in Israel effected complete liberty and a breach of all bonds with slavery,¹⁶⁶ which would form a contrast with the Roman laws concerning manumission, according to which freed slaves remained in a subservient relationship to their former masters. Important for the history of Jewish slavery research is that Urbach was the first scholar of Jewish Studies to write: “slavery was taken for granted as a factor basic to political, economic and social life. From this point of view, the Jewish people formed no exception.”¹⁶⁷ Despite the truth of this statement, we should approach Urbach’s article with caution. As Elizabeth Leigh Gibson shows, Urbach’s methodology is flawed, mainly because Urbach anachronistically uses rabbinic sources from different eras to explain slaveholding practices in a specific time.¹⁶⁸

2.2.2.1. Solomon Zeitlin

Some years later (1964), an important contribution to the debate was delivered by Solomon Zeitlin with his paper “Slavery During the Second Commonwealth and the Tannaitic Period.” In this paper, Zeitlin uses Biblical, halakhic, haggadic, and Greco-Roman material (preferring the former over the latter). He stresses the continuity of the situation in the Second Commonwealth with the Biblical laws. He uses the precepts in the Torah as the perspective from which historical incidents must be explained.¹⁶⁹ The Talmud is uncritically used as a source for history – which leads Zeitlin to claim that there were no Jewish slaves during the Second Commonwealth, although he admits that there is ample evidence for (non-Jewish) slaves in that period.¹⁷⁰ In general, Zeitlin emphasizes the more positive sides of Jewish slavery:

While there were Jewish slaves during the Second Commonwealth the sages always laid stress on humane treatment towards them. Judaea did not have *πρατής λιθος* the stone upon which slaves were sold [*sic*¹⁷¹], which was common among other nations. Actually Jewish slaves were bondsmen. This was due not only to the humane treatment towards them but also to a time limit of service.¹⁷²

This humane treatment is contrasted by Zeitlin with the harsh conditions of slaves in the Roman Empire where slaves were under the power of their owner, and where cruel penalties were normal. However, the treatment of non-Hebrew slaves in Israel was not friendly either. A gentile slave had no rights, was considered property, and was not released after six years. Zeitlin concludes his article by stressing that the sages behaved in the same way as the Stoics: they “did not condemn the institution but endeavored to ameliorate the condition of the slaves by improving their status.”¹⁷³ As one can imagine, Zeitlin’s “attempt to harmonize later rabbinic statements about Jewish slavery with first-century witnesses,” as Martin calls it, is rather unconvincing.¹⁷⁴

2.2.2.2. A Communist Talmudist: Yulii Aronovich Solodukho

A very different approach and outcome can be found in a work that received barely any reception¹⁷⁵: “Slavery in the Hebrew Society of Iraq and Syria in the Second through Fifth Centuries A.D.” by the Soviet scholar, Yulii

¹⁶⁶ Urbach, *The Laws Regarding Slavery*, 59.

¹⁶⁷ Urbach, *The Laws Regarding Slavery*, 4.

¹⁶⁸ Gibson, *The Jewish Manumission Inscriptions*, 59.

¹⁶⁹ Solomon Zeitlin, “Slavery during the Second Commonwealth and the Tannaitic Period,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 53, no. 3 (1963), 190. An example of such a historical incident is the selling of thieves as slaves to pagans outside of Judea.

¹⁷⁰ Zeitlin, “Slavery during the Second Commonwealth and the Tannaitic Period,” 194. The solution that is offered by Zeitlin is that the Talmud is speaking only about debt-slaves. Cf. Boaz Cohen, *Jewish and Roman Law. A Comparative Study*, vol. 1 (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1966), 329: “The institution of civil bondage had completely disappeared already before the Babylonian exile.”

¹⁷¹ I will show that this is incorrect in chapter 4.

¹⁷² Zeitlin, “Slavery during the Second Commonwealth and the Tannaitic Period,” 198.

¹⁷³ Zeitlin, “Slavery during the Second Commonwealth and the Tannaitic Period,” 217.

¹⁷⁴ Dale B. Martin, “Slavery and the Ancient Jewish Family,” in *The Jewish Family in Antiquity*, ed. Shaye J. D. Cohen (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), 116 (note 9).

¹⁷⁵ Even Hezser does not mention it in her standard work on ancient Jewish slavery.

Aronovich Solodukho.¹⁷⁶ This work was originally published in Russian in 1938, and was only translated and published in the West by Jacob Neusner in 1973. According to Solodukho, the “exploiting classes” of the Hebrew people made use of the Talmudic literature “for their own interests.” Subsequently, “bourgeois” researchers have obscured the real nature of the Talmudic literature:

Bourgeois historians devoted all their efforts to distort the Talmudic materials concerning slaves in order to create a picture of “ideal” relations between slaves and their owners.¹⁷⁷

In his paper, Solodukho sketched how agriculture formed the most important means of living in ancient Palestine, and how that mode of existence was more and more dominated by big landowners, which led to an impoverishment of the small landowners. Slave labor was widely used by the big landowning aristocracy to work their land. Slaves were both from Hebrew and gentile origin, and were often forced into slavery because of debts, criminal acts, or because of their “uselessness” as unemployed.¹⁷⁸ Solodukho also observed a change in slavery over time, reflected in the Talmudic references to slavery. Originally, the slave had no right to property, and could not do business in the name of his owner, but this changed later on. Officially, slaves had no right to a family either but, in reality, this must have occurred often. Humane rules that punished the owner who killed or damaged a slave are interpreted by Solodukho as a way to safeguard the productivity of the slave – a more intensive exploitation of the slave was necessary due to the development of agricultural products and trade artifacts for the market.¹⁷⁹ Solodukho also observed a class antagonism between slave and master based on the fact that masters feared their slaves, that owners were freed from the obligation to recompense for the losses made by their slaves (so that slaves could not ruin their master on purpose), and the references to runaway slaves and slave rebellions. Finally, Solodukho noticed that the position of Hebrew slaves was not very different from non-Hebrew slaves.¹⁸⁰ He concluded his paper with the remark that slavery in the Hebrew society of that time was a “significant economic factor,” but not the basis of production. The labor of free men was widely used too, also because the Talmudic literature did not discourage (manual) labor.¹⁸¹

Of course, many of Solodukho’s remarks are influenced by his ideological point of view. Nevertheless, it is a pity that his work was not accessible to Urbach and Zeitlin given that it paid more attention to the negative aspects of slavery and because Solodukho saw that rabbinic texts did not necessarily reflect the “real” situation. He also observed that the difference between gentile and Hebrew slaves might be less important than was often thought. With those observations, Solodukho anticipated later developments in the study of ancient slavery in general, and ancient Jewish slavery in particular. For example, many of his findings are confirmed and elaborated by the next scholar I want to discuss (who knew of Solodukho’s work).

2.2.2.3. Paul Virgil McCracken Flesher

As we have seen, Urbach and Zeitlin primarily made use of legal material in their arguments. The approach of the next scholar is not different in that aspect, but his attitude towards his data is.¹⁸² In 1988, Paul Virgil McCracken Flesher published a study on slaves in the system of the Mishnah, in which he claims that the

¹⁷⁶ See for a biographical sketch of his life, Jacob Neusner, “Foreword,” in Yulii A. Solodukho, *Soviet Views of Talmudic Judaism. Five Papers by Yu. A. Solodukho in English Translation*, ed. Jacob Neusner, Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity 2 (Leiden: Brill, 1973), ix-x.

¹⁷⁷ Yulii A. Solodukho, “Slavery in the Hebrew Society of Iraq and Syria in the Second through Fifth Centuries A.D.,” in *Soviet Views of Talmudic Judaism. Five Papers by Yu. A. Solodukho in English Translation*, ed. Jacob Neusner, Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity 2 (Leiden: Brill, 1973), 1.

¹⁷⁸ Solodukho, “Slavery in the Hebrew Society of Iraq and Syria,” 4.

¹⁷⁹ Solodukho, “Slavery in the Hebrew Society of Iraq and Syria,” 6.

¹⁸⁰ Solodukho, “Slavery in the Hebrew Society of Iraq and Syria,” 7.

¹⁸¹ Solodukho, “Slavery in the Hebrew Society of Iraq and Syria,” 8-9.

¹⁸² A scholar whose contribution on ancient Jewish slavery I will not discuss elaborately is Dean A. Millar (“Biblical and Rabbinic Contributions to an Understanding of the Slave,” in *Approaches to Ancient Judaism: Theory and Practice*, ed. William S. Green [Montana: Scholars Press, 1978], 189-200). In his paper, Millar emphasizes – on the basis of the work of Mary Douglas – the liminality of the slave.

Mishnah rules are not representative of any “real” situation; they are legal fiction.¹⁸³ McCracken Flesher’s most important contribution is that he shows that the difference between a free man and a slave was far more important than the difference between a Hebrew and a gentile slave. He observes how 129 passages in the Mishnah mention slavery, of which only six mention the distinction between a foreigner and an Israelite, and 123 speak of the difference between a bondman versus a free man.¹⁸⁴ So, his conclusion is: “once someone becomes a bondman, slavery constitutes his defining feature; the Mishnah provides no indication of previous ethnic identity.”¹⁸⁵ What is the importance of this finding? As Catherine Hezser summarizes:

If the ethnic distinction was abolished by rabbis, earlier scholars’ assumption that in (post-biblical and) rabbinic times the biblical rules concerning Hebrew slaves – their manumission in the seventh year and their treatment as “bondsmen” rather than slaves – were still practised must be dismissed.¹⁸⁶

Considering the status of the slave, McCracken Flesher finds that a bondman is property according to the Mishnah but, at the same time, the Mishnah acknowledges that it is property with the capacity to reason. Furthermore, McCracken Flesher emphasizes the impact of enslavement: when a slave is brought into the domain of the householder, his previous identity is cancelled out (compare Orlando Patterson’s work).¹⁸⁷ As part of the household, the slave takes the caste of the household, but he has no part in the network of kinship ties. Important is also McCracken Flesher’s identification of a ten caste system in Mishnah regulations, in which both freedmen and *netinim* (נְתִינִים; gentiles who were once slaves of Israelites) take an intermediate place between free men and slaves. In this respect, Urbach’s positive ideas about Jewish manumission practices might be in need of revision too.

To sum up: the first generation of scholars on Jewish slavery predominantly took a legal perspective and underscored the relative humanity of the institution of Jewish slavery. Solodukho questioned this assumption and criticized the distinction between Hebrew and non-Hebrew slaves that former scholars maintained. McCracken Flesher’s work further undermined this distinction. With the work of Martin and Hezser, the “traditional” view of ancient Jewish slavery, which dominated until the second half of the twentieth century, will be shown untenable.

2.2.3. The Final *Demasqué* of the Positive View on Slavery in Early Rabbinic Judaism

Although Dale B. Martin was also active in the field of New Testament Studies (see section 2.3.1), he published in 1993 an important article on ancient Jewish slavery.¹⁸⁸ In this paper, Martin’s purpose is “to make the perhaps unremarkable point that Jewishness itself had little if any relevance for the structures of slavery among Jews.”¹⁸⁹ He states that the Jews who lived during the Greco-Roman period had the same slave structures as the people amongst whom they lived. Martin rejects an important role for ethnicity or religion in the structuring of slavery, and sees socio-economic and geographical factors as decisive.¹⁹⁰ At the same time, Martin acknowledges the extreme difficulty of finding epigraphical evidence about Jewish slaves because they were doubly invisible (both being Jewish and being a slave was often not displayed on tombstones, for example). According to Martin, the

¹⁸³ Paul Virgil McCracken Flesher, *Oxen, Women or Citizens? Slaves in the System of the Mishnah* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).

¹⁸⁴ McCracken Flesher, *Oxen, Women or Citizens?*, 32n7. Moreover, the category differentiation between gentile and Hebrew slave only occurred “when the Mishnah is concerned to carry forward scripture’s own category distinction of native and foreign slaves” (Martin, “Slavery and the Ancient Jewish Family,” 115-116).

¹⁸⁵ McCracken Flesher, *Oxen, Women or Citizens?*, 40. We find the same observation made by Hezser: “Like Greek Jewish writings and in distinction to the Bible rabbinic literature is less concerned about specifying differences between Jewish and non-Jewish slaves and more interested in the general opposition between enslaved and free persons. In rabbinic documents the term ‘slave’ denotes a generic category outside of the realm of free Israelites. When rabbis mention slaves, these slaves are presented as a homogeneous status group” (Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 96).

¹⁸⁶ Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 8.

¹⁸⁷ McCracken Flesher, *Oxen, Women or Citizens?*, 92ff.

¹⁸⁸ Martin, “Slavery and the Ancient Jewish Family,” 113-129.

¹⁸⁹ Martin, “Slavery and the Ancient Jewish Family,” 113.

¹⁹⁰ Martin, “Slavery and the Ancient Jewish Family,” 113.

data that are available help to correct the rabbinic image of a two-tier slavery structure with gentile slaves on the one hand and Hebrew slaves on the other. Martin claims that – aside from the fact that the Mishnah already undermines this distinction (with reference to the work of McCracken Flesher) – this division is not visible in inscriptions or papyri either.¹⁹¹ Another misconception Martin wants to fight is the idea that slaves were (almost) not present in Palestine – a misapprehension that is rebutted by papyrological and epigraphical evidence. Also, the New Testament gives a fairly normal (Greco-Roman) display of slavery in antiquity with slaves in different roles, positions, and numbers. That Jewish slavery was different from the Greco-Roman structures in other aspects (the lack of the use of slaves in large-scale agricultural enterprises and the lack of a strong obliging relationship between a freedman and his former owner) might be true, but those aspects were exceptional in the Roman empire too, Martin claims.¹⁹²

With Martin's work, Jewish slavery is almost entirely stripped of its former special and benevolent image. Elizabeth Leigh Gibson applauds this development in *The Jewish Manumission Inscriptions of the Bosphorus Kingdom* (1999). She states, as quoted earlier (section 1.1):

The apologists who argue that Jews did not keep slaves in the Greco-Roman period or who assert that Jews were unusually humane slave owners have receded into the distant past of the historiography of the field.¹⁹³

However, she also warns that more attention has to be paid to epigraphical evidence, and that many questions are still unanswered. Even if Jews participated in the Greco-Roman slavery system one could wonder how they did that given their “ethnic history and sacred texts.” From her reading of literary, legal, and epigraphical data, it follows that “biblical laws on slavery continued to be respected among some Jews but were not implemented.”¹⁹⁴ Her discussion of Philo, Josephus, and the tannaitic rabbis shows that there was a concern for enslaved fellow Jews, but that this concern rarely stimulated concrete actions. Her work on manumission inscriptions also confirms the view that Greco-Roman Judaism was entirely integrated in ancient society, and that Jewish slavery was almost completely uniform with Greco-Roman practices.

With the insights of Martin and Gibson, the study of the rabbinic discourse on slavery did not cease. Instead, stimulated by research on slavery and gender in classical and New Testament Studies, a series of publications on rabbinic discourse and female slaves have been published in the last two decades. Examples are papers by Boyarin (2000¹⁹⁵), Stein (2011¹⁹⁶), Labovitz (2012¹⁹⁷), and Hezser (2013¹⁹⁸). The focus in these works is on the means by which rabbinic texts constructed female sexuality (Labovitz), on a particular narrative about the relation between a Rabbi and his maidservant (Stein), on the way rabbinic control over women's bodies is established by narratives in general (Boyarin), and on the discursive overlap between the role of the female slave and the wife (Hezser). As I have mentioned earlier (section 2.1.4.1), in the position of the female slave several subservient roles intersect, which makes the analysis of her position very challenging. In this respect, it might be worthwhile to mention the work of Goldenberg (2003) too. In his work, he has studied the history of racism in Judaism and its relation to slavery, and we even find a triple intersection: a black, female slave.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹¹ Martin, “Slavery and the Ancient Jewish Family,” 116.

¹⁹² Martin, “Slavery and the Ancient Jewish Family,” 128-129.

¹⁹³ Gibson, *The Jewish Manumission Inscriptions*, 61.

¹⁹⁴ Gibson, *The Jewish Manumission Inscriptions*, 93.

¹⁹⁵ Daniel Boyarin, “On Stoves, Sex, and Slave-Girls: Rabbinic Orthodoxy and the Definition of Jewish Identity,” *Hebrew Studies* 41 (2000), 169-188.

¹⁹⁶ Dina Stein, “A Maidservant and Her Master's Voice: Discourse, Identity, and Eros in Rabbinic Texts,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 10, no. 3/4 (2001), 375-397.

¹⁹⁷ Gail Labovitz, “More Slave Women, More Lewdness. Freedom and Honor in Rabbinic Constructions of Female Sexuality,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 28, no. 2 (2012), 69-87.

¹⁹⁸ Catherine Hezser, “Part Whore, Part Wife. Slave Women in the Palestinian Rabbinic Tradition,” in *Doing Gender - Doing Religion. Fallstudien zur Intersektionalität im frühen Judentum, Christentum und Islam*, ed. Ute E. Eisen, Christina Gerber and Angela Standhartinger, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 302 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 303-323.

¹⁹⁹ David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham. Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 86-87, 126-127.

2.2.3.1. Catherine Hezser

With the new developments and interests discussed so far, we almost come to the end of this section. However, the most important scholar on ancient Jewish slavery, Catherine Hezser, has yet to be discussed. Catherine Hezser is mainly occupied with social history in her research. Her publications range from books on wages in rabbinic parables and the social structure of the rabbinic movement in Palestine to Jewish literacy and Jewish travel in antiquity. Her interest in slavery and social history, and her knowledge of Greco-Roman antiquity, can at least be partly traced back to her interaction with Keith Hopkins in the early 1990s.²⁰⁰ As a result of her interest in slavery, she published in 2005 a landmark work on the field of slavery studies, the monograph *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*.

Hezser has divided her book in four parts: The Status of Slaves; Slave and the Family; Slaves and the Economy; and The Symbolic Significance of Slaves. In the introduction to her book, she treats a problem that is well known to us by now: the fact that most of the material on Jewish slavery is to be found in the rabbinic (often halakhic) documents, and that those documents cannot be seen as reporting on the historic reality of those days. Nevertheless, Hezser thinks there are possibilities to use this material:

If a number of independent rabbinic traditions from different sugyot, tractates and documents transmitted in different literary forms all point to the same phenomenon, such as, for example, particular ways of acquiring and manumitting slaves, it is likely that these texts have some basis in reality.²⁰¹

Furthermore, these texts can teach us a lot about rabbinical discourse: “If this particular phenomenon is mentioned in theoretical legal texts only, it can be considered part of rabbinic theorizing about slaves which may have been adopted by rabbis’ adherents only.”²⁰² Interesting in this regard is Hezser’s remark that the writing class in the ancient Jewish society (the rabbis) was different from the Roman upper-class writers who belonged to the leisured class. The rabbis rarely owned large areas of land and were active in varied professions. This could have affected their perspective on slavery.²⁰³

As might be clear already, Hezser firmly embeds Jewish slavery within the Greco-Roman world. At the same time, she uses the whole width of rabbinic literature (Mishnah to halakhic midrashim) to illustrate her description of ancient Jewish slavery.²⁰⁴ From her book we learn that the biblical division between gentile and Hebrew slaves became more and more irrelevant in Hellenistic and Roman times, that women and children were often mentioned together with slaves, that keeping domestic slaves was customary, and that rabbis intensively discussed the sometimes intimate relations between slave-owners and their slaves – to mention only a few of her observations. Her overall depiction of the slave life comes closer to the Anglophone tradition (Finley-Bradley) than it does to the German tradition, and the Marxist tradition has left barely any visible traces in her work. She stresses the chattel-status of slaves, the way they were subjected to physical and sexual violence, and that they were cut off from their former national and family ties. However, Hezser is also aware of the positive relations that sometimes existed between owners and slaves, and she illustrates this with stories from the rabbinic sources, of which the (fictional?) anecdotes about Rabban Gamliel and his slave Tavi are the best examples (see chapter 1).²⁰⁵

For our purposes, the fourth part of her book is the most important. In this part Hezser studies the symbolic significance of slavery. She explores the religious, psychological, social, and political usage of the slave metaphor, and discusses the importance of the Exodus experience for post-biblical Judaism. According to Hezser, “[t]he Exodus became the paradigm for liberation from different types of slavery.”²⁰⁶ The Passover seder

²⁰⁰ Robin Osborne, “Keith Hopkins,” 5n6. Seth Schwartz was one of the participants in this interdisciplinary project on the spread of early Christianity as well, together with Wolfram Kinzig and Markus Vinzent. The only product of this project was the monograph, *A World Full of Gods* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999).

²⁰¹ Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 14.

²⁰² Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 14.

²⁰³ Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 12-13. See also her *The Social Structure of the Rabbinic Movement in Roman Palestine*, Text und Studien zum Antiken Judentum 66 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997).

²⁰⁴ A minor criticism one could formulate with regard to Hezser’s work is that she could have paid more attention to historical developments in the timespan she discusses.

²⁰⁵ Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 100.

²⁰⁶ Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 379.

is still a remnant of this pivotal moment in Jewish history. During the meal, slaves are invited to join their masters. Thus, “[t]he Passover seder can [...] be seen as a symbolic celebration of human equality before God.”²⁰⁷

In the second chapter of this part of her book, Hezser deals with the slave parables from the amoraic and tannaitic midrashim and the Tosefta (for a discussion of this chapter, see section 3.3.3). As mentioned in chapter 1, at the end of this chapter of her book, Hezser calls for a comparison between Palestinian and Babylonian slavery parables and between rabbinic and early Christian slavery parables.²⁰⁸ Again, it is the second part of this challenge that I want to respond to in this volume. I will study the rabbinic slavery parables and the slavery parables from the gospels, both in their differences and their similarities, and I will do so by mapping the social context of the parables, comparing the source and target domains of the metaphors and motifs, and the thematic focus(es) of the parables. However, we will come back to these issues more elaborately in chapter 3.

2.2.4. Summary

The field of Jewish Studies, especially when it pertains to the study of slavery, started out as an emancipatory initiative, arguing that Jewish traditions on slavery were not inferior to Christian laws, but that they even surpassed the latter in humanity and benignity. Recent scholarship in this field has, however, established that Jewish slavery in antiquity hardly deviated from ancient slavery as it was known from its broader Greco-Roman context – an insight that also governs my own description of Jewish slaves in the next chapters. Important for this development is that the distinction between Hebrew slaves and non-Hebrew slaves has been found obsolete for the tannaitic period. Like in the study of Greco-Roman slavery, the interest in studying the intersection of women and slaves has grown over the past decades, giving birth to thorough case-studies of varied rabbinic texts. However, students of ancient Jewish slavery are less interested in fictional texts than the scholarship on Greco-Roman slavery. Still, the majority of scholars in Jewish Studies focus their studies on legal texts, which is – given the enormous corpus of these texts in rabbinic Judaism – easy to explain, but such a focus runs the risk of neglecting data from fictional texts and other sources such as archaeology and epigraphy. By studying parables (fictional texts) but triangulating the data from these parables with legal texts and archaeological finds, I hope to avoid these pitfalls and to shed new light on ancient Jewish slavery and its symbolic significance.

2.3. Slavery in Early Christianity

2.3.1. Abolitionism and the Early Christian Communities

As the New Testament scholar, Gerd Theissen, showed in his overview on “Die Kontroverse über die Humanisierung der Sklaverei durch das Christentum,” the first, very positive, interpretations of Christianity’s impact on ancient slavery were influenced by the impetus of abolitionism and the Enlightenment.²⁰⁹ In the already mentioned work of Henri Alexandre Wallon (1847), it is stated that the abolition of ancient slavery was due to the influence of Christianity,²¹⁰ a view that was popularized by the writings of Paul Allard (1867²¹¹). Reminiscent of what we read earlier about the Biblical slave laws, in a 1902 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* we read: “The sentiments it [i.e., Christianity] created were not only favourable to the humane treatment of the class [i.e., the slave class] in the present, but were the germs out of which its entire liberation was destined, at a later period, in part to arise.”²¹² In a similar vein, Franz Meffert wrote, in 1913, that “die

²⁰⁷ Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 376. See also chapter 7.

²⁰⁸ Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 362.

²⁰⁹ Gerd Theissen, “Sklaverei im Urchristentum als Realität und als Metapher. Vortrag zum Gedenken an Henneke Gülzow,” in Henneke Gülzow, *Christentum und Sklaverei in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten*, (Münster: Lit Verlag, 1999), 214.

²¹⁰ Wallon, *Histoire de l’esclavage dans l’antiquité*.

²¹¹ Paul Allard, *Les esclaves Chrétiens. Depuis les premiers temps de l’église jusqu’à la fin de la domination Romaine en Occident* (Paris: Didier, 1876).

²¹² John Kells Ingram, “Slavery in Ancient Rome: Influence of Christianity,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 10th ed., ed. Sir Donald Mackenzie Wallace, Arthur T. Hadley, and Hugh Chisholm (London: The Times Printing House, 1902-1903), accessed August 26, 2020, <https://www.1902encyclopedia.com/S/SLA/slavery-10.html>.

Beseitigung der Sklaverei das Werk des Christentums ist.”²¹³ And, in 1972 still, Siegfried Schulz called the abolition of slavery “eine verspätete Revolution” in his book with the telling title, *Gott ist kein Sklavenhalter*.²¹⁴ But, already in 1875, this thesis was criticized by Franz Overbeck (famous for his friendship with Nietzsche), who claimed that early Christianity never aimed for the abolition of slavery:

Für die alte Kirche ist die Sklaverei thatsächlich ein wesentliches und unablösbares Glied der Staatesgebilde, mit denen sie es zu thun hat, und völlig fremd ist ihrer Denkweise die besondere Antipathie, mit welcher man neuerdings diese Institution zu betrachten pflegt.²¹⁵

Overbeck draws a comparison with the way in which the Church very soon left behind the idea of the communitarian early Christian communities: “Mit weltlichem Besitz überhaupt lässt die Kirche sich auch den Besitz von Sklaven gefallen.”²¹⁶ In 1909, Arthur Cushman McGiffert wrote that Christians did not preach the abolition of slavery, and that the decline of ancient slavery was due to “changed economic conditions.”²¹⁷ William Linn Westermann took a middle position in 1955 when he spoke about the “failure of Christianity over the succession of the centuries to bring the inner opposition of its ideals into an open conflict with the stark realism of slavery,” which he explains by terms of “time-conditioning and of difference of environment.”²¹⁸

2.3.1.1. *Standardwerk?*

It is this old controversy that one of the first modern scholarly studies on slavery and Christianity is (partially) an answer to. In 1969, the German theologian Henneke Gültzow published (according to the reprint) a “Standardwerk”²¹⁹: *Christentum und Sklaverei in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten*. Although it did not receive much, if any, reception outside of Germany as far as I know,²²⁰ given the breadth of its discussions it might indeed be seen as a standard work. The underlying question of the book is whether Christianity contributed to the stabilization or to the decline of ancient slavery.²²¹ By exploring New Testament and Patristic literature, but also a multitude of classical sources, Gültzow comes up with a nuanced answer to that question: “Die Stellung der Sklaven im christlichen Haus unterschied sich äußerlich nur wenig von den Verhältnissen in anderen heidnischen Häusern.”²²² At the same time, the Christian congregations could be particularly attractive to slaves because they could participate in all activities side by side with the free (which might be a somewhat “too rosy view of the actual situation,” as Pleket remarks in a review²²³). In his final chapter, Gültzow describes the figure of the bishop Callistus, who was a former slave yet rose to the position of bishop within the Christian community of Rome. According to Gültzow, that proves that “[n]och am Ende des zweiten Jahrhunderts [...] den Sklaven der Weg in die höchsten Ämter der Gemeinde offen [stand].”²²⁴

²¹³ Franz Meffert, “Urchristentum und Sklaverei,” in *Gesammelte apologetische Volksbibliothek*, ed. Franz Meffert (Mönchen Gladbach: Volksverein Verlag GmbH., 1913) 2:274. Cf. a year later Johannes von Walter, *Die Sklaverei im Neuen Testament* (Berlin-Lichterfelde: Verlag von Edwin Runge, 1915).

²¹⁴ Siegfried Schulz, *Gott ist kein Sklavenhalter. Die Geschichte einer verspäteten Revolution* (Zürich: Flamberg Verlag, 1972).

²¹⁵ Franz Overbeck, “Ueber das Verhältniss der alten Kirche zur Sklaverei im römischen Reiche,” in *Studien zur Geschichte der alten Kirche*, ed. Franz Overbeck, vol. 1 (Schloss-Chemnitz: Verlag von Ernst Schmeitzner, 1875), 167.

²¹⁶ Overbeck, „Ueber das Verhältniss der alten Kirche zur Sklaverei im römischen Reiche,“ 183.

²¹⁷ Arthur Cushman McGiffert, “The Influence of Christianity upon the Roman Empire,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 2, no. 2 (1909), 32.

²¹⁸ Westermann, *The Slave Systems of Greek and Roman Antiquity*, 162. See also pages 149-159. Cf. Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology*, 14-17; and Vogt, *Ancient Slavery and the Ideal of Man*, 144-145.

²¹⁹ Bärbel Dauber, Wolfgang Grünberg, Holger Hammerich and Eckhard Reichert, “Vorwort,” in Henneke Gültzow, *Christentum und Sklaverei in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten*, (Münster: Lit Verlag, 1999), 3.

²²⁰ Bartchy does briefly mention it in his book (*First-Century Slavery*, 17-19).

²²¹ Cf. Theißen, „Sklaverei im Urchristentum als Realität und als Metapher,“ 213.

²²² Henneke Gültzow, *Christentum und Sklaverei in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten*, (Münster: Lit Verlag, 1999), 175.

²²³ Henri W. Pleket, Review of *Christentum und Sklaverei in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten* by Henneke Gültzow, *Vigiliae Christianae* 28, no. 1 (1974), 68.

²²⁴ Gültzow, *Christentum und Sklaverei in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten*, 176.

Although Gülzow certainly did not argue for the position that Christianity helped to abolish ancient slavery, he was quite optimistic about the treatment of slaves in Christian households and communities. Later scholars tend to be more pessimistic about this as well. MacMullen writes in his famous article, “What Difference Did Christianity Make?” that “the early church took slavery entirely for granted” and that the penalties that Christian emperors applied to slaves “grew even crueler.” “If we ask,” he concludes, “whether life was on the whole easier for slaves in Christian times than in pagan, the answer is probably no.”²²⁵ The same is said by the already mentioned classicist Geoffrey de Ste. Croix: “[Jesus’] followers accepted and adapted the prevailing Greco-Roman view [...]”²²⁶ De Ste. Croix claims that Christian texts like the Didache – that tell a slave to serve their master “as a counterpart of God” (Didache 4:11) – do not have their equivalent in pagan literature. He states: “Whatever the theologian may think of Christianity’s claim to set free the soul of the slave, therefore, the historian cannot deny that it helped to rivet the shackles rather more firmly on his feet.”²²⁷

If we follow the course that scholarship has taken over the past century, we may conclude that the impact of Christianity on ancient slave keeping practices was smaller than generally had been assumed. Slaves were (often) not better treated when they served under Christian masters, and their perspective on freedom was not much better either. It seems that Stegemann and Stegemann formulated the scholarly *communis opinio*²²⁸ when they wrote in 1995 (English translation 1999) that the abolition of slavery was not proposed by anyone in antiquity, “not even by Christians!”²²⁹

2.3.2. From Enjoyable Living Conditions to Sexual Exploitation

Since Gülzow remains rather unknown, for the first contribution to the modern scholarly debate on ancient slavery in New Testament Studies most authors return to the 1970s²³⁰ and to S. Scott Bartchy’s publication of his dissertation, *First-Century Slavery and 1 Corinthians 7:21* (1973). Bartchy is commonly seen as the first New Testament scholar who tried to come to a fresh understanding of slavery in early Christianity with the use of knowledge from Greco-Roman sources. Although a footnote shows that he knows of Finley, Bartchy’s focus is on continental scholarship, and he ends his overview of classical scholarship with the Mainzer Akademie scholar Lauffer. Building on the work of the Mainzer Akademie and on the interpretation of relevant Jewish halakha by scholars like Urbach, it cannot be surprising that Bartchy’s depiction of first-century slavery is quite positive. Because Bartchy is mainly interested in slavery in Corinth, his primary sources are the records from the walls of the sacred precinct of Apollo at Delphi, containing more than a thousand manumissions that took place there between 200 B.C. and A.D. 75.²³¹ Based on those manumission records, he observes that there were numerous slaves who enjoyed far more favorable living conditions than many free laborers.²³² On tombstones Bartchy sees testimonies of friendly relations between slaves and masters. Furthermore, he observes that slaves were not always in a subordinate position (they were doctors and teachers). They joined in partnerships with their owners on the basis of a *peculium* and they could enjoy personal and social security (compare our discussion

²²⁵ Ramsay MacMullen, “What Difference Did Christianity Make?,” in *Changes in the Roman Empire. Essays in the Ordinary*, ed. Ramsay MacMullen (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 143.

²²⁶ Geoffrey E. M. de Ste. Croix, “Early Christian Attitudes to Property and Slavery,” in *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom, and Orthodoxy*, ed. Geoffrey E. M. de Ste. Croix (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 349.

²²⁷ De Ste. Croix, “Early Christian Attitudes to Property and Slavery,” 350.

²²⁸ “Aujourd’hui, les historiens admettent généralement que l’Eglise primitive (et Paul avec elle) a émis sur l’esclavage un jugement plutôt timide qui relève d’un conservatism libéral.” Richard Lehmann, *Épître à Philémon. Le Christianisme primitif et l’esclavage* (Genève: Éditions Labor et Fides, 1978), 63. Or see for the same statement in a more recent work: J. Albert Harrill, *The Manumission of Slaves in Early Christianity*, Hermeneutische Untersuchungen zur Theologie 32 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995), 180.

²²⁹ Ekkehard W. Stegemann and Wolfgang Stegemann, *The Jesus Movement. A Social History of Its First Century*, trans. O.C. Dean, Jr. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 88.

²³⁰ “Bartchy provided the first comprehensive examination of Greco-Roman slavery in relation to the NT.” Paul Byron, *Recent Research on Paul and Slavery*, Recent Research in Biblical Studies 3, Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008, 25.

²³¹ Bartchy, *First-Century Slavery*, 37.

²³² Bartchy, *First-Century Slavery*, 44; “In both Greece and Italy, large number of persons even sold themselves into slavery; they did so for a variety of reasons, among which were to find a life that was easier than they had as freemen, to secure special jobs, and to climb socially” (46).

of intersectionality above).²³³ Moreover, manumission was common – although undesirable for some: it brought a more difficult and insecure life. Thus, Bartchy states: “Slavery was by no means an ideal situation, but it was often much better than modern men are inclined to think.”²³⁴ About the psychology of slaves he states: “In most cases, then, a slave did not spend much time worrying about his life as a slave [...],”²³⁵ and he concludes:

If someone in Greece or Rome in the middle of the first century A.D. had cried, “Slaves of the world unite,” he would have attracted only the curious. For neither the climate of unrest among those in slavery nor the kind of class-consciousness presupposed by Marxist theorists existed at that time.²³⁶

Hence the lack of slave revolts. The living conditions under a Jewish owner were even so good that Jews “anxious to sell themselves were unable to find Jewish purchasers.”²³⁷

According to John Byron, the “far-reaching influence of Bartchy’s representation of ancient slavery cannot be overstated.”²³⁸ Bartchy’s very positive depiction of ancient slavery could (and can) be found in almost all commentaries and monographs which deal with slavery after him, even while Bartchy’s observations are largely seen as outdated by experts now.

A second work that deserves some attention is Roman law expert Francis Lyall’s *Slaves, Citizens, Sons. Legal Metaphors in the Epistles* (1984). In chapter two, Lyall discusses the legal metaphors concerning slavery. Remarkably, his treatment of the language of slavery has as its point of view only the Roman law: “In any event, the general similarity of the Roman provisions with those of the other legal systems is such as to justify this way of proceeding.”²³⁹ For example, Lyall emphasizes the importance of the metaphor of the freedman in Paul’s writings. This, he states, can only be read in light of Roman law because only the Roman law had the concept of the freedman: “There was nothing to correspond to the Roman status of freedman in Jewish law.”²⁴⁰ However, we already saw in the work of McCracken Flesher that Jewish law did acknowledge an intermediate status between free man and slave. Also, his statement that “[a] Hebrew slave in most cases would go free in the seventh year, the Year of the Jubilee,”²⁴¹ testifies of his lack of knowledge of the rabbinic texts.²⁴²

2.3.2.1. Dale B. Martin and Middle-Level Slavery

Although the next scholar also focuses mainly on Greco-Roman material, his more sociological approach certainly deserves our attention. Dale B. Martin (previously mentioned in section 2.2.3.) published, in 1990, his dissertation about Paul’s slavery metaphors, *Slavery as Salvation*. In his book, Martin focuses on middle-level slavery²⁴³ because middle-level slaves often served as representatives for their master, an element that also can be found in Paul’s apostleship. Middle-level slavery also raises questions concerning social mobility and issues of status: “For this small but significant minority of slaves, slavery represented an avenue to influence and was therefore, remarkable as it usually sounds to modern ears, a means of social mobility.”²⁴⁴ Although Martin several times mentions that slavery was often a desperate situation, he wants to stress the opportunities that were

²³³ Bartchy, *First-Century Slavery*, 73ff.

²³⁴ Bartchy, *First-Century Slavery*, 46.

²³⁵ Bartchy, *First-Century Slavery*, 72.

²³⁶ Bartchy, *First-Century Slavery*, 87.

²³⁷ Bartchy, *First-Century Slavery*, 52.

²³⁸ John Byron, “Paul and the Background of Slavery: The Status Quaestionis in New Testament Scholarship,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 3, no. 1 (2004), 118.

²³⁹ Francis Lyall, *Slaves, Citizens, Sons: Legal Metaphors in the Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1984), 29.

²⁴⁰ Lyall, *Slaves, Citizens, Sons*, 41. Lyall does notice the “Synagogue of the Freedmen” in Acts 6:9, but claims that the existence of this synagogue does not prove that freedmen were linked in law to their patrons (Lyall, *Slaves, Citizens, Sons*, 42).

²⁴¹ Lyall, *Slaves, Citizens, Sons*, 41.

²⁴² See for a critique on his sole use of Roman law, for example, Adrian N. Sherwin-White, “Book Review of *Slaves, Citizens, Sons: Legal Metaphors in the Epistles* by Francis Lyall,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 76 (1986), 323-324.

²⁴³ “[T]hose who occupied positions somewhere between top imperial slave bureaucrats and the slaves involved in common, manual labor and services.” Dale B. Martin, *Slavery as Salvation. The Metaphor of Slavery in Pauline Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University, 1990), xxi.

²⁴⁴ Martin, *Slavery as Salvation*, xiii.

available to (some) slaves too. Martin deduces from tombstones that many slaves had families, that they were active in all occupations that were open to free men, and that they could obtain a certain measure of wealth and power. Why is this important for him? Martin is especially interested in the *oikonomoi* (οἰκονόμοι), the slaves who were appointed as the most important slave (steward or manager) of a household. His argument is that Paul, by declaring himself a slave of Christ, was referring to these kinds of managerial slaves. Such a message could attract both the lower classes (and the slaves) – who saw Paul as an example of upward mobility and salvation through slavery to Christ – and the higher classes for whom Paul represented a form of “status by association,” leadership as slavery to Christ.²⁴⁵

The work of Martin has been of pivotal importance in the field of New Testament Studies, but it has also been under attack for different reasons. John Byron has critiqued Martin’s thesis because, in his opinion, it neglects the Jewish, theological dimension of the title “slave of God,” which is firmly rooted in the Hebrew Bible.²⁴⁶ Also, although Martin’s emphasis on the “better situated” slaves is perfectly understandable from the point of view of his argument, his work tends to read as a very positive interpretation of first century slavery.²⁴⁷ However, Martin’s theory succeeds well in addressing the sometimes complex evaluation of slaves in our parables: their status is often both bad (they are a slave) and good (they serve under a good master and/or have a good position within the servile hierarchy). So, we will see that the theme of “status by association” and the importance of the managerial slave will regularly surface when we discuss slavery parables in this study. Especially when combined with the “slave of God”-traditions from the Hebrew Bible, Dale Martin’s work makes an important contribution to our analysis of the parables.

2.3.2.2. J. Albert Harrill and the Literary Turn in New Testament Studies

A more negative view on slavery is found in the work of J. Albert Harrill, who has published extensively on slavery in early Christianity. Since Harrill considers Keith Bradley a great source of inspiration, it is no surprise that Harrill often emphasizes the negative sides of slavery (physical brutality, sexual exploitation), and is fond of using comparative data.²⁴⁸ As we will see, a difference in approach might be visible in the “early” Harrill compared to the “later” Harrill. We will start the discussion of Harrill’s work with his first book on slavery: *The Manumission of Slaves in Early Christianity* (1995). In this work, he takes a socio-historical perspective to reconstruct ancient slavery.²⁴⁹ He distinguishes a chattel hermeneutics of slavery (the classical approach) from a social death hermeneutics (Patterson – i.e., that being a slave means one is cut off from one’s previous identity), but tries to work with both in his monograph.²⁵⁰ In his chapter on slavery in the Roman world, he seeks to rebut the idea that laws reflect social reality, and that high rates of manumission reflect a humane treatment of slaves (the opposite might be true, he claims).

In later works, Harrill seems to abandon the more historical approaches to the study of slavery. In *Slaves in the New Testament. Literary, Social and Moral Dimensions* (2006), he favors a purely literary approach to slavery in the New Testament – again inspired by Bradley:²⁵¹

How did the early Christians think about slaves? In this book, I argue that they did so through the literary artifice of conventional figures and stereotypes familiar from ancient literature, handbooks, and the theater.²⁵²

Harrill finds the Roman context “particularly helpful” to understand those conventional figures and stereotypes:

²⁴⁵ Martin, *Slavery as Salvation*, 133-135.

²⁴⁶ Byron, *Slavery Metaphors*, 258–264. Cf. Chanan J. Raguse, “Key Text: Dale Martin, *Slavery as Salvation: The Metaphor of Slavery in Pauline Christianity*,” *NTT Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion* 72, no. 2 (2018), 111-120, in particular 117-119.

²⁴⁷ “In many ways Martin represents the last of those NT scholars who gravitated towards a more benign presentation of slavery.” Byron, *Recent Research on Paul and Slavery*, 31.

²⁴⁸ See Harrill, “Slavery and Inhumanity.”

²⁴⁹ Harrill, *The Manumission of Slaves in Early Christianity*, 193.

²⁵⁰ Harrill, *The Manumission of Slaves in Early Christianity*, 17.

²⁵¹ See Harrill, “Slavery and Inhumanity,” 512.

²⁵² J. Albert Harrill, *Slaves in the New Testament. Literary, Social and Moral Dimensions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 1.

Because the Romans traditionally perpetuated their moral values through the retelling of example stories (exempla), the use of slaves and masters as literary figures was commonplace and a natural referent for the early Christians accustomed as Romans to use such language for self-definition and the construction of a religious community.²⁵³

Although his literary approach to the New Testament certainly has led to new insights (the “running slave” motive²⁵⁴ he discerns in the story about Rhoda is revealing), his reluctance to say anything about the “real” slaves has not been appreciated by everyone. An exchange of papers between Jennifer Glancy and Harrill in *Biblical Interpretation* (2007) might be telling in that respect. She asks:

What is the relationship of, to use Harrill’s terms, literary artifice and social reality? How does Harrill understand literary convention to shape the expectations of readers and auditors and so undergird meaning?²⁵⁵

Or, as she puts it more humorously in another contribution: “should we call this ‘The Case of the Disappearing Slave’, as we had earlier ‘The Case of the Disappearing Woman’?”²⁵⁶ Glancy argues that we should not let “history be absorbed into textuality,” and “slaves into stock characters.” She approvingly quotes Shelly Matthews (who wrote on gender studies): “I have argued that the best feminist historiography pays close attention to representation in texts while still attempting to reconstruct a history of women.”²⁵⁷

Before discussing Glancy’s work more in depth,²⁵⁸ I want to dwell briefly on a remarkable thesis presented in 1998 by Winsome Munro. In her book, *Jesus, Born of a Slave*, Munro argues that the historical Jesus “was of slave status because he was born of a woman who was a slave.”²⁵⁹ She relies for this conclusion on Jesus’ familiarity with slavery language, the many slavery images he uses in his teachings (including parables, about which she writes that they provide a “slave’s eye view”²⁶⁰), which are, in her view, based on personal experience, but also on a more “literal” reading of New Testament passages in which Mary (cf. Luke 1:38) and Jesus (the “Slave of God”-epithet) identify themselves as slaves. While there are probably few other scholars who have studied so many New Testament passages pertaining to slavery in one volume as Munro, her thesis – and with it, her book as a whole – have not found much resonance or support, probably because her main arguments can more easily be explained from the fact that slavery images and language were broadly used by the ancients, not in the least by the early rabbis (compare my discussion of Christ L. de Wet’s work below). Nevertheless, as Glancy has written, “Munro has demonstrated that anyone who wants to come to terms with the material dimensions of Jesus’ symbolic world has to take seriously his pervasive reliance on the trope of slavery in the parables.”²⁶¹ Evidently, the present study agrees with this statement.

²⁵³ Harrill, *Slaves in the New Testament. Literary, Social and Moral Dimensions*, 3.

²⁵⁴ According to Harrill, the story about the slave girl Rhoda in Acts 12 (Rhoda was so enthusiastic about the return of Peter that she forgot to open the door for him, and instead ran inside to tell everybody) is not an example of the realism of Luke’s narrative, but corresponds to the stereotypical figure of the *servus currens* (running slave), which is a “cliché of Greco-Roman comedy” (J. Albert Harrill, “The Dramatic Function of the Running Slave Rhoda (Acts 12.13–16): A Piece of Greco-Roman Comedy,” *New Testament Studies* 46, no. 1 [2000], 151). See also chapter 5.

²⁵⁵ Jennifer A. Glancy, “Response to Harrill,” *Biblical Interpretation* 15 (2007), 222.

²⁵⁶ Jennifer A. Glancy, “Slavery, Historiography and Theology,” *Biblical Interpretation* 15 (2007), 201.

²⁵⁷ Shelly Matthews, “Thinking of Thecla: Issues in Feminist Historiography,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 17 (2001), 54; quoted in Glancy, “Slavery, Historiography and Theology” 201.

²⁵⁸ Of course, more publications have appeared in this decade than I can discuss in this overview. See e.g., Isobel A. H. Combes, *The Metaphor of Slavery in the Writings of the Early Church, From the New Testament to the Beginning of the Fifth Century* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998); Brad Ronnell Braxton, *The Tyranny of Resolution: I Corinthians 7:17-24* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000); Byron, *Recent Research on Paul and Slavery* (see also his review article “Paul and the Background of Slavery”); Sam Tsang, *From Slaves to Sons. A New Rhetoric Analysis on Paul’s Slave Metaphors in His Letter to the Galatians*, Studies in Biblical Literature 81 (New York: Peter Lang, 2005).

²⁵⁹ Winsome Munro, *Jesus, Born of a Slave: The Social and Economic Origins of Jesus’ Message*, Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity 37 (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1998), 2.

²⁶⁰ Munro, *Jesus, Born of a Slave*, 356-357.

²⁶¹ Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity*, 128.

2.3.2.3. Jennifer Glancy and the Bodies of Slaves

Jennifer Glancy's work could be interpreted as an effort to bring in the physical or bodily perspective to slavery studies. Just like Harrill, Glancy has built an impressive track record of publications on slavery in early Christianity. She is most famous for her 2002 book, *Slavery in Early Christianity*. In chapter four of that book, but also in later works,²⁶² Glancy pays attention to the literary processing of the ubiquity of slavery in the ancient world. According to Glancy, previous scholarly work accords "priority to the perspectives of slaveholders rather than the perspectives of slaves."²⁶³ Her approach departs from the fact that in many bills slaves are not considered persons, but as *ta somata doulika* (τα σώματα δουλικά), slave bodies. This leads to a negative portrayal of the slave system, especially where it concerns women. Female slaves possibly formed the majority of slaves because they were more often exposed. They also were manumitted later because of their childbearing (slave-producing) capabilities. Moreover, together with young male slaves, female slaves formed a surrogate body for the slave-owner. In the Roman way of thinking, sex with a slave was, in a way, simply masturbation. Furthermore, because slave women were often seen as threats by official wives, they could not count on any empathetic (or solidary) feelings from that side either. Glancy points to the physical aspect of slave work and the slave sale too. Many female slaves were prostituted by their masters, and matters of sexual and physical cleanness were also considered in sale transactions. She asks: "How did slaves respond to these corporal inspections? In particular, how did young slaves feel when potential owners undressed them, prodded them, or joked about their sexual potential?"²⁶⁴ She also raises practical questions concerning the lives of slaves in the early Christian communities: for example, how was it possible for a slave to restrain him- or herself from certain sexual activities, if one does not have possession of one's own body? As a matter of fact, Glancy was not the first New Testament scholar to address this issue: already in 1994, Renate Kirchhoff wrote a dissertation on *porne* and *porneia* (πορνεία) in Corinthians 6 in which she concluded that prostitutes were, in almost all cases, female slaves or freedwomen (often with a foreign background), who used their bodies as "Produktionsmittel."²⁶⁵ Glancy is also not alone in her focus on the physical and the gender aspects of slavery. Noteworthy in this respect is the work by Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, "Navigating the Womb: Surrogacy, Slavery, Fertility – And Biblical Discourses" (2012). In this paper, Kartzow tries to raise awareness for the slave father: although slave mothers were often recognized, slave fathers could easily be separated from their children.²⁶⁶ Another scholar who has raised awareness for the intersectionality of slaves and women is Bernadette Brooten, for example in her edited volume *Beyond Slavery: Overcoming Its Religious and Sexual Legacies* (2010).²⁶⁷ Scholarship like that of Glancy and Kartzow has been inspired by Schlüsser Fiorenza, a feminist Roman Catholic theologian.²⁶⁸ Fiorenza has written many publications on gender issues and early Christianity, but I will limit myself here to a paper that is explicitly devoted to slavery (2009). In that paper, she states that Paul enforced master-slaves relations while, at the same time, the Essenes and Therapeutae enabled manumission and freedom for the slave men and women.²⁶⁹ According to her, this difference can be explained by what Fiorenza has coined as "kyriarchalizing" – the development of an institutionalized social system in which certain people dominate and/or oppress others. Although freedom was a central theological concept of the early church, discovered "in a specific pair of struggles generated by slavery" (compare Patterson), that value was soon oppressed in favor of more conservative values that came together with the institutionalizing of the Church:

²⁶² For example: Jennifer A. Glancy, "Slaves and Slavery in the Matthean Parables," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 119, no. 1 (2000), 67-90.

²⁶³ Jennifer A. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 7.

²⁶⁴ Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity*, 86.

²⁶⁵ Renate Kirchhoff, *Die Sünde gegen den eigenen Leib* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1994), 65

²⁶⁶ Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, "Navigating the Womb: Surrogacy, Slavery, Fertility – And Biblical Discourses," *Journal of Early Christian History* 2, no. 1 (2012), 45.

²⁶⁷ Bernadette Brooten, *Beyond Slavery: Overcoming Its Religious and Sexual Legacies* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010).

²⁶⁸ Anne Tuohy, "Rhetoric and Transformation: The Feminist Theology of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza," *Australian eJournal of Theology* 5 (2005), 1-8.

²⁶⁹ Elisabeth Schlüsser Fiorenza, "Slave Wo/men and Freedom: Some Methodological Reflections," in *Postcolonial Interventions. Essays in Honor of R.S. Sugirtharajah*, ed. Tat-siong Benny Liew (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2009), 128.

In this kyriarchalizing process, the vision of agape and freedom, mutuality and solidarity among Christians gradually becomes transformed from a “new reality” to mere moral appeal. Slavery, submission and obedience – not freedom, equality and justice – are institutionalized by this kyriarchal scriptural ethos. Since this ethos was not restricted to the household but was also adopted by the ekklesia, Christian faith and praxis ceased to provide a structural-political-religious alternative to the dominant kyriarchal culture of slavery and imperial ethos. The church’s preaching of the gospel and its hierarchical-kyriarchal structures became a contradiction that stripped from the gospel of freedom its transforming power in history.²⁷⁰

2.3.3. Recent Scholarship on Slavery in Early Christianity: Fiction and Metaphor

In the past ten years, a number of dissertations and monographs have appeared that deserve some attention here. In the following overview, I will focus on the works and findings or methods that are of interest for the present study, especially when these studies focus on slavery metaphors and the use of fiction. Works that solely study slavery parables will be discussed in the next chapter.²⁷¹

We start with Bryant’s *Paul and the Rise of the Slave. Death and Resurrection of the Oppressed in the Epistle to the Romans* (2016).²⁷² The author, K. Edwin Bryant, himself a descendant of (African) slaves, strives to construct a positive identity for slaves in Paul’s letter. His central claim is that “[b]y participating in a ritual death with Christ, slaves are no longer beholden to the legal structures that imposed identity on slaves as subjects.”²⁷³ Bryant argues that the death with Christ annulled the state of (social) death that governed each slave’s everyday life. By using terms such as “slave of Christ” as self-identification, Paul developed a counter ideology against the dominium ideology of the Roman Empire. What might be of use for us is that Bryant claims that Paul’s characterization of his calling as that of a slave (Romans 6:12-23) draws upon the comic-philosophical tradition of Plautus’ Comedies and *Vita Aesopi*, which resists and contests existing power relations. Bryant’s reading is based on two assumptions. The first is that slaves formed a dominant part of the letter’s audience. Indeed, Bryant argues that the main audience for the letter were slave congregations in Trastevere, a very poor part of Rome. Secondly, he claims that slaves “in general” endured “unimaginable violence, and worse.”²⁷⁴ Accordingly, Bryant criticizes every form of scholarship that might downplay the gravity of slavery in the Greco-Roman world, targeting especially Martin’s study, *Slavery as Salvation*.

Of importance is also the unpublished dissertation, “Discipleship is Slavery: Investigating the Slavery Metaphor in the Gospel of Mark,” by Edward Noble Kaneen (2017).²⁷⁵ In this PhD thesis, Kaneen studies how the metaphor of slavery is used in the Gospel of Mark to create a model for discipleship. What is noteworthy is that Kaneen carefully tries to collect input from both Roman and Jewish sources, while many studies only focus on one of these contexts. Subsequently, he uses Conceptual Blending Theory to show how the source domain of the social reality of slavery is connected to the target domain of discipleship and how – through this process of transference – both target and source domain are seen in a new light. He also engages with the theory of hidden transcripts, on the basis of which he concludes that the slavery metaphors he studied “mostly reflect the slaveholder ideology of Roman and Jewish text.”²⁷⁶ Since Kaneen also writes on parables, we will come back to his work in the next chapter as well.

²⁷⁰ Fiorenza, “Slave Wo/men and Freedom,” 141.

²⁷¹ Not all new monographs on slavery can be discussed here, let alone articles and papers. Not discussed here are those works that focus on later stages of early Christianity, e.g., Ilaria L.E. Ramelli, *Social Justice and the Legitimacy of Slavery. The Role of Philosophical Asceticism from Ancient Judaism to Late Antiquity*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016); and Shaner, *Enslaved Leadership in Early Christianity*. More popular theological books are also left out of the discussion, but see e.g., W. Reid Litchfield, *Enslaved to Saved. The Metaphor of Christ as our Master* (Springville: CFI, 2015) and Michael Card, *A Better Freedom: Finding Life as Slaves of Christ* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009).

²⁷² K. Edwin Bryant, *Paul and the Rise of the Slave. Death and Resurrection of the Oppressed in the Epistle to the Romans* (Leiden: Brill, 2016). See also my review of his book in *NTT Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion* 72, no. 2 (2018), 194-196.

²⁷³ Bryant, *Paul and the Rise of the Slave*, xiii.

²⁷⁴ Bryant, *Paul and the Rise of the Slave*, 30.

²⁷⁵ Edward Noble Kaneen, “Discipleship is Slavery: Investigating the Slavery Metaphor in the Gospel of Mark,” PhD diss., Durham University, 2017.

²⁷⁶ Kaneen, “Discipleship is Slavery,” 282.

In the book, *The Unbound God. Slavery and the Formation of Early Christian Thought* (2018) by Chris L. de Wet, it is mostly his first, more theoretical chapter that deserves our attention.²⁷⁷ There, De Wet observes that the institute of slavery was “good to think with” for ancient philosophers and theologians with respect to early Christianity. As we have remarked in the previous chapter, De Wet argues that the language of slavery was an essential intellectual tool for early Christianity.²⁷⁸ With the help of the discourse on slavery – for which he coins the term “doulology” (see chapter 1) – the Christian communities shaped their understanding of the self. To analyze this discourse, De Wet makes, in six theses, a distinction between horizontal or secular slavery (the ancient, socio-historical, institution of slavery), vertical slavery (the relation between transcendent beings and men) and metaphorical slavery (e.g., to be a slave to lust or money).²⁷⁹ As this classification makes clear, De Wet takes a new position in the discussion about the metaphoricity of the “slave of God”-relation. He claims that the first Christians did not speak metaphorically when they referred to themselves as slaves of God, but that the relation between God and men *is* one of slavery, i.e., an asymmetrical relationship of conscious domination.²⁸⁰ This relationship might *generate* doulological metaphors, such as allegories and parables, but the “real” relationship between God as master and his people as slaves *is* not the same as those metaphors.²⁸¹

While Marianne Bjelland Kartzow (2018) ambitiously claims in the introduction of her book, *The Slave Metaphor and Gendered Enslavement in Early Christian Discourse: Double Trouble Embodied*, that she wants to broaden the existing perspectives on slavery in four ways,²⁸² the result of her study is mainly twofold: (1) she offers the reader a gender-critical analysis of slavery and slavery metaphors, and (2) she tries to rethink the relation between slavery as metaphor and slavery as social reality, using, among others, Zoltán Kövecses’ work. After an introduction in which Kartzow sets out the challenges and aims of her book, she devotes her first chapter to the analytical tools she wants to use in her analysis of the slavery metaphor. Since one of her ambitions is to overcome the “either-metaphor-or-social-reality” dichotomy with respect to slavery, she introduces conceptual metaphor theory and blending theory (as did Kaneen before her). As we mentioned above, both theories allow for a variety of relations between source and target, with the latter also opening up two extra mental spaces (generic space and blending space). Moreover, she uses the concept of intersectionality to explain complex social relations and power dynamics, and the interaction of body and culture. In the second chapter, she brings her theory into practice. What does it mean when, for instance, Mary calls herself a “slave woman of the Lord” in Luke 1:38? Kartzow shows that for Mary it meant offering her reproductive capital to her master (she would carry the child of God), a service that many slave women had to fulfill for their masters (also in the Bible, e.g., Hagar, Bilhah, and Zilpah). By building on the story of Mary, she not only proves that “female characters too could be connected to the slavery metaphor,”²⁸³ but she also emphasizes the blending of metaphor and reality that occurs: “Is she a slave or is she like a slave? Both, perhaps.”²⁸⁴ In the conclusion of her book, Kartzow succinctly summarizes the double trouble of the slavery metaphor – that for a slave “the slavery metaphor could not be separated from the embodied experience of punishment and penetration.”²⁸⁵

In the four monographs that I have discussed above, themes and methods come to the fore that can also be found in this dissertation, as indicated in the next chapter. What is of most relevance for us is (1) the theoretical reflection on slavery as metaphor, especially with the use of Conceptual Blending Theory; and (2) the use of sources from the comic-philosophical tradition (notably, *Vita Aesopi* and the Comedies of Plautus). A more elaborate discussion of these elements can be found in chapter 3.

²⁷⁷ Chris L. de Wet, *The Unbound God. Slavery and the Formation of Early Christian Thought*, Routledge Studies in the Early Christian World (London/New York, Routledge, 2018).

²⁷⁸ De Wet, *The Unbound God*, 8.

²⁷⁹ De Wet, *The Unbound God*, 18-21.

²⁸⁰ De Wet, *The Unbound God*, 12.

²⁸¹ De Wet, *The Unbound God*, 19. However, I do not agree with De Wet on this issue. See my review of his book in *NTT Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion* 72, no. 3 (2018), 269-270.

²⁸² Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, *The Slave Metaphor and Gendered Enslavement in Early Christian Discourse: Double Trouble Embodied*, Routledge Studies in the Early Christian World, (London/New York, Routledge, 2018), 8. See also my review of Kartzow’s study in *NTT Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion* 73, no. 1, 51-52.

²⁸³ Kartzow, *The Slave Metaphor*, 151.

²⁸⁴ Kartzow, *The Slave Metaphor*, 149.

²⁸⁵ Kartzow, *The Slave Metaphor*, 145.

2.3.4. Summary

On the basis of this short history of the study of slavery in early Christianity, it becomes clear that the formerly popular notion that Christianity caused the abolition of slavery – be it directly or through its spirit²⁸⁶ – has been dismissed by modern scholarship. Also, ancient Christian slavery has increasingly been studied as part of its larger surroundings, the ancient Greco-Roman world. As in the studies of the Classicists, New Testament scholars nowadays pay more attention to the physical and sexual dimension of slavery (cf. Glancy) and to intersectionality (cf. Kartzow). Moreover, fictional texts from both within and without the Christian tradition are used to uncover the feelings and thoughts of slaves themselves, and the tensions between slaves and masters. In order to study these texts, metaphor theory is high on the agenda, with most modern studies making use of (a variant of) Conceptual Blending Theory. I will follow this lead in the next chapter. Surprisingly, what is missing in almost all modern works on early Christian slavery is the study of rabbinic sources. While most scholars easily find their way to Greek and Latin texts, the Talmudic and Midrashic texts rarely pop up in their analyses. It is one of the goals of this study to do both: to use early rabbinic *and* Greco-Roman sources to explain Christian parables, as well as to use Christian *and* Greco-Roman sources to explain Jewish texts. Keeping in mind both the insights that we have gathered in this chapter and the troublesome way in which some of these insights have come to us, I would like to turn now to the methodology and theory that I use in this study.

²⁸⁶ As a Dutch reverend from the nineteenth century said: it is the “Spirit of Christianity” that has abolished slavery in the European states, and it is the same Spirit that will also abolish slavery in the colonies when it has “grasped the consciences of peoples and governments even deeper” (“steeds verder om zich [grijpt] en dieper [doortast] in de consciënten der volkeren en der regeeringen”). See Nicolaas Beets, *De Bevrijding der Slaven. Redevoering gehouden in openbare vergaderingen van de Nederlandsche Maatschappij tot bevordering van der afschaffing der slaverny* (Haarlem: De erven F. Bohn, 1856), 29. See my paper on this subject (in Dutch): “Een werktuig ‘om de negers in ondergeschiktheid en bedwang te houden’? De predikant in zijn rol als influencer in het slavernijdebat,” in *Heilzame verwerking slavernijverleden voor “wit” en “zwart”: Een bijdrage vanuit de kerken*, ed. Egbert Boeker, Rhoinde Doth, Urwin Vyent, Andreas Wöhle (Den Haag: Stichting Lutherse Uitgeverij & Boekhandel, 2020), 96-119.

III. Theory and Methodology

*At New Bedford, where I live, there was a great revival of religion not long ago – many were converted and “received” as they said, “into the kingdom of heaven.” But it seems, the kingdom of heaven is like a net; at least so it was according to the practice of these pious Christians; and when the net was drawn ashore, they had to set down and cull out the fish. Well, it happened now that some of the fish had rather black scales; so these were sorted out and packed by themselves.*²⁸⁷

As set out above (chapter 1), the present study aims to compare early rabbinic and early Christian slavery parables. In this chapter, we provide these aims with a theoretical and methodological foundation. After discussing the chronological and topographical delimitations of the project (3.1), we first discuss how slavery parables are defined in this work (3.2) and we explore a number of earlier studies that have been devoted to the study of slavery parables (3.3). On the basis of this research, we propose a list of slavery parables from early Christian and early rabbinic sources. In section 3.4, the four dimensions of analysis that I use in this study to approach slavery parables are presented.

3.1. Delimitations of the Project: Chronology, Topography and Terminology

The present study does not seek to establish causal relationships between rabbinic and Christian parables. Instead of investigating which parable influenced another parable, we want to study how early rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity took up the same medium (parables) and the same images and metaphors, but (possibly) with different applications and interests at heart. As we will show with the help of Weinrich’s theory (section 3.4.5), parables drew their inspiration from the *Kultur Kreis* that the ancient Mediterranean world was – a pool of stock characters, images, metaphors, topoi, stereotypes, type-scenes, and plot lines.²⁸⁸ Since we are not as much interested in establishing or reconstructing the causal relations between early Christian and early rabbinic traditions (diachrony) as we are in the way both traditions take up theological, philosophical, and exegetical themes by translating them in parable motifs, characters, and narratives (synchrony), the issue of exact chronology is of lesser relevance for the purposes of this study.²⁸⁹ In connection to this, it should be noted that this study is not (primarily) interested in reconstructing the original parables of the historical Jesus; nor does it aim to find the first version of the rabbinical parables. Rather, it takes the parables in their final, redacted form as its point of departure. Nevertheless, we do want to limit ourselves chronologically (1) in order to collect a

²⁸⁷ Frederick Douglass, “The Church and Prejudice, speech delivered at the Plymouth Church Anti-Slavery Society, December 23, 1841,” in *Frederick Douglass. Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. Philip S. Foner (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 3.

²⁸⁸ The term “type-scene” is coined by the German classicist Walter Arend and adopted for Biblical Studies by Robert Alter. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), esp. chapter 3. He defines type-scenes as “series of recurrent narrative episodes,” or “repetitive compositional patterns” (50-51).

²⁸⁹ Cf. Ruben Zimmermann, “How to Understand the Parables of Jesus. A Paradigm Shift in Parable Exegesis,” *Acta Theologica* 29, no. 1 (2009), 165. For a number of comparative studies on rabbinic and Christian parables see, e.g., David Flusser, *Die rabbinischen Gleichnisse und der Gleichniserzähler Jesus*, Vol. 1 of *Das Wesen der Gleichnisse, Judaica et Christiana* 4 (Bern: Lang, 1981); Peter Dschulnigg, *Rabbinische Gleichnisse und das Neue Testament. Die Gleichnisse der PesK im Vergleich mit den Gleichnissen Jesu und dem Neuen Testament*, *Judaica et Christiana* 12 (Bern: Lang, 1988); Clemens Thoma and Michael Wyschogrod, ed., *Parable and Story in Judaism and Christianity* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1989); Brad H. Young, *Jesus and His Jewish Parables. Rediscovering the Roots of Jesus’ Teaching* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), and idem, *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998).

number of parables that is feasible to analyze; and (2) because only rabbinic Judaism continued to create and tell parables after the first three centuries CE. Since we want to analyze and compare parables in Judaism *and* Christianity, it is only logical to restrict ourselves to the first three centuries of the common era, the centuries in which almost all Christian parable production occurred and the centuries in which the seminal phase of rabbinic parable production can be located. Hence, this study focuses on parables in early Christianity, including the New Testament, and early rabbinic Judaism.

For early Christianity, the following sources that contain parables are consulted:

1. The synoptic gospels of the New Testament (Mark, Luke, Matthew – first century, beginning of the second century at the latest; the Gospel of John does not contain parables²⁹⁰);
2. The Gospel of Thomas (final redaction second century, *terminus a quo* ca. 135²⁹¹);
3. The Shepherd of Hermas (between the end of the first century and the first half of the second century²⁹²);
4. The Gospel of Philip (third century²⁹³).

Occasionally, references to other early Christian works will be made, as long as they fall within the chronological boundaries of the project.

With respect to early rabbinic Judaism, we will focus on the earliest rabbinic literature, the so-called tannaitic literature. Within these works, most parables are found in those works that are exegetical in nature and interpret the biblical books of Exodus to Deuteronomy, the so-called halakhic midrashim (and, because of their dating, are also called the tannaitic midrashim²⁹⁴). For all the midrashim, it is assumed that they originated in the land of Israel.²⁹⁵ From the tannaitic midrashim, the following works will be studied:

1. Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael (parts probably from circa 150 CE; final redaction second half of the third century²⁹⁶), a rabbinic commentary on the book of Exodus. When necessary, its “twin commentary,” the Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai (fourth or beginning of the fifth century²⁹⁷) will also be consulted;
2. Sifra (second half of the third century²⁹⁸), a commentary on the book of Leviticus;

²⁹⁰ Some scholars consider a number of images and stories in the Gospel of John parables (see e.g., Ruben Zimmermann, “Die Gleichnisse Jesu. Eine Leseanleitung zum Kompendium,” in *Hermeneutik der Gleichnisse Jesu. Methodische Neuansätze zum Verstehen urchristlicher Parabeltexte*, ed. Ruben Zimmermann and Gabi Kern, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 231 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008], 28-29). However, these texts do not meet the definition of the parable that we set out in section 3.2.1.

²⁹¹ I follow Simon Gathercole here for the dating of the Gospel of Thomas. See his extensive discussion of the date of the Gospel of Thomas in *The Gospel of Thomas. Introduction and Commentary*, Texts and Editions for New Testament Study 11 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 112-127. Cf. Joshua W. Jipp and Michael J. Thate, “Dating *Thomas*: Logion 53 as a Test Case for Dating the *Gospel of Thomas* within an Early Christian Trajectory,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 20, no. 2 (2010), 237-256, who conclude that the gospel “should be dated somewhere between the end of the first century at the earliest and the mid second century at the latest” (254). See also Theissen and Merz who give 140 CE as the latest possible date of composition (Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus. A Comprehensive Guide*, transl. John Bowden [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998], 38).

²⁹² Joseph Verheyden, “The Shepherd of Hermas,” in *The Writings of the Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Paul Foster (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 63; Mark R. C. Grundeken, “The Shepherd of Hermas and the Roman Empire,” in *People Under Power: Early Jewish and Christian Responses to the Roman Empire*, ed. Outi Lehtipuu and Michael Labahn (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 187n3; Carolyn Osiek, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Hermeneia – A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 20.

²⁹³ Wesley W. Isenberg, “The Gospel of Philip,” in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, ed. James M. Robinson (Leiden: Brill, 1984), 131.

²⁹⁴ Hermann L. Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, transl. and ed. Markus Bockmuehl, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 250.

²⁹⁵ Lieve M. Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhiltot. An Annotated Edition and Translation of the Parables in Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael and Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai*, with the assistance of Esther van Eenennaam, Text and Studies in Ancient Judaism 176 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 67.

²⁹⁶ Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 255.

²⁹⁷ Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 259.

²⁹⁸ Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 263.

3. Sifre Numbers (second half of the third century²⁹⁹) and Sifre Zuta (probably early third century³⁰⁰), both commentaries of the book of Numbers;
4. Sifre Deuteronomy (final redaction in the late third century³⁰¹), a commentary on the book of Deuteronomy.

When, occasionally, parables are quoted from early non-midrashic (i.e., halakhic) texts (e.g., Mishnah, Tosefta) and/or from texts from substantially later dates (e.g., the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmud, Genesis Rabbah, Numbers Rabbah), this choice will be explicitly addressed in the main text. With respect to the latter, Geoffrey Herman has recently argued in favor of the study of tannaitic parables in post-tannaitic corpora such as the Babylonian Talmud.³⁰² To not study these parables is like “throwing away the baby with the bath water,” he argues, since a large corpus of tannaitic parables may have been preserved in later corpora.³⁰³ On the other hand is the extent to which the editorial activity of the editors of the Babylonian Talmud (and other rabbinic works) has affected the older traditions they incorporate, still subject of scholarly debate.³⁰⁴ Moreover, as mentioned before (in chapter 1), the attribution of a tradition to an earlier, tannaitic, rabbi (a *baraita*) does not necessarily prove its antiquity given the existence of pseudo-*baraitot*. However, at the same time such an attribution is still seen as “highly useful” to date rabbinic traditions in specific cases.³⁰⁵ Given the uncertainties with regard to (tannaitic) parables from non-tannaitic works, we will be cautious in referring to them, and always point to the late(r) source in which they are found.³⁰⁶ Having said this, I would like to stress again that the exact chronology of the parables is not an object of research of this study, and neither is the way certain parables have developed over time or have influenced each other. Instead, this study wants to conduct a thematic comparison of the imagery of slaves and slavery in early Christian and early rabbinic parables, within their shared *Kulturkreis* of the Greco-Roman world. A last remark with regard to my use of rabbinic sources pertains to the Talmud. When referring to the Talmud, I will, when possible, refer to the Palestinian Talmud, which is both chronologically and geographically closer to the midrashim and the New Testament writings than its Babylonian counterpart. However, in my descriptions of the socio-historical context of the parables at the beginning of each chapter I will regularly use a wide scope of sources, drawing from both a variety of Greco-Roman material and from later rabbinic literature including – but not limited to – the Babylonian Talmud.

Finally we should devote some attention to the terminology used in this volume. In my use of terminology I employ academic categories with longstanding traditions (“early Christian,” “early rabbinic”³⁰⁷). At the same time, by using them, I hope to show how these categories, in a way, conceal the cultural continuities of both traditions in the metaphoric language of slavery, as my conclusions will make clear (see chapter 8). Also when it comes to the genre of parable/*mashal*, the presupposition this study argues from is that the parables ascribed to Jesus and those of the early rabbis are the products of the same Jewish tradition of parable telling (see, e.g., sections 3.2.1 and 3.4.3).

²⁹⁹ Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 267.

³⁰⁰ Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 270.

³⁰¹ Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 273.

³⁰² Geoffrey Herman, “A Note on Parables in the Babylonian Talmud,” in *Parables in Changing Contexts. Interreligious and Cultural Approaches to the Study of Parables*, ed. Eric Ottenheim and Marcel Poorthuis, Jewish and Christian Perspectives 35 (Brill: Leiden, 2020), 182-202.

³⁰³ Herman, “A Note on Parables in the Babylonian Talmud,” 182, 183.

³⁰⁴ See for example Adiel Schremer, “Stammaitic Historiography,” in *Creation and Composition: The Contribution of the Bavli Redactors (Stammaim) to the Aggadah*, ed. Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 114 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 219-235.

³⁰⁵ Günter Stemberger, “Dating Rabbinic Traditions,” in *The New Testament and Rabbinic Literature*, ed. Reimund Bieringer, Florentino García Martínez, Didier Pollefeyt and Peter J. Tomson, Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 136 (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2010), 79-96, 88.

³⁰⁶ See footnote 10.

³⁰⁷ See for some insightful visualizations on the various ways early rabbinic Jews and early Christians looked at themselves and are/were looked upon by their ancient neighbors and modern scholarship Martin Goodman, “Modeling the ‘Parting of the Ways’,” in *The Ways that Never Parted. Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed, Text and Studies in Ancient Judaism 95 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 119-130.

Aside from this general note, one may wonder why I have chosen to write about early Christian parables, instead of Jesus' parables, New Testament parables or parables from the gospels, since Christianity as a movement was still at its nascent stage in the first two centuries CE. I have chosen the term "early Christian," for a number of reasons. First of all, since I also discuss the Shepherd of Hermas, the Gospel of Philip and the Gospel of Thomas it would not be correct to write about the parables of Jesus, the New Testament parables, or the parables of the gospels. My second argument is that I do not study the parables as they were told by Jesus, but – as previously mentioned – I focus on the way they are represented in the gospels, texts that are created by the early Christian movement with its own (theological) interests and foci. Still, one could argue that my use of the term Christian is anachronistic. For that matter I rely on a paper by Daniel Boyarin,³⁰⁸ who has argued that – while Judaism and Christianity only became separate identities until "very late in Late Antiquity" – they formed "separate social groups," that were "in an important sense Christian/not-Jewish or Jewish/not-Christian from fairly early on," by which he means the mid-second century.³⁰⁹ This does not mean that there existed already from the mid-second century two well defined religions, but that within a cluster of groups (Boyarin uses the image of "dialects") that constituted Judaism there was another cluster of various Christian groups. With these groups one can form "definable clusters of religious features" – such as a form of discipleship to Jesus – while "the boundaries between the two categories will remain undefinable."³¹⁰

3.2. What are Slavery Parables?

Since the main object of the present study is slavery parables in early Christianity and early rabbinic Judaism, the question should be asked: What determines a slavery parable? To answer this question, we will (1) first establish what a parable is; and then clarify (2) when it is safe to conclude that slaves occur in a certain parable.

3.2.1. Defining Parables

In the vast number of books and articles devoted to the study of early Christian and early rabbinic parables, many possible definitions for parables can be found. For the history of parable research, I refer the reader to relevant literature.³¹¹ For our purposes, it is important to know that we are primarily involved with two words here: the Hebrew *mashal* (משל), which is derived from the root *m-sh-l*, meaning "to compare," and the Greek *parabole* (παράβολή), from *παράβάλλω*, which has the same meaning. The Hebrew word *mashal* in the Old Testament is most often translated as *parabole* in the Septuagint.³¹² Although both words can be used to refer to short narratives (for a complete definition see below), they both encapsulate a range (more or less the same range³¹³) of literary phenomena. In the Hebrew Bible, the word *mashal* is often used to designate sayings or proverbs. For instance, in 1 Samuel 10:9-12 the origin of a proverb (*mashal*) is illustrated:

³⁰⁸ Daniel Boyarin, "Semantic Differences; or, 'Judaism'/'Christianity'," in *The Ways that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Adam Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed, Text and Studies in Ancient Judaism 96 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 65-85.

³⁰⁹ Boyarin, "Semantic Differences," 78.

³¹⁰ Boyarin, "Semantic Differences," 78-79.

³¹¹ See, e.g., Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhiltot*, 13-44; Eric Ottenheijm, "De parabels van Jezus en van de Rabbijnen als 'media' van Tora," *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 71, no. 2 (2017), 114-129; David B. Gowler, *What Are They Saying about the Parables?* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000); Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent. A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2008), esp. 1-36; Theissen and Merz, *The Historical Jesus*, chapter 11 (316-346). A few decades ago, Craig L. Blomberg has written several publications on the (then) *status quaestionis* of parable research. See, e.g., his "The Parables of Jesus: Current Trends and Needs in Research," in *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of Current Research*, ed. Bruce Chilton and Craig Evans (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 231-254; cf. Bernard B. Scott, "Parables of Growth Revisited: Notes on the Current State of Parable Research," *Biblical Theology Bulletin: Journal of Bible and Culture* 11, no. 1 (1981), 3-9.

³¹² Zimmermann, "How to understand the Parables of Jesus," 160. David Stern, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 10. Snodgrass notes that *parabole* was not an often used word in the first-century Greco-Roman world, "By choosing *parabole* the translators of the Septuagint brought into prominence a word the Evangelists would catapult to notoriety" (Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 39).

³¹³ Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 39.

As he [Saul] turned away to leave Samuel, God gave him another heart; and all these signs were fulfilled that day. When they were going from there to Gibeah, a band of prophets met him; and the spirit of God possessed him, and he fell into a prophetic frenzy along with them. When all who knew him before saw how he prophesied with the prophets, the people said to one another, “What has come over the son of Kish? Is Saul also among the prophets?” A man of the place answered, “And who is their father?” Therefore it became a proverb (משל), “Is Saul also among the prophets?”

In the book Proverbs, the word *mashal* is also used to introduce collections of sayings. Dan O. Via notices that the *mashal* is also often equated with a riddle (*hidah*).³¹⁴ We read in Psalm 49:4 (NIV): “I will turn my ear to a proverb (משל); with the harp I will expound my riddle.” And in Ezekiel 17:2 (KJB): “Son of man, put forth a riddle, and speak a parable (משל) unto the house of Israel.”³¹⁵ We find the same phenomenon, *grosso modo*, in the New Testament where the Greek *parabole* can be used as proverb or lesson. It is said in Matthew 24:32 (cf. Mark 13:28): “From the fig tree learn its lesson (παραβολή): as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near.” And in Luke 4:23: “He said to them, ‘Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb (παραβολή), ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’” And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum’.” In the rabbinic literature the same diversity is found. A *mashal* can be a “wise saying,” an example, allegory, fable, or parable.³¹⁶

Different from the Old Testament, in the New Testament and in early rabbinic literature, the meaning of *mashal/parabole* as narrative parable comes more to the fore. This might be due to influences from the broader, classical world. Indeed, the important parable scholar, Adolf Jülicher, identified narrative parables (“Parabeln”) with fables on the basis of Aristotle’s categories of rhetorical theory.³¹⁷ Moreover, the Jewish scholar David Flusser emphasized that the classical world, not the Hebrew Bible, might be decisive for the development of the parable.³¹⁸ “Man müsste die ganze griechisch-philosophische Literatur sichten, und speziell die griechisch-philosophischen Gleichnisbilder so behandeln, wie wir dies mit den rabbinischen Gleichnissen tun, wenn man in der Frage über die möglichen Einwirkungen der griechischen Literatur weiter kommen möchte.”³¹⁹ Especially the influence of the Greek fable-genre (Epictetus, Aesop, and others) was noted by Flusser: “Fabeln waren bei den Rabbinen beliebt. Sie pflegten dieselben und benutzen sie oft. Auch Jesus kannte die äsopschen [sic] Fabeln.”³²⁰ With the help of some obvious parallels between rabbinic/New Testament parables and Aesopic fables, Flusser argues for a relation of dependence or influence between both genres.³²¹ He summarizes that the Greek-philosophical parabolic images describe cases, situations, and persons from daily life to show practical philosophical and moral teachings. The object of these images is the human being, one’s problems and the finality of one’s existence.³²² Also, in the Greek fables, “Symbolgestalten” (representatives) of the deity occur. So, according to Flusser, it is legitimate to question whether the parables of Jesus are that different from the Greek fables. His answer is: “Angesichts aller Ähnlichkeiten und Unähnlichkeiten scheint mir die Annahme gut begründet zu sein, dass es eine griechische Vorgeschichte der jüdischen Gleichnisse gab.”³²³

³¹⁴ Dan O. Via, *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 10. Cf. Bernard B. Scott, *Hear then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 8ff.

³¹⁵ Cf. Psalm 78:2 and Proverbs 1:6-8.

³¹⁶ See Jastrow for examples. Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targum, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (Leipzig: W. Drugulin, 1903), 855, s.v. משל.

³¹⁷ Adolf Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* (Freiburg: J.C.B. Mohr, 1888), 1:92-111. Cf. Jonathan Pater, “Parables in the New Testament and Rabbinic Literature between Simile and Fable. A Status Quaestionis,” in *Overcoming Dichotomies. Parables, Fables, and Similes in the Graeco-Roman World*, ed. Albertina Oegema, Jonathan Pater, and Martijn Stoutjesdijk, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021 [forthcoming]).

³¹⁸ Flusser, *Die rabbinischen Gleichnisse*, 141-160. Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhiltot*, 23.

³¹⁹ Flusser, *Die rabbinischen Gleichnisse*, 148.

³²⁰ Flusser, *Die rabbinischen Gleichnisse*, 153.

³²¹ See, for example, his study “Aesop’s Miser and the Parable of the Talents,” in *Parable and Story in Judaism and Christianity*, ed. Clemens Thoma and Michael Wyszogrod (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 9-25.

³²² Flusser, *Die rabbinischen Gleichnisse*, 155.

³²³ Flusser, *Die rabbinischen Gleichnisse*, 156.

Finally, Flusser asserts that both the rabbinic parables and their Greek counterparts express the same form of “vulgar” or popular ethics (“Vulgäarethik”). However, Theissen and Merz have noted some dissimilarities between the fable and the parable as well.³²⁴ On the basis of their comparison of both genres, they conclude that, while the parable form “emerged from the meeting of two cultures [i.e., Greek and Jewish],” Jesus’ parables should not be classified as fables.³²⁵ In their “hierarchy of genres,” parables top the fables because the latter are more remote from reality.³²⁶ While this might be true from the strict perspective of ancient rhetorical theory, an increasing number of contributions to the debate point to the continuum between both genres.³²⁷ If we go beyond the fable, taking into account rhetorical forms like *chreia*, *paradeigma*, and *progymnasmata*, Klyne R. Snodgrass concludes that the fact that ancient rhetoricians studied the different kinds of parabolic genres and their function (“their attempts to categorize and instruct about the function of different forms”) “shows the popularity of parables and parabolic sayings in the Greco-Roman world and the fact that people seriously investigated their effectiveness. Jesus’ parables would not have seemed strange to Gentiles.”³²⁸ Thus, we probably have to situate the rise of the early Christian and early rabbinic parable in the context of the interaction between the Greco-Roman and Jewish culture.

This volume will not study the whole range of literary phenomena covered by the terms *maschal* and *parabole*, but will focus on one subcategory: the narrative parable, the genre that is closest to related ancient genres like the fable. It is important to notice that the group of narrative parables is not completely homogeneous. In academic literature, mainly in New Testament Studies, the variety of different species of parables has often been addressed by designing complicated taxonomies. Most famous for this are the scholars Rudolf Bultmann and Adolf Jülicher.³²⁹ In his *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* (2 vols., 1888/1899), Jülicher distinguishes three kinds of parables: “Gleichnisse im engeren Sinne,” “Parabel,” and “Beispiel Erzählungen” – similitude, parable, and example story. Jülicher also emphasizes the differences between parables and allegories – another neighboring category of texts. According to Jülicher, a parable is characterized by a single point of comparison (*tertium comparationis*), while in an allegory many or even all of the elements in the story have a counterpart in the application.³³⁰ Although later Jülicher-reception admits that parables can contain secondary elements that bear significance too, “in the true parable any such details will be kept strictly subordinate to the dramatic realism of the story, and will not disturb its unity.”³³¹ Because of their greater complexity, allegories need an explanation (“Deutung”³³²), while parables should be unambiguous and directly intelligible for all. According to Dodd, another difference between parables and allegories is that parables have the character of an argument, while an allegory is a “merely decorative illustration of teaching.”³³³ When allegorical explanations are found in the New Testament and early Christian Literature (e.g., Mark 4:10-20/Luke 8:11-15; Matthew 13:49-50), they are the

³²⁴ (1) Parables deal with people, fables often with acting and speaking animals and plants; (2) change is possible in the parables, but not in the fables; (3) human behave like animals in the fables, while the parables stress God’s relationship with humans; (4) the fables present a “defensive morality,” in which mercy is not rewarded and the strong trump the weak, while the parables favor a morality that “delights in risk” (Theissen and Merz, *The Historical Jesus*, 336).

³²⁵ Theissen and Merz, *The Historical Jesus*, 335.

³²⁶ Theissen and Merz, *The Historical Jesus*, 337.

³²⁷ For a number of these contributions, see our volume: Albertina Oegema, Jonathan Pater and Martijn Stoutjesdijk, ed., *Overcoming Dichotomies. Parables, Fables, and Similes in the Graeco-Roman World*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021 [forthcoming]).

³²⁸ Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 51. For further information of other ancient genres that were similar to the early Christian and early rabbinic parable, I would like to refer to our edited volume: Oegema, Pater, and Stoutjesdijk, ed., *Overcoming Dichotomies*.

³²⁹ Rudolf Bultmann, *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition*, Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments 29, 2nd ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1931), 181-193.

³³⁰ The same idea with Charles H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 5th ed. (London: Fontana Books, 1967), 18: “The typical parable, whether it be a simple metaphor, or a more elaborate similitude, or a full-length story, presents one single point of comparison. The details are not intended to have independent significance. In all allegory, on the other hand, each detail is a separate metaphor, with a significance of its own.”

³³¹ Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 20.

³³² Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 1:64.

³³³ Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 21.

work of the evangelists and the Church Fathers, Dodd argues. In order to separate the inherent allegorical qualities of certain parables and the allegorical explanations of later generations, Hans-Josef Klauck developed a tripartite division between “allegory” (a rhetorical procedure used in the production of texts; the allegory is intended by the author), “allegorese” (a hermeneutic-exegetical method that seeks to allegorically interpret texts, regardless of their intentions), and “allegorization” (the process of reworking texts into an allegorical direction, building on allegorical elements that are already present in the text).³³⁴

Although Jülicher has been widely criticized (already in his own time by, e.g., Paul Fiebig who pointed to the Jewish background of parables wholly ignored by Jülicher³³⁵), Ruben Zimmermann concludes that “we still hear the resonance of Jülicher’s decision that the interpretation of the parables allows no leeway but instead must lead to unambiguous and clear results.”³³⁶ In our opinion, this debate on the distinctions between parable, allegory, example, and similitude – although indeed still leaving its impressions on New Testament Studies – does not pay enough attention to the parable in its wider contexts, firstly Jewish and, secondly, Greco-Roman (see also the remarks of Flusser above). As Snodgrass has succinctly stated: “it may fairly be said that the more attention one pays to Jewish parables, the less impressed one is with Jülicher’s explanations.”³³⁷ In this study, we will show that the either-or dichotomy between parable and allegory is not helpful in understanding and explaining the parables, nor is it justified by the ancient sources themselves (that often show “allegorizing” tendencies). Instead, we assume a greater flexibility of metaphor and parable in which sometimes elements from the source domain are mapped to the target domain, and sometimes they are not, depending on the context and the “needs” of the author(s) (see also our methodology section, 3.4.5).

But let us turn back to the question at hand: What is a parable? In this study, we depart from the assumption that since the ancient authors used the same term for many comparable stories, they had a “functional” understanding of the genre of the parable, or, to put it differently, they had a genre awareness.³³⁸ For the purpose of the present research, I will focus on those *meshalim/parabolai* that have a narrative component and compare a situation in real life or a situation from the Bible with a short fictional story. We will not divide those parables into different subcategories (*contra* Jülicher, e.a.), since we feel it is important to comprise the full breadth of the literary phenomenon that is the narrative parable. Instead, we follow Ruben Zimmermann’s dictum: “Parabeln – sonst nichts!”³³⁹ Zimmermann proposes the following definition of New Testament parables (leaning on the work of R. Zymner):

A parable is a short narrative (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 structure (5) it challenges the reader to carry out a metaphoric transfer of meaning that is steered by co-text and context information (6).³⁴⁰

³³⁴ Hans-Josef Klauck, *Allegorie und Allegorese in synoptischen Gleichnistexten*, Neutestamentliche Abhandlungen 13 (Münster: Aschendorff, 1978). See for this short summary, e.g., Charles E. Carston, “Parable and Allegory Revisited: An Interpretive Review,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (1981), 230. See for a review article of the study on parables and allegory Kurt Erlemann, “Allegorie, Allegorese, Allegorisierung,” in *Hermeneutik der Gleichnisse Jesu. Methodische Neuansätze zum Verstehen urchristlicher Parabeltexte*, ed. Ruben Zimmermann, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 231 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 482-493.

³³⁵ Paul Fiebig, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu im Lichte der rabbinischen Gleichnisse des neutestamentlichen Zeitalters* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1912). Cf. Klaus Berger, *Formgeschichte des Neuen Testaments* (Heidelberg: Quelle & Meyer, 1984), 40-45. For a later critique of Jülicher see Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*.

³³⁶ Zimmermann, “How to Understand the Parables of Jesus,” 161.

³³⁷ Klyne R. Snodgrass, “From Allegorizing to Allegorizing: A History of the Interpretation of the Parables of Jesus,” in *The Historical Jesus in Recent Research*, ed. James D.G. Dunn and Scot McKnight (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 251.

³³⁸ Cf. Zimmermann, “How to understand the Parables of Jesus,” 164.

³³⁹ See his paper “Parabeln — sonst nichts! Gattungsbestimmung jenseits der Klassifikation in ‘Bildwort’, ‘Gleichnis’, ‘Parabel’ und ‘Beispiel Erzählung’,” in *Hermeneutik der Gleichnisse Jesu. Methodische Neuansätze zum Verstehen urchristlicher Parabeltexte*, ed. Ruben Zimmermann, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 231 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 383-419.

³⁴⁰ Zimmermann, “How to understand the Parables of Jesus,” 170. In his German article: “Parabeln — sonst nichts!,” 409: “Eine Parabel ist ein kurzer narrativer (1) fiktionaler (2) Text, der in der erzählten Welt auf die bekannte Realität

In the image below, Zimmermann has made visible how his six characteristics exclude other neighboring genres. However, I find it important to notice something that Zimmermann does not mention, notably, that not all characteristics always occur.³⁴¹ It is part of the artistry of the ancient author and of human creativity in general to play with the (implicit) conventions of the genre. So, we will find examples of parables that do not meet one or two of Zimmermann's criteria. For example, parables that (1) do not have a full-fledged narrative, or (2) are historical, or (3) are not realistic, or (4) lack transfer signals, or (5) are not appellative, or (6) that could be attested independently.³⁴² Again, I would like to emphasize that my purpose is not to delimit, but to open up to as many meanings and uses of the early Christian and early rabbinic narrative parable as possible.

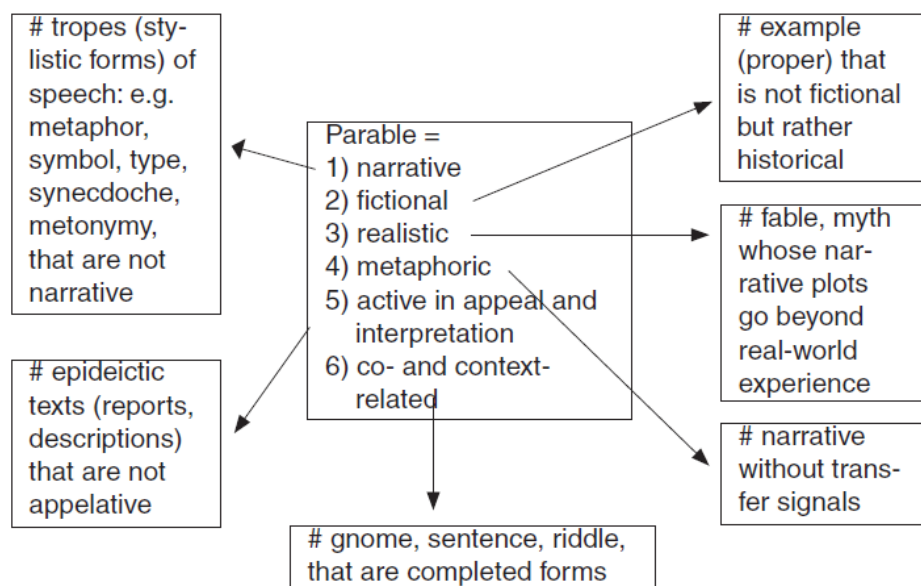


Figure 3.1³⁴³

This brings me to the next step: To what extent can this definition be applied to the early rabbinic *mashal* as well? To answer that question we should note that it is the basic assumption of the project this study is a part of that one *can* compare early Christian and early rabbinic parables, as they share structures, terminology, and motifs. This assumption is supported by previous research, which has shown very promising results when it comes to comparing early rabbinic and early Christian parables.³⁴⁴ So, in this study, I assume that the *mashal*

(3) bezogen ist, aber durch implizite oder explizite Transfersignale zu erkennen gibt, dass die Bedeutung des Erzählten vom Wortlaut des Textes zu unterscheiden ist (4). In seiner Appellstruktur (5) fordert er einen Leser bzw. eine Leserin auf, einen metaphorischen Bedeutungstransfer zu vollziehen, der durch Ko- und Kontextinformationen (6) gelenkt wird.”

³⁴¹ In his later work, *Puzzling the Parables of Jesus: Methods and Interpretation*, Zimmermann argues that not all criteria are “necessarily required,” but he only applies that to the last two criteria, “active in appeal” and “contextually related.” See Ruben Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables of Jesus: Methods and Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015). Even though not all criteria are necessarily required, I would assert that an (implied) reference to another sphere is essential part of what is a parable (i.e. a comparison).

³⁴² To give some examples: not full-fledged narrative: Luke 12:39 (The Burglar); historical: Luke 19:12 (reference to Archelaus, see section 5.4.1); not realistic: Luke 16:19-31 (The Rich Man and Lazarus – a depiction of the underworld); lacking transfer signals: Mark 4:3-9 (The Sower – of course in other gospels clear transfer signals can be found with regard to this parable); not appellative: Mark 2:21 (New Wine into Old Wineskins – more a description of normal practices than an explicit call to action); could be attested independently: Matthew 21:28-31 (The Two Sons – an example of a riddle).

³⁴³ Zimmermann, “How to understand the Parables of Jesus,” 170.

³⁴⁴ Menahem Kister writes on the use of rabbinic literature for the study of the New Testament gospels (especially the parables): “There can be no doubt about the profound importance of rabbinic literature for the understanding of the

and the *parabole* share essentially the same genre. However, this does not mean that the rabbinic *mashal* and the Christian *parabole* are completely identical; there are clearly differences between both genres, perhaps caused by their different time of origin, perhaps caused by different circumstances and (rhetorical) goals. David Stern, who wrote a standard work on *meshalim* in rabbinic literature, defines the *mashal* as “an allusive narrative told for an ulterior purpose.”³⁴⁵ If we break up this definition in three parts, we see that it does not ascribe any qualities to the story like “fictional” or “realistic.” What Stern does emphasize is that the rabbinic *mashal* is preserved mostly in the context of exegesis – midrash – and not in narrative or performative settings.³⁴⁶ Although there also exist parables with an exegetical function or twist in the New Testament (The Wicked Tenants and The Sower make use of “prooftexts”³⁴⁷), and rabbinic parables without that function (e.g., Tosefta Berakhot 6:18 or Avot de Rabbi Nathan B 10), this is an important difference between both traditions (for a more detailed discussion see section 3.4.3.). Moreover, Lieve Teugels has pointed out that Zimmermann’s definition highlights the reality of the parable too much. She shows that there are (often more fable-like) parables in the rabbinic and the New Testament corpus that do contain unrealistic scenarios – such as “a dog weighing his decisions and ‘making up’ with his rival; a fox talking to fish; or ten virgins finding a store to buy oil at midnight (Mat. 25:10).”³⁴⁸ In the present study, we will see examples of unrealistic stories as well. Informed by New Testament, early rabbinic, and Greco-Roman insights, Teugels proposes the following general definition of the New Testament *and* rabbinic parable:

- (1) A parable contains a comparison between two situations; (2) one of these is the “base” situation that will be explained by the other; (3) the second situation is the one with which the “base” situation is compared; (4) The second situation is chosen for its capacity to shed light on the “base situation”; (5) the second situation is presented in the form of a short fictional narrative.³⁴⁹

Teugels adds to this definition (ad 2) that the base situation can pertain to both biblical texts or midrash (as it does often in the rabbinic literature) and situations and conflicts in real life (as is often the case in early Christian writings).³⁵⁰ For the purpose of this study, I will follow Teugels’ definition.

3.2.2. Slavery Terminology

A simple way to answer the question, “what are slavery parables?”, would be to add a sixth clause to Teugels’ definition, saying that “this narrative contains a slave character.” However, this response would only raise new questions. That is why I would like to formulate two subquestions to solve the question of what signifies a slavery parable:

- 1) Is the presence of a slave enough to speak about a slavery parable?
- 2) Which word or words in Greek and Hebrew are used to refer to a slave?

NT. This is not an a priori assumption, but rather the cumulative result of numerous philological studies of various NT passages and phrases. [...] The close relationship between the parables in the gospels and those recorded in rabbinic literature has been noticed, and their reciprocal value for both corpora has been thoroughly examined.” (“Parables and Proverbs in the Jesus-Tradition and Rabbinic Literature,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 41, no. 1 [2018], 6).

³⁴⁵ Stern, *Parables in Midrash*, 6.

³⁴⁶ Stern, *Parables in Midrash*, 7.

³⁴⁷ Cf. David Stern, “Jesus’ Parables from the Perspective of Rabbinic Literature: The Example of the Wicked Husbandmen,” in *Parable and Story in Judaism and Christianity*, ed. Clemens Thoma and Michael Wyschogrod (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1989), 69. With respect to the parable of The Sower Stern states that it is “[t]he only other parable even to allude to Scripture [...]” although this allusion (to Isaiah 6:9-10) “accompanies” the parable rather than it is part of the parable.

³⁴⁸ Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhiltot*, 11n36. We will see examples of unrealistic parables in this volume as well – e.g., the parable in the Shepherd of Hermas. N.B. Technically, only five of the virgins were looking for oil at midnight.

³⁴⁹ Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhiltot*, 11; cf. Lieve M. Teugels, “Talking animals in parables: a *contradictio in terminis*?” in *Parables in Changing Contexts. Interreligious and Cultural Approaches to the Study of Parables*, ed. Eric Ottenheijm and Marcel Poorthuis, Jewish and Christian Perspectives 35 (Brill: Leiden, 2020), 129-148.

³⁵⁰ Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhiltot*, 11n36.

The first question will be more elaborately dealt with in the next section. In this section, we focus on the second question pertaining to slavery terminology in Hebrew and Greek.

The question of how to distinguish a slavery parable is intertwined with the question of which Hebrew and Greek terms refer to slaves. In many “early” publications, the term slave does not even appear at all. For example, Weiser and Crossan (see the next section) speak about “Knechtsgleichnisse” and “servant parables.” However, it cannot be stressed enough that this use of terminology is misleading. Lampe-Densky, in response to Weiser, writes:

Ich verwende die Formulierung ‘Sklavengleichnisse’ statt ‘Knechtsgleichnisse’, um deutlich zu machen, dass eine bestimmte gesellschaftliche Gruppe der Antike, die Sklaven, hier ausdrücklich identifiziert wird. Der Begriff ‘Knechtsgleichnisse’ erweckt den Eindruck, als ob es sich um spätere historische Verhältnisse, wie z. B. im Mittelalter oder im frühen 20. Jh. handelt, als Knechte und Mägde zum sozialen Umfeld gehörten [...].³⁵¹

So, let us start by scrutinizing the words that are used for slaves in Greek and Hebrew, starting with the Greek term *doulos* (δοῦλος), the word that is present in most of the early Christian parables.³⁵² In the English edition of Bauer, we read: “‘servant’ for ‘slave’ is largely confined to Biblical transl[ation] and early American times [...]; in normal usage at the present time the two words are carefully distinguished.”³⁵³ The *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament* reads:

It is wrong to translate *doulos* as “servant,” so obscuring its precise signification in the language of the first century. In the beginning, before it came to be used for slaves, *doulos* was an adjective meaning “unfree,” as opposed to *eleutheros* and this dichotomy remained basic in the first century [...]. The word slave refers above all to a legal status, that of an object of property. To be a slave is to be attached to a master [...] by link of subjection — you are the slave of that which dominates you (2 Pet. 2:19; cf. Rom. 9:12). A slave is an article of personal property that one buys or sells, leases, gives, or bequeaths, that one can possess jointly [...].³⁵⁴

Also, in recent works by leading New Testament scholars in this field, the translation of *doulos* with slave is never doubted, not even discussed (cf. Harrill, Glancy, De Wet, Kartzow). This begs the question: how then, is it possible that many Bible translations (still) translate *doulos* with servant (or, sometimes, bondsman), while New Testament Greek also has special words with that meaning (i.e., θεράπων, ὑπηρέτης, διάκονος)?³⁵⁵ This question was already asked – and answered – in 1945 by Edgard J. Goodspeed, who writes: “[T]he dire consequences of such repugnance to slavery that we will not face it in the pages of the New Testament are clear from the sad misunderstandings it creates in the minds even of [...] sophisticated readers [...]”³⁵⁶ Aside from this reluctance to refer to slavery in general, Murray J. Harris distinguishes two other reasons for not translating *doulos* with slave: (1) readers will project their knowledge of modern (transatlantic) slavery back into the world early Christianity, and (2) a number of linguistic issues problematize the use of the English word slave.³⁵⁷ In his

³⁵¹ Sigrid Lampe-Densky, *Gottesreich und antike Arbeitswelten. Sozialgeschichtliche Auslegung neutestamentlicher Gleichnisse* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Verlag, 2012), 307.

³⁵² See for a helpful discussion on this issue Murray J. Harris, *Slave of Christ. A New Testament Metaphor for Total Devotion to Christ*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 8 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 183-191.

³⁵³ Walter Bauer and Frederick W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature. Based on Walter Bauer's “Griechisch-deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der frühchristlichen Literatur,” sixth edition*, 3rd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. δοῦλος, 259-260.

³⁵⁴ Ceslas Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, transl. and ed. James D. Ernest (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996), 1:380-381. See also his “Le vocabulaire de l’esclavage dans le Nouveau Testament,” *Revue Biblique* 85, no. 2 (1978), 201-226.

³⁵⁵ Cf. Edgar Johnson Goodspeed, *Problems of New Testament Translation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945), 139.

³⁵⁶ Goodspeed, *Problems of New Testament Translation*, 140.

³⁵⁷ (1) That servant was used to designate slaves in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century North American colonies; (2) that in the Elizabethan English of the KJV the term slave referred to a prisoner in jail or in fetters; (3) that in the

article, “Servant, Slave or What?” (1998), Paul Ellingworth describes how both German and English Bible translations struggle with the translation of *doulos*,³⁵⁸ rendering it with either slave or servant (or giving the alternative in the notes), depending on the context (using, for example, the word servant when it pertains to the relation between God and human beings).³⁵⁹ Surprisingly, Ellingworth does not plead for a consistent use of slave, acknowledging the unambiguous meaning of *doulos* in the broader Greco-Roman context, but uses the (then already) outdated work of Scott Bartchy to downplay the gravity of ancient slavery.³⁶⁰ Ellingworth’s position is that the word slave has “too many misleading connotations [i.e., connotations of Trans-Atlantic slavery] to be used, with the probable exception of contexts which explicitly contrasts the *doulos* with a *kurios* or a free person.”³⁶¹ One of his solutions to this translation problem is to use the dynamic/functional equivalence method. In an example of this method, Ellingworth translates Paul’s and Timothy’s self-designation as *douloi Christou Iesou* (Philippians 1:1) with “We belong to Jesus Christ.”³⁶² Since in such a translation both the traditional (Old Testament “slave of God” traditions) and the controversial elements of the formula are lost, I do not think such a translation does justice to the richness of this self-designation. And, still, despite many recent publications on slavery in early Christianity, modern Bible translators time and again choose misleading translations, based on often outdated conceptions of ancient slavery.³⁶³

For the Hebrew *eved* (עֶבֶד) *grosso modo* the same applies. Often *eved* in the Hebrew Bible and in rabbinic writings has been translated with “servant,” “bondmen,” or other euphemistic terms. While in the Hebrew Bible the word *eved* might encapsulate a range of subservient relationships,³⁶⁴ its primary meaning is that of a slave.³⁶⁵ It has been argued that the New Testament usage of *doulos* relies – through the Septuagint – on the Hebrew Bible and its (perhaps) broader use of the Hebrew *eved*. While there might be some truth in the claim that *eved* in the Hebrew Bible includes a variety of servile positions and, as a consequence, that *doulos* in the Septuagint denotes (originally) more than only slaves,³⁶⁶ I would argue that the later use of *doulos* in the

fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the Latin *servus* was often translated with the English servant. See Harris, *Slave of Christ*, 184-185.

³⁵⁸ The same still holds for Dutch Bible Translations. See Suzan J.M. Sierksma-Agteres and Martin Theile, “Kan het woord ‘slaven’ nog wel in de Bijbel?,” *Met Andere Woorden* 2 (2018), 52-53; Sander van Walsum, “Moet het woord ‘slaaf’ nog gebruikt worden in nieuwe Bijbelvertalingen?,” *Volkskrant*, December 23, 2018.

³⁵⁹ Paul Ellingworth, “Servant, Slave, or What?,” *The Bible Translator* 49, no. 1 (1998), 123.

³⁶⁰ Ellingworth, “Servant, Slave, or What?,” 125-126.

³⁶¹ Ellingworth, “Servant, Slave, or What?,” 126.

³⁶² Ellingworth, “Servant, Slave, or What?,” 126.

³⁶³ See this fascinating clip of the ESV Translation Committee’s discussion on *doulos*: Justin Taylor, “The ESV Translation Committee Debates the Translation of ‘Slave’,” last modified November 7, 2011, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/the-esv-translation-committee-debates-the-translation-of-slave/>. See also this blog by John Byron, “Slavery Language in the Bible: How should it be translated?,” last modified September 21, 2011, <http://thebiblicalworld.blogspot.com/2011/09/slavery-language-in-bible-how-should-it.html>. See for a discussion of the way modern bible translations translate *doulos* and *eved* Anders Martinsen, “Men and Unmen in the Parables of Luke: Reception, Slavery, Masculinity” (PhD Diss., University of Oslo, 2015), especially 51-115.

³⁶⁴ Benjamin G. Wright, “‘Ebed/Doulos: Terms and Social Status in the Meeting of Hebrew Biblical and Hellenistic Roman Culture,” in *Slavery in Text and Interpretation*, ed. Allen Dwight Callahan, Richard A. Horsley, and Abraham Smith, Semeia 83/84 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1998), 85-86. See also Edward J. Bridge, “The Metaphoric Use of Slave Terms in the Hebrew Bible,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 23, no. 1 (2013), 13-28.

³⁶⁵ Helmer Ringgren, Horacio Simian-Yofre and Udo Rüterwörden, “עֶבֶד,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, transl. Douglas W. Stott (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 10:376-405; Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, transl. M.E.J. Richardson (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 1:774-775, s.v. עֶבֶד.

³⁶⁶ For scholars who study the variety of translations and meanings of *eved/doulos* in the Septuagint see, e.g., Margaret Eaton, “The Intractable Servant of the Septuagint: Translating ‘ebed,” *The Bible Translator* 48, no. 1 (1997), 114-122; Arie van der Kooij, “Servant or Slave? The Various Equivalents of Hebrew ‘Ebed in the Septuagint of the Pentateuch,” in *XIII Congress of the International Organization for Septuagint and Cognate Studies. Ljubljana, 2007*, ed. Melvin K.H. Peters, LXX Septuagint and Cognate Studies (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010) 225-238; Wright, “‘Ebed/Doulos,” 92-93; Bart Koet, “Ecce Ancilla Domini. Mary as Assistant to God according to Luke 1:26-38,” in *The Apostles’ Creed: Born of the Virgin Mary*, ed. Archibald van Wieringen

New Testament – and *eved* in early rabbinic Judaism³⁶⁷ – is similar to its use in its Greco-Roman surroundings. As Benjamin G. Wright writes:

To a great degree, living in the Hellenistic-Roman Mediterranean and speaking (or, at least understanding) Greek or Latin meant transforming the notion of slavery or servanthood from that of the Hebrew Bible to that of the slave systems characteristic of the Mediterranean social world in the Hellenistic-Roman period. [...] The term *doulos*, one of the two major translations of *'ebed* in the Jewish-Greek Bible, quite simply communicated to the Greek reader in this period something different from what the word *'ebed* did earlier. This consideration most probably applies not only to those instances in which an actual servant or slave is meant, but also to metaphorical uses of the terminology.³⁶⁸

As we have seen in the previous chapter “Jewish” slavery did not essentially differ from Greco-Roman slavery in the first centuries C.E. The fact that specific rules from the Hebrew Bible, such as the difference between Hebrew and foreign slaves, do not occur in the New Testament, nor in most tannaitic texts, supports that position. So, we should conclude that *doulos* and *eved* developed from terms that possibly denoted a wide array of meanings in the Hebrew Bible and its Greek translation, to a rather unambiguous reference to a socio-historical institution of unfree labor that was ubiquitous in Greco-Roman antiquity.

How then, will I translate *eved* and *doulos* in this study? I claim that both words essentially mean the same in early Christianity and early rabbinic Judaism (not the Hebrew Bible). For the purpose of this study, I roughly distinguish three different meanings of the words *eved/doulos*:

1. *Eved/doulos* in its “literal” socio-historical reality, referring to persons who can be bought and sold, who have to be obedient to their master, and who can be (physically) punished and (sexually) used. I will translate the use of *eved/doulos* in this meaning always with “slave.” It is this meaning that we find mostly in the parables.
2. *Eved/doulos* in what I call its metaphorical sense, being either a *doulos* of God (cf. Romans 1:1, James 1:1), or a *doulos* to sin (cf. John 8:34, Romans 6:6), or to righteousness (6:18), lust or men.³⁶⁹ This use of *eved/doulos* I will also translate with the word “slave.” In my opinion, this translation is the best way to honor the principle of concordant translation and it is the best way to express the unique aspects of the relation that is described with this phrase. Moreover, when it comes to the expression “slave of God,” it is one of the main outcomes of this study that this indeed signifies the unfree relation between God and Israel/mankind.
3. The word *doulos* (and more so, *eved*) might refer to the relation between a king and his subjects, especially officers of the king (“Als besonderer Titel eines königlichen Beamten,” Gesenius writes with respect to the Hebrew Bible³⁷⁰). This use of the words *doulos* and *eved* can be situated somewhere in between the first and the second meaning. On the one hand, it is used literally, signifying a strongly

and Marcel Sarot, *Studies in Theology and Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 2021; in preparation). However, see also Henrik Goede, “Constructing Ancient Slavery as Socio-Historic Context of the New Testament,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 69, no. 1 (2013), 1-7, specifically 4-5, who underscores that “[i]n the vast majority of cases” *eved* is translated with *doulos* or *pais* (litt. child, but often used for slaves in Greek literature) by the Septuagint (770 of the 800 instances; Wright, “Ebed/Doulos,” 90).

³⁶⁷ In the rabbinic literature, *eved* is the standard word to designate slaves. See Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 14.

³⁶⁸ Wright, “Ebed/Doulos,” 84. In the conclusion of his article Wright writes that his survey of Jewish writers in the Second Temple period (e.g., Josephus and Philo) “warrants the general conclusion that Jewish writers in the Second Temple period are using words for slaves as they know them to be used in their contemporary socio-cultural environment, that is, that the main terms for slaves can be roughly synonymous even though in individual uses some distinction of function might be intended” (107).

³⁶⁹ Of the two latter, no examples can be found in the New Testament (although: cf. 1 Corinthians 9:27), but they do occur in Latin in the New Testament world, for example, in the famous 47th Letter of Seneca.

³⁷⁰ Wilhelm Gesenius, *Hebräisches und Aramäisches Handwörterbuch über das Alte Testament* (Leipzig: Verlag von F.C.W. Vogel, 1915), 556, s.v. עֶבֶד.

hierarchical, asymmetrical relationship.³⁷¹ Not to translate it with “slave” would conceal the strong power an ancient king had over his subjects, balancing life and death in his hand, as a slave-owner would. An official or subject calling himself “slave of the king” (as Paul is calling himself “slave of Christ”) is showing his awareness of his precarious position *vis-à-vis* the king; he is prostrating himself, perhaps sometimes only ceremonially (the use of this title also has rhetorical rings: “O kings, we are your slaves”), but often also in a very concrete and serious sense.³⁷² On the other hand, the relation between a king and his subject or his officials is ontologically different from that of a slave and his master. The subject was not bought by the king, nor was the king his owner – which signifies this use of *doulos/eved* as metaphorical. How to translate in this case? Since I do not want to lose the gravity of the term “slave,” a gravity that certainly was intended because it carries so many associations, I have decided to use the word “slave” in these cases, but I will add (in the footnotes or elsewhere) that I suspect officials of the kings are meant. In my notes or between brackets, I will translate the words *doulos/eved* with “minister.” The benefit of this translation is that it both signifies the special position of this group of officials, and that this word refers (originally) to serving (Latin *minister*: “subordinate, servant, attendant”³⁷³).

Finally, we have to say a few words on other terms that might or might not refer to slaves. Relevant for this study is the Hebrew word for “doorman” or “guard” (שומר) and the Greek word for “manager” (οικονόμος). Both words would often, or (with respect to οικονόμος) even almost always, refer to slaves. As becomes clear from the New Testament parable of the Doorkeeper/the Serving Master (Mark 13:33-37//Luke 12:35-38; in Luke the word *doulos* is used), doorkeepers could be slaves (see also our discussion in section 5.4.3.). With respect to the οικονόμος, we see how the agricultural manuals describe the position of the οικονόμος/*vilicus* as a *primus inter pares* among his fellow slaves (cf. Luke 12:42-44, in which the οικονόμος is “is evidently the fortunate slave of verses 43 and 44”;³⁷⁴ see also section 5.4.1). As Beavis writes with respect to the οικονόμος in the parable of the Unjust Steward: “It is important to note that a Greco-Roman reader would probably assume that the οικονόμος of the parable was a slave.”³⁷⁵ So, for both words, at least in the parables under scrutiny here, the present study assumes that they refer to slaves.

I would like to close this section by quoting a scholar who is not active in New Testament Studies or Jewish Studies. The classicist Keith Bradley (cf. section 2.3.2.3) almost aggressively attacks (Bible) translations that use the word “servant” in his book, *Slavery and Society at Rome*:

English translations tend to prefer “servants” and “Lord” for “slaves” and “Master” in texts such as these, diluting as a result the forcefulness of the original language (or languages). But to contemporaries there could have been no doubt about the significance of the metaphor. The absolute authority of the object of worship over worshipper was precisely the same as that commanded by the earthly slave owner over the slave, while the powerless subjection of the worshipper before god was exactly the same as that characterizing the earthly slave’s relationship to his owner.³⁷⁶

3.3. Research on Slavery Parables

Although scholarship on slavery parables, especially the rabbinic ones, is not abundant, it is good to look back at the advancements that have been made in this field. I will do so by starting with a discussion of the slavery

³⁷¹ Raymond Westbrook, “Slave and Master in Ancient Near Eastern Law,” *Chicago-Kent Law Review* 70, no. 4 (1995), 1634.

³⁷² Westbrook writes that using the terminology of slave and master in the relation between a vassal and a king implies “absolute obedience and servitude from the vassal and no reciprocal obligations from the overlord.” He calls this a “despotic, one-sided relationship.” Raymond Westbrook, “Patronage in the Ancient Near East,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 48, no. 2 (2005), 223.

³⁷³ D.P. Simpson, *Cassell’s Latin-English, English-Latin Dictionary*, 5th ed. (London: Cassell Publishers Limited, 2007), 373, s.v. *minister*.

³⁷⁴ Rene A. Baergen, “Servant, Manager or Slave? Reading the Parable of the Rich Man and his Steward (Luke 16:1-8a) Through the Lens of Ancient Slavery,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 35, no. 1 (2006), 28.

³⁷⁵ Mary Ann Beavis, “Ancient Slavery as an Interpretive Context for the New Testament Servant Parables with Special Reference to the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-8),” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111, no. 1 (1992), 45.

³⁷⁶ Keith R. Bradley, *Slavery and Society at Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 152.

metaphor in general (working from the assumption that a parable is, in many ways, an extended metaphor; see 3.4.5), with a focus on the Pauline letters. I will continue by discussing works on slavery parables in early Christianity and I will finish this section with a discussion of contributions on the early rabbinic slavery parables. In this section, lists of early Christian and early rabbinic slavery parables will be presented as well.

3.3.1. The Slavery Metaphor in Antiquity and in the Pauline Letters³⁷⁷

As we have already seen in the previous chapter, the slavery metaphor was a particularly popular metaphor in antiquity, both in Jewish and Christian contexts, as well as in the Greco-Roman world at large. Chris de Wet even coined a term, “doulology,” for the discourse that early Christians used “to better understand their relationship with God.”³⁷⁸ Since research on the slavery metaphor in Judaism and Christianity has mainly focused on the use of the metaphor in the Pauline letters, this section will concentrate upon these letters as well. However, we will first explore the use of the slave metaphor in the wider context of the Hebrew Bible on the one hand, and Hellenistic philosophy on the other.

Starting with the Hebrew Bible, we see that the slavery metaphor is often adopted to refer to certain asymmetric relationships (compare the previous section). Hence, a subject or minister of the king can be designated as his slave (1 Samuel 29:3; 1 Kings 11:26; Proverbs 14:35): Joshua was a slave to Moses (Numbers 11:28), and even a king can be a slave to his people (1 Kings 12:7). But the Hebrew word *eved* (עֶבֶד) can also be used to describe the relations between the leaders of Israel, prophets, kings, and Israel itself, and God. It refers, for example, to Samuel *vis-à-vis* God (1 Samuel 3:9); we find it in the Psalms (e.g., Psalm 19:11; 27:9); in Joshua 1:2 God calls Moses “my slave”; and for the sake of “his slave David” God did not destroy Judah (2 Kings 8:19). In Isaiah, we find many examples of the slavery metaphor applied to the people of Israel. In Isaiah 41:8, we read, for example: “But you, Israel, my slave, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend”³⁷⁹ (for some other examples see Isaiah 42:1; 45:4; 48:20). Peter Garnsey writes in his book on ideas of slavery in antiquity: “One of the ways in which the ancient Israelites conceptualized their relationship with Jehovah was in terms of slavery.”³⁸⁰ This use, according to him, “shaped the thought-world of the early Christian Church.”³⁸¹ However, the reception of the biblical slavery metaphor is not limited to early Christianity. A very interesting case in this regard is the writings of Philo of Alexandria (20 BCE-50 CE), who lived and wrote on the crossroads of Judaism and Hellenism. In Philo we find the popular ancient notion (attributed to the Stoics) that one could also be a slave to one’s passions and desires – a more philosophical or psychological rendering of the slavery metaphor. According to Byron, slavery language in Philo is extremely common (more than 800 instances),³⁸² and Philo even devoted a whole book to this theme: *Quod omnis probus liber sit*, That Every Good Person Is Free. In his writings, Philo distinguishes between two sorts of slavery: to be a slave of a master, and to be a slave of one’s desires and vices.³⁸³ Real freedom, according to Philo, lies in being independent of lusts and wants, and is not determined by one’s position. So, a slave can be free, and a free person can be a slave:

Casting aside, therefore, specious quibblings and the terms which have no basis in nature but depend upon convention, such as “homebred,” “purchased” or “captured in war,” (οἰκοτρίβων ἢ ἀργυρωνήτων ἢ αἰχμαλώτων) let us examine the veritable free man (τὸν ἀψευδῶς ἐλεύθερον), who alone possesses independence, even though a host of people claim to be his masters.³⁸⁴

At the same time, Philo uses the metaphor of slavery in a more positive way when he is referring to the relationship of Jews with God: “For of all the things that are held in honor in this world of creation, slavery to

³⁷⁷ See also Hezser’s chapter on slavery metaphors in Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 327-345 (chapter 15).

³⁷⁸ Chris L. de Wet, *The Unbound God: Slavery and the Formation of Early Christian Thought*, Routledge Studies in the Early Christian World (London: Routledge, 2018), 8.

³⁷⁹ NRSV with adaptations MS.

³⁸⁰ Peter Garnsey, *Ideas of Slavery from Aristotle to Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 18.

³⁸¹ Garnsey, *Ideas of Slavery from Aristotle to Augustine*, 18.

³⁸² John Byron, *Slavery Metaphors in Early Judaism and Pauline Christianity. A Traditio-Historical and Exegetical Examination*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe, 162 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 33.

³⁸³ Byron, *Slavery Metaphors*, 106.

³⁸⁴ Philo, *Quod omnis probus liber sit* 3.19 (LCL 363, 21).

God is the best.”³⁸⁵ Why? Because, according to Byron, “[a]s the slaves of God Jews were to act as intermediaries between God and the rest of the world.”³⁸⁶ In this way, the Jews as slaves could have an active role – a role that Philo denies slaves elsewhere; Philo in general characterizes slaves as “passive, slovenly persons.”³⁸⁷

In the works of Josephus (37-ca. 100 CE), a Jewish historian, we find the slavery metaphor again, but mostly applied to the relation between Israel and its oppressor(s),³⁸⁸ or, to put it differently, the slavery metaphor gets a dominant political dimension in the work of Josephus. For example, no Hebrew was a slave under Solomon (because he was a just king, not a tyrant), but Solomon did enslave the Canaanites.³⁸⁹ However, Josephus’ use of the slavery metaphor is not limited to the political realm. In their article, “Josephus’ Vocabulary for Slavery,” Gibbs and Feldman count in total six applications of the slavery metaphor: (1) enslavement to passion; (2) economic servitude; (3) military and political subjection; (4) psychological slavery; (5) on a more positive note, voluntary citizenship; and (6) worship to God (although rare in the corpus of Josephus).³⁹⁰ It is interesting that, for Josephus, submitting to the power of Rome was not in contradiction with enslavement to God per se (as it was felt amongst the Zealots): he believed that “when enslavement was justified, resistance to the inevitable would only compound their [i.e. the Jews’] disobedience to God,” which “represented a missed opportunity for God to act on behalf of the Jews.”³⁹¹

Let us take a brief look now at the way the slavery metaphor occurred in Roman and Greek literature. We focus on Stoic writings.³⁹² Peter Garnsey summarizes Stoic thought on slavery in two principles: on the one hand, there is “real,” institutional slavery, but that is beyond our control, and therefore not worth caring about. On the other hand, there is slavery as a condition of the soul, which is in our control. The paradoxical conclusion from these two principles is that one can be a “real” slave, who is at the same time free in his/her soul, and a free person, who has an enslaved soul.³⁹³ As Diogenes Laertius writes: “The Stoics say: ‘Only he [the wise person] is free, but the bad are slaves. For freedom is the power of autonomous action, but slavery is the lack of autonomous action.’”³⁹⁴ Probably the most well-known exponent of this way of thinking is the Roman philosopher Seneca (4 BCE-65 CE). Seneca was not in favor of the abolition of slavery (as was almost no one in antiquity; see also the previous chapter), but he did plead for humane treatment of slaves because he emphasized that being a slave was often a matter of mere accident: “he whom you call your slave sprang from the same stock, is smiled upon by the same skies, and on equal terms with yourself breathes, lives, and dies.”³⁹⁵ This quote is from his famous 47th Letter, in which Seneca discusses the treatment of slaves. He recommends the readers of his letter value slaves according to their character, and not according to their position. At the end of the letter, he discusses the possible objections of his readers:

³⁸⁵ Philo, *De somniis* 2.100 (quoted by Byron, *Slavery Metaphors*, 114)

³⁸⁶ Byron, *Slavery Metaphors*, 115.

³⁸⁷ Vernon Robbins, *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse. Rhetoric, Society and Ideology* (London/New York: Routledge, 1996), 132.

³⁸⁸ Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 339; 341-345

³⁸⁹ Josephus, *Antiquitates judaicae*, 8.6.3.

³⁹⁰ John G. Gibbs and Louis H. Feldman, “Josephus’ Vocabulary for Slavery,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 76, no. 4 (1986), 302-308.

³⁹¹ Byron, *Slavery Metaphors*, 95.

³⁹² See for some studies on Stoicism and slavery, e.g., C.E. Manning, “Stoicism and Slavery in the Roman Empire,” in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt. Geschichte und Kultur Roms im Spiegel der neueren Forschung*, ed. Wolfgang Haase and Hildegard Temporini, Part II, Volume 36.3 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1992), 1518-1543; Keith R. Bradley, “Seneca on Slavery,” *Classica et Mediaevalia* 37 (1986), 161-172; Peter A. Brunt, “Marcus Aurelius and Slavery,” in *Modus Operandi: Essays in honour of Geoffrey Rickman*, ed. Michel Austin, Jill Harries and Christopher Smith (London: Institute of Classical Studies, 1998), 139-150; Catharine Edwards, “Free Yourself! Slavery, Freedom and the Self in Seneca’s Letters,” in *Seneca and the Self*, ed. Shadi Bartsch and David Wray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 139-159; John T. Fitzgerald, “The Stoics and the Early Christians on the Treatment of Slaves,” in *Stoicism and Early Christianity*, ed. Tuomas Rasimus, Troels Engberg-Pedersen and Ismo Dunderberg (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2010), 141-175.

³⁹³ Garnsey, *Ideas of Slavery from Aristotle to Augustine*, 133.

³⁹⁴ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.121-122. Translation: Garnsey, *Ideas of Slavery from Aristotle to Augustine*, 130.

³⁹⁵ Seneca, *Epistulae morales* 47.10 (LCL 75, 307).

“He is a slave.” His soul, however, may be that of a freeman. “He is a slave.” But shall that stand in his way? Show me a man who is not a slave; one is a slave to lust, another to greed, another to ambition, and all men are slaves to fear. I will name you an ex-consul who is slave to an old hag, a millionaire who is slave to a serving-maid; I will show you youths of the noblest birth in serfdom to pantomime players! No servitude is more disgraceful than that which is self-imposed.³⁹⁶

One of the other applications of the slavery metaphor in Stoic philosophy was the enslavement to the body, which was subject to circumstances.³⁹⁷ For example, Epictetus writes (and this example revokes Keith Bradley’s animalization of the slave³⁹⁸): “You ought to treat your whole body like a poor loaded-down donkey, as long as it is possible, as long as it is allowed; and if it be commandeered and a soldier lay hold of it, let it go, do not resist nor grumble. If you do, you will get a beating and lose your little donkey just the same.”³⁹⁹

Finally, I would like to point to the concept of “enslaved leadership,” a concept that Dale Martin showed to be a common *topos* in Greco-Roman rhetoric, especially present in cynic discourses. This concept tied in with a certain model of leadership in antiquity. Some populist leaders, or demagogues, pictured their leadership as enslaving themselves to the people, being *demotikos* or *demokratikos*, which means quite literally that they belonged to the people (*demos*).⁴⁰⁰ As Dale Martin writes: “In this *topos* the following elements are most important: the leader accommodates the people, he lowers himself socially, and his motivation is gain.”⁴⁰¹

Let us turn now to the New Testament, especially the Pauline letters. It is well known that Paul uses the phrase “slave of God” (δοῦλος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ) as self-designation in many of his letters, a designation that can be found in the letters ascribed to Peter, James, and Jude as well.⁴⁰² In Romans 6:20-23, Paul elaborates on the slavery metaphor (see also 4.4.2):

When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness (ὅτε γὰρ δοῦλοι ἦτε τῆς ἀμαρτίας, ἐλεύθεροι ἦτε τῇ δικαιοσύνῃ). So what advantage did you then get from the things of which you now are ashamed? The end of those things is death. But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In a helpful article in *Bulletin for Biblical Research*, John K. Goodrich divides the bulk of scholarly work on Paul’s use of the slavery metaphor into roughly three positions.⁴⁰³ According to the first position, Paul’s use of the slavery metaphor can be traced back to the Greco-Roman practice of sacral manumission. This practice prescribed that when a slave was manumitted from his/her (human) master, he/she still had to perform services to the deity in whose name he/she was freed.⁴⁰⁴ This meant that a freed slave became – in a very concrete way – the slave of a god, directly after his/her manumission.

³⁹⁶ Seneca, *Epistulae morales* 47.17 (LCL 75, 311).

³⁹⁷ William Fitzgerald, *Slavery and the Roman Literary Imagination*, Roman Literature and its Contexts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 91.

³⁹⁸ Keith R. Bradley, “Animalizing the Slave: The Truth of Fiction,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 90 (2000), 110-125. See also the previous chapter (section 2.1.3).

³⁹⁹ Epictetus, *Diatribai* 4.1.79 (LCL 218, 269).

⁴⁰⁰ Dale B. Martin, *Slavery as Salvation. The Metaphor of Slavery in Pauline Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 87.

⁴⁰¹ Martin, *Slavery as Salvation*, 92.

⁴⁰² E.g., Romans 1:1, 7:6, 7:14, 7:25; 2 Corinthians 4:5; Galatians 1:10, 4:7, 5:1, 5:13; Philippians 1:1; Colossians 1:7, 4:7, 4:12; 2 Timothy 2:24; Titus 1:1, 3:3; Hebrew 2:15; James 1:1; 1 Peter 2:16; 2 Peter 1:1, 2:19; Jude 1:1.

⁴⁰³ For an extensive bibliography on Paul’s slavery metaphor see, e.g., John Byron, *Recent Research on Paul and Slavery*, Recent Research in Biblical Studies 3 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008), especially chapter 3, 67-91; cf. John Byron, *Slavery Metaphors in Early Judaism and Pauline Christianity. A Traditio-Historical and Exegetical Examination*. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe, 162 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003); and John K. Goodrich, “From Slaves of Sin to Slaves of God: Reconsidering the Origin of Paul’s Slavery Metaphor in Romans 6,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 23 no. 4 (2013), 510-512. See also chapter 4 of this dissertation.

⁴⁰⁴ Goodrich, “From Slaves of Sin to Slaves of God,” 510.

The second position focuses more on Greco-Roman law and customs than religion. It reads Paul's slavery metaphor as a reference to (voluntary) self-sale into slavery (cf. Lyall) or emphasizes that serving a high-status master would give the slave an elevated status by the mechanism of status-by-association (the work of Dale Martin; for a discussion of his theory see 2.3.3).

A third and more recent position stresses the Jewish background of the slavery metaphor (Horsley, Byron, Holland⁴⁰⁵). It sees continuity with the use of the metaphor in the Hebrew Bible and claims that the Pauline metaphor of slavery builds on the Old Testament view of Exodus, i.e., that God manumitted Israel from Egypt in order for them to become slaves to him (cf. Exodus 4:23, Leviticus 25:42).⁴⁰⁶

Goodrich follows the third position, but tries to revisit its claims that Paul used the slavery metaphor "free of influence from Greco-Roman slavery."⁴⁰⁷ Goodrich sees a need for the debate to move beyond the either-or dichotomy of Greco-Roman or Jewish influence: "Paul's slavery metaphors, therefore, are Jewish—insofar as they build on a familiar scriptural concept—as well as Greco-Roman—insofar as they draw on aspects of contemporary slave practice."⁴⁰⁸ Goodrich sees evidence for this in, for example, the use of specific monetary terms in Romans 6:21-23.⁴⁰⁹

Goodrich rightly argues that the slavery metaphor and, as a consequence, the slavery parables are best understood as a continuation of the slavery language and metaphor of the Hebrew Bible, but are, at the same time, influenced by the social reality of Greco-Roman domestic and agricultural slavery *and* by the Greco-Roman literary story patterns and stereotypes. This unique configuration explains best how slavery under God can be a positive image in both the New Testament and the rabbinic parables (because it stems from Old Testament traditions), while the concrete depiction of slavery in the metaphors and parables can best be understood against the background of the Hellenistic world of the first centuries of our era. Let us turn now from the slavery metaphor to the slavery parables.

3.3.2. The Study of Slavery Parables in Early Christianity

The number of studies exclusively devoted to slavery parables is limited, although interest in the early Christian slavery parables in particular has grown over the past forty years. The two most important early studies on early Christian slavery parables are that of Adolf Weiser (*Die Knechtsgleichnisse der synoptischen Evangelien*, 1971) and John Dominic Crossan ("The Servant Parables of Jesus," 1974). Next to their work, the most notable⁴¹⁰

⁴⁰⁵ Richard A. Horsley, "Paul and Slavery: A Critical Alternative to Recent Readings," in *Slavery in Text and Interpretation*, ed. Allen Dwight Callahan, Abraham Smith and Richard A. Horsley, Semeia 83/84 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1998), 153–200; Byron, *Slavery Metaphors*; Tom Holland, *Contours of Pauline Theology: A Radical New Survey of the Influences on Paul's Biblical Writings* (Fearn: Mentor, 2004).

⁴⁰⁶ See chapter 4 and my article "God as Father and Master. Sons and Slaves in Sifre Numbers 115 and in the New Testament," *NTT Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion* 72, no. 2 (2018), 121-135.

⁴⁰⁷ Goodrich, "From Slaves of Sin to Slaves of God," 519.

⁴⁰⁸ Goodrich, "From Slaves of Sin to Slaves of God," 520. Applebaum's research on the kingship metaphors in rabbinic parables is interesting in this regard as well. He distinguishes three different uses of the kingship metaphor in the parables: Biblical, inspired on the Roman empire, and folkloric. One could argue that all three sources are present in the slavery parables as well. See Alan Applebaum, *The Rabbis' King-parables: Midrash from the Third-century Roman Empire* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2010). However, Applebaum's method of historicizing is open for critique (see, e.g., Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhiltot*, 37), as was the work of his predecessor: Ignaz Ziegler, *Die Königsgleichnisse des Midrasch beleuchtet durch die römische Kaiserzeit* (Breslau: Schottländer, 1903).

⁴⁰⁹ Goodrich, "From Slaves of Sin to Slaves of God," 526.

⁴¹⁰ Of course it is possible to further expand the list. I have focused here on scholars who devoted separate studies or large parts of greater works on the slavery parables as a whole. See for some other contributions, e.g., Lampe-Densky, *Gottesreich und antike Arbeitswelten*, esp. chapter 4, 259-311; Carolyn Osiek and David L. Balch, *Families in the New Testament World. Households and House Churches* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), esp. chapter 7, 174-192; Luise Schottroff, *The Parables of Jesus*, transl. Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), esp. chapter 22, 171-194; and Jesper Svartvik, "How Noah, Jesus and Paul Became Captivating Biblical Figures: The Side Effects of the Canonization of Slavery Metaphors in Jewish and Christian Texts," *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism* 2 (2001-2005), 168-227.

studies of early Christian slavery parables qua slavery parables are from Ehrhard Kamlah (1963),⁴¹¹ Bernard B. Scott (1989),⁴¹² Anthony Basil Taylor (1989),⁴¹³ Mary Ann Beavis (1992, 2018, 2021),⁴¹⁴ Murray J. Harris (1999),⁴¹⁵ Jennifer Glancy (2002),⁴¹⁶ Albert J. Harrill (2005, 2011, 2018),⁴¹⁷ Anders Martinsen (2015),⁴¹⁸ and Edward Noble Kaneen (2017).⁴¹⁹ Only Weiser, Taylor, and Kaneen also discuss – albeit mostly in passing – some rabbinic parables. The only scholar who has devoted considerable space to solely the rabbinic slavery parables is Catherine Hezser (2006).⁴²⁰ It is noteworthy that there are also scholars who discuss (almost) all (New Testament) parables without discussing slavery parables as a separate category.⁴²¹

From the first scholars who studied slavery parables as a separate corpus, the work of Crossan especially still reverberates in the scholarly debate on the slavery parables.⁴²² In fact, Crossan raised three central issues that remain on the agenda of biblical scholars, and that have to be dealt with in this study as well. The first of these questions is: How should a slavery parable be defined? The second question is: How many slavery parables do we have? The last question is: Do the slavery parables (of Jesus) reflect normalcy or oppose it (and if the latter is true, do all slavery parables subvert normalcy, and if not, which do, and how do we recognize them)? In the next sections, these questions will be discussed with respect to the early Christian slavery parables. In section 3.3.3, I will address these questions with respect to the early rabbinic slavery parables.

3.3.2.1. *Pioneers: Kamlah and Weiser*

Ehrhard Kamlah (1963) was the first to see that slavery parables have a “common theme” (“gemeinsame Thematik”),⁴²³ namely, the master’s judgment of his/her slave’s behavior.⁴²⁴ According to Kamlah, the slavery parables can be divided into three groups. One group of slavery parables shows the slave in a managerial position, above his or her fellow-slaves (e.g., Matthew 24:45-51/Luke 12:42-46). Another group thematizes the attitude of the slave, as he/she waits for his master (e.g., Luke 17:7-10). A third group portrays the slave in debt, or guilty of misbehavior (e.g., Luke 16:1-8, Matthew 18:23-35). In the parables, Kamlah saw a continuity with the slavery metaphor (Kamlah, himself, speaks about a servant, “Knecht,” metaphor):

⁴¹¹ Ehrhard Kamlah, „Die Parabel vom ungerechten Verwalter (Luk. 16, I ff.) im Rahmen der Knechtsgleichnisse,“ in *Abraham unser Vater. Juden und Christen im Gespräch über die Bibel. Festschrift für Otto Michel zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Otto Betz, Martin Hengel and Peter Schmidt (Leiden: Brill, 1963), 276-294.

⁴¹² Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*.

⁴¹³ Anthony Basil Taylor, “The Master-Servant Type Scene in the Parables of Jesus” (PhD diss., Fordham University, 1989).

⁴¹⁴ Beavis, “Ancient Slavery as an Interpretive Context,” 37-54; idem, “The Parable of the Slave, Son and Vineyard: An Early Christian Freedman’s Narrative (Hermas *Similitudes* 5.2-11),” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 80 (2018), 655-669; idem, “Fables, Parables and Slaves. Epictetus, Aesop and the Gospels in Conversation with North American Slave Narratives,” in *Overcoming Dichotomies. Parables, Fables, and Similes in the Graeco-Roman World*, ed. Albertina Oegema, Jonathan Pater, and Martijn Stoutjesdijk, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021 [forthcoming]).

⁴¹⁵ Harris, *Slave of Christ*.

⁴¹⁶ Jennifer A. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), especially chapter 4, 102-129.

⁴¹⁷ J. Albert Harrill, *Slaves in the New Testament. Literary, Social and Moral Dimensions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006); idem, “The Psychology of Slaves in the Gospel Parables: A Case Study in Social History,” *Biblische Zeitschrift* 55, no. 1 (2011), 63-74; idem, “Methodological Approaches to the Synoptic Slave Parables” (unpublished paper presented at the Annual International Meeting, Society of Biblical Literature/European Association of Biblical Studies, University of Helsinki, Finland, July 2018).

⁴¹⁸ Martinsen, “Men and Unmen in the Parables of Luke.”

⁴¹⁹ Edward Noble Kaneen, “Discipleship is Slavery: Investigating the Slavery Metaphor in the Gospel of Mark,” PhD diss., Durham University, 2017.

⁴²⁰ Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*.

⁴²¹ For example: in the work of Snodgrass, Dodd and Young parables are divided into subcategories, without using or identifying a subcategory about slaves (and/or masters).

⁴²² Although some scholars write about servant parables, I consistently use the term “slavery parables,” since I claim that the translation “servant” is misleading and erroneous. See also section 3.3.2.

⁴²³ Kamlah, „Die Parabel vom ungerechten Verwalter,“ 283.

⁴²⁴ Kamlah, „Die Parabel vom ungerechten Verwalter,“ 286.

Es ist [...] so, daß die Metapher “Knecht” das auslösende Grundmotiv der Gleichniserzählung ist. In ihr liegen die anfangs erwähnten Voraussetzungen, die Jesus mit den Hörern teilt. Die Hörer wußten, daß es hier um das Verhältnis des Frommen, oder auch des in einem besonderen Verhältnis zu Gott Stehenden geht. Das bedeutete für sie diese Metapher in ihrem Sprachgebrauch.⁴²⁵

The article by Kamlah inspired the German priest Alfons Weiser to conduct the first broad and systematical research into slavery parables as a separate corpus (1971; Weiser speaks about servant parables as well), since he was of the opinion that this group of parables had not been considered enough in exegetical research. In the introduction to his prizewinning dissertation,⁴²⁶ Weiser wonders what it means when a complete series of parables takes a δούλος as its main character: “Ist dieser Begriff lediglich ein Bildelement, oder ist sein metaphorischer Sinn bedeutsam, so dass die Doulos-Gleichnisse möglicherweise eine ihnen gemeinsame Thematik behandeln [...]?”⁴²⁷

Although Weiser does not explicate what his criteria are for determining a slavery parable, he starts his book with an exploration of Hebrew and, mainly, Greek terms that might designate slaves.⁴²⁸ On the basis of this word study, he distinguishes eight slavery parables that mention the Greek word δούλος, of which six are “actual slavery parables” (“Die eigentlichen Knechtsgleichnisse”), and in two, slaves “only” occur, but “nach deren Bedeutung [lohnt] es sich zu fragen.”⁴²⁹ Because of that, in his book, the last two parables are discussed as well. Since the group of actual slavery parables is divided in two subgroups, Weiser ends up with a total of three groups of slavery parables.

Belonging to Weiser’s first category of slavery parables, the actual slavery parables, are the Unforgiving Slave (Matthew 18:23-25), The Useless Slaves (Luke 17:7-10), The Doorkeeper (Mark 13:33-37), The Waiting Slaves (Luke 12:35-38), The Good and the Bad Slave Manager (Matthew 24:45-51 and Luke 12:42-46), and The Talents/The Pounds (Matthew 25:14-30//Luke 19:11-27).⁴³⁰ In the second category, Weiser lists The Tenants (Mark 12:1-9//Matthew 21:33-41//Luke 20:9-16) and The Banquet (Matthew 22:1-10//Luke 14:16-24//Matthew 22:11-13). Weiser divides the genuine slavery parables in two groups, a group called the “eschatological slavery parables” and a group consisting of The Unmerciful Slave and The Useless Slaves. The eschatological slavery parables are characterized by a shared structure (often a warning to be alert in the introduction, and an absent master in the parable itself) and a common problem: “Was bedeutet in ihnen der (fortgehende und) zur Rechenschaftsforderung kommende Herr?”⁴³¹ In his conclusions with regard to the slavery parables, Weiser points out that Jesus used an image that was widely used in Judaism, and used it in different ways: in a literal and in a metaphorical sense, in its profane and in its religious meaning. Sometimes slaves are only “Nebenfiguren,” but sometimes they play important roles, for example, as representations of the prophets. An important insight from Weiser, which we will come back to in this study, is that the eschatological parables might only have been connected to expectations of the return of Christ (the *parousia*) in a later stage of nascent Christianity; before that, they formed general calls to be aware of one’s judgment in the afterlife.⁴³² Finally, Weiser underscores that Jesus did not “sanction” slavery (here Weiser abandons his servant terminology) by using slavery parables, but simply made use of an everyday image of profane Palestinian life. However, at the same time, the image that Jesus used expresses a certain self-understanding of the relation “man versus God”:

⁴²⁵ Kamlah, „Die Parabel vom ungerechten Verwalter,“ 287.

⁴²⁶ See Rudolf Hoppe and Michael Reichardt, ed., *Lukas – Paulus – Pastoralbriefe. Festschrift für Alfons Weiser zum 80. Geburtstag* (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2014), especially the preface.

⁴²⁷ Alfons Weiser, *Die Knechtsgleichnisse der synoptischen Evangelien*, Studien zum Alten und Neuen Testament 29 (München: Kösel-Verlag, 1971), 15.

⁴²⁸ Weiser, *Die Knechtsgleichnisse der synoptischen Evangelien*, 42-45.

⁴²⁹ Weiser, *Die Knechtsgleichnisse der synoptischen Evangelien*, 45.

⁴³⁰ To avoid confusion, I have chosen always to use my nomenclature of the slavery parables instead of using the names that the authors I discuss give to those stories (and that are often different). See the index for an overview of the names I gave to the early Christian parables (or section 3.3.2.4). For other parables (not about slaves), I have used the common names, as found in, e.g., Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, transl. S.H. Hooke, 2nd ed. (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1972), 247-248.

⁴³¹ Weiser, *Die Knechtsgleichnisse der synoptischen Evangelien*, 125.

⁴³² Weiser, *Die Knechtsgleichnisse der synoptischen Evangelien*, 274.

“nämlich daß es keine Autonomie des Menschen vor Gott gibt, sonder der Mensch in seiner Existenz – ihren Anfängen und ihrer Vollendung – Gottes bedarf und daß das Verhältnis des Menschen zu Gott ein personales ist.”⁴³³

3.3.2.2. *The Lasting Impact of Crossan’s Study of Slavery Parables*

A second important contribution to the study of slavery parables is found in the work of Crossan (1974), an Irish-American New Testament scholar, specialized in historical Jesus research and one of the founders of the Jesus Seminar. Whereas Weiser was not too clear about his criteria for calling a parable a slavery parable, Crossan makes it an important point of his argument to find a definition of a slavery parable (just like his predecessors, Crossan speaks about servant parables). In his article, Crossan proposes to make use of two axes: the master-slave relationship and the superior-subordinate relationship. Slavery parables, then, are “those whose central storyline concerns such a relationship [i.e., superior-subordinate] at some instance of critical confrontation between master and servant.”⁴³⁴ As Crossan clearly indicates, terms (like δούλος) are not important for determining what a slavery parable is because it “cannot be presumed to be of significance for Jesus,” since we do not know which words (*ipsissima verba*) the historical Jesus used.⁴³⁵ On the basis of his definition, Crossan counts eight parables, with significant differences between his list and that of Weiser’s. First of all, he excludes The Banquet because it does not entail a master-slave reckoning, as well as The Useless Slaves (Luke 17:7-10).⁴³⁶ The Tenants (Mark 12:1-8//Matthew 21:33-39//Luke 20:9-15a//Gospel of Thomas 93:1-15) is included, although the confrontation is between the slaves and the tenants, and not between the slaves and their master. The Doorkeeper (Mark 13:34-37//Luke 12:36-38), The Unforgiving Slave (Matthew 18:23-35), The Talents/The Pounds (Matthew 25:14-30//Luke 19:12-27), and The Good and the Bad Slave Manager (Matthew 24:45-51//Luke 12:42-46) are kept on the list. However, Crossan adds two parables to Weiser’s collection: The Unjust Slave Manager (Luke 16:1-7) and The Vineyard Workers (Matthew 20:1-13) because both involve a master-slave or superior-subordinate relationship and a moment of reckoning.⁴³⁷

Crossan divides his list into two groups (not three), and in further contrast to Weiser, his division is a well-considered choice, based on content and structure of the parables. This division became very influential in the field of New Testament Studies, albeit controversial as well.⁴³⁸ Crossan called his two subsections Group A and Group B, with the parables divided as outlined below:

Group A: expected normalcy

The Doorkeeper⁴³⁹
The Talents
The Pounds
The Good and the Bad Slave Manager

Group B: questioning of normalcy

The Unforgiving Slave
The Unjust Slave Manager
The Tenants
The Workers in the Vineyard

Group A contains the parables that represents expected normalcy, “the good servants are rewarded and/or the bad ones are punished.”⁴⁴⁰ This also has consequences for its structural layout: “This normalcy of world is reflected in a very marked homogeneity of sequential structure.”⁴⁴¹ So, in each parable of this group we find an action by a slave and a reckoning by a master. Also, most of the parables consist of the same elements (command, departure, activity, return, reward, and punishment), although there is some room for expansion from this pattern. In group B there is, according to Crossan, a lack of sequential homogeneity, which signifies the fact that the

⁴³³ Weiser, *Die Knechtsgleichnisse der synoptischen Evangelien*, 275.

⁴³⁴ John Dominic Crossan, “The Servant Parables of Jesus,” *Semeia* 1 (1974), 19.

⁴³⁵ Crossan, “The Servant Parables of Jesus,” 19.

⁴³⁶ The Master and The Slave (Luke 17:7-10) is not taken into account by Crossan in his analysis because he sees this story as only a proverb (John Dominic Crossan, “The Servant Parables of Jesus,” 37). However, he does mention the parable in the beginning of his article as one of nine servant parables.

⁴³⁷ Crossan, “The Servant Parables of Jesus,” 20.

⁴³⁸ Harrill, “The Psychology of Slaves in the Gospel Parables,” 63.

⁴³⁹ Crossan sees Mark 13:33-37 (The Doorkeeper) and Luke 12:35-38 (The Serving Master) as parallels and counts them, because of that, as one parable.

⁴⁴⁰ Crossan, “The Servant Parables of Jesus,” 38.

⁴⁴¹ Crossan, “The Servant Parables of Jesus,” 38.

parables of group B question the normalcy of the world.⁴⁴² Furthermore, Crossan states that the group B parables “create their narrative space in the second and opposite possibility to that in Group A.”⁴⁴³ For example: in group A, it is often the master that departs and returns to the slave, while in group B the slave departs and returns to the master. Also, Crossan observes that in both groups the complicating elements can be found at the opposite ends of the narratives (in A at the conclusion, in B at the beginning). From these structural traits, Crossan deduces that the slavery parables (both A and B) are best understood as parables of reckoning: “The comparative structure of the two groups shows how the thematic development concludes by questioning and then reversing itself.”⁴⁴⁴ Crossan uses two diagrams to give a schematic display of the two opposing structures:⁴⁴⁵

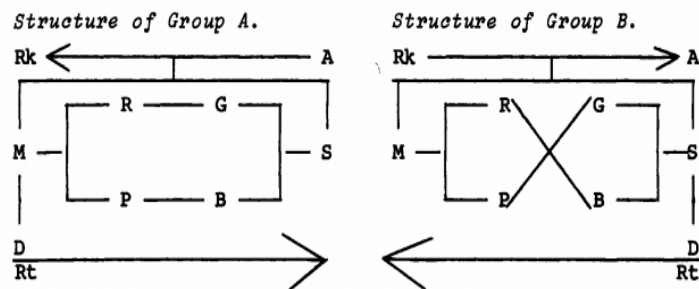


Figure 3.2⁴⁴⁶

(M=Master; S=Servant; R=Reward; P=Punishment; G=Good; B=Bad; D=Departure; Rt=Return; A=Action by servant; Rk=Reckoning by master.)

What is the merit of Crossan’s approach? What does his structural analysis make clear that another interpretative strategy would not? First of all, on the basis of his structural analysis, Crossan hypothesizes that Jesus might have told the same parable over and over again, and that the structure of this parable is preserved by tradition, but its details, its *ipsissima verba*, were not. At the same time, Crossan nuances his position: “In so far as one can generalize from the case of the Servant parables, then, it would seem that the parabolic creativity of Jesus consisted in variations of structure within the same theme and in variations of content within the same structure but not in variations of detail within the same content. No doubt it took such a restless probing of structure to express adequately the challenge Jesus was offering to his tradition.”⁴⁴⁷ Also, Crossan claims that his interpretation shows that Jesus’ slavery parables subvert society.⁴⁴⁸ His third conclusion pertains to biblical tradition and concerns the eschatological message Jesus is believed to have proclaimed. With the help of the slavery parables, Crossan shows that the apocalyptic expectations with regard to the “Son of Man” are much more complex and paradoxical as often has been assumed. I quote Crossan at length:

⁴⁴² Crossan, “The Servant Parables of Jesus,” 39.

⁴⁴³ Crossan, “The Servant Parables of Jesus,” 40.

⁴⁴⁴ Crossan, “The Servant Parables of Jesus,” 40.

⁴⁴⁵ The reader might wonder what he or she can learn from these structures. Crossan connects his treatment of the structure of the slavery parables with the wider debate about Jesus and oral poetics. First, Crossan wonders whether it could be that Jesus told many parables over and over with minor differences, and that those differences are reflected in the different versions we find of many parables in the synoptic gospels. Crossan introduces in his treatment of this question a distinction between *ipsissima verba* and *ipsissima structura* of Jesus. Could it be that people who operate within an oral culture used certain story structures to tell and transmit important narratives? This we cannot conclude, according to Crossan: “In so far as one can generalize from the case of the Servant parables, then, it would seem that the parabolic creativity of Jesus consisted in variations of structure within the same theme and in variations of content within the same structure but not in variations of detail within the same content.” (Crossan, “The Servant Parables of Jesus,” 43.) A similar concept pertaining to fixed parable structures is developed by Marcel Poorthuis who coined the term “virtual mashal.” See his article, “The Invasion of the King: The Virtual Mashal as Foundation of Storytelling,” in *Parables in Changing Contexts. Essays on the Study of Parables in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism*, ed. Eric Ottenheim and Marcel Poorthuis, Jewish and Christian Perspectives 35 (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 205-225.

⁴⁴⁶ Crossan, “The Servant Parables of Jesus,” 41.

⁴⁴⁷ Crossan, “The Servant Parables of Jesus,” 43.

⁴⁴⁸ Crossan, “The Servant Parables of Jesus,” 44.

There is a supreme and double irony in the Servant theme. The motif of the departing and returning master fitted perfectly into the apocalyptic expectation of the coming Son of Man in the primitive community. Yet this motif in Group A was already subverted by Jesus in Group B where it is now the servant who departs and returns. Secondly, the eschatology of Group A is one in which action begets expected reckoning. But this is subverted in Group B in which the reckoning begets unexpected action, and that is a different eschatology.⁴⁴⁹

Crossan's study forms a milestone in the study of slavery parables, although his structural analysis does not find much resonance in current scholarship. However, as Crossan put the spotlight on the slavery parables, defined this subgroup of parables, and identified some of the biggest issues with these parables, studying his work is still mandatory. With regard to his conclusions, a few comments can be made.

1. Despite Crossan's great influence and the merits of the way he tries to define slavery parables, Glancy is, in my opinion, right to call his findings "of limited interest for consideration of parabolic slavery."⁴⁵⁰ By focusing on a superior-subordinate relationship, Crossan often loses sight of slavery, sometimes discussing parables that do not involve slaves at all (Workers in the Vineyard), while ignoring parables that do feature slaves but have another focus at the same time.
2. As the present study will show, I do not agree with Crossan's assessment that Jesus' slavery parables subvert society. To the contrary, the great majority of Jesus' slavery parables, especially those that involve absent masters and moments of reckoning, confirm the norms of ancient society, as depicted in both literary and non-literary texts, with slaves serving their masters. Only in a limited number of cases (most notably Luke 12:35-38; see chapter 7) a true reversal of roles is visible in a parable of Jesus.
3. Finally, with respect to the (supposed) creativity of Jesus when it comes to telling slavery parables, Crossan's claims need to be revisited by comparing Jesus' parables with the early rabbinic parables, as this study aims to do. Such a comparison provides depth to an evaluation of Jesus' creative abilities.

3.3.2.3. Modern Scholarship: Responding to Crossan

The debate does not end with Weiser and Crossan. The next scholar who processes the entire slavery parable corpus is Bernard B. Scott. In his 1989 monograph, *Hear then the Parable*, he divides the New Testament parables in three groups: "Family, Village, City and Beyond," "Home and Farm," and "Masters and Servants." This division is based upon what Scott calls "three of the elementary aspects of Mediterranean social life and culture."⁴⁵¹ To find these aspects, Scott divides society in the ancient Mediterranean world along two axes, a horizontal axis (which organized the social exchange of the society) and a vertical axis (which organized society's power exchange). It is this second axis that is represented in the "Masters and Servants" parables. According to Scott, these parables often involve a test between master and servant because they deal with power relationships.⁴⁵² As with Crossan, for Scott, terms are not important and are even "irrelevant." "What is important is the invocation of the patron-client model."⁴⁵³ Furthermore, Scott advocates a quite unique way to analyze the slavery parables, notably with the help of that same patron-client model. He states about this model: "Patron-client relations are not part of the capitalist model of employer-laborer. The relationship is more familial than contractual. It is voluntary and requires a long term relation in which roles and responsibilities are carefully defined," and "[c]lient-patron societies are inherently unstable, not simply because they are unequal but also because they are legitimated by custom more than by law."⁴⁵⁴ However, his account of the slavery relationships in the parables has been severely criticized – correctly in my opinion – by, amongst others, Glancy⁴⁵⁵ and Beavis,⁴⁵⁶ because this image simply does not match the ancient practice of slavery, which was involuntary and

⁴⁴⁹ Crossan, "The Servant Parables of Jesus," 46.

⁴⁵⁰ Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity*, 123.

⁴⁵¹ Scott, *Hear then the Parable*, 73.

⁴⁵² Scott, *Hear then the Parable*, 73.

⁴⁵³ Scott, *Hear then the Parable*, 208n10; see also below.

⁴⁵⁴ Scott, *Hear then the Parable*, 205-206.

⁴⁵⁵ Jennifer A. Glancy, "Slaves and Slavery in the Matthean Parables," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 199, no. 1 (2000), 69-70.

⁴⁵⁶ Glancy, "Slaves and Slavery in the Matthean Parables," 40.

regularized by law. Glancy states boldly: “By collapsing master-slave relations into patron-client relations Scott distorts the parabolic representation of slavery.”⁴⁵⁷ Nevertheless, it might be worthwhile to take notice of Scott’s division of his patron-client parables. He uses what he calls a “formal” model to divide the parables into two groups. The first group concerns parables in which a master’s departure and return instigates the story; in the second group the focus is on accounting. To the first group belong The Good and the Bad Slave Manager, The Doorkeeper, The Talents and The Tenants. The second group is formed by The Two Debtors, The Useless Slaves, The Unjust Slave Manager, The Unforgiving Slave and The Workers in the Vineyard. If we compare the figure below to the division made by Crossan, we see that only the parable of The Tenants has changed places, whereas the titles of the groups have been modified as well. This signifies the break with the structural analysis that Crossan advocates.

First Group: Master’s Departure and Return

The Good and the Bad Slave Manager
The Doorkeeper
The Talents/The Pounds
The Tenants

Second Group: Accounting

The Two Debtors
The Useless Slaves
The Unjust Slave Manager
The Unforgiving Slave
The Workers in the Vineyard

Another scholar that responded directly to the work of Crossan, but has not received any reception that I know of, is Anthony Basil Taylor. In his 1989 PhD thesis, “The Master-Servant Type Scene in the Parables of Jesus,” Taylor combined Crossan’s terminology with Robert Alter’s theory of the “type-scene.”⁴⁵⁸ Taylor did not define the master-servant type scene more than the “interaction between a master and his servants,”⁴⁵⁹ and – just like Crossan – does not identify specific master-servant titles or terms.⁴⁶⁰ To establish whether a type scene about masters and servants really existed in Jesus’ time, Taylor also looks at the Hebrew Bible and what he calls tannaitic literature (which we will discuss below, 3.3.3). He distinguishes *gross modo* the same eight master-servant parables in the New Testament as Crossan does (Crossan did not see Luke 17:7-10 as a parable, but Taylor does), but adds the fifth parable of the Shepherd of Hermas to that list (compare our section 5.4.2.1). However, Taylor does not see Hermas’ parable as a true example of the master-servant type scene: “The master-servant type scene is employed in the present story only in imitation of the synoptic parables and not as a living convention in the literary world of the author.”⁴⁶¹ The conclusion of his thesis is that there was a continuous use of the master-servant type-scene in the Semitic literature of ancient Palestine – the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the tannaitic literature – which “would often be used metaphorically to refer to the relationship between God and his people.”⁴⁶² A longer passage from his conclusion is worth quoting:

When reading the master-servant stories of the Hebrew Scriptures, one senses that beyond his interest in patriarchs, kings and prophets, the author is trying to say something about Covenant. When reading the master-servant stories of the New Testament, one senses that by alternatively confirming, confounding and reversing conventional expectations, Jesus is probing the relationship of God with his people in terms of Jesus’ message. When reading the master-servant stories of the Tannaitic corpus, one senses that by insistently confirming conventional expectations, the Rabbis are affirming the permanent and unequivocal demands of God for faithful observance of the Law.⁴⁶³

Although his conclusions are relevant for the present volume, Taylor’s study suffers from a number of flaws or problems: (1) just like Crossan, his use of terminology is problematic, conflating servants, slaves, and other hierarchical relationships (e.g., David and Uriah in 2 Samuel 11:6-17); (2) a fundamental problem with Taylor’s

⁴⁵⁷ Glancy, “Slaves and Slavery in the Matthean Parables,” 70; Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity*, 125. Cf. Richard Saller, *Personal Patronage under the Early Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

⁴⁵⁸ Taylor, “The master-servant type scene,” 1-13. For an explanation of the type-scene see footnote 288.

⁴⁵⁹ Taylor, “The master-servant type scene,” 1.

⁴⁶⁰ Taylor, “The master-servant type scene,” 331-332.

⁴⁶¹ Taylor, “The master-servant type scene,” 277.

⁴⁶² Taylor, “The master-servant type scene,” 332.

⁴⁶³ Taylor, “The master-servant type scene,” 332-333.

book is that he nowhere gives a more detailed description of what he sees as the paradigmatic master-servant type scene that would be typical for the Semitic literature of ancient Palestine; (3) he compares parables to other story genres, thereby neglecting the specific character of the parable; and (4) his selection of tannaitic master-servant parables is greatly deficient, both in term of numbers (he only identifies six master-servant parables), and in term of dating or definition (three of the six parables are from the Babylonian Talmud). We will come back to the last issue in section 3.3.3.

Beavis counted, in her article, “Ancient Slavery as an Interpretive Context for the New Testament Servant Parables with Special Reference to the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-8)” (1992), ten (or eleven) cases of slave parables. Beavis does not present her own criteria, but uses the work of Crossan as a starting point and expands his list with The Barren Fig Tree.⁴⁶⁴ Another, later, publication by Beavis (2021) should be mentioned here as well. In this article, Beavis searches for “traces of servile experience submerged in the parable tradition”⁴⁶⁵ by comparing the parables to those fables that are attributed to the slave Aesop, a method similar to what we aim to do in the present study (see 3.4.4). She concludes in her article that “Taken as a body, with the few exceptions noted above [i.e., Luke 12:35-38 and Mark 10:43-44], the slave parables and aphorisms are as conventional as the paraenesis directly addressed to slaves (1 Cor 7:21; Eph 6:5-8; Col 1 Tim 6:1-2; 3:22; Tit 2:9-10; 1 Pet 2:18; Did. 4.11; Barn. 19.7).”⁴⁶⁶

In his often neglected study, *Slave of Christ. A New Testament Metaphor for Total Devotion to Christ* (1999), Murray J. Harris is surprised that the Greek word δοῦλος is only rarely translated with “slave” in Bible Translations. That is what motivated him to investigate how δοῦλος is used in the New Testament, both as a metaphor and as part of social reality. He categorizes the parables as examples of the New Testament attitude towards physical (“real”) slavery. He counts thirteen parables, all of which “accurately reflect the circumstances under which slavery operated in the first century.”⁴⁶⁷ The parables only diverge from “customary practice” in two aspects: instead of manumitting them, “good” slaves receive more responsibilities. Secondly, the image of a slave being served by his master can be found in Luke. However, “this unheard-of reversal of roles was for dramatic effect.”⁴⁶⁸ We will come back to both observations in the following chapters.

In the works by Beavis, Glancy, and Harrill, we encounter a critique of the way Crossan and Scott⁴⁶⁹ (and their followers) analyze and categorize the parables. Beavis criticizes Crossan’s use of the words good and faithful (and their opposites: bad, unfaithful) to designate the behavior of slaves, because those moral categories do not apply to slaves: they are simply slaves, who do what they are expected to do (what their masters ask them to do). Moreover, the “excessive violence” that Scott and Crossan are startled by, was very normal to slaves in antiquity. So, according to Beavis, many of Crossan’s supposed “abnormal” (subverted) situations turn out to be normal after all.⁴⁷⁰ In the work of Glancy, we find a more fundamental critique on Crossan’s work. Glancy mainly criticizes the fact that Crossan seems to have no interest in the corporeal vulnerability of slaves. The abuse of the slave body becomes visible in Crossan’s second group of slavery parables too – those parables in which the normalcy of slavery is inverted. Harrill agrees with Glancy that the recurring use of violence is the “very ‘horizon of normalcy’ that ancient readers would have expected in such tales.”⁴⁷¹ With respect to the moral categories of bad and good slaves that Beavis criticizes, I would like to add that, while many slaves would indeed not have had the luxury to operate on the basis of certain ethical standards, in literary productions slaves nevertheless were *thought of* as ethical *sujets*, capable of taking certain moral positions. In this rather simple moral economy, a good slave was a slave who was obedient and trustworthy, while a bad slave was lazy, unreliable, and indocile. In the same vein, one might add that the “horizon of normalcy” is often much more determined by literary topoi and story patterns than by (modern) expectations on (excessive) violence.

⁴⁶⁴ Beavis also claims erroneously that Crossan’s list missed what she calls the parable of The Waiting Servants, Luke 12,35-38, which is however mentioned and discussed as The Doorkeeper in Crossan’s paper. See Beavis, “Ancient Slavery as an Interpretive Context,” 37n1; Crossan, “The Servant Parables of Jesus,” 20ff.

⁴⁶⁵ Beavis, “Fables, Parables and Slaves.”

⁴⁶⁶ Beavis, “Fables, Parables and Slaves.”

⁴⁶⁷ Harris, *Slave of Christ*, 47.

⁴⁶⁸ Harris, *Slave of Christ*, 48.

⁴⁶⁹ The reception of Weiser is rather modest.

⁴⁷⁰ Beavis, “Ancient Slavery as an Interpretive Context,” 42ff.

⁴⁷¹ Harrill, “The Psychology of Slaves in the Gospel Parables,” 64.

Let us turn now to a dissertation from 2015 that is completely devoted to parables in Luke and that has slavery as one of its primary themes: Anders Martinsen's *Men and Unmen in the Parables of Luke: Reception, Slavery, Masculinity*. While Martinsen's dissertation offers many interesting insights (see also his remarks on translation issues in chapter 1), I focus here on his take on slavery parables in which Martinsen almost completely gets rid of assumptions about the parables as literary devices that question normalcy. In contrast, Martinsen underscores the "conventionality" of the Lukan slavery parables by seeing them as "part of the Greco-Roman literary imagination."⁴⁷² On the basis of this analysis, he concludes: "The master-slave dynamic in the parables predominantly supports the hierarchy of the ancient world and fractions that went against the grain of the dominant ideologies were not sustainable in the longer run."⁴⁷³ The obedience to the master in the parables is equated to the absolute obedience that is due towards God.⁴⁷⁴ This also explains why slavery was not criticized in early Christianity: "the presentation of God as the true master trumped the ideas that could have brought change. The theological equation between serving God and serving masters solidified slavery as an institution."⁴⁷⁵

A more nuanced image is sketched by Edward Noble Kaneen in his 2017 dissertation, *Discipleship is Slavery: Investigating the Slavery Metaphor in the Gospel of Mark*. In this work, Kaneen pays considerable attention to the slavery parables, both in the New Testament and in the rabbinic literature (for his discussion of rabbinic parables, see below). Referring to the work of other scholars, Kaneen states that "nothing happens without slaves" in those parables.⁴⁷⁶ On the basis of his research of the slavery parables in Mark, Kaneen arrives at five conclusions: (1) there are "good" and "bad" slaves in the gospel parables (only good ones in Mark though); (2) slaves model values; (3) slaves experience suffering; (4) slaves are judged by their relationship with their owners; and (5) slave stories demonstrate reversal.⁴⁷⁷ What is also of interest for us is Kaneen's methodological approach. First, by paying equal attention to Roman and rabbinic sources, he shows his awareness of the indebtedness of the New Testament slavery parables to both cultural arenas. Second, by using Conceptual Blending Theory, Kaneen tries carefully to dissect the way the slavery metaphor works and how it relates to slavery parables, perceiving both as a continuum.

Finally, Albert Harrill tries to show that the slave parables of Jesus did not (all or completely) derive from real life situations (compare Martinsen above), but were composed out of stock characters and stock scenes from Greco-Roman comedy. As a case study, he discusses two parables (each from one of the opposing groups of Crossan), namely, The Unforgiving Slave and The Good and the Bad Slave Manager. Those two parables do not "work against each other," but "come from the same cultural (or literary) topos" (*absente ero*, in this case).⁴⁷⁸ He concludes:

To claim, with Crossan and others, that the parables "upset" or "undermine" the expectations of ancient audiences about slavery overlooks the literary conventions about slavery that we know from other forms of fiction, such as drama. [...] The discursive strategy of the texts encourages the audience to think about slaves not as real individuals but in terms of comic stereotypes that supported the ideology and institution of ancient slavery.⁴⁷⁹

Although I believe that Harrill's observations concerning the slavery parables and their literary character can really add something to our understanding of those parables, one would like to see which insights one can accumulate if we compare the parables not (only) with Greco-Roman literary works, but with literary compositions of Jewish origin (the *meshalim*), something that almost all New Testament scholars mentioned above have neglected to do. As we will see in the next section, the number of slavery parables in rabbinic literature is substantive, even greater than in the New Testament. At the same time, one can wonder – keeping

⁴⁷² Martinsen, "Men and Unmen," 473.

⁴⁷³ Martinsen, "Men and Unmen," 474.

⁴⁷⁴ Martinsen, "Men and Unmen," 393.

⁴⁷⁵ Martinsen, "Men and Unmen," 342.

⁴⁷⁶ Kaneen, "Discipleship is Slavery," 193.

⁴⁷⁷ Kaneen, "Discipleship is Slavery," 275-277.

⁴⁷⁸ Harrill, "The Psychology of Slaves," 66.

⁴⁷⁹ Harrill, "The Psychology of Slaves," 73-74.

Glancy's critique in mind⁴⁸⁰ – if it is still possible to say something about “real” slavery when we deconstruct the slaves in the parables as literary stock figures. We will come back to this question throughout this study repeatedly.

3.3.2.4. List of Early Christian Slavery Parables

The lists of New Testaments slavery parables of the scholars mentioned in the previous section⁴⁸¹ can be found in the chart below. In this chart, it is visible, on the one hand, that there exists (almost) scholarly consensus about seven slave parables. On the other hand, it becomes clear that there are another eleven parables whose status is a matter of debate. Ten parables in the table contain the Greek word δοῦλος (no. 1-4, 6-7, 9, 12, 14, 16). However, in The Banquet, The Tares among the Wheat, and The Prodigal Son, the relation between a master and a slave is not the focus point. One could even argue – as Osiek and Balch do⁴⁸² – that the same goes for the Tenants. In those parables, the slaves only have a role as agents who, according to literary theory, “function as pieces in the background or setting, or as aids in characterizing the major characters.”⁴⁸³

For this project, I would like to discuss as many slave parables as possible. As I share both Glancy's critique of Crossan (and, *mutatis mutandis*, of Scott) and her efforts to investigate “slavery qua slavery,” I will focus on all parables in which slaves play a role, selecting those on the basis of Greek terminology. So, to begin with, all parables that mention δοῦλος or δοῦλοι are part of my corpus. Furthermore, as I will show in section 5.4.1 (cf. 3.2.2), I hold that the *oikonomos* in the parable of The Unjust Steward refers to a slave. Therefore, I will take this parable into account as well. On the other hand, I will exclude The Two Debtors (no mention of slaves), The Workers in the Vineyard (ἐργάται⁴⁸⁴), The Last Judgment (no mention of slaves), the Barren Fig Tree (ἀμπελουργός⁴⁸⁵), and the Ten Virgins (παρθένοι⁴⁸⁶) from my corpus since those parables do not contain references to slaves. Finally, I have also looked for early Christian slavery parables outside of the New Testament and found one in the Shepherd of Hermas and one in the Gospel of Philip (the Gospel of Thomas only contains parallels to the synoptic slavery parables). I have added those parables to the bottom of the list. In sum, my collection consists of 13 slavery parables.

	Parable ⁴⁸⁷	Weiser	Crossan	Scott	Beavis 488	Harris	Kaneen	My selection	Main discussion in section
1	The Tenants; Mark 12:1-12//Matthew 21:33-44//Luke 20:9- 18//Thomas 65								6.3.6

⁴⁸⁰ See section 2.3.3.

⁴⁸¹ I have left out a few scholars, because their lists were missing, incomplete, or simply a copy of previous scholars.

⁴⁸² Osiek and Balch, *Families in the New Testament Worlds*, 185-186.

⁴⁸³ Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983), 85.

⁴⁸⁴ Although clearly not about parables, this is a truly fascinating parable. Together with Annette Merz I wrote a brief Dutch article on the parable: “Jezus als joodse parabelverteller: De Werkers in de Wijngaard gelezen vanuit de vroegrijpse literatuur,” *Schrift* 52:3 (2020), 21-26.

⁴⁸⁵ Beavis calls the vinedresser in Luke 13:6-9 “probably an agricultural slave” (Beavis, “Ancient Slavery as an Interpretive Context,” 37), but is not clear to me why she thinks that. A search through other Greek sources does not come up with clear examples of an ἀμπελουργός as slave (e.g. Philo calls Noah a vinedresser: Philo, *Noah's Work as a Planter* 1).

⁴⁸⁶ Kaneen does not explain his identification of the ten virgins as slave-girls. Mitzi J. Smith does, however, give an argument: she reasons that the parable is situated between parables about slaves (The Wise Slave And The Unwise Slave on the one hand and The Talents on the other), and that the parable reflects the view of a slave-owner; see Mitzi J. Smith, *Insights from African American Interpretation. Reading the Bible in the 21st Century* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 80. While I do not want to rule out this possibility completely, one would rather expect a word like παιδίσκαι to be used. Also, for the bridegroom to be escorted by a company of young, virgin, girls, apparently was common in first century Palestine. See e.g. Ruben Zimmermann, “Das Hochzeitsritual im Jungfrauengleichnis: Sozialgeschichtliche Hintergründe zu Mt 25.1–13,” *New Testament Studies* 48 (2002), 48-70.

⁴⁸⁷ The numbers of slavery parables in this figure may differ in some cases from the numbers mentioned in the text above. This is due to the fact that some authors see Mark 13:33-37 and Luke 12:35-38 as parallels (which I do not), and other scholars see the parable of the Pounds and the Talents (that I consider parallels) as two separate parables.

⁴⁸⁸ In her 2020 article Beavis does not include the Workers in the Vineyard in the slavery parables anymore.

2	The Doorkeeper; Mark 13:33-37								5.4.3.1, 7.2.3
3	The Tares among the Wheat; Matthew 13:24-30								5.3.1
4	The Unforgiving Slave; Matthew 18:23-35								4.3.2
5	Workers in the Vineyard; Matthew 20:1-13								
6	The Banquet; Matthew 22:1-14//Luke 14:15-24//Thomas 64								6.3.6 (7.3.2)
7	The Good and the Bad Slave Manager; Matthew 24:45-51//Luke 12:42-46								5.4.1.1, 6.3.6
8	The Ten Virgins; Matthew 25:1-13								
9	The Talents/Pounds; Matthew 25:14-30//Luke 19:12-27//Gospel Of The Nazarenes								5.4.1.3 (6.5.1)
10	The Last Judgement; Matthew 25:31-46								
11	The Two Debtors; Luke 7:41-43								
12	The Serving Master; Luke 12:35-38								5.4.3.1, 7.2.1
13	The Barren Fig Tree; Luke 13:6-9								
14	The Prodigal Son; Luke 15:11-32								5.3.1
15	The Unjust Slave Manager; Luke 16:1-8								5.4.1.2
16	The Useless Slaves; Luke 17:7-10								5.3.1, 7.2.3
17	The Faithful Slave; Shepherd of Hermas 55								5.4.2.1 (6.5.1)
18	The Master Feeding His Household; Gospel of Philip 80-81								6.4.3

3.3.3. The Study of Slavery Parables in Early Rabbinic Judaism

Until now, this section has mainly focused on New Testament parables, but slavery parables in rabbinic literature constitute a “thematic unity” as well. To quote Hezser: “Slave parables [in rabbinic literature] are an important means of employing slave imagery for theological purposes.”⁴⁸⁹ Unfortunately, aside from the work of Catherine Hezser, scholars of Jewish Studies have paid little attention to the rabbinic slavery parables as a separate collection. The monumental work *Die Königsgleichnisse des Midrasch, beleuchtet durch die römische Kaiserzeit* (1903), by the Austrian Rabbi Ignaz Ziegler, forms an exception to that rule. Ziegler was one of the first scholars to systematically study rabbinic parables. In his book, he devotes one chapter, some fifty pages, to freedmen and slaves in the parables.⁴⁹⁰ However, this chapter is more a collection of slavery parables than a study of those parables. Not only is a discussion of the content and the meaning of the parables missing, but his choice of parables is debatable. Many early parables are missing, while a great number of much later parables are part of his treatise. Also, as in the rest of his book, Ziegler operates from the assumption that the kings in the parables can be traced back to the courts and customs of Roman emperors. As a result, he often overstates his case and reads the parables uncritically.⁴⁹¹

⁴⁸⁹ Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 346.

⁴⁹⁰ Chapter 6, „Die Freigelassenen und Slaven der Kaiser,“ in Ziegler, *Die Königsgleichnisse des Midrasch*, 214-263.

⁴⁹¹ Cf. Alan Appelbaum, “‘I Clothed You in Purple.’ The Rabbinic King-Parables of the Third-Century Roman Empire,” PhD diss., Yale University, 2007, 3.

Next to Ziegler, Weiser should be mentioned here. In his above-mentioned dissertation, Adolf Weiser enumerates a number of rabbinic parables. His collection is not based on Weiser's own research, but on Billerbeck's monumental *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* (1924).⁴⁹² However, this collection is seriously flawed; it is not only very incomplete, but it also focuses on the later (amoraic) parables and cannot simply be used for comparison with New Testament parables. In addition, the collection of Billerbeck often shows a theological bias against rabbinic texts.

Some of the same mistakes Weiser made can be found in the work of the earlier mentioned Anthony Basil Taylor. While Taylor is keen to find his "master-servant type scene" in tannaitic literature as well, only three of the six parables he identified as such are truly tannaitic and only one of these three pertains to a slave (The Rotten Fish).⁴⁹³ Thus, his "collection" misses many relevant texts that are discussed in the present study. Although, as a consequence, his conclusions have limited value, it is good to notice that, according to Taylor, reversal is not present in tannaitic *meshalim*: "The good servants receive favorable treatment and the bad servants are punished. Certain of the Rabbinic stories 'play' with audience expectations, but these expectations are never reversed."⁴⁹⁴ As we will see in chapter 7, Taylor is not right about this, since there are (albeit a few) rabbinic parables that feature reversal.

Let us turn now to contemporary scholarship on rabbinic slavery parables as a separate corpus. The most notable scholar in this area is without doubt Catherine Hezser.⁴⁹⁵ Hezser notices in chapter 16 of her book, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, that both the gospels and the rabbinic literature contain more slavery parables than parables in which tenants or day laborers play a role, a fact that deserves attention and analysis. Inspired by Crossan, Hezser states that not only the New Testament but also the rabbinic slave parables form a thematic unity.⁴⁹⁶ Different from the New Testament, the rabbinic slavery parables almost always feature a king as master, and not a "normal" human. Her explanation is that one may assume "that rabbis considered the king metaphor more suitable to express God's honour and position."⁴⁹⁷ So, "[t]he various aspects of a slave's relationship with his master are used to elucidate human beings' relationship with God."⁴⁹⁸

According to Hezser the rabbinic slave parables have a few main topics:⁴⁹⁹

- The slave's observance or non-observance of his master's orders and his master's treatment of him;
- The slave's escape from or attachment to his master;
- The contrast between two slaves or between the master's son and his slave;
- The slave pedagogue or wet-nurse and the master's son.

There are a few limitations with regard to Hezser's discussion of slavery parables. First, she does not aim for completeness, and because of that, Hezser does not discuss a number of rabbinic slavery parables that are relevant to us. Second, Hezser discusses younger – amoraic (from the third century onwards) – parables as well. Since it is not her goal to compare them with New Testament literature, this does not amount to any chronological difficulties for her. However, for our purposes, we have to leave these parables out of consideration.

A few words should also be devoted to the earlier quoted work of Edward Noble Kaneen, who briefly writes on slaves in the tannaitic parables in his 2016 dissertation. According to Kaneen, the slavery parables take an important position in the complete corpus of rabbinic parables (compare the next section). While the slaves in these parables represent "imagined slavery," the actions and attitudes recounted are consistent with the master ideology that could be found in other ancient genres too.⁵⁰⁰ In the parables, the master generally bests the slaves,

⁴⁹² Paul Billerbeck and Hermann L. Strack, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, 6 vols. (München: C.H. Beck, 1922-1961).

⁴⁹³ The other two tannaitic parables are (his titles) The Laborer who did much work (Sifra 26:9) and The Wicked Tenants (Sifre Deuteronomy 32:9). Furthermore, Taylor has found three master-servant parables in the Babylonian Talmud: The Early-Rising Slaves (Hagigah 12b; see footnote 1542), Two Seals (Menachot 43b; see footnote 1199), and The Banquet (Shabbat 153a; see section 7.3.3).

⁴⁹⁴ Taylor, "The master-servant type scene," 320.

⁴⁹⁵ As remarked in chapter 1. Adolf Weiser also provides a tentative list of rabbinic slavery parables; but, for several reasons, that list is of little use.

⁴⁹⁶ Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 346-347.

⁴⁹⁷ Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 348; see also Ziegler, *Die Königsgleichnisse*.

⁴⁹⁸ Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 348.

⁴⁹⁹ Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 348.

⁵⁰⁰ Kaneen, "Discipleship is Slavery," 165.

he asserts, “presumably because the master typically represents God.”⁵⁰¹ Kaneen holds that the main principle of the parables is that of slaves “doing their best to please their master.”⁵⁰² He sees four themes in the parables: obedience and disobedience; reward and punishment; ownership and identity; and sexual relationships.⁵⁰³ However, these four themes rely to a large extent on the slavery parables in Seder Eliyahu Rabbah, which I deem not a tannaitic source.⁵⁰⁴ Kaneen closes his discussion by referring to the work of Scott and Applebaum, concluding that the tannaitic slavery parables “may also offer us ways of thinking about the interaction between oppressor and oppressed.”⁵⁰⁵ With respect to the slavery metaphor in the rabbinic writings, especially the parables, Kaneen comes to the following conclusions (compare his conclusions with regard to the New Testament parables mentioned above):

1. There are “good” and “bad” slaves.
2. Slaves model values: “In particular, the metaphorical slaves of Jewish sources model the ideological concerns of the master which, when the master is God, explains their usefulness as a means of conveying religious ideas.”⁵⁰⁶
3. Slaves experience suffering. This can be an expression of loyalty.
4. Slaves are judged by their relationship with their owners.
5. Slave stories do not typically demonstrate reversal. This is the biggest difference with the New Testament parables, according to Kaneen. However, as mentioned above, this study will demonstrate that when it comes to reversal the early rabbinic slavery parables are rather similar to the early Christian slavery parables (see chapter 7).

This short overview shows that while much work has been done on the slavery parables in the New Testament (other early Christian parables have mostly been neglected), the slavery parables in early rabbinic literature have not really been studied systematically. A careful dissemination of the tannaitic slavery parables can help to disprove a number of misconceptions about both the rabbinic parables, and the presumed characteristics of the early Christian parables. Hence, the focus of this study will be on the rabbinic parables.

3.3.3.1. List of Early Rabbinic Slave Parables

Previous research lacks suitable lists of early rabbinic slavery parables, but such a list is needed for the present study. In order to compile such a list, I have made use of several existing (general) collections of tannaitic parables (Hezser, Johnston, McArthur/Johnston, Notley/Safrai, Kooyman, Teugels), combined with my own search of tannaitic sources.⁵⁰⁷ I have used those lists to collect all parables from the tannaitic period in which slaves occur or, in a few cases, seem to be implied (most notably no. 10, 11 and 28 in the list below). This resulted in the list below. For this list, I have used the Hebrew word *eved* (עֶבֶד, slave) as a point of departure. I have decided not to discuss any pedagogues (as Hezser does in her book), although the pedagogue parables form a highly interesting category of parables with their own characteristics, dynamics, and theological ramifications.⁵⁰⁸ I have made this decision for reasons of space, but also because it is not always certain that all

⁵⁰¹ Kaneen, “Discipleship is Slavery,” 166.

⁵⁰² Kaneen, “Discipleship is Slavery,” 167.

⁵⁰³ Kaneen, “Discipleship is Slavery,” 167-174.

⁵⁰⁴ Mainly the last theme Kaneen mentions – sexual relationships – is barely present in my corpus of tannaitic slavery parables.

⁵⁰⁵ Kaneen, “Discipleship is Slavery,” 176.

⁵⁰⁶ Kaneen, “Discipleship is Slavery,” 178.

⁵⁰⁷ Applebaum, “I Clothed You in Purple”; Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 346-362; Robert M. Johnston, “Parabolic Interpretations Attributed to Tannaim,” PhD diss., Hartford Seminary Foundation, 1977; Arie C. Kooyman, *Als een koning van vlees en bloed. Rabbijnse parabellen in midrasjiem* (Baarn: Ten Have: 1997); Harvey K. MacArthur and Robert M. Johnston, *They also taught in Parables. Rabbinic Parables from the First Centuries of the Christian Era* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1990); R. Steven Notley and Zeev Safrai, *Parables of the Sages: Jewish Wisdom from Jesus to Rav Ashi* (Jerusalem: Carta, 2011); Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhiltot*. Only no. 18 (Sifre Deuteronomy 6) is not attested in any of these overviews.

⁵⁰⁸ See for some examples: Sifre Numbers 87 and 105; Sifre Deuteronomy 11, 19 and 306; Genesis Rabbah 28:6, 31:7.

pedagogues are necessarily slaves.⁵⁰⁹ Moreover, we do not have any pedagogue parables in the New Testament,⁵¹⁰ which would make a discussion of rabbinic slavery parables from a comparative perspective less fruitful. All parables in the list below are discussed in the present study, although some only in passing or in footnotes. Next to the tannaitic parables, I have provided a list of twelve non-tannaitic slavery parables that I refer to in this study (or, in a few cases, even discuss elaborately). As noted previously (3.1), the selection of these parables is motivated in the section in which they occur. The two most frequent used reasons for including these younger parables is, (1) because they form a good (additional) illustration of an argument I make, or (2) because they might reflect older traditions. This list of non-tannaitic slavery parables is, of course, not exhaustive.

No.	Source	Name	Main discussion in section
1	Mishnah Avot 1:3	Do not Obey for a Reward	6.5.2
2	Mishnah Sukkah 2:9	Spilling Drink on the Master's Face	6.3.2
3	Tosefta Berakhot 6:18	The Stupid Slave	5.3.2.2
4	Tosefta Sukkah 2:6	The Removed Lamp	5.3.1.1
5	Tosefta Sotah 11:3	Mixing Wine with Water	5.3.2.1
6	Avot de Rabbi Nathan B 10	Acting out of Fear	6.5.2
7	Mekhilta RS ⁵¹¹ Sanya on Exodus 4:13	The Chosen Slave Manager Retracts	6.3.4
8	Mekhilta RY Pischa on Exodus 12:1	The Slave of a Priest Flees to the Graveyard	6.6
9	Mekhilta RY Beshallach on Exodus 14:5/par. RS	The Slave who Buys a Rotten Fish	5.3.2.3, 6.3.3
10	Mekhilta RY Beshallach on Exodus 14:21/par. RS	The Garden within the Garden	5.4.3.2
11	Mekhilta RY Shirata on Exodus 15:1/par. RS	Blind and Lamé Guards	5.4.3.3
12	Mekhilta RY Shirata on Exodus 15:17-18/par. RS	Defeated Robbers	6.3.6
13	Mekhilta RY Bachodesh on Exodus 20:3	The Patient King	5.3.1.3
14	Sifre Numbers 84	The Slave who Arranges an Inheritance	5.3.1.2
15	Sifre Numbers 94 (only in Vatican)	The King and his Stealing Sons and Slaves	6.4.1 (footnote)
16	Sifre Numbers 115	The King who Bought the Son of a Friend	4.4.1
17	Sifre Numbers 161	The King who is Always with his Son	5.3.1.1 (footnote)
18	Sifre Deuteronomy 6	A King's Slave is a King	7.3.3
19	Sifre Deuteronomy 8	The King who gave his Slave a Field	5.4.2.2
20	Sifre Deuteronomy 26	The Sale of a Debtor's Children as Slaves	4.3.1
21	Sifre Deuteronomy 28	A King, Wine and Two Slaves	5.5.1
22	Sifre Deuteronomy 38	The King who Serves a Slave from High Birth	7.3.1
23	Sifre Deuteronomy 38	Buying Slaves to Feed them	7.3.1
24	Sifre Deuteronomy 40	The King and his Storehouses	6.4.1
25	Sifre Deuteronomy 48/par. Avot de Rabbi Nathan B 35	The Slave and the Bird for the King's Son	6.3.5
26	Sifre Deuteronomy 323	Same Day Delivery of a Slave	4.2
27	Sifre Deuteronomy 357	The Depositor	6.3.6
28	Sifra Nedavah 2:6 ⁵¹²	Bringing Wheat, or Only Wheat	5.5.2
29	Sifra Bechukotai 4:4	On Account of Evil	6.3.1
30	Sifre Zuta 10:35	A Slave who Wakes the King	5.3.1.2
Non-tannaitic			
31	Genesis Rabbah 2:2	Two Slaves on One Bill	4.1.4
32	Genesis Rabbah 15:7	The Slave Girl and the Prince	4.1.2
33	Leviticus Rabbah 8:1	A Matrona and her Slaves	4.1.2
34	b. Shabbat 153a	Being Prepared for the Meal	7.3.2

⁵⁰⁹ Christian Laes, *Children in the Roman Empire. Outsiders Within* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 116.

⁵¹⁰ The metaphor of the pedagogue is not missing altogether in the New Testament. See, for example, Galatians 3:24-26, in which the law is compared to a pedagogue (the only other reference to pedagogues can be found in 1 Corinthians 4:15). See, e.g., Michael J. Smith, "The Role of the Pedagogue in Galatians," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 163 (2006), 197-214; and David J. Lull, "'The Law as Our Pedagogue': A Study in Galatians 3:19-25," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 105, no. 3 (1986), 481-498.

⁵¹¹ RY: Rabbi Yishmael, RS: Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. I have taken up the reference system for the Mekhiltot that Lieve Teugels has developed in *The Meshalim in the Mekhiltot. An Annotated Edition and Translation of the Parables in Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael and Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai*, with the assistance of Esther van Eenennaam, Text and Studies in Ancient Judaism 176 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 73-74.

⁵¹² For Sifra I use the traditional reference system as found in Weiss' edition (Isaac Hirsch Weiss, *Sifra de-ve Rav: hu' Sefer Torat Kohanim* [Vienna: Schlossberg, 1862]).

35	b. Ta'anit 25b	Giving your Slave his Ration	6.4.2
36	b. Hagigah 12b	The Early-Rising Slaves	7.2.1 (footnote)
37	b. Menachot 43b	Two Seals	5.5.1 (footnote)
38	Tanchuma Buber Beshallah 10	Fulfilling the Tasks of a Slave	7.3.3
39	Seder Eliyahu Rabbah 16	Loving and Fearing Sons and Slaves	5.6 (footnote)
40	Seder Eliyahu Rabbah 26	Loving and Fearing Slaves	5.6
41	Numbers Rabbah 1:2	A King does not Find Comfort in the Desert	7.3.3 (excursus)
42	Numbers Rabbah 16:27	Baking Bread for your Slaves	7.3.3 (excursus)

3.3.4. Slavery Parables in Percentages

I would like to round out this part of the chapter by providing some statistical information on the slavery parables. As we have seen above with regard to the New Testament writings (I leave the Shepherd of Hermas and the Gospel of Philip out of consideration here), I have identified 11 individual slavery parables⁵¹³ from a total of 41 New Testament parables (26.8%).⁵¹⁴ They are distributed in the following way over the gospels:

	Number of slavery parables in the NT gospels ⁵¹⁵	Percentage of slavery parables in comparison to all parables in that gospel ⁵¹⁶
Matthew	6	24 total=25%
Luke	8	29 total=27.6%
Mark	2	6 total=33.3%

Winston Munro has calculated that on average slaves parables account for 29.7% of all parables.⁵¹⁷ Kaneen has calculated that slavery parables make up 32% of Matthew's parables, 33% of Mark's parables, and 23% of Luke's parables.⁵¹⁸ Although these percentages do not completely agree with my own calculations (due to definition issues with respect to parables in general and which parables qualify as slavery parables in particular), the overall image is that more than a quarter of the New Testament parables are slavery parables. Kaneen also notices that the corpus of New Testament slavery parables contains both single-tradition, double-tradition, and triple-tradition parables (even more when one takes the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of the Nazarenes into account), which, according to Kaneen, "indicates their popularity and pervasiveness in early Christian tradition."⁵¹⁹

How does this compare to the early rabbinic parables? With regard to that corpus, it is (even) more difficult to come to reliable estimations of the percentages of slavery parables. As far as I know, Kaneen is the only one who has made an attempt in this direction. On the basis of the parable collections in Robert Johnston's PhD thesis "Parabolic Interpretations Attributed to Tannaim" and the *Parables of the Sages* by Steven Notley and Ze'ev Safrai, he has made a list of slavery parables in the tannaitic literature, concluding on the basis of this list that 12% to 16% of all the tannaitic parables are slavery parables.⁵²⁰ While I think his method is sound, I am rather critical of his definition of tannaitic literature, which also includes, amongst others, Song of Songs Rabbah,

⁵¹³ As one can see in the table in section 3.3.2.4, I count the parable of the Talents and the Pounds as one parable.

⁵¹⁴ For the number of 41 parables, I use the list of Joachim Jeremias (*The Parables of Jesus*, 247-248). There are great differences in the lists of New Testament parables. For example, the Jesus-seminar sees 22 parables as authentic words from Jesus (Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels. The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* [New York: Macmillan, 1993]), while Snodgrass comes to a total of 44 parables (*Stories with Intent*, 576-577) and Zimmermann even discusses a total of 104 (!) parables in his *Kompendium* (Zimmermann, "Die Gleichnisse Jesu. Eine Leseanleitung zum Kompendium," 28-29; he also takes metaphoric images into account, including those in John). While every list has its pros and cons, I find it important that a parable has a narrative element (cf. 3.3.1), which is why I have chosen a more conservative list that excludes parabolic images.

⁵¹⁵ Parallels are counted in all the gospels in which they appear.

⁵¹⁶ Again, I rely on the list of Jeremias for the total number of parables per gospel.

⁵¹⁷ Winsome Munro, *Jesus, Born of a Slave: The Social and Economic Origins of Jesus' Message*, Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity 37 (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1998), 329.

⁵¹⁸ Kaneen, *Discipleship is Slavery*, 193.

⁵¹⁹ Kaneen, *Discipleship is Slavery*, 193.

⁵²⁰ Kaneen, *Discipleship is Slavery*, 288.

Exodus Rabbah, the Babylonian Talmud, and Tanna debe Eliyahu – all texts which, in my opinion, are of a later date. If we instead limit ourselves to the early rabbinic sources that I have set out in section 3.1 and use the thirty tannaitic slavery parables that I identified earlier for our calculations, I arrive at the following numbers:

Rabbinic work	Johnston Corpus		Notley & Safrai Corpus	
	Total no. parables	Slavery parables MS	Total no. parables	Slavery parables MS
Mishnah	10	2	7	2
Tosefta	24	3	24	3
Avot de Rabbi Nathan A+B	32	2 ⁵²¹	43	2
Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael + Mekhilta de Shimon bar Yochai	32	7	34+32 ⁵²²	6+5 ⁵²³
Sifre on Numbers	25	4	30	4
Sifre on Deuteronomy	43	10	62	10
Sifra	11	2	13	2
Sifre Zuta	-	1	17	1
Total parables	177	31	262	35
Slavery parables as a percentage of total	-	17.5%	-	13.4%

As one can see, the outcomes of my calculation of the percentage of slavery parables approach that of Kaneen's. If one departs from the thirty slavery parables (31/35 with parallels) that I have found in the early rabbinic corpus (see section 3.3.3.1) and divides that through the high number of 262 parables that Notley and Safrai have identified, this results in a percentage of 13.4% slavery parables in the early rabbinic corpus, or even 17.5% if one reasons from the number of parables in the Johnston corpus. While there are still a lot of uncertainties when it comes to the number of (slavery) parables in tannaitic literature, it is clear that the early rabbinic literature offers a substantial lower percentage of slavery parables in comparison to the early Christian literature. Unfortunately, Kaneen does not provide a real explanation for this difference, aside from his note that it indicates "the importance of the metaphor in the parables of the Synoptic Gospels."⁵²⁴ The present study hopes to provide a more complete answer to that question in the conclusion (8.2).

3.4. How to Analyze Slavery Parables

In this section, I describe how I will analyze the parables I have collected and translated for this study. In my discussion of the parables, four dimensions of analysis can be distinguished: (1) a socio-historical analysis; (2) a rhetorical analysis; (3) a hidden transcript analysis; and (4) a Bildfeld analysis. Although I will not always pay explicit attention to all four dimensions, they are all, I believe, critical to a good understanding of our texts. Below I will briefly explain every dimension. Prior to conducting those four forms of analysis, a reliable text should be established if up-to-date critical text editions are lacking. The current study relies for this on the work of Lieve Teugels for the Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael.⁵²⁵ For the other texts, I will present relevant observations with regard to variant readings on the basis of existing text editions.

⁵²¹ I have included here the parallel Sifre Deuteronomy 48//Avot de Rabbi Nathan B 35.

⁵²² Notley and Safrai give parallel parables in both Mekhilotot as separate entries.

⁵²³ Since Notley and Safrai count the parables in both Mekhilotot as separate corpora, I have added the parallel parables in Mekhilta de Shimon ben Yochai to the list (i.e., The Slave and the Rotten Fish, The Stubborn Guard, The Lame and Blind Guards, and The Defeated Robbers).

⁵²⁴ Kaneen, *Discipleship is Slavery*, 193.

⁵²⁵ See her work on the Mekhilotot: Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhilotot*.

3.4.1. On Comparison

Before continuing with the discussion of my four dimensions of analysis, we should pay some attention to the theoretical concept of comparison, a concept that underlies my analysis of rabbinic and Christian parables. For this matter, I make use of a study on comparison in biblical studies by John S. Kloppenborg.⁵²⁶ On the basis of that article it becomes clear that the kind of comparison that is proposed in this volume is an “analytic comparison,” in which the “investigator juxtaposes equivalent units with each other in order to discern regularities that might provide explanatory generalizations,”⁵²⁷ as opposed to an “illustrative comparison” in which “individual cases are not juxtaposed with each other, but to a theoretical model which they illustrate (or serve to correct and modify).”⁵²⁸ In my view, the rabbinic slavery parables and the early Christian slavery parables are both structurally and content wise suitable “equivalent units,” as the following chapters will show. What is the expected outcome of such a comparison? For an answer to this question it is worth quoting Kloppenborg at length:

Comparison [...] normalizes discourse about Christian origins rather than exoticizing it and turning it into something *sui generis*. At the same time, comparison is not inattentive to differences; instead, it sets certain similarities within a field in a field of differences, thus allowing us to see interpretive possibilities that we might otherwise have overlooked.⁵²⁹

While it no so much my goal to (only) normalize discourse about Christian origins (or Jewish origins for that matter, given the model of dialectical possibilities as proposed by Boyarin, see 3.1), I do think that a comparison of slavery parables in early rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity aids to see that they share more similarities than differences and, thus, are truly part of a shared parable tradition. Consequently, this comparison makes an end to assumptions about the *sui generis* nature of either Christian or rabbinic parables. Moreover, I agree with Kloppenborg that a comparison of both corpora helps us to improve our understanding of individual cases (see 8.2). By bringing also Greco-Roman literature into the equation (a slightly less “equivalent” unit, I would say) the horizon of possible interpretations is opened up even more, especially when it comes to literary stereotypes and patterns. At the same time the different genres of Greco-Roman novellas and comedies highlight the great resemblance of Christian and rabbinic parables. To summarize, the comparison of Greco-Roman, Christian and rabbinic stories aids us in discerning both the similarities of these literary corpora and their differences, with the latter allowing us to base our interpretation of the parables on a better knowledge of the distinctiveness of either tradition.

3.4.2. Socio-historical Analysis

As we have seen in section 3.2.1. in the definition of Ruben Zimmermann, early Christian parables are characterized by both the term “fictional” and “realistic.” What is conventionally meant by “realistic” has visually been described by Dodd in 1935:

In the parables of the Gospels [...] all is true to nature and to life. Each similitude or story is a perfect picture of something that can be observed in the world of our experience. The processes of nature are accurately observed and recorded; the actions of persons in the stories are in character; they are either such as anyone would recognize as natural in the circumstance, or, if they are surprising, the point of the parable is that such actions *are* surprising. Thus there is no doubt something surprising in the conduct of the employer who pays the same wages for one hour’s work as for twelve, but the surprise of the labourers at being treated so gives point to the story. [...] [I]f the parables are taken as a whole, their realism is remarkable.⁵³⁰

Still, the realism of the parables challenges and inspires scholars. Building on the work of Dodd and Kloppenborg, the South-African scholar Ernest van Eck has recently developed what he calls a social-scientific

⁵²⁶ John S. Kloppenborg, “Disciplined Exaggeration: The Heuristics of Comparison in Biblical Studies,” *Novum Testamentum* 59, no. 4 (2017), 390-414.

⁵²⁷ Kloppenborg, “Disciplined Exaggeration,” 395 (quotation of Victoria Bonnell).

⁵²⁸ Kloppenborg, “Disciplined Exaggeration,” 405.

⁵²⁹ Kloppenborg, “Disciplined Exaggeration,” 414.

⁵³⁰ Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 19-20.

reading of the parables on the basis of, mainly, Greco-Egyptian papyri: “[P]apyri from early Roman Egypt provide ‘solid ancient comparanda on the practices and social realities which the sayings of Jesus and the parables presuppose’.”⁵³¹ This step Van Eck deems as important since “[t]his enables the researcher, I believe, to identify what is ‘normal’ (vivid) in the parables, and what is ‘abnormal’ (surprising).”⁵³²

Although the position that the parables are “true to nature and to life” has, *grosso modo*, broad academic support,⁵³³ it often remains difficult to assess what is “normal” and what is not. Is it normal to cut a slave into pieces when he is not awake (Matthew 24:45-51//Luke 12:42-46, The Good and the Bad Slave Manager)? Is it normal for a slave to choose his own penalty (Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael Beshallah on Exodus 14:5, The Slave who Buys a Rotten Fish)? Is it normal for a slave to be freed and made heir when he does some extra work (Shepherd of Hermas 55, The Faithful Slave)? That the realistic aspects of the parables are often difficult to establish is (at least partly) due to a second characteristic of the parables – that they are fictional. As such, the parables might be inspired by “everyday life, but they do *not* necessarily portray everyday events.”⁵³⁴ Key here is that the scenes in the parables ought to be *recognizable* for an ancient audience because they are known from reality and/or because they are known from literature. So, a good command of both domains – literature and social reality – is necessary to estimate what kind of stock situation or stock scene a parable is playing with.⁵³⁵ When it comes to literature, I deem it important to study other ancient texts, especially those that are close to the parables genre-wise, since these texts might function as a “pool” of easily accessible and comprehensible stereotypes, acts, plots, and scenes (see also my remarks on Flusser in section 3.2.1). Hence, following the lead of scholars on Greco-Roman antiquity and early Christianity (see the previous chapter), this study will generously pay attention to related types of folk⁵³⁶ or popular literature (novels, fables, comedies, etc.) when literary themes and motives seem to come to the fore in the parables. When it comes to everyday life (social reality) I extensively refer to legal texts, commentaries, agricultural manuals, and other sources to build a plausible backstory to particular parables. I will also incorporate archaeological data, when available, in my analysis to describe very specific phenomena (for example, the ladle in section 6.3.2). By triangulating the parables with textual and archaeological data, I assume that it is possible to reconstruct the socio-historical background of the parables in most cases.

Finally, I believe that the intricate relation between fictionality and reality that is disclosed in the parables shows very well how reality, human perceptions, and the description of reality, both in “realistic” (e.g., law, history) and fictive literature, are interdependent. But whatever the exact relationship between fiction and reality in each individual parable, I would like to emphasize that parables, because of their very nature, are “on the fringe of fantasy,”⁵³⁷ and that their literary qualities should be taken seriously because of that. This position brings me to the second step of analysis.

3.4.3. Rhetorical Analysis

In order to rightly analyze the literary qualities of the parables, it is of vital importance to realize that Christian and rabbinic parables are never found “on their own.” We do not have any parable collections, like there are

⁵³¹ Ernest Van Eck, “Realism and Method: The Parables of Jesus,” *Neotestamentica* 51, no. 2 (2017), 166.

⁵³² Van Eck, “Realism and Method,” 164.

⁵³³ For a somewhat dated overview, see Charles W. Hedrick, *Parables as Poetic Fictions: The Creative Voice of Jesus* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1994), 39n1.

⁵³⁴ Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 18.

⁵³⁵ Exemplary work in this area has been conducted by Catherine Hezser in her *Lohnmetaphorik und Arbeitswelt in Mt 20:1-16. Das Gleichnis von den Arbeitern im Weinberg im Rahmen rabbinischer Lohngleichnisse*, *Novum Testamentum et Orbis Antiquus* 15 (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1990). In this book Hezser first studies the socio-historical background of day labourers and their wages, then investigates the history of the metaphor of wages in the literature of the Ancient Mediterranean World, and finally conducts a fruitful comparison of Matthew 20:1-16 (The Workers in the Vineyard) and rabbinic parables with a similar theme, resulting in, e.g., a *Bildfeld*.

⁵³⁶ For the parable as folk literature, see Galit Hasan-Rokem, *Tales of the Neighborhood: Jewish Narrative Dialogues in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), esp. chapters 1 and 2.

⁵³⁷ Robert W. Funk, *Funk on Parables. Collected Essays*, ed. Bernard B. Scott (Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 2006), 62.

collections of fables, *chreia*, and proverbs.⁵³⁸ Parables are always part of a bigger rhetorical unit, and they have a particular function or purpose within that unit.⁵³⁹

Let us start with rabbinic literature. About the role of parables in rabbinic literature Lieve Teugels has written: “Whatever the rabbinic pre-history of the *mashal* – and this may indeed have included narrative, popular, even oral teaching – most extant *meshalim* are transmitted as parts of midrash and, when analyzed textually, they need to be analyzed as such.”⁵⁴⁰ But what is midrash? It is an “inner-textual enterprise”⁵⁴¹, a commentary on the text of the Hebrew Bible, that seeks to explain grammatical, syntactic and narratological difficulties, while it has – at the same time – its own theological and political agenda. As Paul Mandel has orally stated: “midrash has one eye on the text and one eye out the window.”⁵⁴² In the way midrash solves textual difficulties, the agenda of the rabbis becomes visible.⁵⁴³

In her book, *The Meshalim in the Mekhiltot*, Teugels distinguishes an ideal-typical form of the midrashic *mashal*. The elements that can be found in such an ideal form are “1. base verse, 2. ‘issue’, 3. hermeneutical operation, 4. introductory formula of the *mashal*, 5. *mashal (proper)*, 6. introductory formula of the *nimshal*, 7. *nimshal*, 8. repetition of the base verse.”⁵⁴⁴ First, one establishes a base verse or proof text, the biblical verse that is quoted in the midrash and that forms the “peg” (or the “gap,” cf. Boyarin⁵⁴⁵) for the *mashal*. Then comes the “issue”: a problem or question is formulated on basis of the base verse. After the *mashal* itself (the *mashal proper*), the application (*nimshal*) follows. Stern calls this bipartite structure the normative and regularized form of the midrashic parable.⁵⁴⁶ The *nimshal* is a response to the issue: it explains, often very briefly, how the issue is solved. As part of the *nimshal* – usually at the end – the base verse is repeated. The different parts of the *mashal* are often introduced by certain standard formulas. The *mashal proper* opens in many cases with “a parable, it is like” (משל ל-) and the application, the *nimshal*, is recognizable by the word “so” (כך).⁵⁴⁷ Teugels stresses that the *mashal* needs the *nimshal* for explanation as much as the *nimshal* needs the *mashal* for explanation.⁵⁴⁸ Also, it is important to see that in many cases the *mashal* is not so much a response to the biblical text as it is to the midrash itself.⁵⁴⁹

If we turn now to the content of the *mashal proper*, Teugels argues, on the basis of the work of Yonah Fraenkel,⁵⁵⁰ that each parable is based on a certain “basic pattern, which mainly consists of the relationship between two or more ‘stock’ characters, such as a man and his son; a man and his wife; a king and his slaves etc.”⁵⁵¹ This is comparable to Boyarin’s “schematic stories.”⁵⁵² What pattern is chosen by the parable teller depends on the “issue” he/she wants to explain. In each manifestation of this stock or basic pattern, details and embellishments differ, firstly dependent on the “needs” of the midrash, but also propelled forward by the

⁵³⁸ Justin David Strong, “How to Interpret Parables in Light of the Fable. Lessons from the Promythium and Epimythium,” in *Overcoming Dichotomies. Parables, Fables, and Similes in the Graeco-Roman World*, ed. Albertina Oegema, Jonathan Pater, and Martijn Stoutjesdijk, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021 [forthcoming]).

⁵³⁹ Cf. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 20.

⁵⁴⁰ Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhiltot*, 8.

⁵⁴¹ Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhiltot*, 8.

⁵⁴² Cf. Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhiltot*, 8. I was one of the attendees of the Masterclass with Paul Mandel in Amsterdam in which he used this phrase (in January 2017).

⁵⁴³ Cf. Ronit Nikolsky, “De functie van parabellen (*mesjalim*) in de *Tanchuma*,” *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 71, no. 1 (2017), 151-168.

⁵⁴⁴ Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhiltot*, 13.

⁵⁴⁵ Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhiltot*, 60; Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 92.

⁵⁴⁶ Stern, *Parables in Midrash*, 9.

⁵⁴⁷ Stern, *Parables in Midrash*, 8.

⁵⁴⁸ Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhiltot*, 51.

⁵⁴⁹ See Nikolsky, ‘De functie van parabellen’.

⁵⁵⁰ Yonah Fraenkel, *Darkhei ha-aggadah vehamidrash*, two vols. (Givataim: Yad La-Talmud, 1991).

⁵⁵¹ Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhiltot*, 50.

⁵⁵² Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhiltot*, 56; Daniel Boyarin, “Review Essay. Midrash in Parables,” *Association for Jewish Studies Review* 20, no. 1 (1995), 131-132.

dynamics of the narrative itself. Finally, Fraenkel argues that the theological message of the parable is often found where the expected pattern of the parable is “broken” (Thoma and Lauer speak of “disclosure”).⁵⁵³

What about the parables that are attributed to Jesus, and that we find in the New Testament? Do we find the same elements there? A good summary of the structural features of New Testament parables can be found in Theissen and Merz’s *The Historical Jesus*. In their section on parables, they distinguish three parts in the New Testament parable: the beginning, the parable itself (the parable proper), and the application (the “*nimshal*”).⁵⁵⁴ The beginning has three variants: (1) a narrative beginning, without clear signals (e.g., Mark 4:3: “A sower went out to sow”); (2) a comparative beginning, with as its most famous manifestation “The kingdom of God is like”;⁵⁵⁵ and (3) a “dialogue beginning,” that often begin with a question (e.g., Luke 11:5: “Suppose one of you has a friend”). With regard to the content of the narrative itself, Theissen and Merz observe, with reference to Bultmann, that the narrative is generally brief, with a limited number of characters (never more than two in action or speech at the same time). Furthermore, the narratives are characterized by unilinearity (the story never shows two characters at the same time) and by repetition. Finally, the narratives often are open-ended.⁵⁵⁶ When it comes to the application of the New Testament parables, Theissen and Merz remark that they, comparable with their rabbinic counterparts, often open with “so,” οὕτως.⁵⁵⁷ Theissen and Merz distinguish two forms of applications: either a (short) moral or *epimythion* (a term used for the “lesson” of the fable; e.g., Matthew 20:16), or a full allegorization, like in Matthew 13:36-43 (The Tares among the Wheat). Of course, just like the rabbinic *meshal*, the New Testament parable is always embedded in a larger narrative or a series of parables.⁵⁵⁸ So, while the early rabbinic parable might be slightly more schematized and formalized than its New Testament counterpart, we see that they share a lot of structural similarities. As a consequence, in the present study we will study both parable traditions alike. Firstly, we will always analyze the parable as part of a longer treatise. We will discuss what the function of the parable is in the midrashic argument or in the New Testament context (does it illustrate, contrast, open up a theological/philosophical space that cannot be entered dialectically?). We will also study how the parable itself is structured and how it relates to its introduction (the base verse and/or its occasion) and its conclusion (the application or *nimshal*). When the different elements of the parable (introduction-parable proper-application) do not match, we will devote special attention to possible explanations for these inconsistencies. For the gospels (but also for some rabbinic parables), there is one extra step that deserves attention: its redactional shape *vis-à-vis* different manifestations of the parable in other gospels (or rabbinic texts).⁵⁵⁹ With this step we conclude the rhetorical analysis of the parable and we go from the visible structure of the parable to its possibly concealed content.

3.4.4. Hidden Transcript Analysis

For both early modern African-American and Greco-Roman slave cultures, the argument has been made that slaves invented and shared specific kinds of stories to provide “psychological release and vicarious revenge [...] against their masters.”⁵⁶⁰ As the work of Bakhtin has shown, this strategy is not reserved to slaves; it might be a universal characteristic of popular culture and literature that it critiques, mocks, and decries elites and elite culture. It often does so by means of humoristic and carnivalesque rituals and through novels, satires, jokes, and comedies that share the same attributes. As Bakhtin writes in his *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*: “Carnivalistic laughter likewise is directed toward something higher – toward a shift of authorities and truths, a

⁵⁵³ Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhiltot*, 29-30, 51; Clemens Thoma, Simon Lauer and Hanspeter Ernst, *Pesiqṭā deRav Kahanā: Einleitung, Übersetzung, Parallelen, Kommentar, Texte*, vol. 1 of *Die Gleichnisse der Rabbinen* (Bern: Lang, 1986), 22.

⁵⁵⁴ Theissen and Merz, *The Historical Jesus*, 329-334; Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 100-103.

⁵⁵⁵ As in the rabbinic literature there are shorter and longer forms of this introduction: compare Mark 4:30 (long, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it?”) with Matthew 13:24 (short, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to [etc.]”).

⁵⁵⁶ Theissen and Merz, *The Historical Jesus*, 331.

⁵⁵⁷ Theissen and Merz, *The Historical Jesus*, 334.

⁵⁵⁸ Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 20-21.

⁵⁵⁹ Step one of Snodgrass’s eleven points manual in explaining the parables (*Stories with Intent*, 26).

⁵⁶⁰ Sara Forsdyke, *Slaves Tell Tales: and Other Episodes in the Politics of Popular Culture in Ancient Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 41.

shift of world orders.”⁵⁶¹ It is important to notice, as Bakhtin does, that (in a way, this will be problematized below) popular culture often exists outside “official” ideology and “high” culture:

In the Middle Ages folk humor existed and developed outside the official sphere of high ideology and literature, but precisely because of its unofficial existence, it was marked by exceptional radicalism, freedom, and ruthlessness. Having on the one hand forbidden laughter in every official sphere of life and ideology, the Middle Ages on the other hand bestowed exceptional privileges of license and lawlessness outside these spheres: in the marketplace, on feast days, in festive recreational literature. And medieval laughter knew how to use these widely.⁵⁶²

Also notice how this quote suggests that humor might play a role in a correct understanding of popular culture; humor has the quality to criticize and subvert situations by means of satire and parody. As we will see below, Scott has pointed to the use of humor to convey hidden messages as well.⁵⁶³

Departing from the work of literary theorists like Bakhtin, this study will analyze slavery parables as a particular form of popular (folk) literature, notably slavery literature. I deem this both justified from a perspective of what I call “genealogy” and from a more outcome-based perspective.

What the “genealogical” perspective denotes is that already in antiquity parables – but foremost their Greco-Roman counterpart, the fables – were strongly associated with the lives of slaves.⁵⁶⁴ So, a famous collection of fables is ascribed to a slave (Aesop), about whose life we learn in *Vita Aesopi*, a book in which the clever slave uses folk wisdom, tricks, and fables to outwit his learned philosopher-master (truly a victory of the people over the elite!).⁵⁶⁵ A telling quotation from Phaedrus might help to understand why the slaves would have composed fables:

Now I will explain briefly why the type of thing called fable was invented. The slave, being liable to punishment for any offence, since he dared not say outright what he wished to say, projected his personal sentiments into fables and eluded censure under the guise of jesting with made-up stories.⁵⁶⁶

As this quotation indicates, fable telling was associated with slaves because it would give them the space to say things they were normally not allowed to say. It is interesting to ponder what the implications for this are for our study of the parables. Carmichael has stated, with reference to the work of David Daube, that “fables in Classical, Biblical, and Talmudic sources often conveyed the attitudes and feelings of slaves. By transferring certain ideas to the world of plants and animals slaves expressed views among themselves that, if openly advocated, could upset their masters. At the same time, however, because the fables depicted an imaginary world, the ideas were

⁵⁶¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and transl. Caryl Emerson, Theory and History of Literature 8, (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1984), 127.

⁵⁶² Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, transl. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 72.

⁵⁶³ Whether the parables contain humor remains a matter of debate. With respect to, for example, the Workers in the Vineyard and the parable of the Unjust Steward it has been argued that one should read these parables from a comic point of view. See, e.g., Young, *The Parables*, who points to the humorous or comic qualities of several parables. See also Fergus J. King’s article “A Funny Thing Happened on The Way to the Parable: The Steward, Tricksters and (Non)sense in Luke 16:1–8,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 48, no. 1 (2018), 18-25. In this article King notices: “Comedy is able to explore complex theological themes and claims” (20).

⁵⁶⁴ E.g., Beavis, “Fables, Parables and Slaves.”

⁵⁶⁵ *Vita Aesopi* has also been compared to the gospels, see, e.g., David F. Watson, “The ‘Life of Aesop’ and the Gospel of Mark: Two Ancient Approaches to Elite Values,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 129, no. 4 (2010), 699-716; Lawrence M. Wills, *The Quest of the Historical Gospel: Mark, John, and the Origins of the Gospel Genre* (London: Routledge, 1997); Whitney Shiner, “Creating Plot in Episodic Narratives: The Life of Aesop and the Gospel of Mark,” in *Ancient Fiction and Early Christian Narrative*, ed. Ronald F. Hock, J. Bradley Chance and Judith Perkins (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 273-291; Steven Reece, “‘Aesop’, ‘Q’ and ‘Luke’,” *New Testament Studies* 62, no. 3 (2016), 357-377.

⁵⁶⁶ Phaedrus 3.pr.33–37 (LCL 436, 255). Latin: *nunc, fabularum cur sit inventum genus / brevi docebo. servitus obnoxia, / quia quae volebat non audebat dicere / affectus proprios in fabellas transtulit, / calumniamque fictis elusit iocis.*

less threatening, and fables could also be used to plead some matter with a sympathetic master.”⁵⁶⁷ Unfortunately, Carmichael and Daube do not explain how they come to this conclusion, nor do they explicate to what “fables” (probably including parables) they refer. It is one of the aims of this study to study whether and how an analysis of slavery parables as popular culture will open up new perspectives on the parables. To do so, I would like to employ James Scott’s division of the public and the hidden transcript to the parables.

Scott has set out his theory of the hidden transcript in his 1990 volume, *Domination and Arts of Resistance*. His theory is based on his fieldwork experiences in a Malay village. He discovered there that the poorer and more economically dependent villagers were, the more they contradicted themselves in the opinions they expressed. In their interaction with richer villagers, they behaved differently from their interactions with members of the same class.⁵⁶⁸ On the basis of this experience, Scott formulated a difference between the “public transcript,” “the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate,”⁵⁶⁹ and the “hidden transcript.” He defines the hidden transcript as “discourse that takes place ‘offstage,’ beyond direct observation by powerholders. The hidden transcript is thus derivative in the sense that it consists of those offstage speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript.”⁵⁷⁰ As Scott stresses, we normally only see the public transcript of the dominant party and the public transcript of the subservient class. To find the hidden transcript, we have to bear three characteristics of that transcript in mind: (1) it is specific to a specific social site and set of actors; (2) it does not only contain speech acts, but a whole range of practices; and (3) “the frontier between public and hidden transcripts is a zone of constant struggle between dominant and subordinate – not a solid wall.”⁵⁷¹ It is especially this zone of constant struggling that Scott refers to as a realm of infrapolitics (in between the hidden and the public transcript). Infrapolitics are low-profile forms of resistance that function by means of disguise and anonymity and that – although they take place in the public domain – are “designed to have a double meaning or to shield the identity of the actors.”⁵⁷² As examples Scott enumerates rumor, gossip, folktales, jokes, songs, rituals, codes, and euphemisms.⁵⁷³

According to Scott, the biggest differences between the public and the hidden transcripts can be found where the degree of domination and subordination is the greatest, for example, in penal institutions, or in different forms of slavery.⁵⁷⁴ An example of the way the different transcripts of slaves in the context of Transatlantic slavery could look like, is visible in figure 3.3. Although the figure does not show it, the hidden transcripts might overlap and intrude the public transcript, creating “zones of struggling” or contested spaces.

⁵⁶⁷ Calum Carmichael, “Review Catherine Hezer, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*,” *Shofar. An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 26, no. 3 (2008), 222-224. Daube himself uses a more careful formulation: “Phaedrus claims that the form originated among slaves who thus communicated thoughts and feelings they could not express openly. This is perhaps to go too far; the biblical fables, for instance exhibit no particular connection with slavery. But even they, we shall see, present the viewpoint of a person or a group faced by superior might and forced to exercise caution; and the fables of the classical West do prove at least the genre’s enormous popularity with slaves.” David Daube, *Ancient Hebrew Fables* (Oxford: The Oxford Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies, 1973), 10.

⁵⁶⁸ James C. Scott, *Domination and Arts of Resistance. Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1990), ix-x.

⁵⁶⁹ Scott, *Domination and Arts of Resistance*, 2.

⁵⁷⁰ Scott, *Domination and Arts of Resistance*, 4-5.

⁵⁷¹ Scott, *Domination and Arts of Resistance*, 14.

⁵⁷² Scott, *Domination and Arts of Resistance*, 19.

⁵⁷³ Scott, *Domination and Arts of Resistance*, 19.

⁵⁷⁴ Compare Scott, *Domination and Arts of Resistance*, x.

Hypothetical Discursive Sites, Arranged by Audience, under Slavery

Harsh master/ overseer	Indulgent master or overseer	Whites having no direct authority	Slaves and free blacks	Slaves of same master	Closest slaves friends	Immediate family
-----			-----			
Public transcripts			Hidden transcripts			

Figure 3.3⁵⁷⁵

The hidden transcript prevents the powerless from appropriating the dominant and dominating, hegemonic ideology.⁵⁷⁶ By developing subcultures with, for example, myths of social banditry, class heroes, and world-upside-down imagery, the slave can resist the justification of the slavery by the ruling groups.⁵⁷⁷ Subsequently, by making use of infrapolitics, slaves (or whatever subordinate group) can put the domination to the test. From that perspective, a carnival-like feast does not form a safety-valve, but it is a way to “press against and test the limits of what may be safely ventured”;⁵⁷⁸ “the carnivalesque maintains the idea that things could and should be different.”⁵⁷⁹

How can Scott’s theory help us in our interpretation of the parables? What it helps to understand is that even in plain sight – seemingly part of the public transcript – the hidden transcript may permeate expressions of popular culture by means of doubled or encoded speech. To understand how this would look, let us briefly discuss Amy Richlin’s use of Scott’s work. Richlin employed Scott’s theory of hidden transcripts to analyze Plautus’ Comedies, another form of popular culture in antiquity. Richlin sees, in the use of jokes in fables, a similarity with the use of jokes in the comedies.⁵⁸⁰ Both are concealed ways to convey sincere feelings and thoughts. Richlin explains that the comedy is a secure site for hidden transcripts because it is protected by frivolity, masks, and costumes.⁵⁸¹ It opens up the possibility to express thoughts and views that would be impossible in the direct interaction between a freeman/a master and a slave. Fitzgerald has noticed in his volume on *Slavery and the Roman Imagination* that “one cannot help being struck by the importance of figures from slavery in the New Testament,” and adds that certain parables “remind us of the Plautine household.”⁵⁸² This statement raises all kind of questions: Do our parables also open up windows to the hidden transcript of slaves, like ancient fables and Plautine comedies? Are they especially devised for the poor people and the slaves too? And, if so, what does that mean for our exegesis of the parables? In general, I would say that the theory of hidden transcripts makes us aware of the power relations that saturate the master-slave parables in this study, and that may or may not find resonance in the ears of “real” masters and slaves in the audience or the readership of the parables.

There is, however, one obvious problem in employing Scott’s theory to the early Christian and early rabbinic parables.⁵⁸³ That problem is that the parables were, as far as we know, not (only) invented and/or told

⁵⁷⁵ Scott, *Domination and Arts of Resistance*, 26.

⁵⁷⁶ Scott, *Domination and Arts of Resistance*, 187ff.

⁵⁷⁷ Scott, *Domination and Arts of Resistance*, 198.

⁵⁷⁸ Scott, *Domination and Arts of Resistance*, 164.

⁵⁷⁹ Amy Richlin, *Slave Theater in the Roman Republic: Plautus and Popular Comedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 176.

⁵⁸⁰ Richlin, *Slave Theater in the Roman Republic*, 200.

⁵⁸¹ Richlin, *Slave Theater in the Roman Republic*, 177.

⁵⁸² Fitzgerald, *Slavery and the Roman Literary Imagination*, 112.

⁵⁸³ For discussions on the use of hidden transcript analysis for the New Testament writings, see Richard A. Horsley, ed., *Hidden Transcripts and the Arts of Resistance. Applying the Work of James C. Scott to Jesus and Paul*, *Semeia Studies* 48 (Leiden: Brill, 2014); Amanda C. Miller, *Rumors of Resistance: Status Reversals and Hidden Transcripts in the Gospel of Luke* (Minneapolis Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2014); and Norman A. Beck, *Anti-Roman Cryptograms*

by slaves.⁵⁸⁴ On the contrary, for them to survive twenty centuries and to be transmitted to us, they would also have to be told and spread by the elites. Classicist Sarah Forsdyke has paid special attention to this issue with respect to the ancient fable and has asked herself many questions, similar to the questions we might ask with respect to the parables: “[W]hy do elites make use of a popular tale? Why are elites not content with their own heroes [...]? [...] Why, in other words, did elites need slave heroes? Why appropriate a tale with so many potentially subversive meanings? Why are these elements not stamped out completely?”⁵⁸⁵ In her answers to these questions, she tries to overcome the dichotomy between slave and elite literature and slave and elite perspective. Her answer is that these stories mediate tensions between groups:

[T]hese tales are important cultural devices through which elites and non-elites (both peasants and slaves) worked out a way of living together. Bandit legends then are not just stories adapted at different times to different audiences, but are actually a common cultural product of diverse groups, heard by all groups, if not simultaneously, at least within the same political community. These stories are a cultural meeting place through which the principles of mutual accommodation are worked out.⁵⁸⁶

This does not mean that these stories, because they are also told by masters, are “domesticated” and cease to empower slaves.⁵⁸⁷ According to Forsdyke, the slave fables both preserve the social order and improve (or aim to improve) the living conditions of subordinates groups: “My interpretation [...] shows how these tales function not simply to provide psychological release but to negotiate better treatment in the very real conditions of slavery.”⁵⁸⁸ As Levine shows for African-American slave literature, slave tales did not so much present a fantasy of a world upside down, but “taught slaves strategies for coping with their masters.”⁵⁸⁹ Since it is obvious for the parables in this volume that elites have been involved in their production and transmission, I agree with Forsdyke that the elites would have had an interest in the (re)production of the parables as well. So, in this study, what I try to do is to get a hold of the power struggles and negotiations that might be operational in the parables, “shaking the textual authoritative system at its foundations,”⁵⁹⁰ not only between “real” masters and slaves, but maybe also between those the master and slaves are compared to: God and Israel (early Christianity). For the latter, I would like to refer to the work of, amongst others, Dov Weiss. In his book, *Pious Irreverence*, he shows how parables form excellent sites to voice critique of God. He writes: “What the sages are not prepared to say explicitly – even through the mouths of biblical characters – they sometimes articulate implicitly with the help of a parable.”⁵⁹¹ In this way, the irreverence of the sages towards God is voiced in a pious way. Thus, in a world in which it was normal for the people of Israel/early Christianity to identify themselves with slaves *vis-à-vis* their master (who is God), the constant struggles between masters and slaves in the parables might teach us something about early Christian and early rabbinic theology and its world view. At the same time there is yet another dimension to the hidden transcript analysis that should not be overlooked, and that is a possible political

in the New Testament: *Hidden Transcripts of Hope and Liberation*, rev. ed., Studies in Biblical Literature 127 (New York: P. Lang, 2010). For rabbinic parables see: Alan Applebaum, “I Clothed You in Purple”; idem, “Hidden Transcripts in King-Parables: Windows on Rabbinic Resistance to Rome,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 17, no. 4 (2010), 287-301.

⁵⁸⁴ The same holds for the Plautine comedies.

⁵⁸⁵ Forsdyke, *Slaves Tell Tales*, 47.

⁵⁸⁶ Forsdyke, *Slaves Tell Tales*, 47.

⁵⁸⁷ A relevant article on this issue for the New Testament slavery texts is from Sheila Briggs, “Can an Enslaved God Liberate? Hermeneutical Reflections On Philippians 2:6-11,” *Semeia* 47 (1989), 137-153. In this article Briggs argues that while the Philippian hymn about the self-enslavement of Christ “does not challenge the interests or beliefs of slavemasters,” “[t]he imagination of the slaves in confronting the Philippian hymn was not circumscribed by the logical associations of the text within the dominant symbolic universe, precisely that which is reconstructed by conventional biblical exegesis” (149).

⁵⁸⁸ Forsdyke, *Slaves Tell Tales*, 47-48.

⁵⁸⁹ Forsdyke, *Slaves Tell Tales*, 71; cf. Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 115.

⁵⁹⁰ Hasan-Rokem, *Tales of the Neighborhood*, 38.

⁵⁹¹ Dov Weiss, *Pious Irreverence. Confronting God in Rabbinic Judaism*, Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 116.

dimension of these parables. As Jesus and the rabbis were politically powerless members of the middle strata of a society colonized by Rome, the parables might also voice carefully veiled resistance to the Roman Empire, as previously been argued for Beck and Applebaum. When such an interpretive possibility occurs, I will certainly address this political dimension.⁵⁹²

In order to illustrate the theory I have set out above, I would like to briefly discuss a fascinating passage from Philo's *Quis Rerum Divinarum Heres Sit*.⁵⁹³ This passage is part of a treatise on the classical virtue of *parrhesia*, speaking frankly to one another. Philo uses Moses as an example who spoke plainly, even cried out to God. In the section that follows, we see how the image of the slave and the slave-owner is applied to God and the human race, more specifically Moses.

Yet courage and well-timed frankness before our superiors are admirable virtues also, so that there seems to be more truth than comedy in the words of the comic poet [Menander],

*The slave (δοῦλος), trained to keep a quiet tongue
Whate'er befalls, is sure to prove a knave.
Grant to thy man some measure of free speech.*

When, then, is it that the slave (οἰκέτης) speaks frankly to his master (δεσπότην)? Surely it is when his heart tells him that he has not wronged his owner, but that his words and deeds are all for that owner's benefit. And so when else should the slave of God (τὸν τοῦ θεοῦ δοῦλον) open his mouth freely to Him Who is the ruler (ἡγεμόνα) and master (δεσπότην) both of himself and of the All, save when he is pure from sin and the judgements of his conscience are loyal to his master, when he feels more joy at being the servant of God (τῷ θεράπονι θεοῦ) than if he had been king of all the human race and assumed an uncontested sovereignty over land and sea alike?⁵⁹⁴

We see three things in this passage that are noteworthy for our endeavors:

1. As set out above, slaves were normally not allowed to speak their mind (i.e., they were not supposed to participate in the public transcript);
2. In Philo's audience, the comparison of a master and slave with God and his people, was probably well established. Notice also his use of the phrase "slave of God";
3. In Philo's view, a slave of God should be able to speak freely to God, under certain conditions.

Together, these three observations make clear how a hidden transcript analysis might not only be fruitful, but perhaps even necessary to infiltrate the thoughts of the early Christians and the early rabbinic Jews *vis-à-vis* their heavenly master, God, as they are "trained to keep a quiet tongue." Unfortunately, most parables we will investigate in this study do not discuss the (hidden) transcripts of slaves as openly as this passage from Philo. Moreover, Scott and the other authors mentioned in this section fail to provide practical tools to unpack the textual representations of hidden transcripts. Through the systematic study of the considerable number of parables this volume offers, we aim to make a start with solving this hiatus. An overview of our findings pertaining to this methodological issue will be presented in our concluding chapter, section 8.3.

3.4.5. *Bildfeld*/Conceptual Blending Analysis

The fourth and final dimension of analysis pertains to metaphor theory. In this study, we take up the suggestion by Petra von Gemünden and Catherine Hezser to apply the *Bildfeld* (image field) theory of the German linguist Harald Weinrich to the parables. This theory focuses on the central metaphor(s) of the parables (in our case: slavery). In our opinion, the advantage of this theory is that it acknowledges the dynamics of parables; Weinrich's approach takes the metaphorical language employed by the parables as its point of departure and enables us to compare networks of parables in which one metaphor evokes another. Weinrich's theory builds on the distinction between *langue* and *parole* from Ferdinand de Saussure.⁵⁹⁵ The *langue* is the language system of a community;

⁵⁹² See e.g. Beck, *Anti-Roman Cryptograms in the New Testament* and Applebaum, "Hidden Transcripts in King-Parables: Windows on Rabbinic Resistance to Rome."

⁵⁹³ Found in Weiss, *Pious Irreverence*, 9.

⁵⁹⁴ Philo, *Quis Rerum Divinarum Heres Sit* 1:5-2:8. Translation and Greek text: LCL 261, 286-287 (with small adaptations MS).

⁵⁹⁵ Harald Weinrich, "Münze und Wort. Untersuchungen an einem Bildfeld," *Romanica. Festschrift für Gerhard Rohlfs*, ed. Heinrich Lausberg and Harald Weinrich (Halle: VEB Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1958), 408-521. See also

the *parole* is the actual speech of an individual. According to Weinrich, in the past, metaphor theory has paid too much attention to the individual metaphor – the *parole*. One of the foundational ideas of *Bildfeld* theory is that a metaphor never stands alone and is always part of a bigger field of meaning, shared by a community – the *langue*. In this way a single metaphor is also always connected to other metaphors and, together, those metaphors form a field, domain, or matrix of images.⁵⁹⁶ These fields are always centered around core or root metaphors or, as Von Gemünden calls them, “Wurzelmetaphern, [...] die das Lebens- und Weltdeutungssystem der jeweiligen Religion(sgemeinschaft) in spezifischer Weise profilieren und zentrale Aspekte der jeweiligen Religion zum Thema haben. Sie beleuchten mannigfaltigste Themenbereiche und sind in intensiv besetzten Bildfeldern entfaltet.”⁵⁹⁷ The other important element of Weinrich’s theory is that a *Bildfeld* only comes to life when two verbal domains get coupled. For example, in the Parable of the Unforgiving Slave (Matthew 18:23-35; see section 4.3), the verbal domain of having debts and being enslaved (the image-offering domain, or “bildspendender Bereich”) is coupled with the domain of having sinned and being a captive of your sins (the image-receiving domain, or “bildempfangender Bereich”). As Weinrich already was aware, several *Bildfelder* can also overlap or share metaphors.⁵⁹⁸

However, *Bildfeld* theory alone is not enough to describe the complex interactions between image-offering and image-receiving domains. Recent studies have shown that *Bildfeld* theory does not sufficiently address the fact that both the image-offering domain influences the image-receiving domain, and the image-receiving domain influences the image-offering domain. Furthermore, instead of separating the parable from, e.g., the simile or the metaphor, modern approaches try to find their common ground – the fact that they employ the same mixture of imageries and realities.⁵⁹⁹ In this context, sometimes parables are also designated as “extended metaphors,”⁶⁰⁰ a perspective that I will use in the present study. In order to explore the continuity between metaphors and parables, newer theories have introduced the concept of a “blend” (see also the previous chapter, section 2.3.3). I briefly discuss below Contemporary Metaphor Theory and Conceptual Blending Theory, on the basis of the volume, *The Slave Metaphor and Gendered Enslavement in Early Christian Discourse: Double Trouble Embodied* by Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, and on the basis of an article by Blake E. Wassell’s and Stephen R. Llewelyn, who apply both theories to the New Testament metaphor of the “fishers of human” (Mark 1:17).⁶⁰¹

The innovation of Conceptual Metaphor Theory is that it uses the spatial metaphor of mapping⁶⁰² (see the figure below) to especially show how innovative or “new” metaphors are constructed:

[T]he constituent elements of the source domain are said to be mapped onto elements of the target domain. In nonlexicalized metaphors it is the role of context to determine what elements are highlighted in the mapping process. In other words, the mapping process is indeterminate without context, and it is the context

Cornelia Müller’s excellent summary of Weinrich’s theory in Cornelia Müller, *Metaphors Dead and Alive, Sleeping and Waking: A Dynamic View* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 81-83.

⁵⁹⁶ Dietmar Peil, “Zum Problem des Bildfeldbegriffs,” in *Studien zur Wortfeldtheorie/Studies in Lexical Field Theory*, ed. Peter Rolf Lutzeier (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1993), 185.

⁵⁹⁷ Petra von Gemünden, *Vegetationsmetaphorik im Neuen Testament und seiner Umwelt. Eine Bildfelduntersuchung*, *Novum Testamentum et Orbis Antiquus* 18 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), 2.

⁵⁹⁸ Catherine Hezser, *Lohnmetaphorik und Arbeitswelt in Mt 20:1-16. Das Gleichnis von den Arbeitern im Weinberg im Rahmen rabbinischer Lohngelehrnisse*, *Novum Testamentum et Orbis Antiquus* 15 (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1990), 225.

⁵⁹⁹ See, e.g., Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, *The Slave Metaphor and Gendered Enslavement in Early Christian Discourse: Double Trouble Embodied*, *Routledge Studies in the Early Christian World* (London/New York, Routledge, 2018); Kaneen, “Discipleship is Slavery”; and, without going into Conceptual Blending Theory, De Wet, *The Unbound God*.

⁶⁰⁰ Sallie McFague TeSelle, “Parable, Metaphor, and Theology,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 42, no. 4 (1974), 630.

⁶⁰¹ Blake E. Wassell and Stephen R. Llewelyn: “Fishers of Humans,’ the Contemporary Theory of Metaphor, and Conceptual Blending Theory,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 133, no. 3 (2014), 627-646.

⁶⁰² They write: “It is clear from the above discussion that one cannot speak of metaphor without metaphor (e.g., source, target, and mapping).” Wassell and Llewelyn, “Fishers of Humans,” 639.

that provides the clues to which elements in the target domain are to be foregrounded (or highlighted) and which are to be backgrounded (or hidden).⁶⁰³

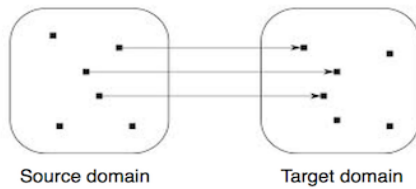


Figure 3.4: Mapping⁶⁰⁴

By means of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory, it becomes visible how an abstract concept in the target domain (like “service to God”) is made tangible by a concrete, perceptual, and embodied concept from the source domain (like slavery). Jennifer Glancy and other scholars have emphasized the bodily experience of ancient slavery;⁶⁰⁵ as Kartzow emphasizes, it is exactly these conceptual metaphors that “allow various kinds of people to draw on their embodied knowledge and experiences of the sources as a framework for thinking about the target.”⁶⁰⁶

What the Conceptual Blending Theory of Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner tries to add to Conceptual Metaphor Theory is how target and source domain (eventually) have an impact on each other in a blended space (see the figure below).

[Fauconnier and Turner] see metaphor as being a special case of how we think as we compress and integrate concepts. Here distinct mental spaces (input spaces) are blended to create a new mental space (the blend) where conceptual integration (a) selectively projects and compresses elements and relations from the input spaces and then (b) develops the emergent structure of the blend through composition, completion, and elaboration.⁶⁰⁷

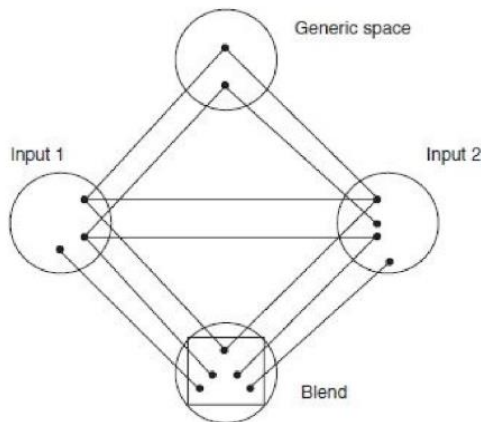


Figure 3.5: Basic conceptual integration network⁶⁰⁸

This blending theory is of high importance of the study of metaphors (and parables) on slavery. As Marianne Bjelland Kartzow argues: “The mental spaces of slavery and the relationship between God and humans [...] blend into mental spaces where it is no longer easy to see what is the target and what is the source.”⁶⁰⁹ Indeed, some

⁶⁰³ Wassell and Llewelyn, “Fishers of Humans,” 629.

⁶⁰⁴ Image from Penny Tompkins and James Lawley, “Applying Cross-Domain Thinking,” last modified May 18, 2013, <https://www.cleanlanguage.co.uk/articles/articles/337/1/Applying-Cross-Domain-Thinking/Page1.html>.

⁶⁰⁵ E.g., Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity*; Kartzow, *The Slave Metaphor*.

⁶⁰⁶ Kartzow, *The Slave Metaphor*, 24.

⁶⁰⁷ Wassell and Llewelyn, “Fishers of Humans,” 639.

⁶⁰⁸ For figure see Kartzow, *The Slave Metaphor*, 26.

⁶⁰⁹ Kartzow, *The Slave Metaphor*, 26.

authors have argued that Israel/early Christianity/humanity is not *like* a slave to God, but *is* a slave to God.⁶¹⁰ I do not agree with this position, but I do understand that it follows from exactly this mixing up of categories of target, source, and blended space, and it is highly plausible to assume that in the intensive use of the slavery metaphor in antiquity a blended space came into existence in which certain aspects of both target and source became intimately entangled.⁶¹¹ From this perspective one can not only ask the question how social reality informs the parables, but also how the parables influence social reality. Although this is not the scope of the present study I am quite certain that, for example, the representation of God as master in the parables will have had its impact on actual slaves (see also my suggestions for further research in 8.4).

Another reason why I think *Bildfeld* Theory should be updated by insights from Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Conceptual Blending Theory is that they make more easily conceivable how metaphors open up a space in which capable users of language can – in principle indefinitely – play with and expand on metaphors. For example, see the figure below. The commonly known figure of speech, “I could see smoke coming out of his ears,” used to describe a very angry person, is creatively adopted and played on by saying: “I thought his hat would catch fire.” In the last statement, the “dead”⁶¹² metaphor of “smoke coming out of his ears” is re-activated to create a new, vivid image of the person’s rage, in which the smoke sets fire to the person’s hat. In a similar vein, the commonly known metaphor of someone being a “slave of God” could, in another context, be transformed by Paul in the metaphor of “freed persons of the Lord,” as Annette Merz has recently shown.⁶¹³

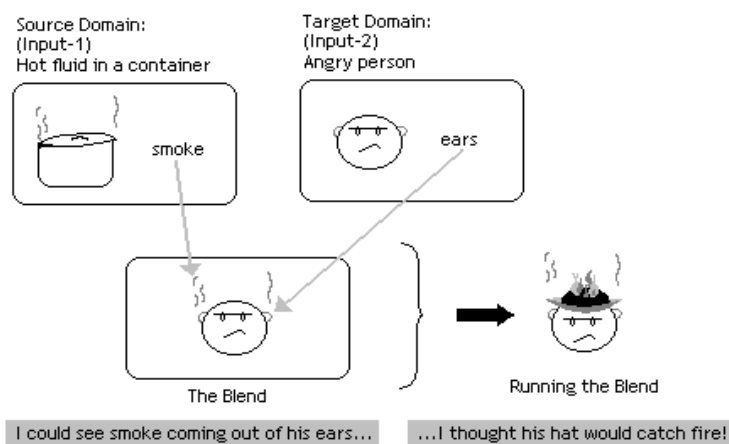


Figure 3.6: Development of the blend⁶¹⁴

What we will do in this study is visually present in each chapter a certain (sub-)*Bildfeld* of slavery, in which relations between source and target domain are mapped. This *Bildfeld* is constructed on the basis of the parables I have studied in that particular chapter. In my discussion of the slavery metaphors, special attention will be paid to reciprocity of source and target, i.e., the blend.

Thus, fully equipped with a list of slavery parables, knowledge of the most important debates with regard to the slavery parables-corpus, and a four-dimensional analytical framework, it is time to study the parables themselves now. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, the next four chapters will thematically discuss four core themes

⁶¹⁰ De Wet, *The Unbound God*, 11-13.

⁶¹¹ See the highly illustrative example of Maria as “slave woman of God,” as discussed in Kartzow’s book. Kartzow, *The Slave Metaphor*, 47-70, esp. 51-54.

⁶¹² Or, in the more advanced taxonomy of Josef Stern, a “routinized metaphor.” See Josef Stern, *Metaphor in Context* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), 309-316.

⁶¹³ Annette Merz, “Believers as ‘Slaves of Christ’ and ‘Freed Persons of the Lord.’ Slavery and Freedom as Ambiguous Soteriological Metaphors in 1 Cor 7:22 and Col 3:22-4:1,” *NTT Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion* 72, no. 2 (2018), 95-110.

⁶¹⁴ Zoltán Kövecses, “Cognitive Linguistics,” Semiotics Encyclopedia Online, E.J. Pratt Library, Victoria University, accessed October 4, 2018, <https://semioticon.com/seo/C/coglin.html#>.

in the (literary) lives of slaves: the start of a slave's life (chapter 4), obeying the master's orders (chapter 5), being punished (chapter 6), and the possibility for reversal or elevation of the slave (chapter 7). In the concluding chapter (chapter 8), we hope to answer all the questions that were raised in this and the previous chapters.

IV. Selling and Buying Slaves: Going from One Master to Another

*Such a set of beings I never saw before! I felt myself surrounded by so many fiends from perdition. A band of pirates never looked more like their father, the devil. They laughed and grinned over us, saying, "Ah, my boys! we have got you, haven't we." And after taunting us in various ways, they one by one went into an examination of us, with intent to ascertain our value.*⁶¹⁵

In this chapter, we focus on the way slaves were sold and bought in the early Christian and early rabbinic parables. We will see how the terminology of bills, prices, delivery, remission of debts, and ransoms permeates our parables. At the same time, it will be made clear in this chapter how these economic terms parallel a very animated theological discourse on the status of humankind *vis-à-vis* God. In the first section of the chapter (4.1), we give a brief overview of the sources of slaves in antiquity, ranging from adoption to war, and also devote one subsection to the question of how important slave work was in Roman Palestine. In this survey, we will make use of a broad selection of sources from rabbinic Judaism and Greco-Roman antiquity. In the next three sections, we focus on three tannaitic parables. First, we discuss a parable that focuses on the delivery terms of the sale of a slave (4.2). In the next section (4.3), we zoom in on one particular source of slaves: debts. In this section, a Christian and a rabbinic parable will be compared in detail. In the last section (4.4), a hitherto largely unexplored rabbinic parable from Sifre Numbers demands a detailed study.⁶¹⁶ This parable will be very helpful in understanding the Pauline language of slavery in the New Testament. In section 4.5, we will reflect on our findings with the help of *Bildfeld* theory. This reflection is followed by a brief concluding section (4.6). The parables that are discussed in this chapter show that the right of God to act like a slave-owner, selling and buying slaves, is never put to the test. Moreover, the parables make clear that there is no possibility to escape from (metaphorical) slavery. Either one is under God's rule, or one is under the rule of something (e.g., sin) or someone else. What we learn from this is that being a (metaphorical) slave is not decisive for one's status or wellbeing; what matters is the status and behavior of one's master.

4.1. Sources of Slaves

For a complete overview of the sources of slaves in antiquity, we take William Harris' paper, "Demography, Geography, and the Sources of Roman Slaves," as a point of departure. In this classic article, Harris distinguishes five sources from which slaves in the Roman empire stemmed: (1) breeding, i.e., children from slave mothers; (2) people that were taken captive during wars; (3) imported slaves; (4) the "self-enslaved"; and (5) the so-called *threptoi*, infants that were left abandoned.⁶¹⁷ However, we would like to know to what extent these five sources can be applied to first- and second-century ancient Palestine, as a small part of the Roman Empire. Therefore, we first have to acknowledge that Roman Palestine did not experience the same large-scale use of slaves that we find in other parts of the Roman Empire. Roman Palestine was not a slave society, whereas Roman Italy was.⁶¹⁸

⁶¹⁵ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave. Written by Himself*, reprint of the original 1845 text (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2009), 93.

⁶¹⁶ Only Catherine Hezser has briefly written on this parable. See Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 352.

⁶¹⁷ William V. Harris, "Demography, Geography and the Sources of Roman Slaves," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 89 (1999), 62. See also Walter Scheidel, "Quantifying the Sources of Slaves in the Early Roman Empire," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 87 (1997), 156-169. Scheidel and Harris debated in these and other articles about the right ratios of the different sources.

⁶¹⁸ Moses I. Finley made the important distinction between a "slave society" and a "society with slaves" in his work *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1980), 9. In antiquity, only classical Greece and classical Italy were true slavery societies, i.e., societies in which slaves dominated in certain forms of production (the

4.1.1. Roman Palestine: No Slave Society

While vast numbers of slaves were active on the Roman *latifundia* (estates), wide-scale use of slaves was rare in ancient Palestine. Isaac Mendelsohn, in 1949, stated for the pre-Roman period, “although the more prosperous farmers, like the upper middle class in the cities, owned slaves who were employed on the land, slave labour was not a decisive factor in the agricultural life of the Ancient Near East.”⁶¹⁹ This conclusion matches the Hebrew Bible in which we do find slaves in agricultural contexts, but mainly as supervisors and shepherds.⁶²⁰ In the New Testament, slaves are predominantly associated with domestic labor. We see this, for example, in the messenger-slaves in the parable of the Tenants (Matthew 21//Mark 12//Luke 20) and in the parable of the Banquet (Matthew 22//Luke 14); the slave of the priest (Matthew 26:51//Mark 14:47//Luke 22:50//John 18:10 and John 18:18, 26); slaves as doorkeepers in the parable of the Waiting Slaves (Mark 13//Luke 12); the slave of a centurion (Luke 7); and the (domestic) slaves of the official (John 4:43-54). Slaves work as messengers, doorkeepers, and overseers, or serve as aides to priests, soldiers, and kings. The only univocal reference to a slave who works in the fields is the slave in the parable of the Useless Slaves (Luke 17:7-10),⁶²¹ but that parable clearly does not refer to *latifundia*-like farms:

Who of you who has a slave, who comes in from the field after plowing or tending cattle (Τίς δὲ ἐξ ὑμῶν δοῦλον ἔχων ἀροτριῶντα ἢ ποιμαίνοντα, ὃς εἰσελθόντι ἐκ τοῦ ἀγροῦ), will ask him: “come here immediately and recline”? Won’t he ask him instead: “Prepare what I will eat and serve me after you have girded [yourself] while I eat and drink; and after these things you may eat and drink”? Will he give thanks to the slave, because he had done what him was ordered? So you also, when you have done all that you have been ordered, say: “We are useless slaves, we have done what we were ordered to do.” (Translation MS)

In this parable, which will be discussed in more detail in chapter 7, a small farm is envisioned where the (only?) slave who returns from the fields must prepare dinner as well. Here, we do not find the specialization that was characteristic of the big Roman *latifundia*, with all its professions and trades.⁶²²

If we compare this image with the rabbinic literature, again it might strike us how rare references to slaves in combination with agricultural labor are. For example, in the Babylonian Talmud, the sages do refer to their personal slaves, who wake them (the slave Daru; b. Berakhot 13b), accompany them (the slave of Rabbi

criterion of “location”; see Finley, *idem*, 149). Keith R. Bradley distinguishes three determinative criteria: demographic (over 20 percent of the population is slave); qualitative (Finley’s criterion of location); and the ubiquity of dependent labor that is not slavery per se (see Keith R. Bradley, *Slavery and Society at Rome* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994], 12-13).

⁶¹⁹ Isaac Mendelsohn, *Slavery in the Ancient Near East. A comparative Study of Slavery in Babylonia, Assyria, Syria, and Palestine from the Middle of the Third Millennium to the End of the First Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949), 111-112.

⁶²⁰ Cf. Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 299. In the Pentateuch, slaves are often mentioned in combination with cattle (e.g., Genesis 20:14; 24:35; 30:43; 32:5; see also Exodus 9:20-21; 20:10, 17; 23:12; Deuteronomy 5:14, 21), but it is unclear whether they served as domestic slaves or as shepherds. According to Mendelsohn, the Biblical slave laws (Exodus 21, Deuteronomy 15, Leviticus 25) had only the domestic slaves in mind; a separate category of agricultural or “field” slaves was not recognized by Biblical law (“State Slavery in Ancient Palestine,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 85 [1942], 14). Aside from the domestic and the rural sphere, Mendelsohn has argued, on basis of the archaeological work of Glueck, that the ancient Israelite society knew some form of state slavery, mostly in or related to the mines, and fueled by war captives - see Mendelsohn, *Slavery in the Ancient Near East*, 3; see also Mendelsohn, “State Slavery in Ancient Palestine,” 14-16. In the latter, Mendelsohn writes: “It is a known fact that slave labor (excepting house slaves) is highly unprofitable unless employed on a large scale in non-technical production. The slave has neither the will nor the skill to operate with delicate techniques and expensive tools. The natural field for the exploitation of slave labor is therefore on large latifundia and especially in mining industries where rough tools are used, where skill is not required, and where human beings can be wasted to an appalling degree without causing great loss to the employer” (16).

⁶²¹ Also in (probably) a more agricultural context: the slaves of the sower (Matthew 13); the slaves of the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15); the slave in the parable of the Useless Slaves (Luke 17, cited above).

⁶²² Cf. Susan Treggiari, “Jobs in the Household of Livia,” *Papers of the British School at Rome* 43 (1975), 48-77. Treggiari counts in the household of Livia 46 jobs. In Trimalchio she has counted 23 professions.

Eliezer; b. Berakhot 47b), take care of them in the bath house (b. Ketubbot 62a), and serve them drinks (the slave Daru again; b. Shabbat 51a). On a more general note, slaves carry wheat (b. Eruvin 22b), slaughter animals (b. Pesachim 88b), make music in the temple (b. Sukkah 51), and, if women, serve as concubines.⁶²³ Of course, it is possible that the fact that references to field work by slaves are missing is caused by the milieu and perspective of the rabbis, who might have been – as the urban elite⁶²⁴ – rather at a distance from rural labor. Interesting in this regard are the discussions about wealth and authority we find in tractate Shabbat. In these debates, the number of slaves is important:

The Sages taught: Who is wealthy? [...] Rabbi Tarfon said: “Everyone who has a hundred vineyards, a hundred fields and a hundred slaves working in them (כל שיש לו מאה כרמים ומאה שדות ומאה עבדים שעובדין בהן).” (b. Shabbat 25b; translation MS)

What is “an authority”⁶²⁵ (רשות)?” Rav Yehudah said that Rav Yitzhak, son of Rav Yehudah, said: “If there is in her (i.e., the city) an important man who has ten slaves who heat for him ten kettles at once in a small bath tub (אם יש בה אדם חשוב שיש לו עשרה עבדים שמחממין לו עשרה קומקומין בבת אחת באמבטי קטנה), he is allowed to bath in it immediately.” (b. Shabbat 151a; translation MS)

The first passage is one of the few instances in the Babylonian Talmud in which field slaves are explicitly mentioned. At the same time, the passage seems to have a more symbolic than realistic character. The number of a hundred slaves (which neatly matches a hundred vineyards and a hundred fields) seems rather inadequate for the enormous number of vineyards and fields that would have needed to be overseen. The symbolic value of the first passage is enforced by the second image of a man who has ten slaves to provide a warm bath for him (the issue is whether the man is allowed to enter the bath directly after the Sabbath). Here, the numbers are more about status than about efficiency. Hezser observes that slaves, especially the domestic ones, served as a status symbol for which the adage “the more, the merrier” held true: “Being accompanied by one’s slaves in public was an indispensable sign of being a respectable citizen. The larger the slave entourage, the greater the owner’s power and authority.”⁶²⁶

In the former paragraph we discussed some references from the Babylonian Talmud. However, because of its different chronology and topography, the situation in the Babylonian Talmud does not necessarily agree with the situation of the Tannaim. However, if we look at, for example, the tannaitic parables, we find, *grosso modo*, the same image as described above. We come across slaves who wake their masters (Sifre Zuta 10:35), slaves who bring pitchers (Mishnah Sukkah 2:9), go to the market (Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael Beshallah on Exodus 14:5), or work as doorkeepers (Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael Beshallah on Exodus 14:21). We also have some parables of slaves who are responsible for fields or gardens (e.g., Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael Shirata on Exodus 15:1). However, we never find the “normal” situation of a slave working in the field of his master.⁶²⁷ The image that emerges from the sources is that of a limited use of slaves in Palestinian agriculture.⁶²⁸ In *The Economy of Roman Palestine*, Ze’ev Safrai argues that the majority of land in Roman Palestine was still owned

⁶²³ For the latter, see, e.g., Jennifer A. Glancy, “The Sexual Use of Slaves: A Response to Kyle Harper on Jewish and Christian Porneia,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 134, no. 1 (2015), 215-229, especially 225ff. Cf. Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 198-199, 386.

⁶²⁴ If the early rabbis were an urban elite at all. One of the main advocates of this view is Hayim Lapin, *Rabbis as Romans: The Rabbinic Movement in Palestine, 100-400 CE* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). For a different view, see Catherine Hezser, *The Social Structure of the Rabbinic Movement in Roman Palestine*, Text und Studien zum Antiken Judentum 66 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997). Cf. Shaye J.D. Cohen, “The Rabbi in Second-Century Jewish Society,” in *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, vol. 3, *The Early Roman Period*, ed. William Horbury, William D. Davies, and John Sturdy, 922-990 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁶²⁵ Reference to an earlier saying by Rabbi Yehuda that a person may bathe directly after Shabbat in a small bath, when there is an authority (רשות) in the city.

⁶²⁶ Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 125.

⁶²⁷ In the next chapter, we will discuss a parable from Sifre Deuteronomy 8, in which a slave works a field. However, before the slave goes to work, this field is given to him by his king.

⁶²⁸ Cf., e.g., Seán Freyne, *Galilee. From Alexander the Great to Hadrian, 323 B.C.E. to 135 C.E.: A Study of Second Temple Judaism* (London: T&T Clark, 1998), 155-207.

by small landowners,⁶²⁹ although there existed an upcoming class of rich landowners, who were mainly non-Jewish (Safrai remarks that the conflict between small farmers and rich landowners was also an ethnic conflict). Those big landowners often distributed their land in small parts to tenants, a form of labor division that was – in comparison to Roman Italy – more popular in Roman Palestine. Accordingly, the parables also have more tenant traditions than stories with slaves who work in the fields.⁶³⁰ Recent archaeological insights show that medium-sized estates indeed existed in the Lower Galilee (the area that is primarily associated with Jesus' life), although hard evidence for the impoverishment of a growing body of peasants is lacking.⁶³¹ Nevertheless, based on our literary survey, we think it is safe to conclude that slaves in Roman Palestine were predominantly found in domestic areas. It should, however, also be noted that domestic slaves tend to be overrepresented in literary works because of the closer proximity to the authors of those works.⁶³²

4.1.2. "Breeding"

For the Roman Empire as a whole, one of the big scholarly questions is how the slave population maintained its size over the centuries. Walter Scheidel argued that, "for purely statistical reasons, natural reproduction made a greater contribution to the Roman slave supply than child exposure, warfare, and the slave trade taken together and was in all probability several times as important as any other single source."⁶³³ Since the "production" of new slaves was of vital importance for big estate owners, measures were taken to encourage slave women to "produce" house born servile labor forces (the so called *vernae*). In the agricultural handbooks of that time, we find examples of these tactics. Columella writes:

To women [...] who are unusually prolific, and who ought to be rewarded for the bearing of a certain number of offspring, I have granted exemption from work and sometimes even freedom (*nonnumquam et libertatem*)

⁶²⁹ Zeev Safrai, *The Economy of Roman Palestine* (London/New York: Routledge, 1994), 358. Scholars like David A. Fiensy have stressed that the part of the land that was in the hands of big entrepreneurs was rapidly growing in the Roman period; although it was "a minority, it was still a sizable minority, affecting profoundly the economic and social structures of Judaism in the Herodian period" (David A. Fiensy, *The Social History of Palestine in the Herodian Period: The Land is Mine*, Studies in the Bible & Early Christianity 20 [Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1991], 60). For an overview of scholarship on the economy of first-century Palestine, see Philip A. Harland, "The Economy of First-Century Palestine: State of the Scholarly Discussion," in *Handbook of Early Christianity: Social Science Approaches*, ed. Anthony J. Blasi, Paul-André Turcotte, and Jean Duhaime (Walnut Creek: Alta Mira Press, 2002), 511-527.

⁶³⁰ Safrai, *The Economy of Roman Palestine*, 336. See also Jack Pastor, *Land and Economy in Ancient Palestine* (London: Routledge, 1997), 103-105; Douglas E. Oakman and Andrew Overman, "Was the Galilean Economy Oppressive or Prosperous?" in *Galilee in the Late Second Temple and Mishnaic Periods. Life, Culture, and Society. Volume 1*, eds. David A. Fiensy and James Riley Strange (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 346-365; John S. Kloppenborg, "The Growth and Impact of Agricultural Tenancy in Jewish Palestine (III BCE–I CE)," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 51, no. 1 (2008), 33-66.

Hezser has formulated some criticism on the position, especially the methodology, of Safrai: "While it is true that there are not many halakhot which deal with the employment of slaves on rural estates specially, there are many hundreds of halakhot which deal with all aspects of slaves and slavery in a more general way [...] In any case, a direct conclusion from rabbinic references to social reality is not very persuasive and should therefore be avoided" (Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 251-252). Although I do share her reluctance in drawing conclusions based on halakhic texts alone, I do think that the combination of halakha, archeological findings, and the parables (New Testament and early rabbinic), which shows the same image, forms a quite convincing argument.

⁶³¹ See David A. Fiensy, "Did Large Estates Exist in Lower Galilee in the First Half of the First Century AD?" *Journal for the Historical Jesus* 10, no. 2 (2012), 133-153; and idem, *Christian Origins and the Ancient Economy* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2014), 103ff.

⁶³² In literary productions like *Vita Aesopi* and the Comedies of Plautus, the plot often focuses on the relation of a personal slave and his master in an urban context. With respect to ancient Greek literature, Victor David Hanson speaks of a "bias for urban life": *The Other Greeks: The Family Farm and the Agrarian Roots of Western Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 429.

⁶³³ Scheidel, "Quantifying the Sources of Slaves in the Early Roman Empire," 156. We find the same opinion in Alan Watson, *Rome of the XII Tables: Persons and Property* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 83.

dedimus) after they had reared many children. For a mother of three sons exemption from work was granted; to a mother of more her freedom as well.⁶³⁴

This economical view on the sexual relations of slaves grew out of the perspective that slaves were mere “chattel”; they were considered the same as livestock in Greco-Roman thinking.

How were slaves seen in early rabbinic thinking? In the Babylonian Talmud, it is stressed that slaves are a living form of property; they are “movable property (מטלטלי)” (b. Yevamot 99a) and “a moving courtyard (חצר מהלכת)” (b. Gittin 21a). As such, they can be compared to animals in rabbinic literature:

Rav Papa said: “[If] an ox gores a female slave, and her child would go out (i.e., she has a miscarriage), he (i.e., the owner of the ox) pays for the child. What is the reason? [It is like] he injured a pregnant donkey, as scripture says, *Stay here with the donkey* (Genesis 22:5), comparing people to a donkey (עם הדומה לחמור).” (b. Bava Qamma 49a; translation MS)⁶³⁵

At the same time, the rabbis seem to realize that slaves differ in some aspects from animals, as this quotation from tractate Qiddushin shows: “An animal walks by the will of its owner; a slave walks by his own will. Rabbi Ashi said: ‘A slave who is a minor is like an animal (עבד קטן כבהמה דמי)’” (b. Qiddushin 22b; translation MS).

Being comparable in status to animals, slaves could unscrupulously be used to “breed.”⁶³⁶ They could be coupled with other slave men or women without their own consent, or slave women could be impregnated by the master himself. On the coupling of slave men and women, we find a humorous parable in the fourth- or beginning of the fifth-century midrash Leviticus Rabbah,⁶³⁷ in which a *matrona* (a rich or noble woman, a “lady”) tries to match all the (male and female) slaves in her household, but without much success.⁶³⁸

If we turn back to the tannaitic sources we see that in a legal dispute, the rabbis discuss whether it is permitted to let the slaves of one household have sex with slaves from another in order to create offspring: “What is [considered] hire of a whore (איזהו אתנן)? [...] He who says to his fellow: ‘Here is this lamb for you, and your female slave will lie with my slave (הא לך טלה זה ותלין שפחתך אצל עבדי).’ Rabbi says: ‘[This is] not [considered] hire of a whore.’ But the sages say: ‘[It is considered] hire of a whore’” (m. Temurah 6:2; compare Sifre Deuteronomy 261).⁶³⁹ The potential offspring of slaves was the property of the master, since the child took the status of its mother (unless it was born as the legitimate offspring of a *pater familias* and acknowledged as such).⁶⁴⁰ In addition, a “slave marriage” was not acknowledged in antiquity, and thus families could be split.⁶⁴¹ In Sifre Deuteronomy 26 (see section 4.3.1), we find a parable in which the children of a free man are sold separately to pay for his debts. Naturally, the same could happen with the children of slaves. Therefore, it may not have been unusual for slave women to try to abort their children – which also formed a deed of resistance against their master.⁶⁴²

⁶³⁴ Columella, *De Re Rustica* 1.8.18-19 (LCL 361, 95).

⁶³⁵ See also Genesis Rabbah 56:2 on Genesis 22:5, as it is discussed in Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 65.

⁶³⁶ This is the terminology of the ancient sources.

⁶³⁷ For the dating of this source see Hermann L. Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 2nd ed., transl. and ed. Markus Bockmuehl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 291.

⁶³⁸ Leviticus Rabbah 8:1//Pesiqta de Rav Kahana 2:4.

⁶³⁹ Translation: MS. Hebrew text: Manuscript Kaufmann (folio 207v).

⁶⁴⁰ According to Roman law, see Watson, *Rome of the XII Tables*, 81; cf. Richard Saller, “Slavery and the Roman Family,” *Slavery & Abolition* 8, no. 1 (1987), 72. The same is true for rabbinic law; see below.

⁶⁴¹ However, as Martinsen correctly remarks, “Slaves formed relationships that were not recognised legally but were recognised socially” (Anders Martinsen, “Men and Unmen in the Parables of Luke: Reception, Slavery, Masculinity” [PhD diss., University of Oslo, 2015], 384).

⁶⁴² Cf. William B. Philips, *Slavery from Roman Times to the Early Transatlantic Trade* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 14. For some cross-cultural evidence of this phenomenon, see, e.g., Liese M. Perrin, “Resisting Reproduction: Reconsidering Slave Contraception in the Old South,” *Journal of American Studies* 35, no. 2 (2001), 255-274. In the Babylonian Talmud Rabbi Yehudah tells about the slave woman of a tax collector who threw her premature child into a pit. Nevertheless, the story continues, the sages declared the pit clean, “because weasels and martens are commonly found there (מפני שחולדה וברדלס מצויין שם)” (b. Avodah Zarah 42a); in other words, the child will be (dragged away and) eaten soon enough.

As mentioned above, a slave-owner could also inseminate his female slaves himself.⁶⁴³ Consider the following law: “And any [woman] who cannot be betrothed to him or to others, the child is like her. And who [is this]? This is the child of a female slave (שפחה) or a foreign woman (ונוכרית)” (m. Qiddushin 3:12).⁶⁴⁴ This law is about a woman who is impregnated by her master, a free, Jewish man (see e.g., Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael Nezikin 2). That a *pater familias* could be both the father and the master of a child might also explain why the terms sons and slaves are sometimes mixed up or used interchangeably.⁶⁴⁵ An example of this confusion can be found in the New Testament, where the protégé of the centurion in Capernaum is clearly called “slave” (δουλος) in Luke 7:2, but “child” (παις) in Matthew 8:5-13, the latter designation being used both for “real” children (cf. John 4:51) and for slaves or servants (Luke 15:26, Acts 4:25).⁶⁴⁶ A simpler explanation for the interchangeable use of “slave” and “son” is that their statuses in antiquity were, to a great extent, overlapping. We will come back to this in section 4.4.

Examples of masters who sleep with (their) slave women can already be found in the Hebrew Bible, where we know of Abraham, who slept with his wife’s slave Hagar (Genesis 16:1-4),⁶⁴⁷ and Leah, who gave her slave Zilpah to Jacob (Genesis 30:18). In the Hebrew Bible, these sexual relations stem from a need to have children. However, in this parable from Genesis Rabbah 15:7, lust might also play a role.⁶⁴⁸

[The matter may be compared] To a son of a king who had sinned with one of his slave girls (אחת משיפחותיו). When the king heard about it, he banished him and made him go out of the palace, and he [the king’s son] went along the doors of the slave girls, but they would not accept him. But the one that had misbehaved with him opened her door to him and accepted him.⁶⁴⁹

In this parable, we might wonder if the intercourse was voluntary or not, given the reaction of the slave girl. Did she open the door because she had feelings for the prince, or was her action caused by her fear to be cast out of the palace as well, as the sexual partner of a disgraced member of the royal family? It is important to notice that even a freed woman (a woman who had been a slave in the past) was generally seen as sexually used and sexually usable, and, as a consequence, a second-rate citizen.⁶⁵⁰ To invite the prince in could have been the girl’s strategy to provide herself with at least a minimal amount of status, protection, and sustenance.

⁶⁴³ See, e.g., Dina Stein, “A Maidservant and Her Master’s Voice: Discourse, Identity, and Eros in Rabbinic Texts,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 10 (2001), 375–97; Gail Labovitz, “More Slave Women, More Lewdness: Freedom and Honor in Rabbinic Constructions of Female Sexuality,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 28 (2012), 69–87.

⁶⁴⁴ Translation: MS. Hebrew text: Manuscript Kaufmann (folio 125v).

⁶⁴⁵ On a psychological level, one might wonder how slaves who were also the offspring of their master would cope with that status (and the knowledge that they might not be the product of a mutually voluntary sexual act).

⁶⁴⁶ Some scholars have also suggested that a pederastic relationship might have existed between the centurion and the boy (see, for example, Theodore W. Jennings, Jr. and Tat-Siong Benny Liew, “Mistaken Identities but Model Faith: Rereading the Centurion, the Chap, and the Christ in Matthew 8:5-13,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 123, no. 3 [2004], 467-494). See also b. Bava Batra 127b, where a man first declares that a person is his son, and then contends his is slave.

⁶⁴⁷ Albeit that she was given to Abram by Sarai as a wife, see Genesis 16:3.

⁶⁴⁸ Compare: “When your crotch is throbbing and there is a slave-girl or home-grown slave-boy ready at hand, whom you could jump right away, you don’t prefer to burst with your hard-on, do you? I certainly don’t. I like sex that is easy and obtainable” (Horace, *Satirae* 1.2.114–9; translation: Craig A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 2nd edition [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010], 33). It is a sad irony that the slave women were often seen as culpable for the behavior of their masters, since they were seen as seductive (cf. m. Avot 2:7). See also Stein, “A Maidservant and Her Master’s Voice: Discourse, Identity, and Eros in Rabbinic Texts”; Labovitz, “More Slave Women, More Lewdness. Freedom and Honor in Rabbinic Constructions of Female Sexuality”; Hezser, “Part Whore, Part Wife”; Albertina Oegema, Jonathan Pater and Martijn Stoutjesdijk, “It is like a Woman Who: Women in Early Christian and Early Rabbinic Parables,” in *Parables in Changing Contexts: Interreligious and Cultural Approaches to the Study of Parables*, ed. Eric Ottenheim and Marcel Poorthuis, Jewish and Christian Perspectives 35 (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

⁶⁴⁹ Translation: MS. Hebrew text: Julius Theodor and Chanoch Albeck, *Bereschit Rabba* (Jerusalem: Wahrmann Books, 1965), 1:140.

⁶⁵⁰ M. Ketubbot 1:4. See about the hierarchy of the ancient Jewish society, for example, Paul V. MacCracken Flesher, *Oxen, Women or Citizens? Slaves in the System of the Mishnah*, Brown Judaic Studies 143 (Atlanta: Scholars Press,

Unfortunately, it is impossible to make any estimations about the percentage of slaves “produced” by slave women. However, if the situation in Palestine was only slightly comparable to the Roman Empire as a whole, it should have been a considerable percentage. What we can say for sure is that the rabbis resembled the Romans in the way they thought about slaves and breeding.

4.1.3. War and Kidnapping

The Roman Empire was a machine of war. According to Keith Hopkins, it was the continuous state of war that, in the end, propelled the need for slaves.⁶⁵¹ The free male labor capacity of the Roman Empire was mainly used as soldiers, which created a shortage of farmworkers. At the same time, the influx of booty produced rich elites with ever growing estates in need of cultivation. So, war created both the need for slaves and its solution. An enormous mass of captured enemies of Rome flowed to estates scattered over the Empire, and especially Italy, to work in positions of enslaved labor. This influx of captured soldiers also created philosophical problems. About a slave born in a position of servility, one could say that he or she is a slave “by nature” (Aristotle, *Politics* 1254b16-21), but that does not (necessarily)⁶⁵² work for a person enslaved by someone during a war:

Kindly remember that he whom you call your slave sprang from the same stock, is smiled upon by the same skies, and on equal terms with yourself breathes, lives, and dies. It is just as possible for you to see in him a free-born man as for him to see in you a slave (*tam tu illum videre ingenuum potes quam ille te servum*). As a result of the massacres in Marius’s day, many a man of distinguished birth, who was taking the first steps toward senatorial rank by service in the army, was humbled by fortune, one becoming a shepherd, another a caretaker of a country cottage. Despise, then, if you dare, those to whose estate you may at any time descend, even when you are despising them.⁶⁵³

From which countries did those people “of distinguished birth” come from? From Palestine, among other places. After the Bar Kochba revolt, so many Jewish slaves were available that their price dropped to that of a horse.⁶⁵⁴ In *Jewish War*, Josephus reports on a number of other moments during which great numbers of Jews were taken captive.⁶⁵⁵ But was Roman Palestine also the beneficiary of prisoners of war? According to Catherine Hezser, Jews had taken war captives during the time of the Hasmonean kings and in the Herodian wars.⁶⁵⁶ Josephus describes how John Hyrcanus and his sons drove the inhabitants of Sebaste into slavery (*Bellum judaicum* 1.2.6-7). Alexander Jannaeus did the same with the population of Gaza, Raphia, and Anthedon (*Bellum judaicum* 1.4.2-3). During the Roman Period, however, there are no indications that a considerable number of enslaved captives of war entered Palestine (although local markets would have also been populated by a number of enslaved rebels from one of the two revolts). As we have seen in section 4.1.1, there probably was no need for great numbers of slaves either. Furthermore, in classic rabbinic texts like the Talmud, very few words are devoted to describing the case of enslaved warriors. This strengthens our claim that war was not an important source for slaves in Roman Palestine. The Talmud does, however, discuss at length what happens with the property of people who have been taken captive. In those discussions, it remains unclear whether those people are imprisoned in war or kidnapped. The kidnapping of free men and women formed a notorious *topos* in Greco-Roman literature. In his comedy, *Curculio*, Plautus narrates how a woman is kidnapped and later sold as a slave

1988); and Judith Romney Wegner, *Chattel or Person? The Status of Women in the Mishnah* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 21–23.

⁶⁵¹ See Keith Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves*, Sociological Studies in Roman History 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 11.

⁶⁵² At least some ancient thinkers would say that a person enslaved during a war could also be a slave “by nature.” Cicero, for instance, writes in *De provinciis consularibus oratio* 5.10: “Jews and Syrians [...] peoples born to be slaves” (translation: LCL 447, 551). Apparently, they were slaves by nature, waiting to be captured by the Romans and to be used as slaves. I owe gratitude to Matthijs den Dulk for this reference.

⁶⁵³ Seneca, *Epistulae morales* 47.10 (LCL 75, 307).

⁶⁵⁴ William V. Harris, “Towards a Study of the Roman Slave Trade,” *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 36 (1980), 122.

⁶⁵⁵ Josephus, *Bellum judaicum* 4.9.1; 6.9.2; 7.6.4; 3.10.10.

⁶⁵⁶ Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 227.

(compare, e.g., *Cistelleria, Captivi, Miles gloriosus*).⁶⁵⁷ For free persons, it was usually the pirates skimming the Mediterranean Sea who had to be feared. But in Italy one could not feel safe either. Bradley reports how Tiberius had to go through all kinds of private slave cells (*ergastula*) “to ensure that kidnapped travelers were not being held in slavery.”⁶⁵⁸ In Palestine, travelers could not feel safe either. Banditry also happened in the land of Israel.⁶⁵⁹ That people could be kidnapped in Roman Palestine is both reflected in the New Testament⁶⁶⁰ and the Talmud. In the Tosefta, the practice of kidnapping is strongly dismissed:

He who steals a person from his brothers, from the Israelites, it is the same whether he steals a man or a woman or a stranger or a freed slave (ועבד משוחרר). It is the same whether he has stolen a man or a woman or a stranger or a freed slave – behold, these are liable. Has he sold him to his father or his brother or another of his relatives he is liable. He stole him but did not sell him, or he sold him and he is standing in the market (ועומד בשוק), he is exempt. He who steals slaves is exempt (הגונב את העבדים פטור). (t. Bava Qamma 8:1)⁶⁶¹

In her discussion of this passage, Hezser explains that the last remark about slaves only means that a thief of a slave would not receive the capital punishment, but would, of course, suffer some sort of penalty.⁶⁶² Stealing a valuable commodity like a slave could not go unpunished.

When people were captured anyway, their fellow-Israelites were encouraged by the rabbis to try to liberate them, both free men/women and slaves.⁶⁶³ Whether this happened depended on a number of factors, like having the right contacts and enough assets. In section 4.4.1, which deals with the ransoming of a captive in a parable from Sifre Numbers 115, we will study the liberation of persons taking captive more closely.

4.1.4. Trade⁶⁶⁴

To maintain the size of the Roman slave population, importing slaves from the Empire’s adjacent regions was necessary. Slaves came from all over the world: Germania, the Caucasus, the Arabian Peninsula, Somalia, Sudan, Mesopotamia, Iran, and maybe even India.⁶⁶⁵ How large the yearly influx of new slaves was is difficult to assess; estimations range from 20,000 to 40,000 persons.⁶⁶⁶ Slaves were sold at major metropolises with specialized slave markets, but also at periodic markets, *ad hoc* markets (following the track of slaving legions), and in small-scale transactions everywhere in the empire.⁶⁶⁷ Can we find any big, specialized slave markets in Roman Palestine? According to Harris, the answer to this question should be “no”: “In Syria and Judaea the direct evidence for major slave markets in the Roman period is very thin, in spite of the undoubted fact that Syria in particular was one of the great suppliers.”⁶⁶⁸ The only Palestinian city that is explicitly mentioned as a trading

⁶⁵⁷ Plautus, *Curculio* 644–52.

⁶⁵⁸ Keith R. Bradley, *Slavery and Society at Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 38.

⁶⁵⁹ See, e.g., Richard A. Horsley, “Ancient Jewish Banditry and the Revolt against Rome,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 43 (1981), 409–432, who calls Jewish banditry in the first century “epidemic” (410) and “out of control” (415). He sees as the main source for banditry the “intense hostility between the common people and the ruling gentry and chief priests” (417). Horsley does not, unfortunately, discuss in what kind of activities the bandits were involved to provide sustenance for themselves. See also Thomas Grünwald, *Bandits in the Roman Empire: Myth and Reality*, transl. John Drinkwater (London: Routledge, 2004), especially chapter 5 (91–109).

⁶⁶⁰ It is once explicitly mentioned in the New Testament (1 Timothy 1:10), but that reference probably does not apply to Palestine.

⁶⁶¹ Translation: MS. Hebrew text: Moses S. Zuckerman, *Tosefta. Based on the Erfurt and Vienna Codices with Parallels and Variants*, 3rd ed. (Jerusalem: Wahrman Books, 1963), 360.

⁶⁶² Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 246.

⁶⁶³ For an extensive treatment of this subject, see Catherine Hezser, “Der Loskauf von Sklaven und Kriegsgefangenen im antiken Judentum,” in *Gefangenensloskauf im Mittelmeerraum: Ein interreligiöser Vergleich*, ed. Heike Grieser and Nicole Priesching, *Sklaverei - Knechtschaft - Zwangsarbeit* vol. 13 (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2015), 3–23.

⁶⁶⁴ What we have called “trade” here was originally called “import” by Harris.

⁶⁶⁵ Harris, “Demography, Geography and the Sources of Roman Slaves,” 72. See also Harris, “Towards a Study.”

⁶⁶⁶ Harris, “Demography, Geography and the Sources of Roman Slaves,” 73 (note 81).

⁶⁶⁷ Harris, “Towards a Study,” 125–126.

⁶⁶⁸ Harris, “Towards a Study,” 128. See also below (section 4.3.3).

place for slaves was Gaza, directly after the fall of Jerusalem and after the Jewish revolt of 135. Given the fact that Palestine's importance as a trade route diminished in the Roman period,⁶⁶⁹ and that Roman Palestine did not have a great need for slaves itself, the lack of slave markets is no surprise. But, how, then, was the trade of slaves organized in Palestine? Since specialized markets were lacking, transactions with slaves would have taken place on an *ad hoc* basis in "normal" markets or between purchasers and buyers in private.

When a slave was sold in a market, certain rules and customs applied. Keith Bradley describes the public display of slaves in the Roman Empire as follows: "The slave stood on a raised platform (*catasta*) to allow potential customers a good view; and, if the slave were a new import, chalk marks on the feet signified the fact."⁶⁷⁰ The platform could be formed by a large stone (see also section 4.3.3); hence, slaves were sometimes referred to as *de lapide emtus* ("bought from a stone").⁶⁷¹ Customers who were not satisfied with looking only could make use of the opportunity to grope the slave or to "test" him or her by making the slave jump up and down. In one of Martial's poems, we even come across an auctioneer who wants to sell a girl of dubious reputation by grabbing her and kissing her four times on her mouth to show the audience that her mouth is clear - "that is that she has not been performing oral sex."⁶⁷² The image of the sale of slaves that springs from these practices is one of humiliation and dehumanization - which was probably felt already in antiquity given the fact that slaves of great beauty and rarity were only shown to potential buyers in private.⁶⁷³ Part of the selling process was also the public appraisal of the slaves. This has splendidly been parodied by the second-century rhetorician and satirist, Lucian of Samosata, in his *Vitarum auctio* (Philosophies for Sale). In this satirical play, Zeus prepares the sale of members of the ancient schools of philosophy. As part of the auction, all philosophers are described. Of the Cyrenaic Aristippus, Hermes says:

In general, he is accommodating to live with, satisfactory to drink with, and handy to accompany an amorous and profligate master when he riots about town with a flute-girl. Moreover, he is a connoisseur in pastries and a highly expert cook: in short, a Professor of Luxury. He was educated in Athens, and entered service in Sicily, at the court of the tyrants, with whom he enjoyed high favour. The sum and substance of his creed is to despise everything, make use of everything and cull pleasure from every source.⁶⁷⁴

Of course, the slave traders did not limit themselves to the verbal embellishment of their merchandise. They also made cosmetic improvements - for which they gained a bad name in antiquity. J. Albert Harrill compares the reputation of slave traders in antiquity (*mangones*) with used-car dealers now. Slave traders were sometimes involved in dubious affairs, and almost always made "dishonest claims about the quality, service, and history of their merchandise."⁶⁷⁵ Moreover, they often did not only work as slave traders, but also as pimps for their slaves.⁶⁷⁶ Because of their reputation, the Roman legal system provided a series of warranties. According to the law code of Ulpian, merchants were obliged to be transparent about the bodily defects of their slaves: "Those who sell slaves are to apprise purchasers of any disease or defect in their wares and whether a given slave is a

⁶⁶⁹ Ben-Zion Rosenfeld and Joseph Menirav, *Markets and Marketing in Roman Palestine*, transl. Chava Cassel, Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 99 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 58.

⁶⁷⁰ Keith R. Bradley, "The Regular, Daily Traffic in Slaves": Roman History and Contemporary History," *The Classical Journal* 87 (1992), 128.

⁶⁷¹ Cf. Plautus, *Bacchides* 4.7.17. Pollux also speaks about a stone ("πρατης λιθος," in *Onomasticon* 3:78).

⁶⁷² Sandra R. Joshel, *Slavery in the Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 99.

⁶⁷³ Martial, *Epigrams* 9:59. Cf. Lauren Hackworth Petersen, "'Clothes make the man': Dressing the Roman Freedman Body," in *Bodies and Boundaries in Graeco-Roman Antiquity*, eds. Thorsten Fögen and Mireille M. Lee (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 181-214; and Elizabeth Fentress, "On the Block: *catastae*, *chalcidica* and *cryptae* in Early Imperial Italy," *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 18 (2005), 220-234.

⁶⁷⁴ Lucian, *Vitarum auctio* 12 (LCL 54, 473).

⁶⁷⁵ J. Albert Harrill, *The Manumission of Slaves in Early Christianity*, Hermeneutische Untersuchungen zur Theologie 32 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995), 39.

⁶⁷⁶ Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity*, 87.

runaway, [or] a loiterer on errands.”⁶⁷⁷ Also, if defects showed up within six months after the purchase the trader had to take the slave back, or compensate the buyer for it (see the Curule Aediles’ Edict).⁶⁷⁸

Did these rules also apply in Roman Palestine, or had the rabbis developed their own system of regulations? In both the halakha and the aggadah, we find many references to the selling of slaves. A few things stand out. First of all, according to the Mishnah, it was possible to share a slave and, related to this, it was possible to be a half-slave (m. Gittin 4:5; compare Matthew 6:24 and Ulpian, *Digesta* 14.3.13.2). Just like the Romans, the rabbis foresaw the possibility that defects – or other surprises – would come to light after the purchase (cf. t. Bava Batra 4:5). We saw an example of this with the pregnant female slave, but one can also think of slaves with a criminal past. Also, it was possible to buy a slave but to allow him or her to be delivered at a later time (compare our discussion of Sifre Deuteronomy 323 below in section 4.2). As proof for the purchase, bills were used (cf. Genesis Rabbah 2:2, Sifre Numbers 115). The text of such a bill could look like the following, according to the Babylonian Talmud:

Rav Yehudah established [the following] for a document of sale of slaves (בשטר זביני דעבדי): “This slave is justified for slavery and he is dismissed and disassociated from freedom (i.e., manumission) and from claims and contests of the king and queen. And there is no mark (ורשום) of [another] man on him, and he is free from any organic defect and from any disruption that has come out, down to ‘white spot,’ new or old.”⁶⁷⁹

Lastly, we must mention that the purchase of a slave was a major one. The prices of slaves ranged widely – from 200 denarii for a slave child and 500-600 denarii for an unskilled adult, to 2000 denarii for a handsome slave boy, or an expert in a certain field.⁶⁸⁰ Keith Hopkins calculated that the purchase price of 500 denarii would have been sufficient “to support an average peasant family for four years.”⁶⁸¹ As such, the purchase of a slave would have been too expensive for many modest farm owners.

With respect to the slave sale and the document that accompanied it, the receipt or contract, a parable from the younger, amoraic, midrash Genesis Rabbah (2:2), deserves our attention. Genesis Rabbah 2 takes Genesis 1:2a (“And the earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep,” KJB) as its point of departure, a verse that describes the state of the earth directly after its creation. After this citation, a short exposition follows in which it is suggested that the earth – although pure and immature – already harbors a dark side (Genesis Rabbah 2:1). Then a new section commences in which only the first part of Genesis 1:2 is held under scrutiny. The whole section can be found below (in my own translation⁶⁸²):

And the earth was “tohu [wabohu]” [“without form and void,” Genesis 1:2] etc.

Rabbi Abahu and Rabbi Yehuda bar Shimon. Rabbi Abahu said: “A parable. It is like a king who bought for himself two slaves on one bill and one price (משל למלך שקנה לו שני עבדים שניהם באוני אחת ובטמי) (אחת). About one he decreed that he should be fed from the treasury, and about one that he should work hard to eat. He [the latter] sat for him *tohu wabohu* [astonished and confounded].”⁶⁸³ He said: ‘Two of us on one bill and on one price, this [one] is fed from the treasury, while I have to work hard to eat.’

⁶⁷⁷ *Digesta* 21.1.1 (quoted by Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity*, 86).

⁶⁷⁸ Mary Johnston, *Roman Life* (Chicago: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1957), 158-177. For the text of the Curule Aediles’ Edict, see Allan Chester Johnston, Paul Robinson Coleman-Norton and Frank Card Bourne ed., *Ancient Roman Statutes. A Translation with Introduction, Commentary, Glossary and Index* (Clark: The Lawbook Exchange, 2003), 204-205.

⁶⁷⁹ b. Gittin 86a. Translation: MS. For my translation of the last part of the passage (ומנוק' מכל מום ומן שחין דנפיק עד) (טצהר חדת ועתיק), see also Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targum, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (Leipzig: W. Drugulin, 1903), s.v. “טצהר,” 549.

⁶⁸⁰ See Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 248, for these numbers.

⁶⁸¹ Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves*, 110. Cf. Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 249. Interestingly, in the Babylonian Talmud the price of 30 shekels is mentioned as fine for those who had murdered a slave (b. Bekhorot 49b, 51a; b. Bava Qamma 9b – compare 43a). This would account for only ca. 120 denarii – although the rabbis seem to acknowledge the possibility that a slave was of a much higher value (m. Bava Qamma 4:5: every owner of a killed slave receives 30 shekels “whether he [the slave] was worth a *maneh* or only one dinar”).

⁶⁸² Hebrew text: Theodor and Albeck, *Bereschit Rabba*, 1:15.

⁶⁸³ A wordplay in Hebrew on the biblical text (תהו ובהו) with the verbs תהה (“to gaze, to be astonished”) and בהה (“to gasp, to be stirred up, to be confounded”). See Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim*, 1648 and 142.

So, the earth sat *tohu wabohu* and said: ‘The creatures of the upper world and the creatures of the lower world were created at the same time, but the creatures of the upper world are fed from the appearance of the Shekinah, while the creatures of the lower world have to work hard to eat.’”

And Rabbi Yehuda bar Shimon said: “A parable. It is like a king who bought for himself two slave women, on one bill and one price (למלך שקנה לו שתי שפחות שחיהן באוני אחת ובטימי אחת). About one he decreed that she should not move from the palace, and about one he decreed banishment. She [the latter] sat for her *tohu wabohu*. She said: ‘Two of us on one bill and on one price, this [one] does not move out from the palace, and over me he decreed banishment.’”

So, the earth sat for her *tohu wabohu*. The earth said, ‘The creatures of the upper world and those of the lower world were created at the same instant. Why is it the case then, that the upper world[’s creatures] live [and never taste death] while the lower world’s creatures are subject to death?’ Therefore: *The earth was ‘tohu wabohu.’*”

Although there is a lot to say about these parables,⁶⁸⁴ I only want to discuss here their socio-historical background. We see in both parables how a king buys two slaves on one bill and for one price. The terminology suggests a formalized transaction. The word that is used for bill (אוני) is a loanword from Greek (ὀνί) and literally means “purchase.” That it is a loanword might have some implications: “As the bill of sale dates back to the biblical period, the use of Greek in Talmudic literature is noteworthy, and may reflect the frequency with which Jews wrote this deed in Greek and, registered it in the official archives.”⁶⁸⁵ That the sale of two slaves was registered on one bill and for one price is not very peculiar. In *Regularia* of the third-century Roman jurist Marcianus, we read: “Should a man buy together, for one price, two slaves, one of whom is dead at the time of the sale, there is no purchase of the other one, either.”⁶⁸⁶ The case Marcianus discusses is remarkably similar to ours: two slaves, sold together and bought for one price. What is unusual, however, is that the first parable suggests that one of the two slaves does not have to work but is fed anyway – from the treasury (also a Greek loanword). Normally, a slave would not have been fed if he did not produce. The Babylonian Talmud probably expresses the general opinion in antiquity when stating: “A slave who is not worth the bread he eats, for what is he wanted for by his master and mistress (עבדא דנהום כרסיה לא שויא למריה ולמרתיה למאי מיתבעי)?” (b. Gittin 12a). On the other hand, ancient sources show us a whole variety of slaves that did not produce but were sustained anyway – as a sign of wealth, or for pleasure. Obvious examples are, of course, slaves who were used for sexual

⁶⁸⁴ In this *pisqa*, we find three consecutive parables (only two are displayed). They have applications, but they hardly have any context. We might observe a similar phenomenon in the New Testament where parables often appear in couples or greater series without much context or narrative embedding. A famous example of this phenomenon can be found in Luke 15 which contains a string of parables consisting of the parable of the Lost Sheep (4-7), the parable of the Lost Coin (8-10), and the parable of the Prodigal Son (11-32). In 1985, Talia Thorion wrote an article especially devoted to *mashal* series in Genesis Rabbah. Of the 200 *meshalim* she found in Genesis Rabbah, 17 were part of a series of two, eight were part of a series of three, and three were part of series with respectively four, five, and even six parables. She divided the 27 series that she found in two groups: one dealt with only one quotation from the Bible, the other with several. Obviously, Genesis Rabbah 2:2 belongs to the first category. Since 30% of all *meshalim* are part of a series in Genesis Rabbah, Thorion tried to understand why the rabbis put so many parables in clusters. She proposes that the rabbis elaborated on the *parallelismus membrorum* from the Hebrew Bible. She divides the *parallelismus membrorum* into two subcategories: synonymous parallelism (“a figure is repeated in different words but with much the same meaning”) and complementary parallelism (“two [or more, MS] images are complements to each other and together they build a whole idea”). Unfortunately, she does not tell us to which category our series from Genesis Rabbah 2:2 belongs. See Talia Thorion-Vardi, “Mashal-Series in Genesis Rabba,” *Theologische Zeitschrift* 41, no. 2 (1985), 160-167.

⁶⁸⁵ Mordechai A. Friedman, “Contracts: Rabbinic Literature and Ancient Jewish Documents,” in *The Literature of the Sages, Second Part: Midrash and Targum; Liturgy, Poetry, Mysticism; Contracts, Inscriptions, Ancient Science and the Language of Rabbinic Literature*, ed. Shmuel Safrai, Zeev Safrai, Joshua Schwartz, and Peter J. Tomson, *Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum* (Assen: Royal Van Gorcum, 2006), 428.

⁶⁸⁶ D 18.1.44 in Paul Du Plessis, *Borkowski’s Textbook on Roman Law*, 5th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 269.

favors, but the phenomenon of *delicia* (deformed children) can also be mentioned,⁶⁸⁷ or the mass of slaves that Trimalchio had for all kinds of specialized tasks.⁶⁸⁸ Since the text does not give us any clues, we can only guess the reason why one slave had to work and one slave was fed by the treasury (the same is true for the fate of the two slave women in the second parable). However, this is exactly the intention of the parable, as the *nimshal* shows: it seeks to create confusion about the unfair treatment of the two slaves, which is equal to the confusion of the earth, when it saw how differently the creatures of the lower and of the upper world are treated.

4.1.5. Debt-Slavery and Self-Enslavement

One of the most difficult sources of slaves to discuss is debt-slavery. The term debt-slavery is reserved for a special, non-permanent form of slavery, which was common in the Ancient Near East. When the Hebrew Bible discusses slavery (in Exodus 21 and Deuteronomy 15), it seems to focus on this form of slavery.⁶⁸⁹ According to the biblical regulations, fellow Hebrews can only be temporarily enslaved when they cannot pay their loans (Exodus 21:2), and they are protected against violent attacks from their masters (2:20-21) and cannot be sold (Leviticus 25:42). After six years, debt-slaves have to be released from their service and their debts have to be remitted – a rule that can be compared to article 117 of the Code of Hammurabi, which stipulates that after three years, debt-slaves should be liberated.⁶⁹⁰ These lenient rules from the Hebrew Bible do not apply to non-Hebrew slaves; Leviticus 25:46 states that non-Hebrews can be made slaves for life and can be passed on from fathers to sons. However, already in Jeremiah 34:8-16 and Nehemiah 5:2-6, the people of Israel are called to release their fellow Hebrew (debt) slaves – which suggests that the rules concerning debt-slaves were not followed in practice (cf. section 2.2).⁶⁹¹ In the first important rabbinic text, the Mishnah, the division between (Hebrew) debt-slaves and (gentile) normal slaves is replaced by a division between slaves and freeborn people, as shown by the research of McCracken Flesher.⁶⁹² Hezser claims that from the second century onwards, “the distinction between slaves and freeborn people was as clear-cut in rabbinic as in Roman society.”⁶⁹³

Roman society knew the phenomenon of debt-slavery as well, the *nexum*. This form of debt-bondage or -slavery was officially abolished in 323 BCE by the Lex Poetelia Papiria.⁶⁹⁴ Despite this abolition, people continued to be enslaved because of their debts.⁶⁹⁵ What the exact status of the so-called *nexi* was, is much debated in Roman law and by scholars who study that law. Apparently, the debt-slaves remained Roman citizens

⁶⁸⁷ Christian Laes, “Desperately Different? Delicia Children in the Roman Household,” in *Early Christian Families in Context. An Interdisciplinary Dialogue*, ed. David L. Balch and Caroly Osiek (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), 298-324.

⁶⁸⁸ Like a special slave for the balls, and a eunuch with a chamber pot (Petronius, *Satyricon* 27).

⁶⁸⁹ Mendelsohn, *Slavery in the Ancient Near East*, 85: “It is obvious that, like the earlier Babylonian counterpart, the subject of the Biblical Law was not the common Hebrew slave but the Hebrew defaulting debtor” (85).

⁶⁹⁰ For an extensive treatment of debt-slavery in (the context of) the Hebrew Bible, see Gregory C. Chirichigno, *Debt-Slavery in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, Journal of the Old Testament Supplement Series 114 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993).

⁶⁹¹ Catherine Hezser, “The Social Status of Slaves in the Talmud Yerushalmi and in Graeco-Roman Society,” in *The Talmud Yerushalmi and Graeco-Roman Culture III*, ed. Peter Schäfer, Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 93 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 106.

⁶⁹² Paul V. McCracken Flesher, *Oxen, Women or Citizens? Slaves in the System of the Mishnah*, BJS 143 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).

⁶⁹³ Catherine Hezser, “Greek and Roman Slaving in Comparative Ancient Perspective: The Level of Integration,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Greek and Roman Slavery*, ed. Stephen Hodkinson, Marc Kleijwegt, and Kostas Vlassopoulos, Oxford Handbooks Online (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 7.

⁶⁹⁴ Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology*, 84. According to Aleksandr Koptev, the debtor was more in a position of a hostage - until somebody would pay off the debt: “the debtor paid with his body rather than with his assets or labour” (Aleksandr Koptev, “Principles of the Nexum and Debt Laws in the Twelve Tables,” in *Principios Generales del Derecho. Antecedentes históricos y horizonte actual*, ed. Fernando Reinoso Barbero [Madrid: Thomson Reuters, 2014], 227).

⁶⁹⁵ Alessandro Stanziani, “Slavery, Debt and Bondage: The Mediterranean and the Eurasia Connection from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century,” in *Debt and Slavery in the Mediterranean and Atlantic Worlds*, ed. Gwyn Campbell and Alessandro Stanziani (Oxon: Routledge, 2016), 39-48.

(“free persons”),⁶⁹⁶ were allowed to stay in their place of residence,⁶⁹⁷ and could not be used for sexual purposes, like normal slaves.⁶⁹⁸ Also, there is some discussion as to whether the debtor could simply be captured by his creditor, or if the interference of a judge was necessary. In any case, while possible, it was not simple to sell the debt-slave as a “real” slave *trans Tiberium*.⁶⁹⁹

In Roman Palestine, we find indications too that people were enslaved because of their debts. Hezser suggests that this might be a “privilege” of the provinces.⁷⁰⁰ An example of debt-slavery in a Jewish context is, again, found in Sifre Deuteronomy 26 (section 4.3.1). In Josephus, we come across insolvent debtors who become enslaved – although there might be a connection in this case with penal slavery: “He that stealeth a head of cattle shall pay fourfold as a penalty, save in the case of an ox, for which he shall be fined fivefold. He that hath not the means to defray the imposed amount shall become the slave of those who have had him condemned.”⁷⁰¹ Philo, too, reports on debt-slavery and its causes.⁷⁰²

The importance of debt-slavery might have been great, since many scholars have pointed to the high number of impoverished inhabitants of Roman Palestine due to a growing population in combination with the emergence of big estates at the expense of small land-owners.⁷⁰³ In this time, the *prosbul* was introduced by Hillel (m. Gittin 4:3) so that loans would continue to exist, even after sabbatical and Jubilee years.⁷⁰⁴ The rich elite had been giving out these loans, often with 20% interest rates, to the urban poor and small landowners.⁷⁰⁵ If these landowners could not pay back the loan, the creditors could seize their land and sell the owners as slaves, or, probably more frequently, force them to the margins as day laborers or tenants. Martin Goodman suggests that “both small independent farmers and the craftsmen and urban plebs of Jerusalem fell heavily into debt as much because the rich landowners needed to invest surplus income profitably as because the poor needed loans to survive.”⁷⁰⁶ This was also one of the determinants for the rise of banditry, according to Horsley.⁷⁰⁷ Nevertheless, Goodman and others (like Urbach) claim that the number of debt-slaves remained limited, since there was a wide availability of non-Hebrew slaves on the market of the Roman empire, and Jewish debt-slaves would have had too many rights.⁷⁰⁸ Also, the biblical emphasis on freedom (under God’s authority) might have played a role here.

⁶⁹⁶ Watson, *Rome of the XII Tables*, 113.

⁶⁹⁷ Jesper Carlsen, “Lex Poetelia Papiria,” in *The Historical Encyclopedia of World Slavery*, ed. Junius P. Rodriguez (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO), 2:408.

⁶⁹⁸ Marc Kleijwegt, “Debt Bondage and Chattel Slavery in Early Rome,” in *Debt and Slavery in the Mediterranean and Atlantic Worlds*, ed. Gwyn Campbell and Alessandro Stanziani (Oxon: Routledge, 2016), 29-38. See also Moses Finley, *Economy and Society in Ancient Greece* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1981 [1953]), 150-166 (Ch. 9, “Debt-bondage and the problem of slavery”). On sexual favors: Watson, *Rome of the XII Tables*, 114-115, with a reference to Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 8.28.

⁶⁹⁹ Watson, *Rome of the XII Tables*, 115.

⁷⁰⁰ Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 235, with a reference to Reginald H. Barrow, *Slavery in the Roman Empire* (New York/London: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1968 [1928]), 12.

⁷⁰¹ Josephus, *Antiquitates judaicae* 4.8.27 (LCL 490, 133). See also Solomon Zeitlin, “Slavery during the Second Commonwealth and the Tannaitic Period,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 53, no. 3 (1963), 187.

⁷⁰² Philo, *De specialibus legibus* 2.122; *De virtutibus* 122.

⁷⁰³ The economic situation in Galilee might have been slightly better in comparison to the situation in Judea. See, for example, David A. Fiensy, James Riley Strange, ed., *Galilee in the Late Second Temple and Mishnaic Periods*, 2 vols. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014-2015). In several contributions in this work it is shown that Second Temple Galilee had a relatively healthy economy.

⁷⁰⁴ The intention of the *prosbul* was to help the poor. According to the Hebrew Bible, debts should be annulled every seventh (sabbatical) and fiftieth (Jubilee) year (see, e.g., Deuteronomy 15:1-11, Leviticus 25:25-28). Because of these stipulations, the rich were not inclined to lend to the poor, which denied the poor one of the last opportunities to make end meets, albeit temporarily. Since the *prosbul* cancelled the system of sabbatical and Jubilee years with respect to loans, the investments of the rich were safe-guarded, and the poor continued to have the possibility to receive a loan. See, e.g., Elisha Ancselovits, “The *Prosbul* – A Legal Fiction?” *The Jewish Law Annual* 19 (2011), 3-16.

⁷⁰⁵ Goodman, “The First Jewish Revolt,” 423.

⁷⁰⁶ Goodman, “The First Jewish Revolt,” 418-419.

⁷⁰⁷ Horsley, “Ancient Jewish Banditry and the Revolt against Rome,” 417.

⁷⁰⁸ Goodman, “The First Jewish Revolt,” 424-425. Compare the next Talmudic saying: “Whoever buys a Hebrew slave is like buying a master for himself” (b. Qiddushin 20a).

As indicated by the section title, debt-slavery is also related to self-enslavement. It was possible for people in antiquity to sell themselves in order to pay for debts, or to escape starvation (as a slave, one would be nourished and sheltered). Also, there might have been some exceptional cases of people who enslaved themselves to attain a high position in a profession that was only open to slaves, like the governmental jobs in the imperial household (*familia Caesaris*).⁷⁰⁹ However, since this institution cannot be found in Roman Palestine, and since we have seen that there was not a big demand for Jewish slaves (and Jews themselves might not have been inclined to give up freedom themselves), self-enslavement would have been a rather rare phenomenon.

4.1.6. Adoption and the Sale of Children

In his paper, “Towards a Study of the Roman Slave Trade,” Harris argues that child exposure was a substantial source of slaves, and even the largest source in the provinces after the *vernae*, the house born slaves.⁷¹⁰ In the Roman Empire, foundlings who were taken in and raised by an adoptive family belonged to this family’s property. They could be raised as the family’s own children, but they could also be raised as future slaves.⁷¹¹ Child abandonment – which often equaled infanticide – seemed to be mainly a matter of poverty.⁷¹² It is Plutarch who is famous for his saying “the poor do not bring up their children.”⁷¹³ However, children were frequently left exposed by rich Romans as well, since they had developed the ideal of a small family unit.⁷¹⁴

Did Jews also leave children on the streets? Tacitus has been known for his observation that the Jews disapproved of exposing children (*Historiae* 5.5).⁷¹⁵ This observation has been confirmed for Late Antiquity by John Boswell, who asserts that Jews almost never abandoned children at birth.⁷¹⁶ Yaakov Elman has, however, contested this position, since Boswell’s study only has a limited scope and does not include a thorough discussion of rabbinic sources. Elman points to m. Qiddushin 4:1, where foundlings (found in the market) are mentioned. In the Tosefta, the status of these foundlings is discussed. Although they are not left outside the rabbinic societal system, they are placed at the end of it. The Hellenistic-Jewish philosopher, Philo of Alexandria, has also written on child exposure, rejecting it in very strong words.⁷¹⁷ For Boswell, this rejection is confirmation of the Jewish aversion to child abandonment;⁷¹⁸ for Elman, on the contrary, it implies that child exposure was a big problem among Jews as well.⁷¹⁹ Hezser stresses that Philo only seemed to have had rich parents on his mind.⁷²⁰ Although historical data is lacking to determine how common child exposure was among Jewish parents, Elman is inclined to say that child abandonment among Jews in the Hellenistic period was a minor phenomenon. He also asserts that early Christianity took over the same reluctance to expose children, which led in certain cases to an “abundance of girls.”⁷²¹ Since our corpus of parables does not refer to cases of child exposure, this phenomenon will not be further discussed in this study. What we do want to mention briefly, however, is the sale of children.

⁷⁰⁹ “The quantitative weight of such events was presumably minimal,” as Walter Scheidel writes in “The Roman Slave Supply,” in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery*, ed. Keith R. Bradley and Paul Cartledge, vol. 1, *The Ancient Mediterranean World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 300.

⁷¹⁰ Harris, “Towards a Study,” 123. See also William V. Harris, “Child-Exposure in the Roman Empire,” *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 84 (1994), 1-22.

⁷¹¹ Catherine Hezser, “The Exposure and Sale of Infants in Rabbinic and Roman Law,” in *Jewish Studies Between the Disciplines*, ed. Klaus Herrmann, Margarete Schlueter and Giuseppe Veltri (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 11; William W. Buckland, *The Roman Law of Slavery. The Condition of the Slave in Private Law From Augustus to Justinian* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1908), 402.

⁷¹² Hezser, “The Exposure and Sale of Infants,” 6.

⁷¹³ Hezser, “The Exposure and Sale of infants,” 6, with reference to Plutarchus, *De Amore Proles* 5.

⁷¹⁴ Saller, “Slavery and the Roman Family,” 69.

⁷¹⁵ Harris, “Child-Exposure in the Roman Empire,” 7, cf. 4.

⁷¹⁶ John Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers: The Abandonment of Children in Western Europe from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance* (New York: Pantheon, 1988). Cf. Yaakov Elman, “Marriage and Marital Property in Sasanian Law,” in *Rabbinic Law in Its Roman and Near Eastern Context*, ed. Catherine Hezser, Text and Studies in Ancient Judaism 97 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 227-276.

⁷¹⁷ Philo, *De Specialibus Legibus* 3.110, 113, 115-116.

⁷¹⁸ Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers*, 147-152.

⁷¹⁹ Elman, “Marriage and Marital Property,” 271 (note 122).

⁷²⁰ Hezser, “The Exposure and Sale of Infants,” 8.

⁷²¹ Elman, “Marriage and Marital Property,” 273.

Since they lived under the *patria potestas*, children were completely subjugated to their father. Parents sometimes sold children because they could not afford their upbringing, or because that was the only way to compensate for debts. Occasionally, children from the second group were restored to their free status after the debt was paid.⁷²² The same phenomenon might be found in the Hebrew Bible, in Exodus 21:7-11, where fathers are allowed to sell their daughters, but those daughters were not destined for permanent slavery.⁷²³ Children could also be taken captive by creditors themselves when their parents could not pay off the debts (see below for our discussion of Sifre Deuteronomy 26, section 4.3.1). Christian theologians like Basil of Caesarea and Ambrose of Milan have written about these phenomena as well.⁷²⁴ Again, we see here how the categories of slaves and children (sons) might conflate: children could be sold as slaves on the one hand, and could be adopted as either children or slaves on the other hand. The status of children (as well as slaves) in antiquity was, thus, a precarious one *vis-à-vis* the absolute power of the *pater familias*.⁷²⁵

Finally, it should be noticed that we have not mentioned all possible sources for slaves. Unmentioned are the *servi poenae*, “slaves of the penalty,” who were convicted to serve as slaves because of their crimes.⁷²⁶ We also did not discuss the acquisition of slaves via *usucaption*, i.e., making persons slaves by treating them as slaves (cf. section 4.4.1.). We will return to these and other slave-acquiring methods over the course of this study, as far as it is necessary. For now, we will continue this chapter with (to the best of my knowledge) all early Christian and tannaitic parables in which the above-mentioned sources of slaves occur as narrative motifs.

4.2. Same Day Delivery: Sifre Deuteronomy 323

In this and the next sections, we will discuss a number of parables in which the sale of slaves is thematized. We will take these parables as a point of departure for our *Bildfeld* analysis (see section 3.4.5). In this section, we will discuss a parable from Sifre Deuteronomy, pisqa 323. Sifre Deuteronomy was compiled in the late third century from different sources.⁷²⁷ Sifre Deuteronomy contains both aggadic and halakhic sections. Our section, pisqa 323, is part of one of the two haggadic sections (1-54; 304-357).⁷²⁸ In the relevant section, Deuteronomy 32:30 is discussed. That verse reads:

How could one have routed a thousand,	אֵיכָה יִרְדָּף אֶחָד אֶלֶף וּשְׁנָיִם יָגִסוּ רֶבֶבָה אֶם־לֹא כִי־צוּרָם
and two put a myriad to flight,	מִקְרָם גִּיהֲוֹנָה הַסִּגְיָרָם:
unless their Rock had sold them,	
the Lord had given them up?	

⁷²² Hezser, “The Exposure and Sale of Infants,” 21.

⁷²³ Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers*, 143.

⁷²⁴ Ambrose, *De Tobia* 1.8.29, Basil, *Homilia in Illud Lucae Destruam* 4; see Hezser, “The Exposure and Sale of Infants,” 25, and Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers*, 169.

⁷²⁵ See on this subject, e.g., Christian Laes, *Children in the Roman Empire: Outsiders Within* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). For an overview of the research in this field, see Reidar Aasgaard, “Children in Antiquity and Early Christianity: Research History and Central Issues,” *Familia* 33 (2006), 23-46. See also the dissertation by Albertina Oegema, *Negotiating Paternal Authority and Filial Agency. Fathers and Sons in Early Rabbinic Parables*, Quaestiones Infinitae 130 (Utrecht, 2021).

⁷²⁶ John Bodel, “Slave Labour and Roman Society,” in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery*, ed. Keith R. Bradley and Paul Cartledge, vol. 1, *The Ancient Mediterranean World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 415.

⁷²⁷ Hammer, *Sifre*, 6-8, with reference to the work of Goldberg. Cf. Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 273; Menahem I. Kahana, “The Halakhic Midrashim,” in *The Literature of the Jewish People in the Period of the Second Temple and the Talmud*, ed. Shmuel Safrai, Ze’ev Safrai, Joshua J. Schwartz and Peter Tomson, vol. 3, *The Literature of the Sages. Second Part: Midrash and Targum*, Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum 3b (Assen: Royal Van Gorcum, 2006), 95-100.

⁷²⁸ Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 272.

This verse is part of the Song of Moses (32:1-43), which forms – together with Moses' blessing (33:2-29) – a conclusion to both Deuteronomy and the Pentateuch, as well as to the life of Moses.⁷²⁹

In Sifre Deuteronomy, the focus is on the second part of verse 30 (“unless their Rock had sold them, the Lord had given them up”). This clause is discussed in both pisqa 322 and 323.⁷³⁰ We start our discussion with the last part of pisqa 322.

For they are a nation void of counsel (Deuteronomy 32:28): Rabbi Yehudah interpreted it with regard to Israel, Rabbi Nehemiah interpreted it with regard to the nations of the world.

Rabbi Yehudah interpreted it with regard to Israel: Israel voided the good council given to them, and council only is Torah, as it is said: *Council is mine and sound wisdom* (Proverbs 8:14). *And there is no understanding in them* (Deuteronomy 32:28). Not one of them would reflect and say: “Aforetime, one of them could pursue thousand of the nations and two could make ten thousand flee, and now one from the nations pursues a thousand of us and two make thousand flee. *Unless their Rock had sold them* (Deuteronomy 32:30).”

Rabbi Nehemiah interpreted it with regard to the nations: The nations voided the seven commandments that I had given to them, *And there is no understanding in them*: Not one of them would reflect and say: “Now one of us pursues a thousand of Israel and two make ten thousand flee. In the time of the Messiah one from Israel will pursue a thousand of us and two will make ten thousand flee. *Unless their Rock had sold them*. It once happened during the war that was in Judea that one decurion ran after an Israelite in order to kill him. And he could not overtake [him] until a snake came out and bit him on his heel. He [the Israelite] said to him [the decurion]: “Do not imagine that because we [the Romans] are strong, they have been handed over into our hands, *Unless their Rock had sold them*.”⁷³¹

This passage takes Deuteronomy 32:28 (“For they are a nation void of counsel”) as its point of departure. Two rabbis discuss which nation is devoid of counsel – Israel or the nations? Let us follow their reasoning. Rabbi Yehudah holds that this judgement applies to Israel (“counsel” referring to the Torah), since the Israelites do not understand that they could only be defeated because God has given up on them. Rabbi Nehemiah takes the opposite position, arguing that it is the heathens who do not understand that they could only beat Israel because God had allowed it. To substantiate this argument, a story is told that is situated in a war (בפולמוס)⁷³² in Judea against the Romans (a *decurion* is involved). According to Hammer, the revolt that is referred to is the Bar Kokhba revolt – a theory that I deem very likely.⁷³³ This story recounts how a *decurion* could only bear down an Israelite after a serpent⁷³⁴ had stung the man. The Israelite sees this as a divine intervention and claims that it is only because of the snake (who was sent by God) that the Roman had trumped him. If we follow the rhetoric of the text, this historical anecdote functions as a *pars pro toto* example of the fact that the Romans had beaten the Israelites in 132-136 CE because of a divine intervention.

The same line of reasoning is found in the next pisqa, in which a parable is specifically designed for the discussion of verse 32:30b.

⁷²⁹ For more information on the Song of Moses see, e.g., Matthew Thiessen, “The Form and Function of the Song of Moses (Deuteronomy 32:1-43),” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 123, no. 3 (2004), 401-424; G. Ernest Wright, “The Lawsuit of God: A Form-Critical Study of Deuteronomy 32,” in *Israel's Prophetic Heritage: Essays in Honor of James Muilenburg*, ed. Bernhard W. Anderson and Walter Harrelson (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), 26–67; and Brian Britt, *Rewriting Moses: The Narrative Eclipse of the Text*, JSOT Supplement Series 402 (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 148.

⁷³⁰ The Song of Moses belongs to those chapters of Deuteronomy that are discussed in more detail. See Hammer, *Sifre*, 5.

⁷³¹ Translation MS. Hebrew text: Louis Finkelstein and Haim S. Horovitz, *Sifre on Deuteronomy* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1969), 372.

⁷³² A loanword from the Greek πόλεμος that was especially used in rabbinic literature for war with the Romans (see Jastrow, *A Dictionary*, s.v. פולמוס, 1142).

⁷³³ Hammer, *Sifre*, 501 (note 12). See also page 20: “The historical background is that of a time of trouble, suffering, even disaster: the situation of the Jewish people in the Land of Israel during and after the Hadrianic persecution and the failure of the Bar Kokhba revolt.”

⁷³⁴ References to serpents are also made in the last part of pisqa 323.

Translation (MS)

Unless their Rock had sold⁷³⁶ them, and the Lord had delivered them up (Deuteronomy 32:30b): I will deliver you up not by myself but through others.

It happened that flies handed them over⁷³⁷ in Judea.

Rabbi Hanina of Tib'in⁷³⁸ says:

“A parable. It’s like somebody who said to his fellow: A slave I will sell to you in due time⁷³⁹ (*kairion*).

But I am not like this, [because] I sell and deliver up immediately.”

[Another interpretation: *And the Lord had sold them*: Do I hand⁷⁴¹ you [over] as the unclean ones into the hands of the clean ones, or as the clean ones into the hands of the unclean ones? We learn that only the unclean are delivered up, as it is said, *Then the priest shall deliver up him that hath the plague [for] seven days* (Leviticus 13:4).

Text⁷³⁵

אם לא כי צורם מכרם וה' הסגירם איני מסגיר אתכם
על ידי עצמי אלא על ידי אחרים וכבר היה

מעשה שהזבובים מסרו אותם ביהודה

רבי חנינה איש טיבעים אומר

משל לאחד שאמר לחבירו⁷⁴⁰ עבד קירי אני מוכר לך

אבל אני איני כן אלא מוכר אני ומסגיר אני מיד

[דבר אחר וה' הסגירם אני מוסר]

אתכם כטמאים ביד טהורים או [אינו] אלא כטהורים ביד
טמאים הא אין מסגירים אלא טמא שנאמר והסגיר הכהן את
הנגע שבעת ימים

In this passage, the idea is expressed again that it is only because of God’s decision that Israel has fallen to its attackers. How God will deliver his people is left undecided: is it through others (על ידי אחרים), like flies, or by himself, as Rabbi Hanina seems to claim? To which “others” does Sifre refer? The reference to flies is unclear,⁷⁴² but one could imagine that the hiding place of a group of Israelites was betrayed by the flies that surrounded the location. Also, flies were generally viewed negatively in the Ancient Near East.⁷⁴³ Anyway, it is striking that in both pisqa 322 and 323, animals (“even lowly creatures of nature”⁷⁴⁴) function as intermediaries of God.

The passage also makes a connection with historical events in Judea. This historical connection becomes even clearer in the next section, on Deuteronomy 32:31 (not displayed above), in which it is said that God gives

⁷³⁵ Hebrew text: Louis Finkelstein and Haim S. Horovitz, *Sifre on Deuteronomy* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1969), 373.

⁷³⁶ Hammer translates with “had given them over,” but I follow here the NRSV in translating with the verb “to sell,” a verb that is used in the parable as well.

⁷³⁷ The verb מסר can also be translated with the English “to deliver,” but in order to distinguish מסר from the hifil of סגר, I have chosen another translation here.

⁷³⁸ Since this is the only time Hanina of Tib'in occurs in the early rabbinic sources, it is difficult to precisely identify him. Notley and Safrai presume that Tib'in is an alternative spelling for Tivon, a center for study in Lower Galilee. If they are right, Hanina of Tib'in is probably a different designation for Hanina ben Gamliel, a disciple of Tarfon who lived mid-second century CE, and was located in Tivon. See R. Steven Notley and Ze'ev Safrai, *Parables of the Sages: Jewish Wisdom from Jesus to Rav Ashi* (Jerusalem: Carta, 2011), 357.

⁷³⁹ For this translation see Jastrow, *A Dictionary*, s.v. קירי, 1369.

⁷⁴⁰ Manuscript Berlin has the longer introduction formula: “A mashal. To what is it like? It is like somebody [etc].”

⁷⁴¹ For this emendation, see Louis Finkelstein, “Studies in the Tannaitic Midrashim,” *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 6 (1934-1935), 214.

⁷⁴² There might be an intertextual connection with Wisdom of Solomon 16 in which the wrath of God reveals itself by means of the bites of snakes (verse 5) and flies (verse 9).

⁷⁴³ Flies were associated with nuisance and diseases. See, for example, the following discussion on the Canaanite deity, Baal Zebub (“Lord of the Flies”): Wolfgang Herrmann, “Baal Zebub,” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking and Pieter W. van der Horst, 2nd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 154-156.

⁷⁴⁴ Jacob Neusner, *Rabbinic Narrative: A Documentary Perspective. Volume Two: Forms, Types, and Distribution of Narratives in Sifra, Sifre to Numbers, and Sifre to Deuteronomy* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 187.

“them” (the adversaries of Israel) power, although they treat Israel “according to the measure of cruelty. They kill us, burn us, and crucify us.”⁷⁴⁵ This last punishment – crucifixion – is closely associated with the Romans.⁷⁴⁶ The repeated reference to the war with the Romans fits the broader scope of Sifre, and especially its third and last part (Ha’azinu).⁷⁴⁷

Before turning to the parable, I would also like to point to the part of the text that follows directly after our passage, in which the legitimization of God’s handing over of Israel is given: the Israelites belong to the category of people who are suspected of uncleanness. As scriptural proof, Leviticus 13:4 is given in which it is stated that the unclean are confined or quarantined (וְהִקְיִיר) by the priest to see if they really suffer from a leprous disease. The connection between Deuteronomy 32:30 and Leviticus 13:4 is made by the Hebrew verb סָגַר, that is understood in Deuteronomy 32 as delivery, while it is translated in Leviticus with terms like confinement or isolation,⁷⁴⁸ notably, the confinement of the suspected sick person by the priest. However, when we continue reading in Leviticus, we discover that if the disease does not spread, the person shall be declared clean again by the priest. We might conclude from this that the war with the Romans is envisioned by Sifre as a test to see whether the Israelites are worthy to be God’s people.

Let us turn now to the parable. The parable is short but is clearly introduced as such by its narrator (and composer?) Rabbi Hanina of Tib’in. The *mashal proper* consists of only one sentence: “It is like somebody who said to his fellow: ‘A slave I will sell to you in due time.’” The parable turns out to be a so-called contrast-parable⁷⁴⁹ since, in the application, God behaves exactly like the opposite of the anonymous man from the parable: “But I am not so, I sell directly and I deliver immediately.”⁷⁵⁰ To what kind of slave sale does this parable refer? I would say that the fact that the text speaks of a fellow or friend (לחבירו) suggests the intimate atmosphere of a private sale, a deal closed in the domestic area, without interference of professional traders (*mangones*) and without the rules of a purchase on a public market. This image is strengthened by the oral character of the purchase. As we have seen in the Talmud (b. Gittin 86a), and as we will see in the parable below (Sifre Numbers 115; cf. Genesis Rabbah 2:2), the purchase of a slave in Roman Palestine normally involved official writs or documents. Here, however, we only read of a verbal agreement, a kind of commitment that presupposes a degree of familiarity that is only possible in particular contexts.

Another element of the story is that the slave will only be sold “in due time” (קִירִי). To express that element of the purchase, a Greek loanword is used, namely the adverb *kairion* (καίριον).⁷⁵¹ What is meant here? From other sources, we know that slaves were not always delivered directly. In a *baraita* from the Babylonian Talmud (tractate Bava Qamma), we read, for example:

And in a scholarly discussion between Tannaim, it has been taught: “One who sells his slave to another (המוכר עבדו לאחר) and agreed with him on the condition that he would serve him (i.e., the seller) for thirty days [before he is transferred].” Rabbi Meir says: the first [owner] is under the law of “a day or two days,” because he (i.e., the slave) is [still] under him (שהוא תחתיו). (b. Bava Qamma 90a, cf. b. Bava Batra 50a; translation MS)

⁷⁴⁵ Translation Hammer, *Sifre*, 335.

⁷⁴⁶ Martin Hengels calls it “the supreme Roman penalty.” Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion. In the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross*, transl. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977 [1976]), the title of his fourth chapter (33ff).

⁷⁴⁷ “Indeed the concluding aggadic sections of the work, especially Ha’azinu, which is the major portion, display a didactic tendency which would be appropriate to the period of time following the failure of the Bar Kokhba rebellion.” Hammer, *Sifre*, 17.

⁷⁴⁸ Cf. the following translations: NRSV, KJV, CJB, ISV, GNT, NASB.

⁷⁴⁹ See Talia Thorion-Vardi, *Das Kontrastgleichnis in der rabbinischen Literatur*, Judentum und Umwelt 16 (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Peter Lang, 1986). Also, Jeremias works with the category of contrast parable (see, e.g. Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, transl. S.H. Hooke, 2nd ed. [Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1972], 150).

⁷⁵⁰ Notice that the parable uses the same two verbs as the biblical passage.

⁷⁵¹ Which is in line with the tendency to use (Greek) loanwords and special vocabulary in contracts. Cf. Friedman, “Contracts: Rabbinic Literature and Ancient Jewish Documents,” 426-460.

Although Rabbi Meir's view is contested, this passage shows that the possibility that a slave was only delivered at a later moment was at least theoretically entertained.⁷⁵² But why? A very obvious reason could be that the (former) master of the slave would like to have the slave around for a final important project. Since the Greek word *καίρος* can also refer to a critical time, periodic state, or a season, it is not impossible that the word refers here to the harvest time, a season-bound moment in the year when a lot of labor force was needed. Another reason could be that the slave-owner did not want to sell his slave at all, but was forced to sell because of his debts, or because of his lower status compared to the person who wanted to acquire the slave.

Another peculiarity of the parable is the way the *mashal proper* and the *nimshal* merge, since the *nimshal* pursues the metaphorical language of the *mashal*. As Neusner puts it with respect to this parable: "It is uncommon for the interpretation to be delivered within the pseudo-narrative framework of the parable itself."⁷⁵³ Here, however, we have such a case.

Having analyzed the rabbinic law that plays a role in the parable, it is now time to take the next step and ask ourselves what happens in Sifre Deuteronomy 323 on a metaphorical level. The most important observation that we have to make is the identification of God with a slave-owner. This is an identification that we will see more often in this study. What we will also see frequently is the comparison of the people of Israel with a slave. I will come back to both elements more elaborately in the course of this chapter. What I do want to discuss here, however, is the fellow to whom the protagonist of the parable sells his slave. We have concluded from an analysis of the context of this parable that – in the application – the enemy to whom God has delivered the Israelites is the Roman Empire. Would it not be strange to call the Romans God's fellow? But does that really happen? In the application, the buyer has been omitted, indicating that the focus should be on the I-figure. Moreover, one should be cautious in striving for an overly rigid parallelization of elements from the parable with elements in the application. This is supported by the image from Leviticus in which the priest "delivers" the possibly leprous person, but not to someone else. Also, this study will show that in the metaphorical language of slavery, often a problem arises with the identity of the transaction partner of God (compare, for example, Genesis Rabbah 2:2). Thus, I think we have to conclude for now that the friend is an unactualized element of the parable.

Finally, a few words about the possibility of a hidden transcript reading of the parable. What we see is that the parable rather straightforwardly compares God with a slave-owner who sells his slave. Although the proof text clearly indicates that God has given up on the people of Israel (betrayed them?), this is not problematized in the midrash or in the parable. Instead, it is emphasized that God as slave-owner is straightforward and quick in finalizing his deals, in contrast to the slave-owner of the parable. From the second proof text (Leviticus 13:4), it becomes clear that the blame for God delivering up his people does not rest with God, but with the people who are unclean. So, the parable primarily employs slavery imagery to paint God as a fair and correct slaveholder (who immediately sells his slaves, i.e. punishes directly) and portrays Israel as an unclean (useless?) slave (indirectly, throughout the rest of the passage).

4.3. Debt-Slavery or Debt and Slavery?⁷⁵⁴

The practice of the selling of slaves, together with debts as one of the reasons why people were sold as slaves, forms the subject of this section. In early Christian and early rabbinic texts, the language of debt and slavery is often employed in a metaphorical sense to designate sin. In this section, we will investigate a parable from the rabbinic tradition, Sifre Deuteronomy 26, and a parable from the New Testament, Matthew 18:23-35, to study the connection between sins on the one hand and debt and slavery on the other hand. We conduct this research by applying the *Bildfeld* (image field) methodology of Harald Weinrich, as outlined in chapter 3. Our research represents a response to an article from Catherine Hezser in which she concluded that it is possible to compare

⁷⁵² It is not clear to me if that also meant that the actual sale (transferring the money, writing a document) only occurred at the moment of delivery or happened earlier. Furthermore, Roman law anticipates the possibility that a seller was negligent in the delivery of a slave. In that case, the seller should compensate for the work that the slave could not do for his new owner. Cf. Henry John Roby, *Roman Private Law in the Times of Cicero and of the Antonines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1902), 2:148-149.

⁷⁵³ Neusner, *Rabbinic Narrative: A Documentary Perspective*, 2:188.

⁷⁵⁴ This section is a (partly) rewritten version of my article, "From Debtor to Slave: An Explorative Bildfeld Analysis of Debt and Slavery in Early Rabbinic and New Testament Parables," in *Parables in Changing Contexts: Interreligious and Cultural Approaches to the Study of Parables*, ed. Eric Ottenheim and Marcel Poorthuis, Jewish and Christian Perspectives 35 (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 280-300.

the motives that occur in the parables from Matthew and Sifre with the help of the *Bildfeld* methodology, without, however, performing that comparison.⁷⁵⁵

4.3.1. Sifre Deuteronomy 26

We will start our discussion with the parable from Sifre Deuteronomy. In chapter twenty-six, the commentary forms a response to Deuteronomy 3:23: “At that time, too, I entreated the LORD, saying [...]” These words were spoken by Moses, prior to the entrance of the people of Israel into the Promised Land. Since Moses had been disobedient to God at Kadesh, he was not allowed to enter the land; he was only allowed to see it from the top of the mountain. In the midrash, this verse evokes a discussion about the “two fine leaders of Israel,”⁷⁵⁶ Moses and David, and about the forgiving of sins. In this section, I will focus on the second part of the treatise, which discusses the leadership of David, and in which we find a parable about debt and slavery.

According to the introduction to this parable, David had asked God *not* to record his sin (with Bathsheba) after him (לא תכתב אחריו). But God replied to that question, “Does it not matter that the people might say, ‘It is because He loved him that He forgave him?’” This is the point at which Sifre inserts the parable:

Translation (MS)

A parable. It is like someone who borrowed one thousand *kor* of wheat in a year from the king.

Everyone said: “Is it possible that this [one] can bear a thousand *kor* of wheat in a year and [it is] not from a loan of the king, unless he had written for him an *epoche* [remission of debt]?”⁷⁵⁸

One time he reserved [wheat] for himself, and he did not pay anything to him [the king].

The king [went] to his house and took his sons and his daughters and placed them on the stone of sale.

[That] moment everyone knew that he had nothing left in his hand.

Similarly, all the punishments that came upon David were doubled [...]

Text⁷⁵⁷

משל לאחד שלוח מן המלך אלף כורים בשנה

היו הכל אומרים איפשר שזה יכול לעמוד באלף כורים חטים בשנה ואינו ממשכנו המלך אלא כתב לו אפוכי

פעם אחת שייר ולא שקל לו כלום

נכנס המלך לביתו ונטל בניו ובנותיו והעמידם על אבן המכר

באותה שעה ידעו הכל שלא שייר בידו כלום

אף כל פורעניות שהיו באות על דוד היו מכופלות

⁷⁵⁵ Catherine Hezser, “Rabbinische Gleichnisse und ihre Vergleichbarkeit mit neutestamentlichen Gleichnissen,” in *Hermeneutik der Gleichnisse Jesu: Methodische Neuansätze zum Verstehen urchristlicher Parabeltexte*, ed. Ruben Zimmermann in collaboration with Gabi Kern, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 231 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 236.

⁷⁵⁶ Steven D. Fraade, “Sifre Deuteronomy 26 (ad Deut. 3:23): How Conscious the Composition?” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 54 (1983), 264.

⁷⁵⁷ Finkelstein and Horovitz, *Sifre on Deuteronomy*, 38.

⁷⁵⁸ Fraade notices how “[t]his sentence has caused commentators substantial difficulty” (Fraade, “Sifre Deuteronomy 26,” 262n38; see for an elaborate discussion of these difficulties 298-301). Key to a good understanding of this mashal is the word *epoche* or *apoki* (אפוכי). In the recent past, many translators (including Hans Bietenhard, *Der Tannaitische Midrasch Sifre Deuteronomium*, Judaica et Christiana 8 [Bern/Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1984], 57; Hezser, “Rabbinische Gleichnisse,” 231; and Fraade, “Sifre Deuteronomy 26,” 266) have translated the word as “receipt,” and have not understood it as a remission of debts. However, I follow other translations that translate the term as “remission” or “cancellation [of debts]”; see, e.g., Joseph Heinemann and Jakob J. Petuchowski, *Literature of the Synagogue* (New York: Behrman House, 1975), 122; and Hammer, *Sifre*, 47-48. For an elaborate overview of this translation, see also Fraade, “Sifre Deuteronomy 26,” 298-99. I have followed those earlier translations because (1) in many rabbinic texts, the word has to be understood as a remission of debt (cf. Numbers Rabbah 13:5; Esther Rabbah proem [11]; Genesis Rabbah 42:3; Lamentations Rabbah 4:25; and Pesiqta de Rav Kahana 5:8); and (2) because of the logic of the plot. It is clear that the people are surprised that the man can bear such a great debt, and they wonder whether the king has written him an *epoche*. Within the boundaries of the narrative, the only logical explanation is that the man would have had a guarantee that the king would not demand his loan back – in other words, he supposed that the king exempted him from paying back the money (by giving him the money, or by remitting the debt). That also matches the conclusion of the parable and the comparison with David.

In the conclusion of the chapter, the question is asked: what can we learn from the stories about Moses and David? A *qal wa-homer* (a fortiori) argument follows: “If they could suspend [their sin] by good deeds [and] they ask from the Holy One, blessed be He, that he grants them only mercy (חַנּוּם), how much more should he who is one of the thousand, thousands, thousands and myriad myriads of their pupils ask from the Holy One, blessed be He, that he grants only mercy to him?”

How should we interpret this parable? In the parable, David is compared to someone who borrows a huge amount of wheat from a king (worth at least 50,000 shekel⁷⁵⁹). The parable-author uses the voice of “the people” to ask the question of how the man can bear this debt.⁷⁶⁰ The only way to bear it, they speculate, is because the king wrote an *epoche*, i.e., a remission of debt. However, at a certain moment, the man was not able (or did not want) to pay his debt – it was thus not remitted after all – and the king sells the man’s children as slaves. It becomes clear to everyone that an *epoche* was never written; the man had to pay his debt, just like the others.

Apparently, just like the man from the parable had to pay his debts and was punished when he did not, David also had to undergo the consequences of his sins (which were rather enormous if they are compared to a thousand *kor*). Accordingly, the midrash compares the loss of David’s first child with Bathsheba to the loss of the debtor’s children in the parable. In this way, the parable shows that in the mind of the rabbis, debts could represent sins, enslavement could stand for not receiving mercy, and the remittance of debts could symbolize forgiving.

4.3.2. Matthew 18:23–35

Steven Fraade noticed with respect to the parable from Sifre Deuteronomy that “[t]he best parallel to our mashal is to be found in Matthew 18:25.”⁷⁶¹ This parable is situated by Matthew after a short discussion between Peter and Jesus about the frequency of forgiving.⁷⁶² In the parable, a slave with a great debt (10,000 talents) appears before the king. Since the slave is not able to pay his debt, the king orders him to be sold together with his wife, children, and possessions. But after the man begs the king for mercy, the king takes pity on him and decides to remit the slave’s debt. Directly after the slave has left the king, the slave encounters one of his fellow slaves who owes him a small debt. However, the slave is not as merciful as his king, and throws his fellow slave in jail when he cannot pay the money. After hearing this, the king becomes furious and delivers the unforgiving slave over to the torturers. Both the context, i.e., the discussion between Jesus and Peter, and the application suggest that the parable is about forgiving. Its conclusion in verse 35 is very clear: as God forgives us, so we have to forgive our neighbours. The complete text of the parable is:

Text (NA 28)

23 Διὰ τοῦτο ὁμοιώθη ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν
ἀνθρώπῳ βασιλεῖ, ὃς ἠθέλησεν συνᾶραι λόγον
μετὰ τῶν δούλων αὐτοῦ.

Translation (MS)

That is why the kingdom of heavens is compared to a
human king, who wanted to settle account with his
slaves.

⁷⁵⁹ See Leviticus 27:16; cf. m. Arakhin 3:2, 7:1 (50 shekel of silver for each homer=1 *kor* of barley). See also Shlomo Josef Zevin (ed.), *Encyclopedia Talmudica: A Digest of Halachic Literature and Jewish Law from the Tannaitic Period to the Present Time* (Jerusalem: Talmudic Encyclopedia Institute, 1992), 4:206-207, s.v. “Beyth Kor.”

⁷⁶⁰ Already in antiquity, rabbinical commentators wrestled with the story of David and Bathsheba. For some examples, see Marcel Poorthuis, “Jewish Influences upon Islamic Storytelling: The Case of David and Bathsheba,” in *Hebrew Texts in Jewish, Christian and Muslim Surroundings*, ed. Klaas Spronk and Eveline van Staaldoune-Sulman, *Studia Semitica Neerlandica* 69 (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 136-150.

⁷⁶¹ Fraade, “Sifre Deuteronomy 26,” 282. See also Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 227.

⁷⁶² “Then Peter came to Him and said, ‘Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.’” (NKJV). A similar discussion can be found in b. Yoma 86b: “It was taught: Rabbi Yose bar Yehudah said: ‘[If] a man commits a transgression: the first time, he is forgiven. The second time, he is forgiven. The third time, he is forgiven. The fourth time he is not forgiven (רביעית אין מוחלין לו), as it is said: *Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment* (Amos 2:6). And it says: *God indeed does all these things, twice, three times, with mortals* (Job 33:29).”

24 ἀρξαμένου δὲ αὐτοῦ συναίρειν προσηνέχθη αὐτῷ εἷς ὀφειλέτης μυρίων ταλάντων.

25 μὴ ἔχοντος δὲ αὐτοῦ ἀποδοῦναι ἐκέλευσεν αὐτὸν ὁ κύριος πρᾶθῆναι καὶ τὴν γυναῖκα καὶ τὰ τέκνα καὶ πάντα ὅσα ἔχει, καὶ ἀποδοθῆναι.

26 πεσὼν οὖν ὁ δοῦλος προσεκύνει αὐτῷ λέγων· μακροθύμησον ἐπ’ ἐμοί, καὶ πάντα ἀποδώσω σοι.

27 Σπλαγχνισθεὶς δὲ ὁ κύριος τοῦ δούλου ἐκείνου ἀπέλυσεν αὐτὸν καὶ τὸ δάνειον ἀφῆκεν αὐτῷ.

28 ἐξελθὼν δὲ ὁ δοῦλος ἐκεῖνος εὔρεν ἓνα τῶν συνδούλων αὐτοῦ, ὃς ὤφειλεν αὐτῷ ἑκατὸν δηνάρια, καὶ κρατήσας αὐτὸν ἔπνιγεν λέγων· ἀπόδος εἴ τι ὀφείλεις.

29 πεσὼν οὖν ὁ σύνδουλος αὐτοῦ παρεκάλει αὐτὸν λέγων· μακροθύμησον ἐπ’ ἐμοί, καὶ ἀποδώσω σοι.

30 ὁ δὲ οὐκ ἤθελεν ἀλλ’ ἀπελθὼν ἔβαλεν αὐτὸν εἰς φυλακὴν ἕως ἀποδοῦναι τὸ ὀφειλόμενον.

31 ἰδόντες οὖν οἱ σύνδουλοι αὐτοῦ τὰ γενόμενα ἐλυπήθησαν σφόδρα καὶ ἐλθόντες διεσάφησαν τῷ κυρίῳ ἑαυτῶν πάντα τὰ γενόμενα.

32 Τότε προσκαλεσάμενος αὐτὸν ὁ κύριος αὐτοῦ λέγει αὐτῷ· δοῦλε πονηρέ, πᾶσαν τὴν ὀφειλὴν ἐκείνην ἀφῆκά σοι, ἐπεὶ παρεκάλεσάς με·

33 οὐκ ἔδει καὶ σὲ ἐλεῆσαι τὸν σύνδουλόν σου, ὥς καγὼ σὲ ἠλέησα;

34 καὶ ὀργισθεὶς ὁ κύριος αὐτοῦ παρέδωκεν αὐτὸν τοῖς βασανισταῖς ἕως οὗ ἀποδοῦναι πᾶν τὸ ὀφειλόμενον.

35 οὕτως καὶ ὁ πατήρ μου ὁ οὐράνιος ποιήσει ὑμῖν, ἐὰν μὴ ἀφῆτε ἕκαστος τῷ ἀδελφῷ αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ τῶν καρδιῶν ὑμῶν.

When he began to settle [accounts], one was brought in front of him, who owed him ten thousand talents.

Because he did not have [the money] to pay [him] back, the master ordered to sell him and his wife and his children and everything that he has, so that it would be paid back.

Kneeling, the slave begged him, saying: “Be patient with me, and I will pay back everything to you.”

The master, who felt pity for this slave, released him and he remitted him the debt.

Going out, this slave found one of his fellow slaves, who owed him hundred denarii, and after gripping him, he strangled him, saying: “Pay back what you owe me.”

Kneeling, his fellow slave begged him, saying: “Be patient with me, and I will pay it back to you.”

But he did not want it, and when he left, he threw him in jail, until he would have paid back that what he owed [him].

His fellow slaves, seeing what had happened, became very sad and they went to say their master everything that had happened.

When he had called him, his master said to him: “Evil slave, this entire debt I have remitted you, when you begged me:

And should you not have shown mercy to your fellow slave, just like I showed mercy to you?

And being angry his master gave him to the torturers, until he had paid back everything that he owed [him].

So also my heavenly father will do to you, when not every one of you will remit his brother from your heart.

One of the things that immediately draws our attention in the parable of The Unforgiving Slave is the enormous amount of money borrowed or administered by the slave. As many commentators have noticed, the sum of 10,000 talents is unbelievably large (the already huge sum of 1,000 *kor* from the parable above is worth approximately 50,000 shekel; 10,000 talents, however, amounts to 36,000,000 shekel!). Even the total amount of tax that was collected in ancient Judea (600 talents) could only account for a fraction of the money that is needed here.⁷⁶³ To solve this problem, John Duncan Derrett has suggested that the first slave is a tax-collecting minister of the king.⁷⁶⁴ However, I agree with Glancy that there is no reason to think that the δοῦλος here would

⁷⁶³ See, e.g., Bernard B. Scott, “The King’s Accounting: Matthew 18:23–34,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104, no. 3 (1985), 432, esp. note 17.

⁷⁶⁴ John D.M. Derrett, “The parable of the Unmerciful Servant,” in *Law in the New Testament*, ed. John D.M. Derrett (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1970), 33–35. Another possibility for reconstructing a credible story is by

not be a slave.⁷⁶⁵ Slaves fulfilled all kinds of roles and positions in antiquity, and a managerial slave who was responsible for huge sums of money is not impossible at all; a parallel could be formed by the slaves of the Roman imperial household (the *familia Caesaris*). But irrespective of the exact setting, it is clear that the parable of Matthew presupposes a wealthy and important *mise-en-scène*. It is also insightful to see, as Jennifer Glancy notices, that even a slave in a high position is vulnerable to corporeal punishment and cannot feel safe about his or her situation.⁷⁶⁶

Another remarkable feature of the parable is the slave sale. Although the parable of Matthew has often been described as an example of debt-slavery,⁷⁶⁷ I assert that this is not the appropriate term. Since the debtor was already a slave, the slave can only be sold to another owner.⁷⁶⁸ Furthermore, many commentators have noted that the sale of the slave and his family seems not to make sense because the sale would never compensate for the enormous loss of money the king has suffered.⁷⁶⁹ However, the slave sale could have had another purpose too. It might have served as a punishment for the slave: he will be separated from his wife and children, and/or forced to do heavier, even fatal, slave work (e.g., in the mines, which was a common penalty for criminal and/or runaway slaves).⁷⁷⁰ As such, the sale of the slave functions as a punishment: from a good master and a good position to a bad master and a lower position.

An often overlooked aspect of the parable I want to raise awareness for is the position of the slave woman and her children: while not being active figures in the story – the parable does not suggest any responsibility from their side for the behavior of their partner/father – they nonetheless are included in the king's initial penalty (and she and her children certainly will have suffered under their partner's/father's imprisonment with loss of status, protection and income – if not worse). Here, we see how a female slave and her children suffer from a double vulnerability – a phenomenon that could be addressed with the term intersectionality (see also section 5.4.1.1): even more than the male slave, who at least has been given the opportunity to defend himself, the female slave (and the same holds, in a slightly different way, for her children) has to cope with two barriers – that of being a slave and that of being a woman. As such, the female woman is enough person to suffer together with her family, but not enough person to be treated in her own right.⁷⁷¹ For the children an even enhanced lack of agency can be presupposed.

decreasing the number of talents; see Marinus C. de Boer, “Ten Thousand Talents? Matthew's Interpretation and Redaction of the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matt 18:23–35),” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50 (1988), 214–32.

⁷⁶⁵ Jennifer A. Glancy, “Slaves and Slavery in the Matthean Parables,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 119, no. 1 (2000), 85–86.

⁷⁶⁶ Glancy, “Slaves and Slavery,” 86–87.

⁷⁶⁷ E.g., Mary Ann Beavis, “Ancient Slavery as an Interpretive Context for the New Testament Servant Parables with Special Reference to the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1–8),” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111, no. 1 (1992), 39.

⁷⁶⁸ As noted by, e.g., Glancy, “Slaves and Slavery,” 86. For a comparable motive, see the parable in Sifre Deuteronomy 323 we discussed in section 4.2. There, God's handing over of the people of Israel to their enemies is compared to a king who sells a slave to his friend. In a parable in Sifre Numbers 115, this situation is reversed: God's liberation of Israel out of Egypt is compared to a king who buys a slave from a kidnapper (see section 4.4). In both cases, the transition is from one slave-owner to another, not from a status of freedom to slavery or vice versa.

⁷⁶⁹ “Given the average value of slaves in the ancient world, the selling of a family would not begin to pay back the debt owed (10,000 talents)” (William D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991], 2:799). Cf. Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 695; or Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 459.

⁷⁷⁰ See, e.g., Joan Burdon, “Slavery as a Punishment in Roman Criminal Law,” in *Slavery and Other Forms of Unfree Labour*, ed. Léonie Archer (London: Routledge, 1988), 68–85.

⁷⁷¹ Compare Jonathan Pater, Albertina Oegema and Martijn Stoutjesdijk, “It Is Like a Woman Who? Women in Early Rabbinic and Early Christian Parables,” in *Parables in Changing Contexts: Interreligious and Cultural Approaches to the Study of Parables*, ed. Eric Ottenheim and Marcel Poorthuis, Jewish and Christian Perspectives (Leiden: Brill, 2020), especially 253.

This brief discussion of the New Testament and the rabbinic parable above already shows that there are a lot of similarities and differences between the two parables.⁷⁷² A comparable feature of both stories is that they occur in treatments on forgiveness. Of course, the language of both parables is the same: money, huge debts, family, and – the main point of comparison between the two stories – the sale of the debtor and/or his family. There are differences too. In Sifre, the parable has a predominantly exegetical purpose and is connected to two biblical heroes, Moses and David. The story of Jesus is not part of exegesis but is told as a response to a concrete question in a bigger discourse on morality. As we have seen, we find an example of debt-induced slavery in Sifre, but in Matthew we “only” have a case of reselling. In the rabbinic parable, the children are being sold (where is the mother, and what will happen with the man?); in the New Testament, the whole family is threatened to be sold. And, of course, we have in the New Testament an extra figure, a second slave, who is not acquitted from his debt by the first slave. Finally, the applications of both stories seem to differ: in the New Testament parable, God is merciful to those who are merciful themselves; in the rabbinic parable, God demands atonement – even if that seems not the case at first sight. In all these respects, the plots of the two stories are divergent, but I allege that their core is the same: a king personifying God, debts representing sins, and debtors who are slaves or on the verge of becoming slaves.

4.3.3. Social Reality: Two “Image-Offering” Elements

To truly understand a *Bildfeld*, one has to be familiar with its image-offering domain (*bildempfangender Bereich*). In this section, we will explore the *Bildfeld* of slavery, as it presented itself in the two parables discussed above, by highlighting two of its constitutive elements: the practice of slave sale in Jewish antiquity, with special attention for the auction block, and the role of (professional) torturers in the way slaves were punished.

The question of whether and how the Jews kept slaves during the Second Temple period and thereafter has troubled many scholars over the past centuries. As we have discussed earlier, in section 2.2, Jewish scholars who wrote on the subject took a minimalist or even apologetic stance towards the issue of Jewish slavery. For example, in 1964, Solomon Zeitlin claimed that the Jewish slaves were actually bondsmen, and that “Judaea did not have *πρατής λιθος*, the stone upon which slaves were sold, which was common among other nations.”⁷⁷³ However, our text from Sifre Deuteronomy does speak about a “stone of sale,” or, less literally, an “auction block” (אבן המכר).⁷⁷⁴ It is, however, the only occurrence of the term in the early rabbinic corpus.⁷⁷⁵ With respect to the auction block, we might wonder whether there was a permanent place for that stone, and whether the stone was specifically designed for the purpose of selling slaves. In her book, *Graeco-Roman Slave Markets: Fact or Fiction?*, Monika Trümper asserts that it is practically impossible to find material evidence for permanent slave markets, and that “purpose-built slave markets were overall rare.”⁷⁷⁶ The rarity of permanent slave markets and the infrequent occurrence of the word for “auction block” in the rabbinic corpus makes its use here stand out. Is the idea behind it that the king in Sifre wants to get rid of his debtor in such an abrupt way that he has delivered his children to slave traders instead of selling them himself? Or does it belong to the *mise-en-scène* of the story? My hypothesis is that the socio-historical background of the parable imagined here is that of a big (possibly Roman) city and a powerful king, which would suit a (permanent) auction block.

⁷⁷² See also Hezser, “Rabbinische Gleichnisse,” 232–36.

⁷⁷³ Zeitlin, “Slavery during the Second Commonwealth and the Tannaitic Period,” 198.

⁷⁷⁴ Fiensy, *Christian Origins and the Ancient Economy*, 170: “Jeremias and Krauss note that slaves were sold on a special platform in Jerusalem,” with reference to Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus. An Investigation into Economic and Social Conditions during the New Testament Period*, transl. F.H. Cave and C.H. Cave (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969 [1962]), 36, 51; Samuel Krauss, *Talmudische Archäologie. Grundriss der Gesamtwissenschaft des Judentums* (Leipzig: Buchhandlung Gustav Fock, 1911), 2:362.

⁷⁷⁵ We do find the word in Yalqut Shimoni to Deuteronomy §810, but that passage depends on Sifre Deuteronomy. See Fraade, “Sifre Deuteronomy 26,” 281n99 (Fraade erroneously refers to §811). A more frequently used term is אבן הלקה, but that term can only be found in more recent works.

⁷⁷⁶ Monika Trümper, *Graeco-Roman Slave Markets: Fact or Fiction?* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2009), 15.



Figure 4.1: Slave sale on a tombstone; the slave is standing on a platform – either from wood or stone, Capua, late first century CE (G. Fittschen *Neg. D-DAI-Rom 1983VW1305*)⁷⁷⁷

The other phenomenon I would like to discuss is the fact that the unforgiving slave is handed over to torturers (τοῖς βασανισταῖς) in Matthew 18:34.⁷⁷⁸ Again, we come across a rather exceptional term in the parable; it is the only time that it is used in the New Testament and, again, it suggests the background of an important king and a big court (which is, as we have seen, in line with the great sums of money mentioned).⁷⁷⁹ In general, the beating of slaves was not unique in antiquity: slaves often received physical punishments – an issue on which we will elaborate in chapter 6. However, the case of the torturers (βασανισταί) deserves some attention here. Often, a penalty would be executed by the master himself (or by his own staff),⁷⁸⁰ but it was also possible to hire professionals. In Roman texts, such a professional torturer is called a *carnifex* or a *manceps*. In an inscription from Puteoli (first century CE), the responsibilities of the torturer are meticulously described:

In the case of those who wish to inflict punishment on a male or female slave privately the law prescribes the following for the one who wishes to inflict the punishment. In the case of crucifixion, the contractor (*manceps*) will provide the beams, chains and ropes for the punishment as well as the punishers themselves.⁷⁸¹

A parable from Tosefta Sotah 15:7 suggests the rabbis were familiar with several kinds of torturers as well:

They told a parable. To what can it be compared? To one who sinned in a city and he was handed over to a “lasher,”⁷⁸² and he lashed him (לרצען וריצעו). He was too difficult for the lasher, [and] he was handed over to the rod officer, and he struck him (לבעל זמורה וחבשו). He was too difficult for the rod officer [and] he was handed over to the centurion and he imprisoned him (לקטרוו וחבשו). He was too difficult for the centurion [and] he was handed over to the ruler and he threw him into the furnace (לשלטון והטילו בקמין). So also [it is with] Israel: their later troubles make them forget the earlier ones.⁷⁸³

Although it remains unclear whether the torturers from Matthew 18:34 are independent entrepreneurs or belong to the staff of the king, they are, in both cases, specialists. We might ask what the presence of those specialists tells us about the (meaning of the) parable. If we presume that the torturers in Matthew’s parable belong to the king’s staff, their presence might lend more credibility to our impression that the *mise-en-scène* of both parables

⁷⁷⁷ Joshel, *Slavery in the Roman World*, 98.

⁷⁷⁸ Although some dictionaries (e.g., Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, and Henry Stuart Jones. *A Greek-English Lexicon. With a Supplement*, 9th ed. [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996], s.v. βασανιστής, 309) also provide the possibility that a βασανιστής could refer to a jailor, the use of the word outside the New Testament corpus proves its identification as torturer (see Antiphon 1:11 and 5:32; Plutarch, *Moralia* 2:498d; Themistius, *Orationes* 21:247c; Demosthenes, *Orationes* 37:40).

⁷⁷⁹ The related verb occurs 17 times in the NT.

⁷⁸⁰ In the Roman novella *Satyricon*, the freed slave Trimalchio has two *tortores* on his staff (Petronius, *Satyricon* 49).

⁷⁸¹ Brian K. Harvey, *Daily Life in Ancient Rome: A Sourcebook* (Indianapolis: Focus, 2016), 116.

⁷⁸² Probably a flagellator (*quaestionarius*). See Notley and Safrai, *Parables of the Sages*, 82-83.

⁷⁸³ Translation MS. Hebrew text: Saul Lieberman, *The Tosefta. According to Codex Vienna, with Variants from Codex Erfurt, Genizah Mss. and Editio Princeps* (Venice 1521) (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1955-1988), 4:241.

presupposes a wealthy king. Also, from the perspective of the comparison between God and the king, the reference to torturers raises questions about the way God's judgment is executed. As we will see in chapter 6 more elaborately, punishments are often not executed by the king/master (=God) in the parables. A possible explanation might be found in a parable from Sifre Numbers 105 in which the relation between a father and his son is focalized, not the relation between a master and his slave. Here, the father wants to have his son chastised. However, not only is this punishment executed by an intermediary of the father – a pedagogue – but the father does not want to witness the punishment either. The parable is told as a response to Numbers 12:1-16 in which Miriam was made leprous because she (together with Aaron) complained about Moses' choices and leadership. The parable specifically seeks to explain the verses 9-10b: "And the anger of the Lord was kindled against them [i.e., Miriam and Aaron], and he [God] departed. When the cloud went away from over the tent, Miriam had become leprous, as white as snow." In the parable, God is compared to the mortal king with the cloud as his pedagogue.

A parable. It is like a king of flesh and blood who said to a tutor (pedagogue): "Punish my son (רדה את בני), but [only] after I go you should punish him, for the father has mercy on the son (מפני שרחמי האב על הבן)." [This is] an a fortiori argument: if God has mercy on the righteous at the moment he is angry [with them], all the more at the moment that he is pleased [with them], as it is said: *Thus says the Lord: "In a time of favor I have answered you."* (Isaiah 49:8).⁷⁸⁴

The fact that the father does not want to witness (and execute, we might add) the punishment of his son is explained from a perspective of mercy (רחם). Perhaps this is also the explanatory lens through which we should interpret the fact that the king or master in parables so rarely punishes his slaves himself. Then again, it might also simply be explained by the wish of the parable-tellers to stage these parables in the context of a high and mighty court, in which a king would not be expected to perform physical tasks himself.

4.3.4. *Bildfelder* and Hidden Transcript

One of the interesting facets of the comparison between the New Testament parable and the rabbinic parable is that both use the language of (borrowing) money to elucidate the concept of forgiving. This is not an innovation. According to Anderson, there was a tradition of the "systematic conceptualization of sin as debt in the exilic period and beyond."⁷⁸⁵ He sees Matthew's parable as the "best illustration of this sort of symbolism."⁷⁸⁶ Anderson also points to the fact that the Lord's Prayer employs the same vocabulary of debt (Matthew 6:12: "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors"). We find the same imagery in Sirach 28, especially verses 1 and 2: "The vengeful will face the Lord's vengeance, for he keeps a strict account of their sins. Forgive your neighbour the wrong he has done, and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray."

What the parable in Matthew also shares with the passages from Sirach and the Lord's Prayer is that they all emphasize the connection between God's forgiveness towards humans on the one hand (what we might call "vertical forgiveness") and humans forgiving each other on the other hand ("horizontal forgiveness"). All three texts stress that it is only when we forgive our neighbour that God is willing to forgive us (see also Matthew

⁷⁸⁴ Translation MS. Hebrew text: Haim S. Horovitz, *Sifrē 'al sefer Ba-midbar ve-Sifrē Zūṭa*, 2nd ed., Corpus Tannaiticum (Jerusalem: Wahrman Books, 1966), 103.

⁷⁸⁵ This description of Anderson's theory is from Tzvi Novick, "Forgiveness—III. Judaism—B. Rabbinic Judaism," *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception*, ed. Dale C. Allison et al., vol. 9 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2014), 443–46. See also Hans-Josef Klauck, "Heil ohne Heilung? Zu Metaphorik und Hermeneutik der Rede von Sünde und Vergebung im Neuen Testament," in *Sünde und Erlösung im Neuen Testament*, ed. Hubert Frankemölle (Freiburg: Herder, 1996), 29–32; and Beat Weber, "Schulden erstatten – Schulden erlassen. Zum matthäischen Gebrauch einiger juristischer und monetärer Begriffe," *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 83 (1992), 253–256. Weber speaks about "Das matthäische Interesse an 'monetärer' Ausdrucksweise" (254).

⁷⁸⁶ Gary A. Anderson, *Sin: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 32. Anderson seems to be unfamiliar with the parable of Sifre Deuteronomy. Another parable in which debt is connected to sin, and the cancellation of debts to forgiving, can be found in Luke 7:41–43.

5:23-24⁷⁸⁷). Although this notion does not play a central role in the rabbinic parable from Sifre Deuteronomy 26, it is attested in rabbinic thinking as well.⁷⁸⁸ Compare, for example, this parable from the Babylonian Talmud (b. Rosh Hashana 17b) that makes a distinction between “offences committed by a man against God” and “offences committed by a man against his fellow man.” The parable is ascribed to the tannaitic rabbi Yose the Priest:

Rabbi Yose the Priest joined her and said to her (i.e. the proselyte Bluria): “I will tell you a parable. To what can it be compared? To a man who lent to his fellow a *maneh* and he established for him a time [to return the money] before the king. And he swore on the life of the king [to return the money]. When the time approached, he did not pay the debt [and] he went to appease the king. But he (the king) said to him: ‘About my insult I forgive you, [but] go and appease your fellow.’ So also here. Here (i.e. one text): on sins between man and God (בעבירות שבין אדם למקום). There (i.e. another text): on sins between man and his fellow man (בעבירות שבין אדם לחבירו). [The text continues with a different explanation by Rabbi Akiva.] (Translation MS)

In the two parables we have discussed in this section (4.3), the *Bildfeld* of what Weinrich calls “Sündenschuld”⁷⁸⁹ is, in a natural way, connected to the other *Bildfeld* of slavery. As Anderson summarizes: “According to the logic of the metaphor [...] we are in danger of becoming debt-slaves when we sin. Should the act go uncorrected, then one will have to ‘pay’ for the ‘cost’ of the misdeed through the ‘currency’ of physical punishment.”⁷⁹⁰ However, when one remits the debts of one’s fellowman (Matthew 18) or pays one’s terms (Sifre Deuteronomy 26), “God is merciful and will remit the debt we owe.”⁷⁹¹

Finally, we could ask the question as to whether a hidden transcript can be traced in the two parables we have studied in this section. In this respect, two lines of inquiry can be followed: the role of the bystanders and the use of imperial language. Let us start with the bystanders. Remarkably, in both parables, a rather anonymous group occurs that sides with the king against the slave. In the parable from Sifre, this group is called “everyone” (הכל) and in the New Testament parable this group is formed by the “chorus” of fellow-slaves (συνδουλοῖς, v. 31). I purposely use the term “chorus” from classical theatre here because I think that there are similarities between these vaguely defined groups in the parables and the chorus in Greco-Roman plays. One of the possible roles of the ancient chorus is that of an ideal spectator or audience to which “the audience may measure its response.”⁷⁹² I believe this is the function of the anonymous groups in the parables. In a way, these two groups from Sifre and Matthew formulate the theological struggles of the general public: how could David be so loved by God when he was such a sinner as well? And is it fair that even the biggest sinner is shown mercy by God, even when that sinner is not merciful himself? The answers to the questions of these “parabolic choruses” are: God will bring judgment on sinners, even if we think that it is never going to happen (Sifre), and God will only forgive our (big) mistakes if we forgive the (small) injuries against ourselves (Matthew).

We continue now with the imperial language of both parables with a focus on the Matthean parable. For this interpretation, I am indebted to an article by Warren Carter.⁷⁹³ Carter’s analysis departs from the perspective

⁷⁸⁷ “So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.”

⁷⁸⁸ See Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages. The World and Wisdom of the Rabbis of the Talmud* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), especially 462-471; and Adolf Büchler, *Studies in Sin and Atonement in the Rabbinic Literature of the First Century* (New York, Ktav, 1967); and (in Dutch) Marcel Poorthuis and Theo de Kruijf, *Avinoe, Onze Vader. De joodse achtergronden van het Onze Vader* (Baarn: Adveniat, 2016), 135-139.

⁷⁸⁹ Harald Weinrich, “Münze und Wort. Untersuchungen an einem Bildfeld,” *Romanica. Festschrift für Gerhard Rohlfs*, ed. Heinrich Lausberg and Harald Weinrich (Halle: VEB Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1958), 517.

⁷⁹⁰ Anderson, *Sin: A History*, 32.

⁷⁹¹ Anderson, *Sin: A History*, 32.

⁷⁹² Albert Weiner, “The Function of the Tragic Greek Chorus,” *Theatre Journal* 32, no. 2 (1980), 206. Weiner, himself, does not support this theory. However, I agree with Robson that the function of an ideal audience is only one of the possible roles of the chorus (James Robson, *Aristophanes. An Introduction* [London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2009], 97-98).

⁷⁹³ Warren Carter, “Resisting and Imitating the Empire. Imperial Paradigms in Two Matthean Parables,” *Interpretation. Journal of Bible and Theology* 56, no. 3 (2002), 260-272, esp. 260-268.

that religion in antiquity was inherently connected to the political, social, and economic domains. To use the image of a king in this context – one of Roman oppression – is not an innocent choice. While God and Jesus have often, positively, been identified as kings by the text of Matthew (and of the New Testament as a whole for that matter), Carter argues that the king of Matthew 18:23-35 is the opposite of God. The *mise-en-scène* of a king counting his taxes (i.e., “means of transferring wealth from its producers to the political elite”⁷⁹⁴) is that of a “powerful elite” who “accumulate resources and wealth at the expense of the rest.”⁷⁹⁵ While the slave initially is forgiven his debt, this is not a model for God’s forgiveness, Carter claims. Instead, it serves the king’s self-interest. Selling the slave would not have solved the debt-issue, while forgiving him would make the slave even more “indebted” to the king and would preserve his expertise. So, it should be no surprise that the slave is not positively transformed by this act of forgiving: the slave immediately makes use of the underling that comes to him to reassert his authority. Although perhaps not clear on first sight, this action of the slave is still a form of imitation of the king by the slave, according to Carter:

Though the official’s imprisoning the lower-ranked slave seems to contradict the king’s treatment of him, both acts are quite similar. Both exert control. Both employ bullying tactics to secure power over another. The slave, who is to be tortured until he pays the amount (v. 30), will need agents to do so. Even more people will be intimidated and become indebted to the more powerful official. He has learned his lessons well from his imperial master!⁷⁹⁶

We could ask: why is the king then so angry about the slave’s behavior? Carter speculates that the “ruthless action” of the slave towards his underling might have shamed the king, whose earlier act of forgiveness might be perceived as an act of weakness in light of that of his slave.

Although I do not think that Carter is right in asserting that “[t]he king is not God” (compare verse 35: “So also my heavenly father will do to you” and compare section 6.3.6), I think he is right in pointing out (1) that the king is not a flawless model of forgiveness (why does he not forgive a second time, one might wonder⁷⁹⁷); and (2) that the parable breathes the imperial language of violence, extortion, and oppression. Thus, we end up with the paradox of using imperial language to propose the anti-imperial message of a world in which forgiveness is practically unending (v. 22). Similarly, the parable from Sifre Deuteronomy uses the image of a king, who is not as merciful as one could hope for – knowing that this king represents God. It is, however, relevant to see in this case that the selling of the children is no hyperbole or an example of imperial language, but is directly compared to the death of the son of David, as described in 2 Samuel 12:13-23. This makes me hesitant to wholeheartedly agree with Carter’s hidden transcript reading⁷⁹⁸ of the parable of The Unforgiving Slave. While I think that imperial language might have been purposefully used to create a tension with the kingdom of God, it is naïve and uncritical to assume that early Christian and rabbinic theology did not allow for God to be at times harsh, vengeful, and merciless. We will, however, come back to this issue repeatedly over the course of the next chapters.

⁷⁹⁴ Carter, “Resisting and Imitating the Empire,” 266.

⁷⁹⁵ Carter, “Resisting and Imitating the Empire,” 265.

⁷⁹⁶ Carter, “Resisting and Imitating the Empire,” 268.

⁷⁹⁷ As noticed by, e.g., Jeremias (*The Parables of Jesus*, 97), the parable does not seem to be a good illustration of the verses 21-22. However, Davies and Allison asserted that both units (21-22, 23-35) do not “teach precisely the same lesson” (Davies and Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 2:794), since verses 21-22 calls for repeated forgiveness and 23-35 reminds its audience that “failure to forgive is failure to act as the heavenly father acts.” While I concur that both units have different themes, they are, in my opinion, closely connected since “to act as the heavenly father acts” is to forgive repeatedly.

⁷⁹⁸ Carter does not make use of the terminology of the theory of hidden transcript.

4.4. Redeemed as a Slave⁷⁹⁹

In the fourth section of this chapter, we would like to advocate the use of Sifre Numbers 115 as a lens to explain Paul's slavery language. In the first part, we will discuss the parable from Sifre Numbers; in the second, we will show how this parable can be of use in understanding Paul's sometimes paradoxical use of slavery language.

4.4.1. Sifre Numbers 115

The parable that is the focus of attention in this section is situated in Sifre Numbers, chapter 115. Sifre Numbers is a halakhic midrash that is ascribed to the school of Rabbi Yishmael and can be dated to the second half of the third century.⁸⁰⁰ Our parable is part of a unit called Parasha Shelach (chapters 107–115), which discusses chapter 15 of the biblical book of Numbers. Sifre Numbers 115 deals with Numbers 15:37–41:

The Lord said to Moses: "Speak to the Israelites, and tell them to make fringes on the corners of their garments throughout their generations and to put a blue cord on the fringe at each corner. You have the fringe so that, when you see it, you will remember all the commandments of the Lord and do them, and not follow the lust of your own heart and your own eyes. So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and you shall be holy to your God. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: I am the Lord your God."

In Sifre Numbers 115, this biblical passage is completely dissected.⁸⁰¹ The length of the fringes is discussed, as is the question about which color exactly is meant by "blue." In section five of the chapter, the biblical passage is quoted again. Immediately after the biblical quote, the midrash asks the following question: "Another matter. Why remember the Exodus from Egypt at each and every commandment?"⁸⁰² The rabbis answer this question by telling a parable. Since the parable immediately follows the question, and a new issue is raised immediately afterwards, the parable with its application is the only answer the midrash gives to its question.

Translation (MS)

A parable. To what can it be compared? To a king whose friend's son was taken captive.

When he [the king] redeemed him, he did not redeem him as a free man, but as a slave, so that if he decreed something and he did not listen, he could say to him: "You are my slave."

When he entered a city, he said to him: "Put me my sandals on and carry [my] garments in front of me and bring [them] to the bathhouse."

When the son began to protest, he presented him with a document⁸⁰⁴ and he said to him: "You are my slave."

So, when the Holy One Blessed be He redeemed the offspring of his friend Abraham, he did not redeem them as sons, but as slaves,

so that if he issues decrees and they do not accept them, he can say to them: "You are my slaves."

When they entered the wilderness, he started to decree

Text⁸⁰³

משל למה הדבר דומה למלך שנשבה בן אוהבו

וכשפדאו לא פדאו לשום בן חורין אלא לשום עבד

שאם יגזור ולא יהיה מקבל עליו יאמר לו עבדי אתה

כיון שנכנס למדינה אמר לו נעול לי סנדליי וטול לפני כליהם להוליך לבית המרחץ

התחיל הבן ההוא מנתק הוציא עליו שטר ואמר לו עבדי אתה

כך כשפדה הקב"ה את זרע אברהם אוהבו לא פדאם לשום בנים אלא לשום עבדים

כשיגזור ולא יהיו מקבלים עליהם יאמר להם עבדי אתם

כיון שיצאו למדבר התחיל לגזור עליהם מקצת מצוות

⁷⁹⁹ This section is a (partly) rewritten version of my article, "God as Father and Master: Sons and Slaves in Sifre Numbers 115 and in the New Testament," *NTT Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion* 72, no. 2 (2018), 121–135.

⁸⁰⁰ See Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 267, and Kahana, "The Halakhic Midrashim," 87–90.

⁸⁰¹ Jacob Neusner is right in calling this chapter a "systematic exposition." Jacob Neusner, *Sifre to Numbers. An American Translation and Explanation*, Brown Judaic Studies (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 2:177.

⁸⁰² ד"א למה מזכירים יציאת מצרים על כל מצוה ומצוה

⁸⁰³ Text: Horovitz, *Sifre 'al sefer Ba-midbar ve-sifre zuta*, 127–128.

⁸⁰⁴ For this translation, see Friedman, "Contracts: Rabbinic Literature and Ancient Jewish Documents," 425, 428.

some light commandments and some heavier commandments, for example the Sabbath and forbidden sexual relations, fringes and phylacteries. When Israel began to protest, He said to them: “You are my slaves. On this condition I redeemed you, on the condition that I would decree and you would carry out.”

קלות ומקצת מצוות המורות כגון שבת ועריות ציצית ותפילין
התחילו ישראל להיות מנתקים אמר להם עבדיי אתם
על מנת כן פדיתי אתכם על מנת שאהיה גוזר ואתם מקיימים

As I will explain below, the theme of this parable is the reluctance of the friend's son to accept his role as a slave, and the master's insistence on his new slave's obedience. This becomes clear in obvious elements, such as the king saying to the friend's son that he is his slave, but also in more subtle points. I want to focus first on one of those subtle elements, namely, the formulation of the king's command: “Put me my sandals on and carry [my] garments in front of me and bring [them] to the bathhouse.” We find the same wording of a slave's duties in a Talmudic discussion on the rabbinic institution of *chazakah* (חזקה). Within the framework of *chazakah*, the possibility was acknowledged to acquire a slave by usucaption (in Roman law: *usucapio*), i.e., to gain ownership by making use of something or someone (often for a prescribed period of time; compare the Dutch “Recht van overpad” [“right of way”] and the phenomenon of “adverse possession”).⁸⁰⁵ In the Palestinian Talmud, tractate Qiddushin, we read how *chazakah* is performed:

What is possession (*chazakah*) of slaves? He tied his shoe for him, or untied his shoe, he carried [his garments] in front of him to the bath (נעלו לו והתיר לו מנעלו ונטל לפניו למרחץ) (y. Qiddushin 1:3, 59d)⁸⁰⁶

Without claiming that the parable is an example of *chazakah*, I want to note the similarities on a lexical level between the words of the king in Sifre and the first half of the Talmudic saying.⁸⁰⁷ Apparently, Sifre Numbers made use here of a well-known, formulaic enumeration of slave duties. Elsewhere in the Talmud, it becomes clear that the care for shoes and feet is the pivotal task of a slave.⁸⁰⁸ In Sifre Deuteronomy 355 we also find evidence for this in the following story:

When he came to his house, he called his slavegirl (לשפחה) [and] he said to her: “Come and wash our feet (בואי ורחצי את רגלינו).” She filled a bowl with oil and washed their feet, [thus] establishing what is said: *and may he dip his foot in oil* (Deuteronomy 33:24).⁸⁰⁹

Traces of the importance of the care for shoes and feet can be found in the New Testament too. We may recall what John the Baptist says about Jesus in Mark 1:7: “I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.”⁸¹⁰ Moreover, both in the New Testament and in other ancient sources, the ultimate slave duty was the washing of feet. The resistance of Peter against Jesus' washing his feet in John 13 should be explained by the overtly servile character of the deed.⁸¹¹ Jesus was aware of this when he says after the feet-washing: “Very truly,

⁸⁰⁵ See, e.g., Du Plessis, *Borkowski's Textbook on Roman Law*, 192 (with reference to *Dig* 41.10.3); cf. Catherine Hezser, “Slavery and the Jews,” in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery*, ed. Keith R. Bradley and Paul Cartledge, vol. 1, *The Ancient Mediterranean World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, 443. For modern laws on usucaption, see, for example, the 2006 report by the British Institute of International and Comparative Law on Adverse Possession, accessed January 2, 2018, https://www.biicl.org/files/2350_advposs_sep_ftnsv3.pdf.

⁸⁰⁶ Parallel t. Qiddushin 1:3. Translation: MS.

⁸⁰⁷ The similarities are even clearer in the text of the Babylonian Talmud (b. Qiddushin 22b).

⁸⁰⁸ See, for example, Hezser, “The Social Status of Slaves,” 134 (esp. note 213). See e.g. y. Yevamot 13:2, 13c; b. Ketubbot 96a; b. Qiddushin 22b; Mekhilta Nezikin 1:56-63 (with a difference between Hebrew and non-Hebrew slaves).

⁸⁰⁹ Translation: MS. Hebrew text: Finkelstein and Horovitz, *Sifre on Deuteronomy*, 421.

⁸¹⁰ Cf. Luke 15:22 (the Parable of the Prodigal Son): “But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe – the best one – and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.’”

⁸¹¹ Compare the washing of the feet of Jesus in Luke 7:36–38 and John 12:3. Cf. *Joseph and Aseneth* 20. See also Shane A. Baker, “Loosing a Shoe Latchet: Sandals and Footwear in the First Century,” in *Masada and the World of the New Testament* 36, no. 3 (1996), 197-99.

I tell you, slaves are not greater than their master” (13:16). That taking care of the feet belonged to the traditional tasks of slaves in the ancient Mediterranean world is also shown in Greek and Roman texts,⁸¹² and when the washing of the feet was not performed by slaves, it was worth mentioning for the Romans.⁸¹³

What might be puzzling, however, is why the king in the parable in Sifre orders his slave to do so. Is he trying to convince his friend’s son of his new status as a slave? Why is that necessary? Apparently, the status of the son of the king’s friend was open to debate. Hence, we will discuss his status somewhat more elaborately here.

The son of the king’s friend probably did not originate from a family of slaves, for a king would normally not have friends among slaves. Moreover, the son was not enslaved (העביר), but captured (נשבה). What kind of situation did the parable teller envision here? The *crux interpretum* is formed by the remark that the king did not redeem him (פדא) as a free man, but as a slave (לשום עבד). To understand the parable, we consult the Mishnah, tractate Gittin 4:4:

[If] a slave was taken captive and they (others) redeemed him, (if they redeem him) like a slave – he must remain a slave, (if they redeem him) like a free man – he should not remain a slave. Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel says: “In either case he must remain a slave.”

עבד שנישבה ופדאוהו לשום עבד ישת⁸¹⁴ עבד לשם בן חורין לא ישתעבד רבן שמעון בן גמליא' אמ' בין כך ובין כך ישתעבד⁸¹⁵

The situation described here is that of the kidnapping of a slave by bandits (see also 4.1.3). The slave is redeemed by someone who is not his owner. The Mishnah lays down as a rule that when that third party redeems him as a slave, he should go back to slavery, and when he is redeemed as a free man, he should go free (לשום עבד ישתעבד לשם בן חורין לא ישתעבד). Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel disagrees with the majority opinion presented in the Mishnah; he states that in both cases, the captured person should go back to slavery. In the Babylonian Talmud, the following rationale for this opinion is ascribed to him: “So that each and every slave should not go and hand himself over to robbers and [so] release himself from his master’s hand (כך ישתעבד שלא יהא כל אחד ואחד הולך ומפיל) (עצמו לגייסות ומפקיע עצמו מיד רבו)” (b. Gittin 37b; translation MS). If we follow this explanation, Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel apparently anticipated the possibility that slaves would speculate on a redemption as free man and, therefore, would want to be kidnapped. However, in our parable, the situation is the opposite of the one described in the Mishnah – that of an original free man who is redeemed as a slave. Was that even possible?

To answer this question, we turn to other ancient sources, since the rabbinic discussion ties in to a broader discussion in the Mediterranean world about the status of liberated captives. According to Roman law, the liberated captive regained the status he or she had before imprisonment – whether a slave or a free person.⁸¹⁶ However, when the captive is freed by a third party, problems arise.⁸¹⁷ Catherine Hezser argues that the Roman and Byzantine legal systems were complex and uncertain on this point.⁸¹⁸ Some Roman laws indicate that redemption of a captured free person by a third party led to a continuation of the captured person’s state of slavery, but now because the ransomer had a lien on him/her. In this case, the captive became (at least *de facto*) the slave of the one who had ransomed him/her.⁸¹⁹ It is exactly this situation that we find in Sifre Numbers 115:

⁸¹² In the Roman world, this is, for example, attested in writings on the walls of Pompeii (CIL IV 7698a–c: “Let water wash your feet clean and a slave wipe them dry”; transl. Alison E. Cooley and Melvin G.L. Cooley, *Pompeii: A Sourcebook* [London: Routledge, 2004], D80), cf. Martial, *Epigrammata* 14.65. For some Greek examples, see Herodotus, *Historiae* 6.19; *Odyssea* 19.386 and *Vita Aesopi* 61. As Thomas puts it: “Footwashing could be used as a synonym for slavery.” John C. Thomas, *Footwashing in John 13 and the Johannine Community* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 46.

⁸¹³ Plutarch, *Pompei viri illustris vita* 73.7.

⁸¹⁴ In the manuscript the word ישת is doubled.

⁸¹⁵ Translation: MS. Hebrew text: Manuscript Kaufmann (folio 109v).

⁸¹⁶ Buckland, *The Roman Law of Slavery*, 292 (with reference to the, admittedly late, *Codex Theodosianus* 5.7.1)

⁸¹⁷ “It remains to consider how far these rights [i.e., of a formerly free person] are suspended in the case of redemption for a price, by a third party” (Buckland, *The Roman Law of Slavery*, 311). Cf. Hezser, “Der Loskauf von Sklaven und Kriegsgefangenen im antiken Judentum,” 13; Youval Rotman, *Byzantine Slavery and the Mediterranean World*, transl. Jane Marie Todd (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 29ff.

⁸¹⁸ Hezser, “Der Loskauf von Sklaven und Kriegsgefangenen im antiken Judentum,” 13.

⁸¹⁹ Buckland, *The Roman Law of Slavery*, 311–317.

a person – the son – who was free before his kidnapping, but was ransomed as a slave by the king. According to Philo, such an originally free person, who was kidnapped or captured, could never be considered a slave:

Again, anyone who thinks that people put up for sale by kidnappers thereby become slaves goes utterly astray from the truth. Selling does not make the purchaser a master, nor the purchased a slave (οὐ γὰρ ἡ πρᾶσις ἢ κύριον ἀποφαίνει τὸν πριάμενον ἢ τὸν παθόντα δοῦλον). Fathers pay a price for their sons and sons often for their fathers if they have been carried off in raids or taken prisoners in war, and that such persons are free men is asserted by the laws of nature which have a more solid foundation than those of our lower world.⁸²⁰

Despite Philo's bold statement (or because of that statement – which was apparently necessary), this parable seems to imply that it was possible to ransom people as slaves, even when they were free before.

If this is the situation imagined here, it might not be surprising that the friend's son has to get used to his new status and even dares to protest explicitly against the king. Was it normal that slaves would protest against the orders of their masters? Obviously not. Having said that, we should be aware that resistance by slaves against their owners was ubiquitous in antiquity. Keith Bradley indicates that resistance can take all kinds of forms, from laziness and inertia to overt violence, like in the famous slave revolts.⁸²¹ Also, in ancient literature we find plenty examples of indocile slaves who start discussions with their masters. For example, in *Vita Aesopi* we observe the following scene:

And he [Aesop] came in with his chains on.
Xanthus said, "Turn him loose."
Aesop said: "I don't want to be turned loose."
Xanthus: "But I am turning you loose so that you may give me a solution."
Aesop: "Then you're turning me loose for your own interest, are you?"
Xanthus said: "Stop it, Aesop!"⁸²²

Moreover, the fact that a (presumably) formerly free person is enslaved in our parable might have had its impact on the way their (justified?) protest would have been perceived in antiquity. Becoming enslaved would have been the worst and most dreaded thing for a free Roman. In Roman literature, this anxiety was, as Fitzgerald states, "among the most maligned of literary plot devices."⁸²³ The obsession with this motif shows that the enslavement of free people formed one of the core anxieties of the Roman populace.⁸²⁴ As Tuplin concluded concerning Greek *poleis*: "Fear of slavery is a defining feature for the political culture of the classical city-state – perhaps the defining feature [...] The individual knows that, if enslaved, he will be denied all the aspirations and avocations that characterize his life."⁸²⁵ From this perspective of the "fear of enslavement,"⁸²⁶ the response of the son in our parable might have been benignly received by an ancient audience, while this audience normally

⁸²⁰ Philo, *Quod Omnis Probus Liber Sit* 6.37 (LCL 363, 33).

⁸²¹ See Keith R. Bradley, *Slavery and Rebellion in the Roman World 140 B.C.-70 B.C.* (Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989).

⁸²² *Vita Aesopi* 83. Translation: Lloyd W. Daly, "The Aesop Romance," in *Anthology of Ancient Greek Popular Literature*, ed. William Hansen (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 147.

⁸²³ William Fitzgerald, *Slavery and the Roman Literary Imagination*, Roman Literature and its Contexts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 93; see also J. Albert Harrill, "The Vice of Slave Dealers in Greco-Roman Society: The Use of a Topos in 1 Timothy 1:10," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 118, no. 1 (1999), 97-122. That this "plot device" has not lost its power in modern times is shown by the 2013 movie, *12 Years a Slave*, which tells the true story of the free African-American man Solomon Northup who was kidnapped and sold as a slave in 1841.

⁸²⁴ See Anastasia Serghidou, ed., *Fear of Slaves, Fear of Enslavement in the Ancient Mediterranean – Peur de l'Esclave – Peur de l'Esclavage en Mediterranee Ancienne (Discours, représentations, pratiques)* (Besançon: Presse Université de Franche-Comté, 2007).

⁸²⁵ Christopher Tuplin, "Fear of Slavery and the Failure of the Polis," in *Fear of Slaves, Fear of Enslavement in the Ancient Mediterranean – Peur de l'Esclave – Peur de l'Esclavage en Mediterranee Ancienne (Discours, représentations, pratiques)*, ed. Anastasia Serghidou (Besançon: Presse Université de Franche-Comté, 2007), 68.

⁸²⁶ Cf. Serghidou, ed., *Fear of Slaves*.

would have been inclined to oppress such behavior with brutal force.⁸²⁷ Notice how the king responds to the impertinence of his new slave – not by threats, but by showing him a document that probably served as proof of the sale.⁸²⁸ In this way, the king convinces the slave of his status.

This brings us to the application of the parable: “So, when the Holy One Blessed be He redeemed the offspring of his friend Abraham, he did not redeem them as sons, but as slaves.” What is interesting here is the way sonship and slavery are connected (see also above, section 4.1.2).⁸²⁹ Slaves and sons are often mentioned together in parables,⁸³⁰ and there are parables that have two variants, one with sons and one with slaves.⁸³¹ As Catherine Hezser has put it: “These parables show that the father-son and master-slave relationships provided forceful images which could be used to illustrate the various facets of God’s relationship with Israel.”⁸³² The positions of slave and son share a number of features, since they are both under the *potestas* of the head of the household in Roman law (*patria potestas* in the case of children, *dominica potestas* in the case of slaves).⁸³³ They are dependent on the leader of the household and cannot manage their own finances; nor can they decide their own future. Compare the following quote from Philo:

But parents have not only been given the right of exercising authority over their children, but the power of a master (δεσποτεῖαν) corresponding to the two primary forms under which servants [or slaves, θεραπόντων] are owned, one when they are home-bred, the other when they are purchased.⁸³⁴

However, sons probably had more room to disobey or disagree with their fathers than slaves would have had.⁸³⁵ Moreover, things would change over time for the sons: the son would build his own family, inherit his father’s belongings and, eventually, succeed his father as the master of the family.⁸³⁶ The only way for slaves to escape their owner’s power was to buy their freedom – which was in many cases not possible or not allowed.

Expositions playing on the difference between sons and slaves can be found in rabbinic literature as well as in the New Testament.⁸³⁷ A very relevant passage in this regard is the way Paul discusses the change over time in the status of slave and son in Galatians 4:1–7.⁸³⁸ Paul states that “we” are originally not different

⁸²⁷ In Plautus’ comedies, we find many examples of slaves who are (threatened to be) beaten because they talk back to their master. Cf. *Rudens* 1401–1402, *Amphitryo* 1030.

⁸²⁸ For another parable in which the receipt of the sale of slaves plays a role, see Genesis Rabbah 2:1.

⁸²⁹ Also take notice of the fact that both parable and application use the same words: the offspring of Abraham are not *like* slaves of God, they *are* slaves of God, just like the friend’s son *is* a slave of the king.

⁸³⁰ A few examples of slaves and sons mentioned together: Sifre Numbers 94, Sifre Deuteronomy 38 and 40 (//Midrash Tannaim 11:12). An example of a New Testament parable in which the difference between sons and slaves is thematized: Mark 12:1–12//Matthew 21:33–44//Luke 20:9–18//Thomas 65.

⁸³¹ E.g., Sifre Zuta 10:35 (slave) and Sifre Numbers 84 (friend).

⁸³² Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 351. Elsewhere in the same book, Hezser writes that “in both rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity both images, that of the merciful father and that of the authoritative master were two sides of the same coin” (idem, 352).

⁸³³ E.g., *Digesta* 50.16.215.

⁸³⁴ Philo, *De specialibus legibus* 2.233 (LCL 341, 453).

⁸³⁵ Compare Matthew 21:28–32 (Parable of the Two Sons) to Luke 17:7–10, esp. 9 (Parable of the Master and the Slave).

⁸³⁶ Peter Garnsey, “Sons, Slaves – and Christians,” in *The Roman Family in Italy. Status, Sentiment, Space*, ed. Beryl Rawson and Paul Weaver (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 101–122.

⁸³⁷ Cf. Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 350–356; Sam Tsang, *From Slaves to Sons: A New Rhetoric Analysis on Paul’s Slave Metaphors in His Letter to the Galatians*, Studies in Biblical Literature 81, New York: Peter Lang, 2005; Garnsey, “Sons, Slaves – and Christians.” Also notice that the Greek *παῖς* (and its Roman counterpart *puer*) could be used both for sons and slaves (compare the use of the word “boy” for slaves in the American context). Cf. J. Edmondson, “Slavery and the Roman Family,” in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery*, ed. Keith R. Bradley and Paul Cartledge, vol. 1, *The Ancient Mediterranean World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 337–361, 357.

⁸³⁸ “My point is this: heirs, as long as they are minors, are no better than slaves, though they are the owners of all the property; but they remain under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father. So with us; while we were minors, we were enslaved (δεδουλωμένοι) to the elemental spirits of the world. But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so

from slaves (4:1) because we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world (4:3: τα στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου). But the arrival of God's Son redeemed (ἐξαγοράσθη) us from our slavery of the law and turned us – by means of adoption – into sons (4:5), and as sons we are heirs of God's kingdom (4:7).⁸³⁹

It is very clear that our parable from Sifre Numbers does not take the route of Galatians. It is precisely because a son has, in the end, more autonomy than a slave, that God did not liberate the Israelites as sons but as slaves. As Hezser puts it: “The assumption [of the parable] is that the master has more power over the slave than the father over the son.”⁸⁴⁰ God wants the Israelites to listen to and obey his commands. The application of the parable even states that the obedience of Israel was the “only condition” on which God redeemed them from Egypt. The motivation for this condition is that when Israel starts to protest, God can say: “You are my slaves.” This exact same tension – between the designation of the people of Israel as slaves and as sons – is addressed in the Babylonian Talmud by the use of two parables, situated in a tannaitic context. The conclusion of both parables is: “At the moment that you carry out the will of God, you are called ‘sons’ and at the moment that you do not carry out the will of God, you are called ‘slaves.’”⁸⁴¹

The idea that Israel is liberated from Egypt as slaves can be found in the Torah as well. The best scriptural proof for this might be Exodus 4:23, in which God says: “Let my son [i.e., Israel] go so he may serve (וַיַּעֲבֹדֵנִי) me.”⁸⁴² The redemption from Egypt's service also serves as a legitimation for God's disapproval of “worldly” slavery: “For they are *my* slaves, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves are sold” (Leviticus 25:42, italics MS). John Byron speaks in this context of the “paradox of the Exodus imagery” – that the Israelites were freed to serve God.⁸⁴³ As he analyzes in his book, *Slavery Metaphors in Early Judaism and Pauline Christianity*: “The image of enslavement in Egypt is sometimes contrived of as a cruel domestic slavery that ends with manumission at the hand of Israel's victorious God. This is not the case, however. Rather it is the image of a people oppressed by a king who refuses to release those he has enslaved to the state so that they might serve another king. The episode in Egypt is not about the manumission of Israel *but a change of master*.”⁸⁴⁴ This also forms the answer to the question that evoked the parable: “Why remember the Exodus from Egypt at each and every commandment?” The answer to that question is: “Because obedience to the commandments is a direct consequence of the Exodus.”

that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ *So you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son then also an heir, through God* (ὥστε οὐκέτι εἰ δοῦλος ἀλλ’ υἱός· εἰ δὲ υἱός, καὶ κληρονόμος διὰ θεοῦ.).” (NRSV with adaptations; italics MS)

⁸³⁹ Garnsey correctly notices that Paul elsewhere does imply that slaves and sons are comparable (Garnsey, “Sons, Slaves – and Christians,” 106–107).

⁸⁴⁰ Cf. Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 352.

⁸⁴¹ Bava Batra 10a. Translation MS. The two parables read in my translation: “I (i.e., Turnuf Rufus) will tell you a parable. ‘To what can it be compared? To a king of flesh and blood who was angry with his slave and detained him in the prison house and he ordered about him that he should not be given food or drink. And one man went and gave him food and drink. If the king heard [this], would he not be angry with him? And you are called slaves, as it is said: *For to me the people of Israel are slaves* (Leviticus 25:55, עֲבָדִים בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל עָבְדִים).’ Rabbi Akiva said to him: ‘I will tell you a[nother] parable. To what can it be compared? To a king of flesh and blood who was angry with his son and he detained him in the prison house and he ordered about him that he should not be given food or drink. And one man went and gave him food and drink. If the king heard [this], would he not send a gift to him? And we are called sons, as it is written: *You are sons of the Lord your God* (Deuteronomy 14:1, בָּנִים אַתֶּם לַיהוָה).’ The context of these parables is the question whether the charity of the Jewish people condemns them or saves them. See also Pesiqta Rabbati 27 (28):3.

⁸⁴² Translation MS. Cf. Leviticus 25:55.

⁸⁴³ John Byron, *Slavery Metaphors in Early Judaism and Pauline Christianity. A Traditio-Historical and Exegetical Examination*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe, 162 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 197. Compare 1 Corinthians 6:20: “For you were bought with a price [ἡγοράσθητε γὰρ τιμῆς]; therefore glorify God in your body” and 7:23 “You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of human masters.” See also Jon D. Levenson, “Exodus and Liberation,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 13, no. 1 (1991), 158, who speaks about “a movement from one form of slavery to another.”

⁸⁴⁴ Byron, *Slavery Metaphors in Early Judaism and Pauline Christianity*, 48.

4.4.2. Romans 6

As I have indicated earlier, I think that the parable from Sifre can be very helpful in understanding slavery metaphors and language in the New Testament writings.⁸⁴⁵ In the previous section, we briefly discussed a passage from Galatians 4 in which Paul explained that because of the redemption by Christ, we are no longer slaves but sons and heirs. Paul's creative use of the slavery metaphor becomes visible in a passage from the Letter to the Romans that has a rather different message. In Romans 6:20–22 we read:

When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness (ὅτε γὰρ δοῦλοι ἦτε τῆς ἁμαρτίας, ἐλεύθεροι ἦτε τῇ δικαιοσύνῃ). So what advantage did you then get from the things of which you now are ashamed? The end of those things is death. But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God (νυνὶ δὲ ἐλευθερωθέντες ἀπὸ τῆς ἁμαρτίας δουλωθέντες δὲ τῷ θεῷ), the advantage you get is sanctification.

I would like to argue that this passage from Romans 6 closely resembles the situation we have found in the parable from Sifre Numbers 115. At first, the Romans were already slaves (v. 20), namely, slaves of sin. They were captured, so to say, by evil forces. We may compare this to the friend's son in Sifre Numbers 115 who was enslaved by his kidnappers. However, after the ransoming by Jesus, "they" (the Romans) have been freed from sin *and enslaved again* (v. 22), but now by God, just like the son in Sifre was freed from his kidnappers but enslaved by his "liberator." So, the Roman Christians are not really free since they still have a master.⁸⁴⁶ A later Christian parable (simile) from John Chrysostom (347-407), Fragment on 1 Peter 1:18-21a, may be illustrative for this way of thinking.⁸⁴⁷

One could wonder whether this transfer from one master to another (from sins to God, or from Egypt to God) is an improvement. To answer this question, I would like to circle back to the rabbinic discussion about the liberation of slaves from robbers. From the Talmud, we learn that Shimon ben Gamliel was of the opinion that it is a religious duty to ransom both free people and slaves.⁸⁴⁸ The primary rationale for this was that it is only possible to be a devout Jew as a free person in Israel or, for a slave, under a Jewish master, also preferably in Israel.⁸⁴⁹ In this line of thinking, a Jewish master is always better than another master, since only in a Jewish

⁸⁴⁵ As Francis Lyall already noticed in 1984, many commentators do not see the difference between metaphors of purchasing a slave and redeeming a slave: "Of course, most of the references in the Epistles to purchase definitely include the concept of redemption, but this is quite a different legal notion from the idea of the purchase of a slave. Unfortunately, many modern commentators fail to distinguish between the two metaphors. The redemption of an individual who was up for sale in a slave market was quite possible, but that does not mean that the person involved was a slave [...] we ought to keep redemption and the transfer of a slave following a sale quite separate." Francis Lyall, *Slaves, Citizens, Sons. Legal Metaphors in the Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1984), 39.

⁸⁴⁶ Byron, *Slavery Metaphors in Early Judaism and Pauline Christianity*, 197. Cf. John K. Goodrich, "From Slaves of Sin to Slaves of God: Reconsidering the Origin of Paul's Slavery Metaphor in Romans 6," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 23, no. 4 (2013), 509–530. Elsewhere in the New Testament, different images and solutions can be found. Compare John 15:15: "I do not call you slaves any longer, because the slave does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father." (NRSV with adaptations)

⁸⁴⁷ The text of the passage is as follows: "A simile: A good master sold (ἀποδοῖτο) a bad slave to a harsh ruler who should punish him. When the master saw that the chastised slave wanted to return to him, he bought him back (ἐξαγοράζει). In this way God reacquired (ἀνακτᾶται) us after the devil had first acquired (κτᾶται) us for the price of our sins; this means that sins authorized the devil to acquire mankind." See for the text and a discussion of the text Riemer Roukema, "The Metaphor of Being Bought at a Price (1 Cor. 6:20; 7:23) in Ancient Christian Interpretation," (forthcoming). Notice how in this simile, in contrast to our parable from Sifre Numbers 115, the slave never has been free, but goes from a good to a bad, and back to a good master. So, in this simile there is no moment of freedom imagined at all.

⁸⁴⁸ y. Gittin 4:4, 45d: "'Rabban Simeon ben Gamliel says, in any case he shall serve (as a slave - ישתעבד); just as Israel is obligated to redeem (לפדות) free persons so they are obligated to redeem slaves.' [...] Halakhah (הלכה) is according to Rabban Simeon ben Gamliel." Cf. b. Gittin 37b.

⁸⁴⁹ Compare the opinion of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi in b. Bekhorot 3a: "He who sells his slave to a gentile, they (i.e., the Sages) fine him up to hundred times [his value]. A slave is different, as each day hinders him from [doing his] mitzvot (מצוות) ליה מפקע ויומא ויומא דכל יומא עבד דכל יומא עבד דכל יומא עבד דכל יומא עבד" (Translation MS).

context can the keeping of commandments be safeguarded. Similarly, being enslaved to God is not a bad condition according to Paul, since it comes with great advantages (like sanctification), while being enslaved to sin only brings you death.

It is worthwhile to take a look at social reality again. In a recent book on Romans, Petra von Gemünden and Gerd Theissen observe that manumitted slaves in antiquity were not really free. As former slaves, *liberti*, they still had obligations towards their former masters. Only when slaves were bought by another master were they completely free from obligations towards their former masters.⁸⁵⁰ Paradoxically, for slaves in the ancient world, true freedom from the power of one's master lay only in the power of a new master. Therefore, Theissen and Von Gemünden argue that underlying the concept of slavery, we find the ancient view that human existence is always determined by all kinds of forces.⁸⁵¹ It is this way of thinking that governs the metaphorical language of both early rabbinic and early Christian thought. Freedom is not so much to be found in autonomy as it is in the protection of a good ruler. Likewise, with respect to the Letter to the Romans, Dale B. Martin writes: "In Rom. 6:20–23, Paul can speak of slavery to God as the positive counterpart to slavery to sin by contrasting the returns or benefits of slavery to one master, sin, with those of slavery to a better master, God."⁸⁵² To conclude this part of my analysis, it should be observed that the Letter to the Romans also contains different metaphorical language. In Romans 8, the image is different from Romans 6 and comes close to that of Galatians. In 8:15a, we read: "For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption." While the image here is different (instead of a transition from one master to another, the transition is from slavery to sonship), this passage shows again how slavery is associated with fear (of punishment, which relates to obedience; compare chapter 6), while adoption is without the same kind of fear. The precise relationship between the metaphor of Romans 8 and Romans 6 is difficult to decipher, but it seems that Romans 8 is written from an eschatological perspective: according to Romans 8:23, adoption is something "we wait for" (υιοθεσίαν ἀπεκδεχόμενοι), while, according to Romans 6:22, the enslavement to God has already happened: "now [...] you have been enslaved to God" (νυνὶ δὲ [...] δουλωθέντες δὲ τῷ θεῷ).

Finally, we should discuss whether a hidden transcript-analysis opens up new interpretations of the parable from Sifre Numbers 115 and the passage in Romans 6. From such a perspective, it is striking to notice how being enslaved to God does not lead to freedom. Instead, it is emphasized that enslavement to God means, in the words of Vogt, "utter subjection" to God.⁸⁵³ According to Romans 6:22, this subjection has its benefits: the advantage of being enslaved to God is sanctification. In the parable of Sifre Numbers, it is not even entirely certain whether the slave benefits from his transfer of master at all. However, what is of interest for a hidden transcript reading of the parable is that Sifre Numbers seems to put to the test the right of God to act like a slave-owner. The parable does so by allowing the friend's son, the brand-new slave, to voice a protest towards his new master. We ought to realize that this protest should be read against the background of the Exodus-story, in which the people of Israel, on a few occasions, also protest against God's decisions and care (cf., e.g., Numbers 11 and 14:1-2, 21:4-5; Exodus 5, 14:11-12, 15:22, 16:1-3, 17:1-4). These protests in the Exodus-story are not seen as legitimate or justified, but merely as disobedience and as a lack of faith on behalf of the Israelite people. Perhaps the intertextuality with the Exodus story suggests that the protest of the friend's son in Sifre Numbers should be considered likewise.⁸⁵⁴ Nonetheless, it is relevant that the writer(s) of Sifre Numbers 115 did take up this element

⁸⁵⁰ "Denn nur wenn ein neuer Herr den Sklaven gekauft hat, ist der Sklave ganz und gar von seinem vormaligen Herrn frei und von da ab ganz und gar seinem neuen Herrn verpflichtet: Als Sklaven der Sünde waren die AdressatInnen frei gegenüber der Gerechtigkeit (6,20), jetzt – befreit von der Sünde – sind sie Sklaven Gottes und nur diesem verpflichtet." In Gerd Theissen and Petra von Gemünden, *Der Römerbrief. Rechenschaft eines Reformators* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016), 175. See also Rachel Zelnick-Abramovitz's study *Not Wholly Free. The Concept of Manumission and the Status of Manumitted Slaves in the Ancient Greek World*, Mnemosyne (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

⁸⁵¹ Theissen and Von Gemünden, *Der Römerbrief*, 164.

⁸⁵² Dale B. Martin, *Slavery as Salvation. The Metaphor of Slavery in Pauline Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University, 1990), 62.

⁸⁵³ Joseph Vogt, *Ancient Slavery and the Ideal of Man*, transl. Thomas Wiedermann (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 143.

⁸⁵⁴ P. J. Johnson, "The Murmuring Tradition: A Paradigm for Every Age," *Indian Journal of Theology* 38, no. 1 (1996), 27. For a full study of these complaints see e.g. David Frankel, *The Murmuring Stories of the Priestly School, A Retrieval of Ancient Sacerdotal Lore*, Vetus Testamentum, Supplements 89 (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

from the Exodus story in the parable, even more so given the fact that an ancient audience probably would have sympathized with the friend's son. This might have led to tension in the minds of the ancient audience: with whom should they sympathize? Since the parable allows for these kinds of feelings and doubts, it might have opened up a discursive space in which the authority and order that the slave-owner represents, as well as the theology that follows from it, is held under scrutiny.

To sum up, in this section, we have come across the competing metaphors “father-son” and “master-slave” in a parable from Sifre Numbers 115. We have established that, in this parable, the metaphor of slavery is preferred over that of sonship, since the parable underscores the unconditional obedience of the people of Israel towards its God. We have also seen how the parable of Sifre Numbers opens up surprising perspectives on the Exodus from Egypt, in which the interpretation of the Exodus as a transition from a bad master to a good master trumps the well-known interpretation of the Exodus as liberation. These insights have proven to be useful for the study of New Testament slavery metaphors too, since both the parable in Sifre Numbers and Romans 6:20-22 express the same, ancient view that freedom can only be found in the protection by a good ruler. One should not try to escape such protection or, as Josephus puts it: “shall we fly from the best of masters (κάλλιστον δεσπότην), from God Himself, and not be deemed impious?”⁸⁵⁵

4.5. Reflection and *Bildfeld*

BILDFELD 1: Selling and Buying Slaves

Creditor – <i>God</i>	Contract – <i>Covenant/ commandments</i>	Debt (δάνειον, ὀφειλή//יכשכ) – <i>Sins</i>	Payback (ἀποδίδωμι) – <i>Forgiving others/ suffering punishments</i>
Debtor – <i>Sinner</i>			Remission (ἀφίημι//יפוח) – <i>Forgiveness by God</i>
			Slavery/being sold – <i>Penalty/death</i>

Auction block (אבן המכר)	Slave sale (πιπράσκω) <i>Direct delivery <> later delivery</i>	Slave-owner (κύριος) – <i>God <> Death</i> (<i>Good <> Bad</i>)	Slave’s behaviour: Wise <> unwise (directed to) Fellow-slaves (σύνδουλοι)	Transfer to another owner
Slave market		Slavery – <i>Service to God <> Death</i>	↑↓	Freedom
Slave trader(s)		Slave (δοῦλος) – <i>Human <> Sinner</i>	Torturers (βασανισταί) Treatment owner: Harsh <> mild (penalties)	Manumission/ Death

⁸⁵⁵ Josephus, *Bellum Judaicum* 3:373 (LCL 487, 109). I would like to thank Peter Tomson for this reference.

In the figure above, I present the *Bildfelder* that we have explored in this chapter.⁸⁵⁶ These *Bildfelder* are far from complete, but already show the ways in which the root metaphors of debt, buying, selling, and slavery can develop. The image-offering field has been set in roman type, while italics has been used for the image-receiving field (with the root metaphors in bold). The *Bildfelder* are complemented with some terms that are not (explicitly) mentioned in the parables but are part of the phenomena of debt and slavery as we know them from social reality. With the help of this field, we may notice that not all the aspects of the *Bildfeld* of slavery, in particular, are being utilized (or implied). Those aspects are indicated by the grey colouring.

The *Bildfelder* are sequentially constructed: the *Bildfeld* of debt (which we have mainly discussed in section 4.3) starts at the left side with a creditor and a debtor who enter into a (mutual) financial agreement. The right side of the field displays several ways to get out of debt. The *Bildfeld* of slavery is constructed similarly: to the left we see the elements that are necessary for the purchase of a slave; to the right we see how a slave can get out of his/her current state. As one can see, the third column of the slavery *Bildfeld* plays a double role, since one can go from a “good” (benevolent) master (beginning of Matthew’s parable/Romans 6:22/Sifre Numbers 115) to a “bad” (harsh) master (Matthew 18:25/Sifre Deuteronomy 26/Sifre Deuteronomy 323). When Greek and Hebrew words are used in the parables for parts of the *Bildfeld*, I have added them to the *Bildfeld* (in brackets).

These two *Bildfelder* yield several comments and questions. The first thing that stands out is the (predominantly) grey right part of the slavery *Bildfeld*. Apparently – at least in the parables under review in this chapter – *no options exist to get out of slavery*.⁸⁵⁷ This is an important point for which this study aims to create awareness. Mary Ann Beavis already noticed that the good slaves in the New Testament parables receive more responsibility instead of manumission.⁸⁵⁸ Anders Martinsen’s explanation for this is: “Maybe because there is no freedom from God’s reign.”⁸⁵⁹ This raises some interesting questions concerning the difference between being in debt (having sinned) and being a slave. What subtlety is expressed by this difference? Our *Bildfeld* suggests that, metaphorically speaking, slavery is a more permanent state than being in debt. Maybe this difference between the *Bildfelder* of slavery and debt reflects the ancient view that human existence is always determined by all sorts of powers and forces it cannot control, that is, one is always a slave to someone or something.⁸⁶⁰ There is, however, one exception to this rule in the New Testament, as Annette Merz has recently pointed out.⁸⁶¹ This exception can be found in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians 7:22: “For whoever was called in the Lord as a slave is a freed person belonging to the Lord, just as whoever was free when called is a slave of Christ.” Here, Paul invents a new metaphor: the freed person (*ἀπελεύθερος*, Latin: *libertus*) of the Lord – a metaphor that indicates that it is possible to imagine metaphorically a post-servile life. Merz explains this metaphor from the perspective of the situation of the Corinthian church members who were slaves.⁸⁶² Paul tries to avoid calling them real-life slaves, “slaves of Christ,” a metaphor that would fail to indicate their changed status in Christ. Instead, Merz writes, the slave members in Corinth:

[...] are told that they should consider themselves as freedpersons of the Lord, which means that in their call, they had undergone the transformation every slave longed for: from an object owned by someone else into a free self-determining subject. However restricted they may be in their daily lives, within the community they

⁸⁵⁶ Compare the “Semantische Bezugfelder zur ‘Schuld(en)abhängigkeit’” developed by Beat Weber in “Vergeltung oder Vergebung!? Matthäus 18,21–35 auf dem Hintergrund des ‘Erlassjahres,’” *Theologische Zeitschrift* 50, no. 1 (1994), 136.

⁸⁵⁷ As we have seen earlier, Byron writes: “The episode in Egypt is not about the manumission of Israel but a change of master.” See Byron, *Slavery Metaphors in Early Judaism and Pauline Christianity*, 197.

⁸⁵⁸ Beavis, “Ancient Slavery as an Interpretive Context,” 43. An exception is the parable from Shepherd of Hermas (to be treated in the next chapter).

⁸⁵⁹ Martinsen, “Men and Unmen in the Parables of Luke,” 394.

⁸⁶⁰ Theißen and Von Gemünden, *Der Römerbrief*, 164.

⁸⁶¹ Annette Merz, “Believers as ‘Slaves of Christ’ and ‘Freed Persons of the Lord.’ Slavery and Freedom as Ambiguous Soteriological Metaphors in 1 Cor 7:22 and Col 3:22-4:1,” *NTT Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion* 72, no. 2 (2018), 95-110.

⁸⁶² The free members of the Corinthian community should think of themselves as voluntarily choosing the life of being a slave of Christ, like Israel had entered into a covenant relationship with God after its liberation from Egypt’s slavery (Merz, “Believers as ‘Slaves of Christ,’” 105).

have left behind their status of being a slave. They are no longer slaves in relation to Christ, who has freed them and thereby given them a higher responsibility and a broader agency.⁸⁶³

We will come back to the issue of manumission (either metaphorically or in real-life) in other chapters of this study.

Another observation is that although Sifre Deuteronomy speaks of an auction block, and the parable in Sifre Numbers speaks about a sale, the metaphorical potential of a slave market and slave traders is not activated. We might wonder why the narrator of the parable did not use this potential. Is it because intermediaries (slave traders) create problems in the image-receiving field? On the other hand, the torturers from Matthew 18 do not seem to give rise to these problems, probably because Matthew referred to known traditions of sadistic apocalyptic punishments in hell.⁸⁶⁴ Here, more study is needed on the early rabbinic and early Christian beliefs concerning auxiliaries of God.

The image presented above shows how difficult it is to construct unambiguous and consistent *Bildfelder*. We see, for example, that the status of a slave plays a double role in the *Bildfeld* since one can be a slave of God (which is a positive status), but one can also be sold by God in order to become the slave of another slave-owner (a negative status). From this, we can conclude that *being a (metaphorical) slave is not decisive for one's status; what matters is having a good or bad master*. Moreover, while the *Bildfeld* of debt leads to the *Bildfeld* of slavery in Sifre Deuteronomy, in Matthew's parable, the *Bildfeld* of debts functions within the boundaries of the *Bildfeld* of slavery (as indicated by the striped arrow).

Finally, I would like to stress that in the parables studied in this chapter, *the right of God to act like a slave-owner, selling and buying slaves, is not really put to the test*. Apparently, just like the ancient slave-owner, God has an undisputable right to the body (and soul?) of those who believe in him. While some critique may be hidden in the parables (with regard to the imperial order the parabolic kings represent, or the protests that are voiced), this critique does not fundamentally challenge either the ancient society or early Jewish and early Christian theology.

4.6. Summary

In this chapter, we have investigated a collection of early Christian and early rabbinic parables in which the image of selling and buying slaves occurred. We were interested to see how one enters the slave status and whether it is also possible to leave that position. As we have learnt from the *Bildfelder* that we presented in the previous section, when one conceptualizes life as the relation between a slave-owner and his/her slaves, it is rather complex, perhaps even impossible, to escape one's servile position; one is always the slave of something or someone, be it God, sin, or lust. And since one is always under the reign of a certain master, it is crucial to serve a good master who treats his/her slaves well and whose status is beneficiary for his/her underlings. Of course, by definition, God is the good master. As I have shown, by choosing the metaphor of God as slave-owner, the rabbinic and Christian parables build on "slave of God"-traditions in the Hebrew Bible. As in the Hebrew Bible, this metaphor has two sides: not only is God a good master who cares for his slaves and who clearly and transparently regulates their lives (by means of the Torah), but he also expects unconditional obedience and is prepared to punish those who are not obedient (for example, those who do not follow his example). When the rabbinic or Christian texts want to emphasize this obedience, they opt for the metaphor of the "master-slave" relation; when they want to emphasize the love of God for his people, they choose the "father-son" relation. Both metaphors are not contradictory per se; they are complementary. One could even argue that they form, to a certain extent, a continuum. We will address this issue in more detail in the following chapter, for example, when we discuss a parable from the Shepherd of Hermas. Finally, I would like to mention that while our hidden transcript has not opened up completely new avenues to our parables, it has shown some "cracks" in the parables through which criticism towards God and society might be heard. In the case of the parables on debts and slavery, it has led us on the trail of the anonymous bystanders and the importance of their questions, and it has shown us how the parables use imperial images to both confirm and contrast God's

⁸⁶³ Merz, "Believers as 'Slaves of Christ'," 05.

⁸⁶⁴ For these traditions, see, e.g., Richard Bauckham, "Early Jewish Visions of Hell," *Journal of Theological Studies* 41, no. 2 (1990), 355-385, and Martha Himmelfarb, *Tours of Hell: An Apocalyptic Form in Jewish and Christian Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983).

kingdom. Furthermore, the parable from Sifre Numbers 115 allowed for servile protest *vis-à-vis* the slave-owner, representing God.

V. When the Master is Away: Obeying the Master's Orders

*Mr. Covey was one of the few slaveholders who could and did work with his hands. He was a hard-working man. He knew by himself just what a man or a boy could do. There was no deceiving him. His work went on in his absence almost as well as in his presence; and he had the faculty of making us feel that he was ever present with us.*⁸⁶⁵

What is the ultimate function of the slave? According to Orlando Patterson, the slave's pivotal purpose in most societies was not one of economic benefit, but of an accumulation of honor: "The real sweetness of mastery for the slaveholder lay not immediately in profit, but in the lightening of the soul that comes with the realization that at one's feet is another human creature who lives and breathes only for one's self, as a surrogate for one's power, as a living embodiment of one's manhood and honor."⁸⁶⁶ Although economic motives may not have formed the primary rationale for keeping slaves, the grand scale use of slaves did have its repercussions for the way labor and earning money was organized and perceived; so, Patterson observed that work became dishonorable in many slave societies.⁸⁶⁷ The work of Hopkins proved that this was true for ancient Roman society as well. Hopkins analyzed that physical work was reserved for slaves and the poor free in Roman Italy, and that the poor free were more likely to join the army than to cultivate the land or exercise crafts.⁸⁶⁸ One of the reasons for the latter was that working under a boss – and following his/her orders – was associated with a servile status.⁸⁶⁹ That one had to serve one's master under all circumstances and in all aspects turned out to be defining for the position of the slave. In this chapter, it is exactly this aspect of slavery that we will study in the parables. In the first section, we will survey the socio-historical background of slaves serving their masters in Roman antiquity, and especially the phenomenon of the absent master (*absente ero*). In the second section, the literary manifestations of the *absente ero*-theme are discussed, with special attention to the comedies of Plautus, and alongside some theoretical considerations. In the third to fifth sections, we shift our attention to the parables and highlight several themes in them about slaves serving their master: receiving orders (5.3), the absent landlord (5.4 – with important consequences for our view on the *parousia*), and slaves who try to go "the extra mile" (5.5). In the concluding section (5.6), again a *Bildfeld* is presented, together with some seminal conclusions. The straightforward but important thesis of this chapter is this: In the slavery parables, unconditional obedience is expected from slaves, just like God expects from his people. In line with Greco-Roman stereotypes, slaves generally seem to be expected to behave badly. As a consequence, the slavery parables emphasize what happens if slaves disobey and misbehave, which, for an ancient audience, probably functioned as a warning and instruction.

5.1. Serving a Roman Master

In the previous chapter, we learnt that Roman Italy was a slave society – a society in which slaves dominated in certain forms of production. The form of production in which the slaves of the Roman Empire were dominant was agricultural labour. As part of the transformation of a subsistence economy into a market economy – which produced a surplus of food for the ever growing city of Rome – small farms owned by free Italian men (or women) of modest means were replaced by big estates, cultivated by slave gangs, and owned by the rich urban

⁸⁶⁵ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave. Written by Himself*, reprint of the original 1845 text (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2009), 68.

⁸⁶⁶ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death. A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 78.

⁸⁶⁷ Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 84-85.

⁸⁶⁸ Keith Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves*, *Sociological Studies in Roman History* 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 13-14.

⁸⁶⁹ Hopkins speaks about "the reluctance of free citizens to work full-time as labourers on the farms of the rich" (Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves*, 13).

elite: the so-called *latifundia*.⁸⁷⁰ Together with the rise of the *latifundia*, the emergence of a new phenomenon came to light: the absent master. As financial and political matters tied the elite to the cities (especially Rome), the big estates of the rich were rarely supervised by the owners themselves; the owners only visited a few times a year to see whether their farms were being led effectively.⁸⁷¹ Since the situation of the absent master (*absente ero*)⁸⁷² was so common in Roman antiquity, plenty attention was devoted to that matter in the agricultural manuals of the time. These manuals described how the daily supervision of the *latifundia* was in the hands of the *vilicus* (Greek ἐπίτροπος or οικονόμος), a slave who was appointed this task and received additional rewards for it. As a consequence, the appointment of a *vilicus* was a delicate matter. Columella (4-70 CE) writes about the profile of a *vilicus*:

A man should be chosen who has been hardened by farm work from his infancy, one who has been tested by experience. If, however, such a person is not available, let one be put in charge out of the number of those who have slaved patiently at hard labour; and he should already have passed beyond the time of young manhood but not yet have arrived at that of old age, that youth may not lessen his authority to command, seeing that older men think it beneath them to take orders from a mere stripling, and that old age may not break down under the heaviest labour. He should be, then, of middle age and of strong physique, skilled in farm operations or at least very painstaking, so that he may learn the more readily; for it is not in keeping with this business of ours for one man to give orders and another to give instructions, nor can a man properly exact work when he is being tutored by an underling as to what is to be done and in what way. Even an illiterate person, if only he have a retentive mind, can manage affairs well enough.⁸⁷³

And Varro (116-27 BCE) writes in his *De Re Rustica*:

[I]t is especially important that the foremen be men who are experienced in farm operations; for the foreman must not only give orders but also take part in the work, so that his subordinates may follow his example, and also understand that there is good reason for his being over them — the fact that he is superior to them in knowledge. They are not to be allowed to control their men with whips rather than with words, if only you can achieve the same result. [...] The foremen are to be made more zealous by rewards, and care must be taken that they have a bit of property of their own, and mates from among their fellow-slaves to bear them children; for by this means they are made more steady and more attached to the place. [...] their loyalty and kindly feeling to the master may be restored by the consolation derived from such measures.⁸⁷⁴

But the *vilicus*, regardless of his capabilities, was controlled frequently by the master, since the absence of the master corrupted the slaves:

[I]t is certain that slaves are corrupted by reason of the great remoteness of their masters and, being once corrupted and in expectation of others to take their places after the shameful acts which they have committed, they are more intent on pillage than on farming.⁸⁷⁵

In Cato the Elder's (234-149 BCE) *De Agricultura*, the first steps of a master's visit to his farm are meticulously described:

When the master arrives at the farmstead, after paying his respects to the god of the household, let him go over the whole farm, if possible, on the same day; if not, at least on the next. When he has learned the condition of the farm, what work has been accomplished and what remains to be done, let him call in his overseer the next day and inquire of him what part of the work has been completed, what has been left

⁸⁷⁰ Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves*, 1-98. Compare the figure on page 12.

⁸⁷¹ See Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves*, 51. See also the discussion below.

⁸⁷² For this term, see Kathleen McCarthy, *Slaves, Masters, and the Art of Authority in Plautine Comedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 71, and its later adoption by Albert Harrill, "The Psychology of Slaves in the Gospel Parables: A Case Study in Social History," *Biblische Zeitschrift* 55, no. 1 (2011), 71-73.

⁸⁷³ Columella, *De Re Rustica* 1.8.2-4 (LCL 361, 85). For a list of duties of the *villicus* see Cato, *De Agricultura* 5.1-2.

⁸⁷⁴ Varro, *De Re Rustica*, 1.17.4-7 (LCL 283, 227-229).

⁸⁷⁵ Columella, *De Re Rustica*, 1.1.20 (LCL 361, 39).

undone; whether what has been finished was done betimes, and whether it is possible to complete the rest; and what was the yield of wine, grain, and all other products. Having gone into this, he should make a calculation of the labourers and the time consumed.⁸⁷⁶

This moment of reckoning will be recognized by readers of the New Testament immediately, since it occurs in a number of New Testament parables (see 5.4 of this chapter). At the moment of reckoning, all the slaves – called “articulate instruments” by Varro⁸⁷⁷ – are held accountable for their work. Slaves who are sickly or aged form a liability and should be given less food, or even be sold.⁸⁷⁸ There is also the category of slaves that has turned criminal or insubordinate, and that should be punished proportionally.⁸⁷⁹ This devotion to justice is not driven by high moral standards, but by the perspective of effectiveness and economy. So, Columella writes:

Such justice and consideration on the part of the master contributes easily to the increase of his estate. But he should also bear in mind, first to pay his respects to the household gods as soon as he returns from town; then at once, if time permits, if not, on the next day, to inspect his lands and revisit every part of them and judge whether his absence has resulted in any relaxation of discipline and watchfulness, whether any vine, any tree, or any produce is missing; at the same time, too, he should make a new count of stock, slaves, farm-equipment, and furniture. If he has made it a practice to do all this for many years, he will maintain a well-ordered discipline when old age comes; and whatever his age, he will never be so wasted with years as to be despised by his slaves.⁸⁸⁰

In the end, it is the values of discipline (*disciplina*), watchfulness (*custodia*), and productivity that govern the evaluation of the slaves in the absence of their master.

We might wonder whether we can find the absent masters and the accompanying values of discipline, watchfulness, and productivity also in Roman Palestine, with its more modest farms.⁸⁸¹ We do know that Agrippa I, Hyrcanus II, Herod, and other members of the royal family had estates that were not always situated close to their palaces.⁸⁸² Also, we know of non-royal individuals who owned or were given lands, such as Rabbi Yehudah the Prince (y. Shevi'it 6, 36d) or Josephus (*Vita* 422).⁸⁸³ How these estates were managed during the absence of their owners remains unclear, however. Ze'ev Safrai expects that it would follow the “accepted form of estate operation in the Roman Empire”⁸⁸⁴ with slaves who lived in shabby houses nearby, and a foreman who lived in the estate house.⁸⁸⁵ We also know that ideas and values similar to the agricultural manuals by Varro, Cato, and Columella can be found in the household codes (*Haustafeln*) of the New Testament.⁸⁸⁶ Therefore, we might assume that the ideas and challenges that we find in the ancient Greco-Roman agricultural manuals also apply, at least partially, to the world of early rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity.

⁸⁷⁶ Cato, *De Agricultura*, 2.1-2 (LCL 283, 7).

⁸⁷⁷ Varro, *De Re Rustica*, 1.17.1 (LCL 283, 225).

⁸⁷⁸ Cato, *De Agricultura*, 2.2-7.

⁸⁷⁹ Columella, *De Re Rustica*, 1.8.16-19.

⁸⁸⁰ Columella, *De Re Rustica*, 1.8.19-20 (LCL 361, 95).

⁸⁸¹ See also the previous chapter.

⁸⁸² Zeev Safrai, *The Economy of Roman Palestine* (London/New York: Routledge, 1994), 183.

⁸⁸³ See, e.g., Zeev Safrai, “Agriculture and Farming,” in *Oxford Handbook of Jewish Daily Life in Roman Palestine*, ed. Catherine Hezser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 246-263.

⁸⁸⁴ Safrai, *The Economy of Roman Palestine*, 188.

⁸⁸⁵ However, Kloppenborg and others have emphasized that instead of slaves, tenants played a big role in the agriculture of Jewish Palestine. See John S. Kloppenborg, “The Growth and Impact of Agricultural Tenancy in Jewish Palestine (III BCE–I CE),” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 51, no. 1 (2008), 33-66.

⁸⁸⁶ See the fourth chapter of Albert Harrill, *Slaves in the New Testament. Literary, Social and Moral Dimensions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 85-118. Avery-Peck emphasizes the differences in the treatment of agricultural issues in rabbinic and Greco-Roman discourses (“two very different approaches,” Alan J. Avery-Peck, “History of the Mishnaic Law of Agriculture,” in *The Law of Agriculture in the Mishnah and the Tosefta*, ed. Jacob Neusner, volume 1 [Leiden: Brill, 2005], 35): while Greco-Roman authors on the topic focused on the science and economics of food production, the rabbinic texts are preoccupied with “the Israelites’ observance of the divine laws that assure the presence of God’s blessing upon the produce of the land of Israel” (idem). However, in our discussion below we will see that the customs with respect to the absent master and his return to his estate are very similar in both cultures.

However, it was not only the manuals that devoted attention to the situation of the absent master; this situation also became a *topos* in literary writings. When the theme of *absente ero* reached the parables, one might even wonder whether it is the socio-historical theme of the absent master that is displayed in these stories, or if it is, rather, the wide-spread *literary* theme of the absent master that is taken up. Of course, this literary theme has its roots in the socio-economical world of antiquity, but it also has its own history of development and peculiarities. To unearth the particulars of the literary theme of *absente ero*, we will devote the next section to its occurrence in the Plautine comedies. Later in this chapter, we will also take a look at popular Greco-Roman novels and at the life of the famous fable-teller Aesop, as recorded in his biography, *Vita Aesopi*.

5.2. *Absente Ero* in the Plautine Comedies

In Plautus' *Meneachmi*, a comedy that is overpopulated with servile figures, the slave Messenio recites the following monologue on the character of a good slave:

This is the touchstone for a good slave (*bono servo*): that one is good who secures, watches, arranges, and has in mind his master's business, so that when his master is away (*absente ero*) he guards his master's business as diligently as if he were present in person or even better. A slave who has his heart in its proper place has to put his back above his gullet, his shins above his belly. Let him remember what reward those who are worthless are given by their masters, the lazy and shameless ones: beatings, shackles, the mill, exhaustion, hunger, harsh cold, these are the rewards of laziness. I'm terribly afraid of this terrible suffering. That's why I'm resolved to be good rather than bad. [...] The time is close when my master will reward me. I serve him on that principle, as I think it advantageous.⁸⁸⁷

This passage – called, by Fraenkel, a “catechism” of good slave behavior⁸⁸⁸ – connects well with our previous discussion of the agricultural manuals. Again, the situation of an absent master (*absente ero*) is imagined. The good slave will in that situation secure, watch, arrange, and have in mind (*erilem procurat, videt, collocat cogitatque*) his master's business. Why? Because the bad slave (who does otherwise) will be punished by beatings, hunger, or hard physical work (see also the next chapter). The good slave, however, will be rewarded.

Interestingly, the absent master imagined here is not the owner of a big farm; nor is Messenio the overseer of slave gangs. Apparently, the theme (*topos*) of the absent master could be stretched to envelop any situation in which the slave had to manage the master's belongings when that master was away.

As already said, the comedy *Meneachmi* was written by Plautus (254-184 BC), a Roman playwright who was famous for his *pallatia comoedia*, Romanized versions of Greek comedies.⁸⁸⁹ With Plautus' comedies we come across the most voluminous literary source about the life of slaves in antiquity.⁸⁹⁰ In his twenty-one comedies, we encounter forty slaves, of which fourteen have a major role in the plays. According to Stace, these fourteen slave-roles can be divided into three groups: *servi callidi* (the largest group with eight occurrences), deceived slaves, and slaves of special interests.⁸⁹¹

With the Plautine intriguing slave, or *servus callidus*, we have arrived at a special characteristic of the comedies of Plautus: its (possibly) subverting character, or its Saturnalian world.⁸⁹² In Plautus' *servus callidus*, called by Stace “the greatest creation of Roman Comedy” and “the product of an imaginative genius,”⁸⁹³ we see

⁸⁸⁷ Plautus, *Meneachmi* 967-985 (LCL 61, 527 with adjustments by MS).

⁸⁸⁸ Eduard Fraenkel, *Elementi Plautini in Plauto* (Florence: “La Nuova Italia” Editrice, 1960), 234, quoted in Roberta Stewart, *Plautus and Roman Slavery* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 150.

⁸⁸⁹ *Pallatia comoedia* or *pallatia fabula* means “comedy in Greek costume,” and is distinguished from its counterpart, the *fabula togata* (“Roman dress”). Moore notices that in the latter (plays set in Italy, and in Roman context), slaves were generally not portrayed as more clever than their masters, since Roman spectators grew sensitive to these subversions (Timothy Moore, *The Theatre of Plautus. Playing to the Audience* [Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998], 40). See also Peter Brown, “Greek Comedy at Rome,” in *A Handbook to the Reception of Greek Drama*, ed. Betine van Zyl Smit (Malden: Blackwell-Smith, 2016), 65-67.

⁸⁹⁰ Other important Roman literary sources to which we will refer in this study are Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, Petronius, *Satyricon*, and the already mentioned anonymous, *Vita Aesopi*.

⁸⁹¹ C. Stace, “The Slaves of Plautus,” *Greece & Rome* 15, no. 1 (1968), 65-66.

⁸⁹² Moore, *The Theatre of Plautus*, 41.

⁸⁹³ Stace, “The Slaves of Plautus,” 77.

how a slave – a subordinate and passive creature – can retrieve a measure of agency by using his/her sharp mind and wits. Stewart calls this kind of character a trickster, and considers it a typical slave character that also occurs in other forms of “slave literature,” both ancient (e.g., *Vita Aesopi*, second century CE⁸⁹⁴) and early modern: “The trickster’s verbal skills – both their forms and their purposes – have parallels in comparative material from the slave societies of the Caribbean and the American South. Although the particular circumstances of Roman, Caribbean, and American slave societies were arguably very different, the trickster is the folk hero of subordinated groups, and a basic feature of the trickster across cultures is the capacity to manipulate language, its literal and figurative meanings.”⁸⁹⁵ Stace analyzes how Plautus uses the trickster-character as “simultaneously subscribing to and subverting the power relationship of slavery.”⁸⁹⁶ We meet Plautus’ trickster slaves in, for example, the comedies *Asinaria* (the slaves Libanus and Leonida help their master to rob his wife of her money), *Epidicus* (the slave Epidicus helps his master’s son to buy a female slave he loves, by using the money of his unknowing father), and *Persa* (by organizing the fake sale of his daughter, the slave Toxilus succeeds in obtaining the money for liberating his mistress, also using money of another slave’s [Sagaristio] master). The fact that Plautus makes such good use of the folk hero of subordinated groups begs the question of how we should interpret Plautus’ extensive use of slavery in his comedies: why did he use that element, and how reliable is his picturing of that ancient institution? Roberta Stewart describes in her book, *Plautus and Roman Slavery* (2012), how ancient commentators suggested that Plautus had personal experience as a slave, or had hired himself out for work in a mill.⁸⁹⁷ Although these suggestions do not seem very reliable, Stewart rightly notices that “the biographical tradition does signal Roman recognition of Plautus’ acuity in perceiving and representing accurately slaves and slave behavior.”⁸⁹⁸ She also refers to Matthew Leigh’s research, which has drawn attention to Cicero’s statement that in Roman comedy we see “a carefully fashioned image of our daily life (*imaginem vitae cotidianae*).”⁸⁹⁹ More recently, Amy Richlin has argued that the Plautine corpus responds to and reflects everyday slavery, since both its audience and its actors and writers would have come from the most humble classes of society, including slaves.⁹⁰⁰ Since this is not the place to discuss the character of Plautine comedy at length, I hope that this short overview will suffice to show that Plautus’ comedies not only offer an insight into the way slavery in antiquity was perceived literary, but also an impression of slavery in social reality.⁹⁰¹

That the Plautine comedies rely on the social reality of ancient slavery does not mean that the actual conversations in the Plautine comedies mirror the day-to-day conversations between masters and slaves in the Roman Empire. The difference between the sort of language that a slave was allowed to use and that of a free person is beautifully illustrated by a quote from Plautus’ *Persa*: “My master told me to have a slave’s work, but a freeman’s tongue (*servam operam, linguam liberam*)” (280a). On the other hand, the comedies might reflect the feelings and dreams of actual slaves (e.g., “we’d all rather be free than slaves”⁹⁰²). In order to understand this tension, Richlin applies James Scott’s division of the public and the hidden transcript (see section 3.4.4) to the Plautine comedies. What Richlin shows is that the comedy is a secure site for hidden transcripts, since the actors are protected by jokes, masks, and costumes.⁹⁰³ It opens up the possibility to express thoughts and views

⁸⁹⁴ William Hansen, “Comic Biography,” in *Anthology of Ancient Greek Popular Literature*, ed. William Hansen (Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), 109.

⁸⁹⁵ Stewart, *Plautus and Roman Slavery*, 173.

⁸⁹⁶ Stewart, *Plautus and Roman Slavery*, 166.

⁸⁹⁷ Stewart, *Plautus and Roman Slavery*, 18.

⁸⁹⁸ Stewart, *Plautus and Roman Slavery*, 18-19.

⁸⁹⁹ Stewart, *Plautus and Roman Slavery*, 18; Matthew Leigh, *Comedy and the Rise of Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 6-9 (Cicero in his speech for Roscius of Ameria, 46-47).

⁹⁰⁰ Amy Richlin, “Talking to Slaves in the Plautine Audience,” *Classical Antiquity* 33, no. 1 (2014), 175-225.

⁹⁰¹ For a more critical voice on using Roman literary sources in general, see Keith R. Bradley, “Imagining slavery: the limits of the plausible,” *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 14 (2001), 473-477, in which he asks: “If slaves were good for Roman writers to think with, how can it be known from *imaginative* literature, exactly, what they thought? Of the Roman authors treated in detail in this book, none to my knowledge has left any independent evidence that addresses the subject of slavery and makes clear a particular author’s views about the tensions slavery engendered at Rome. [...] At issue is how the literary critic can be confident about what the ancient author was imagining when he composed his piece of imaginative literature” (477).

⁹⁰² “omnes profecto liberi lubentius sumus quam servimus” (*Captivi* 120; LCL 60, 519).

⁹⁰³ Richlin, “Talking to Slaves in the Plautine Audience,” 177.

that would be impossible in the direct interaction between a freeman and a slave, like we encounter in this passage from the *Asinaria* (*Comedy of Asses*). In this passage, we read how the slave Leonida talks back to a merchant, claiming that he is a human just like him:

Merchant (<i>to Leonida</i>)	What? Are you, a slave, insulting a free man?
Leonida	Get beaten!
Merchant	That'll happen to you, getting beaten, as soon as I set eyes on Demaenetus today. I'm calling you to court. [...]
Leonida (<i>more calmly</i>)	All right, come on, go then. Should you insult another man and not be insulted yourself? I am a human being as much as you (<i>tam ego homo sum quam tu</i>). ⁹⁰⁴

Also, Richlin notices how in the plays dreams of reversal and revenge are pursued: "The plays' obsession with slave punishment, amounting to a running critique adorned with enactments of revenge [...], matches Scott's description of how slave societies make discourse." In the way the slave punishments are commented on, both protests and pride are voiced. A famous passage from *Persa* expresses the fear of beatings:

If a master has threatened his slave with a beating, how wretched is the slave when the whip has been taken, while he's taking off his tunics, even if it's not going to happen. What's not going to happen scares me nonetheless now.⁹⁰⁵

On the other hand, in *Asinaria* 551-552, the slave Libanus is proud of the scars of his beatings, which he compares to those of a soldier:

Great praise and thanks be to Perfidy as she deserves, since by our swindles, tricks, and clever moves, relying on the daring of our shoulder blades and the excellence of our forearms who went against cattle-prods, hot iron-blades, crosses and shackles, neck-irons, chains, prisons, collars, fetters, and yokes, the fiercest painters fully acquainted with our backs [who have often before put scars on our shoulder blades] now these legions, troops and armies of theirs have been put to flight by fierce fighting and our perjuries. This was done through this colleague's valor and my kind assistance. Who is braver than me when it comes to suffering blows?⁹⁰⁶

Of course, there is also an abundant number of passages where no protest is heard, or slavery is even strongly confirmed. However, these words are part of the public transcript, spoken here by a slave-overseer:

If it is the will of the immortal gods that you should undergo this affliction, you ought to bear it patiently. If you do so, your burden will be lighter. I believe you were free at home; if slavery has now been inflicted on you, it's a good idea to comply with it and with your master's authority and to soften slavery through your attitude toward it. The wrongs a master does must be deemed right.⁹⁰⁷

Richlin's claim that the plays of Plautus have an intentional message for slaves implies that slaves belonged to the comedies' audience. Indeed, Richlin distinguishes three reasons why she thinks that the plays address slaves, freed slaves, and poor people. First of all, she claims that Plautus plays with and refers to the conditions of slavery (like the reference to scars above). Secondly, the plays give slaves and poor people what they want. To give an example: in the conversations with their masters, some of Plautus' slave characters not only talk back, but change positions with their masters:

Pseudolus	Go on, say anything you like, even if I'm angry with you.
Simo	You, a slave, are angry with me, your master?

⁹⁰⁴ Plautus, *Asinaria* 478-490 (LCL 60, 192-195).

⁹⁰⁵ Plautus, *Persian* 362-364 (LCL 163, 499).

⁹⁰⁶ Plautus, *Asinaria* 545-558 (LCL 60, 200-203).

⁹⁰⁷ Plautus, *Captivi* 195-200 (LCL 60, 526-527).

The *servus callidus* is clearly an example of the changing of roles too. In the plays with such slaves,⁹⁰⁹ the slave orchestrates the movements of all parties, including their owners, and those owners are also often subjected to the tricks of their property.⁹¹⁰ Richlin's third reason for assuming that slaves belonged to (or even simply were) the primary audience of Plautus' plays is the phenomenon of double speech. Earlier we noted that Plautus makes a distinction between a freeman's tongue and a slave's tongue. Apparently, one was aware in antiquity that slaves did not always say what they meant, a phenomenon Plautus toys with. As an example, Richlin discusses a passage from *Persa* in which the enslaved Philocrates says, "Slavery didn't bother me much, it was no different for me than if I were the son of the house" (272-273). This saying has a double meaning, since Philocrates indeed was a son from that family. Then the slave Tyndarus adds: "How adroitly he tailors his speech to slavery," meaning that Philocrates really sounds like a slave on the one hand, but also does a good job in hiding a meaning in an ambiguous saying (imitating real slaves in that sense as well).⁹¹¹

We might add to these three reasons that the Plautine plays themselves also indicate the presence of slaves in the audience.⁹¹² In the prologue of *Poenulus*, prostitutes, theatre staff, and house slaves are directly addressed,⁹¹³ and the position of slaves (standing in the back of the theatre) is referred to in *Captivi* as well.⁹¹⁴ Furthermore, actors often had low positions or even were slaves – something Plautus refers to when he writes in an epilogue: "Now if you want to intercede for this old man so that he shouldn't get a beating, we believe that this can be achieved if you give us loud applause."⁹¹⁵

So, we have established that the comedies of Plautus both had slaves in their audience and might have had a (hidden) message for them. Does the same apply for our parables? As we have argued in the third chapter, it might. Following the work of Forsdyke, we are keen to learn how stories like parables and fables mediate tensions between elites and non-elites. The *absente ero*-parables, in which masters are often found to be instructing their slaves, might form an excellent locus for these tensions and, thus, for hidden messages.

5.3. Receiving Assignments in the Parables

5.3.1. Good Slaves, Following their Orders

We start the discussion of the parables with a selection of early Christian and early rabbinic parables in which the obedience of the slave is focalized. The term focalized is used here to signify that a certain meaning is ascribed to the acts of the slaves, and that the slave's act (or the lack thereof) is in the center of the parable's plot.

I want to start this section by briefly going into a famous parable that is seldom read in the light of slavery, but might be interesting for our purposes nonetheless. That parable is Luke 15:11-32, the Parable of the Prodigal Son, and the relevant passage (v. 22ff) reads:

The father said to his slaves (εἶπεν δὲ ὁ πατήρ πρὸς τοὺς δούλους αὐτοῦ): "Quickly, bring out the robe – the best one – and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. And bring the fatted calf, slaughter [it], and let us eat and celebrate, for this son of mine was dead and he lives again, he was lost and is found." And they began to celebrate.

But his elder son was in the field: and as he came and neared the house, he heard music and dancing, and after he called one of the slaves (καὶ προσκαλεσάμενος ἓνα τῶν παίδων), he asked [him] what these

⁹⁰⁸ Plautus, *Pseudolus* 272-274 (LCL 260, 295).

⁹⁰⁹ *Asinaria*, *Bacchides*, *Epidicus*, *Miles Gloriosus*, *Mostellaria*, *Persa*, *Poenulus*, and *Pseudolus*.

⁹¹⁰ Again, a reference to the *Vita Aesopi* – which contains many examples of slaves outwitting their masters – is in place here. See, e.g., *Vita Aesopi* 3, 15, 25, 38-64 (several incidents), 74, 77, 77a, 77b, 80.

⁹¹¹ Richlin, "Talking to Slaves in the Plautine Audience," 195.

⁹¹² See also Moore, *The Theatre of Plautus*, 40; Stewart, *Plautus and Roman Slavery*, 16.

⁹¹³ Plautus, *Poenulus* 23-28 (LCL 260, 23): "Let no slaves occupy seats so that the free may have a place, or let them pay money for their freedom (*servi ne opsident, liberis ut sit locus, vel aes pro capite dent*)." Cf. Richlin, "Talking to Slaves in the Plautine Audience," 175.

⁹¹⁴ Plautus, *Captivi* 1-4.

⁹¹⁵ Moore, *The Theatre of Plautus*, 10-11.

things may be. He said to him: “Your brother has come, and your father has slaughtered the fatted calf, because he got him back healthy.” And he was angry and did not want to go inside, and his father came out and begged him. And answering, he said to his father: “Lo, so many years I have slaved away for you (ἰδοὺ τοσαῦτα ἔτη δουλεύω σοι) and I never transgressed your command (καὶ οὐδέποτε ἐντολήν σου παρήλθον), but to me you have never given a young goat, so that I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours, who ate up your living with prostitutes (πορνῶν⁹¹⁶), came, you slaughtered for him the fatted calf.” (Translation MS)

This short passage is illuminating for the New Testament way of thinking about the duties of slaves. The passage opens with the father who commands his slaves (δούλους) to dress his son, and to make him put sandals on his feet – typical slave duties, as we have seen in the previous chapter.⁹¹⁷ They also have to prepare a meal (see chapter 7). A few instances later, it is the older son who commands one of the slaves (παῖδον); he literally calls the slave to himself, or summons him, and the slave answers.⁹¹⁸ Meanwhile, we learn that the orders of the father have been carried out: the calf is killed and the feast has started. This, I would like to emphasize, is the normal situation: a master gives an order, and the slaves fulfill that order. That this situation indeed is the standard, follows from the words of the son to his father. He says that he has for many years “served like a slave” for his father. The verb used here, δουλεύω, is quite strong; we find it in the New Testament only in the context of (real or metaphorical) slavery;⁹¹⁹ it is normally not used as a verb to express serving. In the second clause of the sentence, it is explained what it means to “slave,” namely, never to overlook a commandment⁹²⁰ or instruction (cf. Colossians 4:10) of the master. The parable suggests that this is the essence of being a slave: carrying out any order the master gives (cf. Pliny: obedience is to “respect and obey and keep their masters”⁹²¹ or Colossians 3:22). Without going too much into the depth of this parable, we might wonder if that is not exactly the mistake of the elder son: that he was behaving like a slave (feeling that he was not allowed to make mistakes), while he was a son (who is – see the example of the younger son – allowed to make great mistakes, and who shares in the property of his father).

Another parable that shows a “normal” interaction between slaves and their master is found in Matthew 13:24-30. This parable elucidates the hierarchical relations between both positions: the expectation clearly is that the master will give orders and the slaves will follow those orders.

Another parable he placed before them, saying: “The kingdom of heavens may be compared to a man sowing good seed in his field. When everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed tares in the middle of the wheat and went away. When the crops came up and produced fruit, then the tares appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder (οἱ δούλοι τοῦ οἰκοδεσπότου) approached and they said to him: ‘Master, have you not sowed good seed in your field? Why [then] does it have tares?’ He answered to them: ‘An enemy has done this.’ And the slaves said to him: ‘Now do you want us to go and collect them?’ But he said: ‘No, for when you collect the tares you will uproot the wheat with them. Let them both grow together until the harvest, and in the season of the harvest I will tell to the harvesters: ‘Collect the tares first and bind them into bundles in order to burn them, [and] gather the wheat into my barn.’” (Translation MS)

⁹¹⁶ Possibly referring to slave women, since prostitutes in antiquity were often slaves. See, e.g., Jennifer A. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 55.

⁹¹⁷ Not only were those tasks typical slave duties, but the fact that sandals were needed suggests that the prodigal son was barefoot, which, according to Greg Forbes, typifies him as a slave. See Greg Forbes, “Repentance and Conflict in the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32),” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 42, no. 2 (1999), 220, with reference to b. Pesahim 118a; b. Shabbat 152a.

⁹¹⁸ From superior to a lower person, see e.g. Mark 15:44; Acts 13:7; 23:23; or Matthew 18:32 (in the Parable of the Unforgiving Slave); Acts 5:40.

⁹¹⁹ Cf. John 8:33; Acts 7:7; Galatians 4:25; Romans 7:6; Matthew 6:24; Luke 15:29; 16:13; Romans 14:18; Galatians 5:13; Ephesians 6:7; Romans 6:6; 7:25.

⁹²⁰ The word that is used here (ἐντολή) normally bears the connotation of a biblical command (cf. Matthew 22:36, 38, 40; Mark 10:19; John 13:34; Romans 13:9; 1 Corinthians 7:19).

⁹²¹ Pliny the Younger, *Panegyricus*, 42 (LCL 59, 415).

However, there is no place in the New Testament where this “zero-point” of being a good slave is better expressed than in the story of the centurion (Luke 7:1-10⁹²²):

After Jesus had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. A centurion there had a slave (δοῦλος) whom he valued highly, and who was ill and close to death. When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and heal his slave. [...] And Jesus went with them, but when he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to say to him, “Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my ‘son’ (ὁ παῖς μου) be healed. For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes, and to my slave, ‘Do this,’ and the slave does it (καὶ γὰρ ἐγὼ ἄνθρωπός εἰμι ὑπὸ ἐξουσίαν τασσόμενος ἔχων ὑπ’ ἐμᾶντον στρατιώτας, καὶ λέγω τούτῳ· πορεύθητι, καὶ πορεύεται, καὶ ἄλλῳ· ἔρχου, καὶ ἔρχεται, καὶ τῷ δούλῳ μου· ποιήσον τοῦτο, καὶ ποιεῖ.).” When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, he said, “I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.” When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health. (NRSV with adaptations)

As we read in verse 8b, the slave of a “man under authority” does what his master says, just like a soldier goes when his officer tells him to go. Similarly, the centurion expects that when Jesus commands it, his slave will become healthy again. This story serves not only as an illustration of the expected role pattern of a slave *vis-à-vis* his/her master, but it also shows how Jesus was seen as a man of authority, whose powerful speech alone was enough for miracles to happen.⁹²³

Finally, the importance of following orders is underscored in a parable that we will only discuss at length in chapter 7: Luke 17:7-10. In this parable, Jesus asks (v. 9-10): “Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? (μὴ ἔχει χάριν τῷ δούλῳ ὅτι ἐποίησεν τὰ διαταχθέντα;) So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do (πάντα τὰ διαταχθέντα ὑμῖν), say, ‘We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done (ὁ ὀφειλομεν ποιῆσαι πεποιήκαμεν)!’” As we will see in chapter 7, this parable from Luke is a splendid summary of what it means to be a slave according to the slavery parables: absolute obedience to one’s master, doing what is commanded, and not expecting a reward.⁹²⁴

5.3.1.1. Tosefta Sukkah 2:6

We turn now to a number of rabbinic parables in our corpus in which slaves simply carry out their masters’ orders. In those parables, I would argue, the focus is not on the assignment of the slave; the following of orders by a slave is a simple matter of fact – something that is to be expected. We find such a parable in Tosefta Sukkah 2:6⁹²⁵:

Translation (MS)

At the moment that the sun is in eclipse, it is a bad sign for the world.

A parable.

Text⁹²⁶

בזמן שהמאורות לוקין סימן רע לאומות העולם

משל

⁹²² Parallel Matthew 8:5-13 (cf. John 4:46-53).

⁹²³ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX*, The Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries 28A (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 650 (see also the references on page 653). The passage also sheds some light on the sometimes-tender relationships between slaves and their masters; especially the Matthean version of the story suggests paternal or even homoerotic love of the master for his “son.” Cf. Theodore W. Jennings, Jr. and Tat-Siong Benny Liew, “Mistaken Identities but Model Faith: Rereading the Centurion, the Chap, and the Christ in Matthew 8:5-13,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 123, no. 3 (2004), 467-494. See also the discussion about the relation between this passage and John 4:46-53. E.g. Raymond E. Brown, *John I-XII*, The Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries 29A (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 192-193.

⁹²⁴ Alfons Weiser, *Die Knechtsgleichnisse der synoptischen Evangelien*, Studien zum Alten und Neuen Testament 29 (München: Kösel-Verlag, 1971), 105.

⁹²⁵ Parallel: b. Sukkah 29a.

⁹²⁶ Saul Lieberman, *The Tosefta. According to Codex Vienna, with Variants from Codex Erfurt, Genizah Mss. and Editio Princeps (Venice 1521)* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1955-1988), 2:262-263.

It is like a king of flesh and blood who build a palace and finished it and he prepared for them a banquet and after that he brought in the guests.	למלך בשר ודם שבנה פלטרין ושכללה והתקין בה את הסעודה ואחר כך הכניס את האורחין
When he became angry with them he said to the waiter:	כעס עליהן אמ' לשמש
“Take away the lamp from them,” and as a result of this they were all sitting in the darkness.	ונטל את הנר מלפניהן ונמצאו כולן יושבין בחשיכה

The focus of this parable is the way the king expresses his anger towards his guests. As a consequence, he instructs his slave⁹²⁷ to extinguish the light. That the slave is not of much importance here is underscored by his absence in the application, which this time precedes the parable. While the lamp has its counterpart in the sun, the guests have their counterpart in the world, and the king is implicitly compared to God, the parable fails to provide a comparandum for the slave. This implies that the slave and the slave's behavior – his obedience to his master's commands – are taken for granted in the parable.

5.3.1.2. *Sifre Numbers 84 and Sifre Zuta 10:35*

Two other examples about slaves being ordered can be found in *Sifre Numbers 84*.⁹²⁸

Translation (MS)

And Moses said: “Arise, O Lord” (Numbers 10:35, NRSV).

And another scriptural verse says:

At the command of the Lord they would camp, and at the command of the Lord they would set out (Numbers 9:23, NRSV).

How can these two verses of Scripture stand next to each other?

A parable. (1) The matter may be compared to a king of flesh and blood who said to his slave:

“See to it that you arrange for me that I may go and give an inheritance to my son.”

Another explanation: to what may the matter be compared?

(2) To a king flesh and blood who was going on the way and his friend went with him.

When he travels, he says,

“I shall not travel until my friend comes.”

And when he encamps, he says,

“I shall not make camp until my friend comes.”

Text⁹²⁹

ויאמר משה קומה ה'

וכתוב אחד אומר

על פי ה' יחנו ועל פי ה' יסעו

כיצד יתקיימו שני כתובים הללו

משל למלך בשר ודם שאמר לעבדו

הנראה שתעמידני בשביל שאני הילך ליתן ירושה לבני

ד'א למה הדבר דומה

למלך בשר ודם שהיה מהלך בדרך ונהג אוהבו עמו

כשהוא נוסע אומר

איני נוסע עד שיבא אוהבי

וכשהוא חונה אומר

איני חונה עד שיבא אוהבי

⁹²⁷ In the version of the Babylonian Talmud, “slave” (עבד) is used instead of the more equivocal “waiter”/“servant” (שמש). Since waiting on guests during meals was a typical slave task (see chapter 7), I deem it likely that the waiter here has the status of a slave.

⁹²⁸ For another example of a parable in which a slave is instructed, see *Sifre Numbers 161*: “Rabbi says: ‘A parable. To what can the matter be compared? To a king who said to his slave (למלך שאמר לעבדו): “If you were searching for me, I was with my son. At all times that you are searching for me, I am with my son.” Thus it says: *which remains with them in the midst of their uncleannesses* (Leviticus 16:16) [...]’” Translation: MS. Hebrew text: Haim S. Horovitz, *Sifre ‘al sefer Ba-midbar ve-sifre zuta*, 2nd ed., Corpus Tannaiticum (Jerusalem: Wahrman Books, 1966), 223.

⁹²⁹ Text: Horovitz, *Sifre ‘al sefer Ba-midbar ve-Sifre Zuta*, 80.

The result is that it can be upheld that by the word of Moses they made camp and it can be upheld that by the word of God they made camp, and by the word of Moses they travelled and by the word of God they travelled.

נמצאת מקיים על פי משה יחנו ונמצאת מקיים על פי
ה' יחנו ועל פי משה יסעו ועל פי ה' יסעו

Schematically, the first parable looks like this:

Parable	Application
Mortal king	God
Slave	Moses
Inheritance	Land of Israel
Son	People of Israel

Since a direct *nimshal* is missing (although the final *nimshal* can probably be applied to both *meshalim*), we have to reconstruct that just as the king instructed his slave to take care of the transfer of his inheritance to his son, so God commanded Moses to take care of the transfer of the land of Israel to his people. In this way, the parable hopes to solve the problem of agency in the text of Numbers. Although it is Moses who calls God to arise, it is – *a priori* one could say – God who has instructed Moses to do so in the first place. Implicitly, the parable conveys the message too, that it is as absurd to suppose that Moses would command God, as it would be for a slave to command his master. That this reversal of roles (see also chapter 7) was indeed perceived as an absurdity can be concluded from the following story that was recorded by Pliny:

Lucullus gave charge over himself to a slave to enforce control, and he, an old man who had celebrated a triumph, suffered the very deep disgrace of having his hand kept away from the viands even when feasting in the Capitol, with the added shame of obeying his own slave more readily than himself (*pudenda re servo suo facilius parere quam sibi*).⁹³⁰

The second parable from Sifre Numbers 84 discusses the same problem of agency but features a king and his ally. However, in Sifre Zuta 10:35, a comparable parable is found with a slave in the role of the ally:

Translation	Text ⁹³¹
A parable. To what can it be compared?	משל למה הדבר דומה
To a king who said to his slave:	למלך שאמר לעבדו
“I will sleep until you wake me from my sleep.”	הריני ישן לי עד שתעירני משנתי
So, the Holy one Blessed be He, said:	כך אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא
“I am not going until you say to me: ‘go.’”	איני מהלך עד שתאמר לי לך

In this parable, again the king is compared to God and the slave to Moses. The equation of Moses to a slave of God follows a long-standing biblical tradition,⁹³² and occurs regularly in the early rabbinic parables. The midrash addresses the issue of whether the biblical designation of Moses as slave is a negative one explicitly in Sifre Deuteronomy 357: “*The slave (עבד) of the Lord* (Deuteronomy 34:5): Scripture does not speak in disgrace of Moses, but in praise, because we find that the first prophets were called ‘slaves’ (שכן מצינו בנביאים שנקראו עבדים), as it is said *Surely the Lord God does nothing, without revealing his secret to his slaves (עבדים) the prophets*”

⁹³⁰ Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis historia* 28.14 (LCL 418, 41).

⁹³¹ Text: Horovitz, *Sifrē ‘al sefer Ba-midbar ve-Sifrē Zūṭa*, 267.

⁹³² See, for example, Exodus 14:31 (“When Israel saw the great power which the LORD had used against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD, and they believed in the LORD and in His slave Moses”), Exodus 40:16, Numbers 12:7 (“Not so, with My slave Moses, He is faithful in all My household”), Deuteronomy 18:18, 1 Chronicles 6:49, 2 Chronicles 24:9, Nehemiah 10:29, and Daniel 9:11, and in the New Testament Hebrews 1:1; 3:2; 3:4; and Revelation 15:3.

(Amos 3:7).⁹³³ From this passage we learn (1) that already the rabbis sometimes might have struggled with the title or description “slave” for persons who were not actually slaves; and (2) that they positively (re)interpreted this term relying on, in this case, Amos. This hesitance to call Moses a slave can also explain the composition with two parables in Sifre Numbers 84: there the second parable, which compares Moses to a friend of the king, might be added as a nuance to the image of the first parable (that of Moses as a slave of the king).

The parable makes clear that although it is the slave who wakes God, it is God who firstly gave the slave the assignment to do so. So, in all three rabbinic parables we have discussed in this subsection, it is carefully demonstrated that even if it seems that humans are in charge, it is ultimately God who takes the reins. This shows the ancient audience’s sensitivity for the absolute power of God, but also of the slaveholder – a sensitivity that, I would assert, follows from the daily ambiguities of social life in antiquity in which slaves sometimes did command free people, either because of their position (for example, as part of the government; compare the concept of intersectionality that we have discussed in chapter 2), or because of their personality.⁹³⁴

5.3.1.3. *Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael Bachodesh on Exodus 20:3*

We close this section by discussing a parable that illuminates the differences in the way free people are addressed in comparison to slaves:

Translation (MS)	Text ⁹³⁵
<i>You shall have no other gods before me</i> (Exodus 20:3, NRSV).	לא יהיה לך אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים
Why is it said?	למה נאמ'
Because it says:	לפי שהוא או'
<i>I am the Lord, your God</i> (Exodus 20:2a).	אנכי יי אֱלֹהֶיךָ
A parable. It is like a king of flesh and blood who entered a province.	משל למה בשר ודם שנכנס למדינה
His slaves said to him:	אמרו לו עבדיו
“Decree upon them decrees.”	גזור עליהן גזירות
He said to them:	אמ' להן
“No. When they accept my kingship,	לא כשיקבלו מלכותי
I will decree upon them decrees,	אגזור עליהן גזירות
but if they do not accept my kingship,	שאם אינן מקבלין מלכותי
how will they carry out my decrees?”	היאך מקיימין גזירותי
So, the Place said to Israel:	כך אמ' המקום לישר'
<i>“I am the Lord, your God. You shall have no other gods before me</i> (Exodus 20:2a, 3).	אנכי יי אֱלֹהֶיךָ לא יהיה לך אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים
I am he whose kingship you accepted upon yourselves in Egypt.”	אני הוא שקיבלתם מלכותי עליכם במצ'
They said to him: “Yes and yes.”	אמרו לו הן והן
“And just like you received my kingship upon yourselves, accept my decrees.	וכשם שקבלתם מלכותי עליכם קבלו מלכותי גזירותי
<i>You shall have no other gods before me</i> (Exodus 20:3).”	לא יהיה לך אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים

This parable narrates how, when a king enters a city or a province, his slaves advise him to formulate some decrees first. The king, however, first wants to see if the people of the city accept him as their leader before he

⁹³³ Translation: MS. Hebrew text: Louis Finkelstein and Haim S. Horovitz, *Sifre on Deuteronomy* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1969), 428.

⁹³⁴ See Margaret Y. MacDonald, *The Power of Children. The Construction of Christian Families in the Greco-Roman World* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014), 42-43.

⁹³⁵ Ms Oxford, as cited in Lieve Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhiltot. An Annotated Edition and Translation of the Parables in Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael and Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai*, with the assistance of Esther van Eenennaam, *Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism* 176 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 430.

decrees any laws. That is, according to the rabbis, the reason why the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20) start with a statement about God and his work for his people (“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery”), and only then continues with the commandments itself. Interestingly, the slaves drop out the application of the parable. From the perspective of the exegetical problem (why start the Ten Commandments with a statement about God?), indeed, the slaves are not needed. They are but a narratological necessity so that the different attitude of the king (i.e., God) comes out more clearly. Nevertheless, I think it might be relevant to analyze the discourse on slaves that the parable uses. The slaves are depicted in this parable as being very eager to proclaim all kinds of decrees. Apparently, they think that doing so is the best way to govern the city. This might tie into the way slaves were seen in antiquity. As scholars like Bradley have observed, slaves were often suspected of laziness.⁹³⁶ Without external motivation (reward or punishments), they would not do anything.⁹³⁷ It might be that kind of discourse that forms the undercurrent of this parable.

In this section, we explored a number of parables in which slaves followed orders. We have seen that in both early rabbinic and early Christian parables, following orders was seen as one of the defining characteristics of slaves. In the rabbinic literature this obedience might be connected to the rabbinic emphasis on Torah observance and its various facets. In the parables of Sifre Zuta and Sifre Numbers, it was stressed that a slave could never order his master to do something, but that it should always be the other way around. With respect to the used imagery in the parables, we see again and again how God is equated with the most powerful character – almost always a king. We also saw that the role of the slave was a few times equated with Moses (following a Biblical tradition), and that slaves sometimes only functioned as interlocutors, or – to use a narratological term – agents. Within these parables, the status quo is not questioned but firmly affirmed. In the next series of parables, we may, however, come across some forms of resistance and hidden transcripts.

5.3.2. Bad Work: Infrapolitics of Rabbinic Slaves?

For a slave to openly talk back to his master is not wise. There are, however, other and more subtle ways to show one’s master is wrong. In *Vita Aesopi* (second century CE), we find some masterful examples of this. The following passage from *Vita Aesopi* is worth quoting at length:

When Xanthus found some of his friends at the bath, he told Aesop to give the robes to their servants and said to him, “Aesop, go on home, and since my wife trampled the vegetables in her temper, go out and cook us lentil. Put it in the pot, put some water in with it, put it on the cooking hearth, put some wood under it, and light it; if it starts to go out, blow on it. Now do as I say.” Aesop: “I’ll do it.” And he went home, went to the kitchen, put one lentil in the pot and cooked it.

When Xanthus and his friends had had their bath, he said, “Gentlemen, will you share my simple fare? There will be lentil. We ought to judge our friends by their good will and not by the elegance of their food. On occasion the humblest dishes afford a more genial pleasure than more pretentious ones if the host serves them with a gracious welcome.”

His friends said, “Let’s go.” Xanthus took them to his house and said, “Aesop, give us something to drink for men right from the bath.” Aesop filled a pitcher straight from the bathtub and gave it to Xanthus. Xanthus said, “What’s this?” Aesop said, “Something to drink, right from the bath.” Xanthus looked sullen, and after a moment he said, “Bring me the footbath.” Aesop brought it without any water and set it down. Xanthus said, “And what’s this?” Aesop said, “You said: ‘Bring me the footbath.’ You didn’t say: ‘Put water in it, and wash my feet.’” Xanthus said, “Take my sandals and get on with your work.” Then he said to his friends, “Gentlemen, I find that I haven’t bought a slave but purchased myself a teacher. Now if you like, we’ll get up and go to the table.” When the drink had been going around for some time, Xanthus said, “Aesop, is the lentil cooked?” Aesop said, “Yes.” Xanthus said, “Let me see if it is done.” Aesop brought the one lentil in a spoon and gave it to Xanthus. Xanthus ate the one lentil and said, “It’s all right. It’s done. Bring it

⁹³⁶ Keith R. Bradley, *Slavery and Society at Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 65-66.

⁹³⁷ Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 2.1.15-16: “For who would care to have a man in his house who wants to do no work and has a weakness for high living? But now let us see how masters treat such slaves. Don’t they discipline their randiness by starving them? stop their stealing by locking up whatever they might get their hands on? prevent their escape by chaining them? and beat the laziness out of them with whips? What do you do when you discover a slave like that in your own house?” Translation: LCL 168, 99 (with small changes by MS).

in and serve it.” Aesop put on a plate, poured the soup, and said, “Dinner is served.” Xanthus said, “Why, this is nothing but soup you’ve served. Where is the lentil?” Aesop said, “Why, you ate the lentil.” Xanthus said, “Did you just cook one?” Aesop said, “Yes. Didn’t you tell me to ‘cook lentil’ and not ‘lentils’? The one is singular and the other plural.”⁹³⁸

What we observe here is the interaction between Aesop, a very resourceful slave, and Xanthus, his master and a philosopher. *Crux interpretum* of this passage are the following words by Aesop: “Yes. Didn’t you tell me to ‘cook lentil’ and not ‘lentils’? The one is singular and the other plural.” What Aesop is doing in this passage – and the same trick recurs in *Vita Aesopi* – is interpreting the orders of his master too literally (in the Spanish recension of the tale it reads: “By you I was once told not to bring anything but what was asked for”⁹³⁹). Although Aesop knows what he is doing (hence “Lad, you know better than that” in the Spanish recension), he also knows that his master is bound by his philosophical ideals of self-control and patience, and will not punish him, since – technically – he has done nothing wrong. We find these kinds of tales, about slaves who take their masters’ orders too literally, more often in ancient literature. Compare, for example, this anecdote from Plutarch with respect to consul Marcus Pupius Piso (61 BC).

Pupius Piso, the orator, not wishing to be troubled, ordered his slaves to speak only in answer to questions and not a word more. Subsequently, wishing to pay honour to Clodius when he was a magistrate, Piso gave orders that he be invited to dinner and prepared what was, we may suppose, a sumptuous banquet. When the hour came, the other guests were present, but Clodius was still expected, and Piso repeatedly sent the slave who regularly carried invitations to see if Clodius was approaching. And when evening came and he was finally despaired of, Piso said to the slave, “See here, did you give him the invitation?” “I did,” said the slave. “Why hasn’t he come then?” “Because he declined.” “Then why didn’t you tell me at once?” “Because you didn’t ask me that.” So [is] a Roman slave [...].⁹⁴⁰

Let us now take a look at three rabbinic parables in which problems arise with the execution of orders. The first two parables stem from the Tosefta. We start with a parable from Tosefta Sotah 11:3.

5.3.2.1. Tosefta Sotah 11:3

Translation (MS)

Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah said:
 “They told a parable. To what can it be compared?
 To a king of flesh and blood who said to his slave:
 ‘Mix for me [wine] with warm [water].’
 He said to him:
 ‘I do not have warm [water].’
 He said to him:
 ‘If there is no [warm water], mix with cold [water].’
 So if the manna had not stopped,
 they would not have been willing to eat from the crops of
 Canaan.”

Text⁹⁴¹

ר' אלעזר בן עזריה אומ'
 מושלו משל למה הדבר דומה
 למלך בשר ודם שאמ' לו לעבדו
 מזוג לי בחמין
 אמ' לו
 אין לי חמין
 א' לו
 ואם לאו מזוג לי בצונן
 כך אילו לא פסק המן
 לא רצו לאכל מתבואת ארץ כנען

By means of this parable, Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah seeks to explain why manna stopped being given to the people of Israel when they entered the promised land (Exodus 16:35). The situation is compared to a king who wants to mix his wine with warm water. Mixing one’s wine with water was considered normal and civilized in

⁹³⁸ *Vita Aesopi* 39-41. Translation: Lloyd W. Daly, “The Aesop Romance,” in *Anthology of Ancient Greek Popular Literature*, ed. William Hansen (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 128-129. The translation is based on the recension Vita G, with supplements from Vita W.

⁹³⁹ John E. Keller and L. Clark Keating, *Aesop’s Fables. With a Life of Aesop*, (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2015), 22.

⁹⁴⁰ Plutarchus, *Moralia. De garrulitate* 511D-E (LCL 337, 449).

⁹⁴¹ Lieberman, *The Tosefta*, 4:218.

antiquity.⁹⁴² Often, the water was warm; drinking the wine cold was seen as deviant behavior: “The waiters carrying hot water would have run out of it by now, Sextilianus, if you were not drinking your wine neat.”⁹⁴³ Notice how in this line from Martial the attendants (*ministros*) are responsible for the warm water. In our little parable, the slave cannot provide the king with warm water, hence the king orders him to use cold water. This is compared to the people of Israel who only chose to eat the food from Canaan (cold water), since there was no mana (warm water) anymore. Therefore, in this parable, the king does not stand for God but, rather, for Israel – a rare phenomenon. Again, the slave finds no evident counterpart, unless one would argue that the slave represents God – an equation that I find rather improbable here.⁹⁴⁴ Although the slave is not able to serve his master with the right beverage, this is not a token of resistance or unwillingness. As a consequence, I cannot identify a hidden transcript in this parable.

5.3.2.2. *Tosefta Berakhot 6:18*

In the second parable from the Tosefta (Berakhot 6:18), the slave is not passively reporting on a failure in the kitchen (the lack of warm water), but is responsible himself:

Translation (MS)

They told a parable. To what can it be compared?
To a king of flesh and blood who said to his slave:
“Cook for me a dish.”
But he had not cooked a dish [before],
[so] in the end he burnt the dish, and he angered his master.
[The master ordered] to fold for him an undershirt,⁹⁴⁶
and he had not folded an undershirt before, [so] in the end he messed up the undershirt, and he angered his master.

Text⁹⁴⁵

משלו משל למה הדבר דומה
למלך בשר ודם שאמ' לעבדו
בשל לי תבשיל
והוא לא בשל תבשיל מימיו
לסוף מקדיח הוא את התבשיל ומקניט את רבו
להפוך לו חלוק
והוא לא הפך חלוק מימיו לסוף מלכלך את החלוק
ומקניט את רבו

This parable is told within a discussion on the three blessings that a person has to say every day (“Blessed [be Thou] who did not make me a gentile; blessed [be Thou], who did not make me a boor; blessed [be Thou], who did not make me a woman”⁹⁴⁷). In the course of the discussion, Rabbi Yehudah tries to explain these three blessings. He states that one should be thankful for not being a boor because a boor is not afraid of sin (שאין ירא חטא; cf. m. Avot 2:5). Then the parable follows.⁹⁴⁸ In this parable, the boor is compared to a slave, who follows the orders of his king, even if he does not know how to fulfill them. The king first orders the slave to make a broth for him, but the slave burns that meal. Then the king orders the slave to fold an undershirt for him, but instead he stains it.

⁹⁴² Magen Broshi, “Wine in Ancient Palestine - Introductory Notes,” *Israel Museum Journal* 3 (1984), 21-39. With respect to the barbaric nature of drinking unmixed wine, see, for example, Plato: “whereas the Scythians and Thracians, both men and women, take their wine neat and let it pour down over their clothes, and regard this practice of theirs as a noble and splendid practice” Plato, *Leges* 1.637 (LCL 187, 45).

⁹⁴³ Martial, *Epigrammata* 1.11 (LCL 94, 49).

⁹⁴⁴ See for that section 6.3.5 on the parable of the cup (Mishnah Sukkah 2:9), which shows that the rabbis were cautious to compare God to a slave.

⁹⁴⁵ Lieberman, *The Tosefta*, 1:38.

⁹⁴⁶ Or a “plain, smooth garment” (a tunic). See Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (Leipzig: W. Drugulin, 1903), s.v. “חלוק,” 465.

⁹⁴⁷ Tosefta Berakhot 6:18 (ברוך שלא עשני גוי ברוך שלא עשני בור ברוך שלא עשני אשה). Translation: MS. Hebrew text: Lieberman, *The Tosefta*, 1:38.

⁹⁴⁸ I follow here the order of the Erfurt manuscript. In the Vienna manuscript, the discussion of the boor precedes the discussion of the blessing for not being a woman, pulling the parable apart from the blessing for not being a boor. It is, however, also possible to read the parable as an illustration of all three groups: gentiles, women, and boors. These three groups share a lack of knowledge that is necessary to observe the commandments correctly. See Neusner, *The Tosefta*, 42-43.

Preparing a meal, serving drinks, letting in guests – the meal is a locus *par excellence* for the visibility of a slave’s submissive status. It is not surprising that many of our slave parables, and of the Greco-Roman tales (fables, comedies, novellas), thematize that moment (see also chapter 7). In the passage from *Vita Aesopi* that we quoted at the beginning of this section, we saw how the incident with the lentil put pressure on the relation between Aesop and his master. The reason for that is simple: the meal is often a public gathering. As a consequence, the honor of the host is at stake. Accordingly, the passage from *Vita Aesopi* continues with Xanthus saying to Aesop: “Just so that I won’t appear to be insulting the gentlemen, go quickly and prepare with vinegar and seasoning the four pig’s feet you bought.”⁹⁴⁹ So, the slave in this parable from the Tosefta takes an incredible risk by preparing a meal that he is not familiar with. At the same time, the Tosefta-parable ridicules the stupid slave – since making a broth does not really require any real cooking skills. The same holds for the folding of the undershirt.

Are there any “slavery rhetorics” at work in this parable, or is the plot only caused by its use in rabbinic exegesis? One might notice that the two failures of the slave are not paralleled by concrete failures of the boor. The message of the parable only seems to be that like a slave who is doing a task without being afraid to fail, so the boor is living without being afraid to sin. Therefore, I would argue that these two concrete examples (the failing in folding and the failing in cooking) make use of a well-known *topos* in antiquity: a discourse in which slaves are stupid, lazy, and useless.⁹⁵⁰ As Aesop states: “it is not right for me alone to remain useless and unprofitable to our master”⁹⁵¹ – a claim that echoes in New Testament sayings.⁹⁵² We also find similar comments in the comedies of Plautus: “A slave who always waits to be reminded of his duty and doesn’t remember to do it voluntarily is a slave who isn’t worth keeping (*qui manet ut moneatur semper servos homo officium suum nec voluntate id facere meminit, servos is habitu huius probus*). You fellows remember to demand your rations of food on the first of every month; why don’t you remember to do in the house what needs to be done?”⁹⁵³ As I noticed earlier in my treatment of the agricultural manuals, the only good slave is a productive slave. A useless slave is only a liability. The “useless-slave” discourse is, by all means, the discourse of the slave-owning class. In this regard, the parable does not show any indications of the presence of infrapolitics, unless one would argue that the mistakes of the slave are a form of obstruction. I am not so sure about that, but I am quite sure that the next parable from the Mekhilta does refer to a slave who intentionally did something wrong, and whose act was acknowledged as such – although the midrash seems not to be interested in the first element.

5.3.2.3. Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael Beshallah on Exodus 14:5

The introduction to the parable reads in my translation:

The minds of Pharaoh and his officials were changed etc. (Exodus 14:5). Formerly: *Pharaoh’s officials said to him: “How long shall this fellow be a snare to us?”* (Exodus 10:7), and now: *The minds of Pharaoh and his officials were changed* (Exodus 14:5). They said: If we had been struck and not let [them] go, it would have been enough, but we have been struck and let [them] go. Or, if we had been struck and let [them] go and our money was not taken, it would have been enough. But we have been struck, let [them] go, and our money was taken.

Then, the parable follows:⁹⁵⁴

⁹⁴⁹ *Vita Aesopi* 42 (translation Daly, “The Aesop Romance,” 129).

⁹⁵⁰ Cf., e.g., Keith R. Bradley, “The Bitter Chain of Slavery,” *Dialogues d’histoire ancienne* 41, no. 1 (2015), 167; Robert Seesengood, *Philemon. Imagination, Labor and Love* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 46.

⁹⁵¹ In the Spanish recension (Keller and Keating, *Aesop’s Fables. With a Life of Aesop*, 14). The Greek version reads: “I’m ashamed to let the master see me not helping when all my fellow slaves are hard at work” (*Vita Aesopi* 17; translation Daly, “The Aesop Romance,” 118).

⁹⁵² Compare Matthew 25:27, 30 (“You wicked and lazy slave”; “As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth”); Luke 17:10 (“So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, ‘We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!’”); Philemon 11 (“Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me.”)

⁹⁵³ Plautus, *Stichus* 58-60 (LCL 328, 23).

⁹⁵⁴ A parallel to the parable can be found in the Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai (edition Epstein-Melamed, 49).

Translation (MS)**Text⁹⁵⁵**

They told a parable. To what can it be compared?

מושלו משל למה הדבר דומה

To one who said to his slave:

לאחד שא' לעבדו

“Go and bring me a fish from the market.”

צא והבא לי דג מן השוק

He went and brought for him a rotten fish.

יצא והביא לו דג מבאיש

He said:

אמ'

“By decree, you eat the fish or be whipped with a hundred lashes or pay hundred minah.”

בגזירה שתאכל את הדג או שתלקה מאה מכות או שתתן

מאה מנה

He said:

אמ'

“Behold, I will eat.”

הריני אוכל

He started to eat, but he could not finish.

התחיל לאכול ולא הספיק לגמור

Until he said:

עד שאמ'

“Behold, I will be whipped.”

הריני לוקה

He was whipped sixty, seventy [times] [but] he could not finish.

לקה ששים שבעה לא הספיק לגמור

Until he said:

עד שא'

“Behold, I will pay.”

הריני נותן

It seems that he ate the fish and he was whipped with lashes and he paid hundred minah.

נמצא אוכל את הדג ולוקה מכות ונותן מאה מנה

So it was done to the Egyptians.

כך נעשה למצ'

They were plagued, they sent [Israel] away and their money was taken.

לקו ושילחו ונטלו ממונן

In this chapter, I will not discuss the penalties in the parable, since these penalties will be elaborately discussed in the next chapter. Instead, we focus here on the first part of the parable's narrative from which we might learn how the parable teller has drawn from a familiar well.

The master who instructs his slave to get something from the market is a *topos* that can be found in other slave literature as well. We go back to Aesop again:

The next day Xanthus sent out invitations to the students who had entertained him at dinner and said to Aesop, “I’ve invited my friends to dinner; go cook the best, the finest thing imaginable.” Aesop said to himself, “I’ll show him not to give me stupid orders.” So he went to the butcher shop and bought the tongues of the pigs that had been slaughtered. When he came back, he prepared them all, boiling some, roasting some, and spicing some. At the appointed hour the guests arrived [...].⁹⁵⁶

Aesop wants to make his owner look like a fool during one of the most prestigious occasions of life, a banquet with friends and colleagues. When the fellow philosophers of Xanthus start to be disturbed by the meal, Xanthus is furious:

Xanthus said, “Aesop, do we have anything else?” Aesop said, “We have nothing else.” Xanthus said, “Nothing else, damn you? Didn’t I tell you: ‘Buy the finest, the most delicious thing imaginable’?”⁹⁵⁷

⁹⁵⁵ Ms Oxford, as cited in Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhiltot*, 123. See Teugel’s chapter on this parable for information on parallels and textual deviations (119-133). See also her article “Between Hermeneutics and Rhetorics: The Parable of the Slave Who Buys a Rotten Fish in Exegetical and Homiletical Midrashim,” in *Hebrew Texts in Jewish, Christian and Muslim Surroundings*, ed. Klaas Spronk and Eveline van Staaldvine-Suman (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 50-64.

⁹⁵⁶ *Vita Aesopi* 51 (translation Daly, “The Aesop Romance,” 133).

⁹⁵⁷ *Vita Aesopi*, 52-53 (translation Daly, “The Aesop Romance,” 134); in the Spanish recension, Xanthus threatens Aesop with a beating. An adaptation of this story about tongues can be found in the midrashic literature, in the late midrash Leviticus Rabbah 33. In this story, the protagonists are the Rabban Gamliel and his slave Tavi.

In the end, it turns out that Aesop has outwitted Xanthus again, since, as Aesop declares, “what can one imagine finer or greater than the tongue? You must observe that all philosophy, all education, depends on the tongue.”⁹⁵⁸ The present scholars have to agree on this judgment: “The students said: ‘Yes, well put, by the Muses. It was your mistake, professor.’”⁹⁵⁹ Another text in popular ancient Roman literature in which a scene about buying a rotten fish in the market occurs is Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses* 1.24-25. In this comical scene, the protagonist, Lucius, (at that time a freeman) buys a fish in the market. When he meets a friend, Pythias, who is also a local magistrate, this friend becomes angry about the poor quality of the fish. Together they go back to the seller where Pythias throws the fish on the pavement and crushes it to pulp, robbing Lucius of both his money and his fish.

As we have seen, the slave in our parable does not get away with his failure but is heavily punished. We will not focus on his punishments now, but we want to zoom in on the slave’s reason for his misconduct. Our main question is whether his failure is a sign of stupidity or resistance. It is, of course, possible that the parable plays with the stereotype of the foolish slave.⁹⁶⁰ The smell of the rotten fish would be easily detectable, so to buy it nonetheless would show a lack of good sense on the slave’s side. Since I find this a rather improbable interpretation, I will argue that the slave bought the rotten fish on purpose. To make this case, I have both an inner and an outer textual argument. On the level of the parable’s plot, I would like to point to the direct and severe punishment of the slave (see again the next chapter), which indicates the master’s recognition of his slave’s intention. As Joshel states, “[m]ost slaves are [...] bad slaves” in the view of Roman law and literary texts, so “[s]ervile dishonesty and neglect (*fraus, neglegentia*) are a particular preoccupation.”⁹⁶¹ It is from this perspective that our parable operates as well. Would the master also have punished his slave if it was “only” a mistake? Possibly, but both the slave’s act and the master’s response make more sense when we read it from a perspective of resistance. This interpretation is aided by the application of the parable (my second argument). In the application, the slave is compared to Pharaoh (or *pars pro toto* Egypt). Of course, the Pharaoh does not “forget” to let Israel go; nor is he too stupid to know how. The Pharaoh is deliberately failing the orders he gets from God via Moses. He is also actively resisting the punishments he receives. This adds to the image of the slave in the parable as an active agent, who is not able to stand the pressure of his master (he is a slave after all), but goes down fighting.

The aforementioned interpretation opens up a contested space between the master and the slave in the parable. In a discrete way, the slave rebels, indirectly, against his master. The master recognizes his deed and decides to punish him, without explicating the matter. One could easily pass this act of resistance without noticing. This makes our parable surpassingly fit to the analysis as proposed by Scott. The purchase of a rotten fish is part of the hidden transcript of the slave, testing and finding the limits of what is permitted. The response of the master follows the familiar lines of the public transcript, confirming and securing the position of the master *vis-à-vis* his slave by violence and extortion.

What does this teach us about the *Bildfeld* of the slavery parables? We see again God as a slave’s master, who gives commands and, when necessary, punishes his slaves. Those who talk back (cf. Sifre Numbers 115) or do not obey can expect a response. In his response, God does not shun violence. This parable also shows us that God is not only the master of his own people but of other nations as well. In this particular parable, one of those other nations (Egypt) represents a bad slave that deserves to be punished, whereas Israel is (or at least can be) a good slave, as other parables show.

5.4. *Absente Ero* in the Parables

The theme of the absent master dominates the early Christian slavery parables but is also present in at least three rabbinic parables. The great frequency of this theme makes it one of the core focal points of this study. Because of this frequency, the discussion below will often only hit the surface of the parables by concentrating on the

⁹⁵⁸ *Vita Aesopi*, 53 (translation Daly, “The Aesop Romance,” 134).

⁹⁵⁹ *Vita Aesopi*, 53 (translation Daly, “The Aesop Romance,” 134).

⁹⁶⁰ Myles Lavan, *Slaves to Rome: Paradigms of Empire in Roman Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 79. Cf. Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves*, 121.

⁹⁶¹ Sandra R. Joshel, “Slavery and Roman Literary Culture,” in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery. Volume 1: The Ancient Mediterranean World*, ed. Keith R. Bradley and Paul Cartledge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 220.

way the slaves follow orders (or do not follow them). In the next chapters, we will regularly come back to the parables to single out other elements. For the sake of convenience, I have divided the parables in this section in three categories: absent masters “in general” (there is no reference to estates or agriculture), absent masters and the cultivating of fields, and absent masters and doorkeepers.

5.4.1. Absent Masters in General

In the first category we count four parables: The Serving Master (Luke 12:35-38), The Good and the Bad Slave Manager (Luke 12:42-46//Matthew 24:45-51), The Unjust Slave Manager (Luke 16:1-8), and The Talents/Pounds (Luke 19:11-27//Matthew 25:14-30). We start our discussion with a cluster of parables from Luke 12 and Matthew 24.⁹⁶²

5.4.1.1. Luke 12:35-38 and Luke 12:42-46//Matthew 24:45-51

The parable of The Good and the Bad Slave Manager appears in both Matthew (24:45-51) and Luke (12:42-48). In Luke, the parable is preceded by the parable of the Serving Master (Luke 12:35-41). For sake of space, I only display the parables from Luke here. In my discussion, I will direct my attention mostly to the parable of The Good and the Bad Slave Manager since the parable of the Serving Master will be discussed elaborately in chapter 7 (and briefly in section 5.4.3 of this chapter).

Luke 12:35-48 (NA28)

35 Ἐστῶσαν ὑμῶν αἱ ὀσφύες περιεζωσμέναι καὶ οἱ λύχνοι καϊόμενοι·

36 καὶ ὑμεῖς ὅμοιοι ἀνθρώποις προσδεχομένοις τὸν κύριον ἑαυτῶν· τότε ἀναλύσῃ ἐκ τῶν γάμων, ἵνα ἔλθόντος καὶ κρούσαντος εὐθέως ἀνοίξωσιν αὐτῷ.

37 μακάριοι οἱ δοῦλοι ἐκεῖνοι, οὓς ἔλθων ὁ κύριος εὐρήσῃ γρηγοροῦντας· ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι περιζώσεται καὶ ἀνακλινεῖ αὐτοὺς καὶ παρελθὼν διακονήσῃ αὐτοῖς.

38 ἄν ἐν τῇ δευτέρᾳ ἢ ἐν τῇ τρίτῃ φυλακῇ ἔλθῃ καὶ εὕρῃ οὕτως, μακάριοί εἰσιν ἐκεῖνοι.

39 τοῦτο δὲ γινώσκετε ὅτι εἰ ᾗδῃ ὁ οἰκοδεσπότης ποῖα ὥρα ὁ κλέπτης ἔρχεται, οὐκ ἂν ἀφῆκεν διορυχθῆναι τὸν οἶκον αὐτοῦ.

40 καὶ ὑμεῖς γίνεσθε ἑτοιμοί, ὅτι ᾗ ὥρᾳ οὐ δοκεῖτε ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἔρχεται.

41 Εἶπεν δὲ ὁ Πέτρος· κύριε, πρὸς ἡμᾶς τὴν παραβολὴν ταύτην λέγεις ἢ καὶ πρὸς πάντας;

42 καὶ εἶπεν ὁ κύριος· τίς ἄρα ἐστὶν ὁ πιστὸς οἰκονόμος ὁ φρόνιμος, ὃν καταστήσῃ ὁ κύριος ἐπὶ τῆς θεραπείας αὐτοῦ τοῦ διδόναι ἐν καιρῷ [τὸ] σιτομέτριον;

43 μακάριος ὁ δοῦλος ἐκεῖνος, ὃν ἔλθων ὁ κύριος αὐτοῦ εὐρήσῃ ποιοῦντα οὕτως.

Translation (MS)

(1) Let your loins be girded and have your lamps lit.

And you, be like men who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding, so that they may directly open [the door] when he comes and knocks.

Blessed be the slaves who, when the master comes, he finds to be watchful. Truly I tell you that he will gird himself and he will have them recline and he will come and serve them.

If he comes in the second or in the third watch and he will find them so, blessed are those [slaves⁹⁶³]!

Know this: if the master of the house had known at which hour the thief would come, he would not have allowed him to go through his house. And so you must be ready, since you do not know at which hour the Son of Man will come. And Peter said: “Master, do you speak this parable to us or to all?”

(2) And the master said: “Who then is the reliable and prudent slave manager, who the master will appoint over his household to give [them their] ration at the [right] hour?

Blessed is this slave, whom, when his master arrives, he will find doing so.

⁹⁶² We focus here on *absente ero* parables in which the relation between an absent master and his slaves is thematized. The parable of The Tenants (Mark 12:1-12//Matthew 21:33-44//Luke 20:9-18//Thomas 65) is also an *absente ero* parable, but there the workers are not slaves – which is why we discuss this parable elsewhere (6.3.6).

⁹⁶³ “Slaves” is added for clarification in the manuscripts of the Byzantine textual tradition.

44 ἀληθῶς λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι ἐπὶ πᾶσιν τοῖς
 ὑπάρχουσιν αὐτοῦ καταστήσει αὐτόν.
 45 ἐὰν δὲ εἴπῃ ὁ δοῦλος ἐκεῖνος ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ
 αὐτοῦ· χρονίζει ὁ κύριός μου ἔρχεσθαι, καὶ
 ἄρξῃται τύπτειν τοὺς παῖδας καὶ τὰς παιδίσκας,
 ἐσθίειν τε καὶ πίνειν καὶ μεθύσκεσθαι,
 46 ἥξει ὁ κύριος τοῦ δούλου ἐκεῖνου ἐν ἡμέρᾳ ἣ
 οὐ προσδοκᾷ καὶ ἐν ᾧ ἡ οὐ γινώσκει, καὶ
 διχοτομήσει αὐτόν καὶ τὸ μέρος αὐτοῦ μετὰ τῶν
 ἀπίστων θήσει.

47 Ἐκεῖνος δὲ ὁ δοῦλος ὁ γνοὺς τὸ θέλημα τοῦ
 κυρίου αὐτοῦ καὶ μὴ ἐτοιμάσας ἢ ποιήσας πρὸς
 τὸ θέλημα αὐτοῦ δαρήσεται πολλάς·
 48 ὁ δὲ μὴ γνοὺς, ποιήσας δὲ ἄξια πληγῶν
 δαρήσεται ὀλίγας. παντὶ δὲ ᾧ ἐδόθη πολὺ, πολὺ
 ζητηθήσεται παρ' αὐτοῦ, καὶ ᾧ παρέθεντο πολὺ,
 περισσώτερον αἰτήσουσιν αὐτόν.

Truly, I tell you that over all his belongings he
 will be appointed.

But when that slave says in his heart: my master
 is delayed in his coming, and he begins to beat
 the slave men and slave women,⁹⁶⁴ to eat and to
 drink and to be drunken,

The master of that slave will come on a day
 when he does not expect [him] and at an hour
 that he does not know, and he will cut him in
 half and he will place his part with the
 unbelievers.

And that slave who knew the will of his master
 and did not prepare or did his will, he will be
 beaten many [times];

And the one who did not know, and did things
 worthy of stripes, he will be beaten [only] few
 times. Everyone to whom much is given, much
 shall be demanded of him, and to whom much is
 entrusted, of him they will require [even] more.

In these parables, the similarities with the Roman agricultural manuals immediately strike us.⁹⁶⁵ The situation that is envisioned here is the same: slaves have to be ready for the return of their master (dressed⁹⁶⁶ and with lamps, so that the master can walk right in), and during the absence of the master a slave will be put in charge of fellow-slaves⁹⁶⁷ and the (other) possessions of his master. On a socio-historical level, the parables seem to form a reliable depiction of ancient practices. The image of the οἰκονόμος, distributing food (a rather technical term for ration, σιτομέτριον, is used here), corresponds with other ancient sources.⁹⁶⁸ Enrico Dal Lago and Constantina Katari consider the task of food distribution even as one of the two core tasks of the *vilicus* and his wife.⁹⁶⁹

The parables serve to illustrate how one should wait for the arrival of the Son of Man (Luke 12:40; Matthew 24:44). As such, they are called “*parousia* parables” by Joachim Jeremias.⁹⁷⁰ The perspective of the *parousia* is employed by many scholars to interpret these parables. According to Richard Bauckham, “[a]ll three [parables] are evidently intended to focus on the unexpectedness of the parousia, though in different ways. One form of unexpectedness is common to everyone: no one knows when the Son of Man will come: hence the exhortation to live in a state of constant preparedness (xii. 40).”⁹⁷¹ Moreover, Werner Kümmel states that “there

⁹⁶⁴ In Matthew 24:49 “fellow slaves” (τοὺς συνδούλους).

⁹⁶⁵ Although the parables under investigation here do not necessarily have a rural/agricultural context.

⁹⁶⁶ Cf. 1 Kings 18:46, Job 38:3, Ephesians 6:14, 1 Peter 1:13. See also Luke 17:8 (section 7.2.4).

⁹⁶⁷ Notice the difference between fellow slaves (συνδούλοι) in Matthew and slave men and women (τοὺς παῖδας καὶ τὰς παιδίσκας) in Luke; see also below.

⁹⁶⁸ See, e.g., Jesper Carlsen, *Vilici and Roman Estate Managers Until AD 284* (Rome: “L’Erma” di Bretschneider, 1995). Carlsen notices that the term *vilicus* was not reserved for managers of estates, but also occurred in an urban context (33-34).

⁹⁶⁹ Enrico Dal Lago and Constantina Katsari, “Ideal Models of Slave Management in the Roman World and in the ante-bellum American South,” in *Slave Systems: Ancient and Modern*, ed. Enrico Dal Lago and Constantina Katsari (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 192-193. The other core task is taking care of sick slaves.

⁹⁷⁰ Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, transl. S.H. Hooke, 2nd ed. [Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1972], 48. On *parousia* in general see Erich Gräßer, *Das Problem der Parusieverzögerung in den synoptischen Evangelien und in der Apostelgeschichte*, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft 22 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1977).

⁹⁷¹ Richard Bauckham, “Synoptic Parousia Parables and the Apocalypse,” *New Testament Studies* 23, no. 2 (1977), 165.

is no doubt that these parables are intended to urge preparedness for the day of the appearance of the parousia,⁹⁷² and he adds in a footnote that “[t]he parables lose all real meaning if the wakefulness for the unexpected coming of the lord is interpreted as readiness for the judgement which is always in process [...]”.⁹⁷³ The question of whether these parables from Luke 12/Matthew 24 should be seen through the lens of the *parousia* is closely connected to another question, namely, what the origin of these parables is. Without going into detail, we might notice that in Luke 12:41 Peter asks who the addressees are of these parables. That question makes good sense (at least with regard to the parable of Luke 12:42ff and Matthew 24:45ff), since the main characters of these parables are managerial slaves. This could imply that the parable is, in its application, dealing with the leaders of the early church, suggesting a late date (or late redaction) of the parable. However, Alfons Weiser and others have argued for an attribution of this parable to the historical Jesus,⁹⁷⁴ who, in turn, made use of a theme that was already present in Habakkuk and many subsequent Jewish writings.⁹⁷⁵ As François Bovon states, Jesus might have been talking about the second coming when he spoke about a delay (v. 45), but he could just as well have intended to address individual death or the last judgment.⁹⁷⁶ The present study shows that the *absente ero* theme was not limited to New Testament parables, but occurs in rabbinic parables too. This might urge us to rethink the concept of *parousia*. We will come back to this issue again over the course of this chapter.

From a rhetorical point of view, it is good to notice that both the parable in Luke and its counterpart in Matthew are part of strings or series of parables. In both cases, a combination is made with a rather extraordinary parable (Luke 12:39/Matthew 24:43), which compares the master of the household with the believer (contrary to slavery parables that associate the master of the household with God), and the burglar with the Son of Man. The parables in the series seem to reinforce each other: they amplify the call to be ready.

With respect to the following of orders, it is clear that the managerial slave is expected here to obey the orders of his master meticulously, even when that master is not around. When he fails, he will face serious consequences (see the next chapter). The first parable of Luke 12 (The Serving Master) also illuminates the other side of the coin: when successful, the slave might receive a reward (this atypical reward will be further discussed in chapter 7).

In the parables, we do not encounter a hidden transcript of slaves. The parables are told from the perspective of the master who instructs his slaves. The *monologue interieure* of the slave (verse 44 and verse 48) is negative and plays with stereotypes we know from, among others, Columella.⁹⁷⁷ In one of the Plautine comedies (*Persae*), we see the theme of abundantly eating and drinking when the master is away too, in a dialogue between two slaves (Sagaristio and the *servus callidus* Toxilus):

Toxilus	I'm celebrating the Festival of Liberty in grand style.
Sagaristio	How so?
Toxilus	Because my master is abroad.
Sagaristio	Do you say so? He's abroad?
Toxilus	If you can bear having a good time, come: you'll have the time of your life with me, you'll get a reception with grand food. ⁹⁷⁸

⁹⁷² Werner G. Kümmel, “The Pressing Imminence of the End,” in *The Historical Jesus in Recent Research*, ed. James D.G. Dunn and Scot McKnight, Sources for Biblical and Theological Study 10 (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2005 [reprint]), 191.

⁹⁷³ Kümmel, “The Pressing Imminence of the End,” 191n3.

⁹⁷⁴ See Alfons Weiser, *Die Knechtsgleichnisse der synoptischen Evangelien*, Studien zum Alten und Neuen Testament 29 (München: Kösel-Verlag, 1971), 188-193; Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20*, 700; also Fitzmyer has stated that “it is an oversimplification of the NT data to ascribe the sayings about watchfulness in vv 39-40, 42b-46 [in Luke 12] solely to early church creation” (Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX*, 987).

⁹⁷⁵ François Bovon, *Luke 2. A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 9:51-19:27*, transl. Donald S. Deer, Hermeneia – A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 239.

⁹⁷⁶ Bovon, *Luke 2*, 240.

⁹⁷⁷ “[I]t is certain that slaves are corrupted by reason of the great remoteness of their masters.” Columella, *De Re Rustica*, 1.1.20 (LCL 361, 39).

⁹⁷⁸ Plautus, *Persae* 28-31 (for this reference, see Harrill, “The Psychology of Slaves,” 71).

This comedy passage, the New Testament parable, and the agricultural manuals are all part of the same discourse in which slaves cannot be trusted when the master is away. The appointment of a *vilicus* or οἰκονόμος as a kind of substitute-master, only forms a partial answer to that problem, since the slave-manager cannot be trusted either. “Indeed,” Joshel notices, “Roman jurists suspected *vilici* and *procuratores* of hiding slave fugitives on the farms that they managed. We might suspect that in some cases the slave *vilicus* and the slave labourers negotiated a regimen of work that satisfied their own needs and interests [...]. Visits by the slaveholder, actual or promised, threatened the slaves’ own arrangements. Columella himself notes that the purpose of the slaveholder’s visits was to instill fear (*metus*) in both ordinary labourers and the *vilicus*.”⁹⁷⁹

Before finishing this section with my Bildfeld analysis, I would like to turn the spotlight to verse 45. This is one of only two parables from the New Testament in which slave women are mentioned in New Testament parables (for the other one, see section 4.3.2). While slave women must have been ubiquitous in Roman Palestine, they are almost invisible in our (parabolic) sources.⁹⁸⁰ An explanation for this phenomenon can be found in the fact that two oppressed and invisible positions overlap in the slave woman – that of the slave, and that of the woman – an issue that is also addressed with the help of the theory of intersectionality. This “discursive overlap” forms a double burden for the slave woman.⁹⁸¹ Elsewhere I have argued that when ancient authors mention slaves, that usually happens in generic, male, terms. Only when specific female roles have to be addressed, concerning birth, sexuality, children, and the domestic domain, slave women sometimes pop up in our sources.⁹⁸² This raises the question of why Luke explicitly mentions the slave women in his version of the parable. Kartzow speculates about the possibility that the “beating” of the slave women is different from the beating of the men. Is it possible that “beating” is a hidden reference to sexual violence? Given the fact that the slave indulges in alcohol, food, and violence, it would not be illogical to suspect that he also seeks to fulfil his sexual desires. But we have to be careful not to make hasty conclusions, since the gospel of Luke seems to mention women in general more frequently than the other gospels do, often in parallel to male characters. Furthermore, the expression “slave men and women” also occurs in a very neutral way in early rabbinic literature, for example in the Mekilta de Rabbi Ishmael Neziqin 13:73-74: “[One who steals] male or female slaves (עבדים ונשים), documents, grounds, or consecrated property only pays the principal.”⁹⁸³

Finally, in an analysis of the *Bildfeld*, it comes to the fore that, as usual, the Son of Man is associated with the master in the parable. What is new is that in the slave population different ranks have been distinguished (the manager slave versus his fellow-slaves). Moreover, there are a number of elements in both parables that do not have an obvious counterpart. We might, for example, wonder what “dressed for action and with the lamps lit” means in Luke 12:35. We assume that these words are meant to reinforce the image of readiness. Interesting is also the remark in Luke 12:44/Matthew 24:46 that the good slave will be in put in charge of all the possessions of his master. What exactly does this mean with respect to the application of the parable? Are “good believers” appointed over other believers in the kingdom of heaven, or are they granted other additional rewards? We will come back to the issue of rewards later in this and in the next chapter.

⁹⁷⁹ Sandra R. Joshel, “Geographies of Slave Containment and Movement,” in *Roman Slavery and Roman Material Culture*, ed. Michele George, Phoenix Supplementary Volumes 52 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 109.

⁹⁸⁰ See, e.g., Catherine Hezser, “Part Whore, Part Wife: Slave Women in the Palestinian Rabbinic Tradition,” in *Doing Gender–Doing Religion: Fallstudien zur Intersektionalität im frühen Judentum, Christentum und Islam*, ed. Ute E. Eisen, Christine Gerber, and Angela Standhartinger, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 302 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 306; and Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity*, 16-24.

⁹⁸¹ Hezser, “Part Whore, Part Wife,” 321; and Sandra R. Joshel and Sheila Murnaghan, introduction to *Women and Slaves in Greco-Roman Culture: Differential Equations* (London: Routledge, 1998), 3.

⁹⁸² Jonathan Pater, Albertina Oegema and Martijn Stoutjesdijk, “It Is Like a Woman Who? Women in Early Rabbinic and Early Christian Parables,” in *Parables in Changing Contexts: Interreligious and Cultural Approaches to the Study of Parables*, ed. Eric Ottenheim and Marcel Poorthuis, Jewish and Christian Perspectives (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 257.

⁹⁸³ Translation: MS. Hebrew text: Jakob Z. Lauterbach, *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 2:430. Another example can be found in Leviticus Rabbah 8:1; cf. Hezser, *Jewish Slavery*, 183. In Acts 2:18 we also find an example of the pairing of slave men and women, but that verse is a quotation from Joel 2:29.

5.4.1.2. Luke 16:1-8

The next parable (Luke 16:1-8) is a “Fremdkörper” in our collection, since some scholars argue that it is not even featuring a slave.⁹⁸⁴ However, as Beavis has stated, an average Greco-Roman reader would probably have assumed that an οἰκονόμος (vs. 1, 3) simply was a slave,⁹⁸⁵ or, as we read in *Vita Aesopi*: “the steward is a slave and is himself consigned to the yoke of servitude.”⁹⁸⁶ The text of the parable is as follows:

Luke 16:1-8 (NA28)

1 Ἐλεγεν δὲ καὶ πρὸς τοὺς μαθητάς· ἄνθρωπός τις ἦν πλούσιος ὃς εἶχεν οἰκονόμον, καὶ οὗτος διεβλήθη αὐτῷ ὥς διασκορπίζων τὰ ὑπάρχοντα αὐτοῦ.

2 καὶ φωνήσας αὐτὸν εἶπεν αὐτῷ· τί τοῦτο ἀκούω περὶ σοῦ; ἀπόδος τὸν λόγον τῆς οἰκονομίας σου, οὐ γὰρ δύνη ἐτι οἰκονομεῖν.

3 εἶπεν δὲ ἐν ἑαυτῷ ὁ οἰκονόμος· τί ποιήσω, ὅτι ὁ κύριός μου ἀφαιρεῖται τὴν οἰκονομίαν ἀπ’ ἐμοῦ; σκάπτειν οὐκ ἰσχύω, ἐπαιτεῖν αἰσχύνομαι.

4 ἔγνων τί ποιήσω, ἵνα ὅταν μετασταθῶ ἐκ τῆς οἰκονομίας δέξωνταί με εἰς τοὺς οἴκους αὐτῶν.

5 καὶ προσκαλεσάμενος ἓνα ἕκαστον τῶν χρεοφειλετῶν τοῦ κυρίου ἑαυτοῦ ἔλεγεν τῷ πρώτῳ· πόσον ὀφείλεις τῷ κυρίῳ μου;

6 ὁ δὲ εἶπεν· ἑκατὸν βάτους⁹⁸⁷ ἐλαίου. ὁ δὲ εἶπεν αὐτῷ· δέξαι σου τὰ γράμματα καὶ καθίσας ταχέως γράψον πενήκοντα.

7 ἔπειτα ἐτέρῳ εἶπεν· σὺ δὲ πόσον ὀφείλεις; ὁ δὲ εἶπεν· ἑκατὸν κόρους σίτου. λέγει αὐτῷ· δέξαι σου τὰ γράμματα καὶ γράψον ὀγδοήκοντα.

8 καὶ ἐπήνεσεν ὁ κύριος τὸν οἰκονόμον τῆς ἀδικίας ὅτι φρονίμως ἐποίησεν· ὅτι οἱ υἱοὶ τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου φρονιμώτεροι ὑπὲρ τοὺς υἱοὺς τοῦ φωτὸς εἰς τὴν γενεάν τὴν ἑαυτῶν εἰσιν.

Translation (MS)

And he said to the disciples: “There was a certain wealthy man who had a slave manager, and it was made clear to him that he [the slave manager] was squandering his belongings.

And when he had called him, he said to him: ‘What is this that I hear about you? Give report me about your management, because you cannot be managing any longer.’

The slave manager said to himself: What shall I do, now that my master is taking away the management from me? I do not have the power to dig, and I am ashamed to beg.

I know what to do, so that – when I am removed from the management – they will receive me in their houses.

And he called everyone of his master’s debtors to him, [and] he said to the first: ‘How much do you owe my master?’

He said: ‘Hundred *bath* of oil.’ He said to him: ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly and write fifty.’

Then he said to another: ‘How much do you owe?’ He said: ‘Hundred *kor* grain.’ He said to him: ‘Take your bill and write eighty.’

And the master approved of the dishonest slave manager, because he did prudently: for the children [litt. sons] of this world are more prudent than the sons of light in their own generation.

⁹⁸⁴ E.g., Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 92. Cf. Rene A. Baergen, “Servant, manager or slave? Reading the parable of the rich man and his steward (Luke 16:1-8a) through the lens of ancient slavery,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 35 (2006), 25-38.

⁹⁸⁵ Mary Ann Beavis, “Ancient Slavery as an Interpretive Context for the New Testament Servant Parables with Special Reference to the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-8),” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111, no. 1 (1992), 37-54. She is followed in that assessment by e.g. Fabian E. Udoh, “The Tale of an Unrighteous Slave (Luke 16:1-8 [13]),” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128 no. 2 (2009), 311-335. An earlier scholar who advocated the identification of the οἰκονόμος with a slave was William O. E. Oesterley in *The Gospel Parables in the Light of Their Jewish Background* (New York: Macmillan, 1936).

⁹⁸⁶ *Vita Aesopi* 13 (translation Daly, “The Aesop Romance,” 116).

⁹⁸⁷ Apparently, this word was not well known in antiquity; a few Western witnesses read καθους (“jars”) or καθους (a measure equal to approximate two liters, *cab*) and in the Alexandrian textual tradition βαδους (a variant spelling of βάτους) is attested.

9 Καὶ ἐγὼ ὑμῖν λέγω, ἑαυτοῖς ποιήσατε φίλους ἐκ τοῦ μαμωνᾶ τῆς ἀδικίας, ἵνα ὅταν ἐκλίπη δέξωνται ὑμᾶς εἰς τὰς αἰωνίους σκηνάς.

And I say to you, make yourselves friends from dishonest wealth, so that when it is gone, they will receive you in the eternal tents.”

From a socio-historical perspective, we see how the parable echoes the description and the duties of the slave manager, as they were described in the agricultural manuals. One of the responsibilities of the *vilicus* was the keeping of accounts. The slave manager normally could read and write, according to Cato and Columella,⁹⁸⁸ which was also a necessity given his administrative tasks. Jesper Carlsen describes Cato’s view on the way the slave manager should handle his wallet: “The *vilicus* should not be allowed on his own initiative to buy or sell anything, nor lend money without his master’s permission. On the contrary it was his job to collect the loans made by the owner. He also had frequently to render an account of the money entrusted to him. The *vilicus* needed ready cash for various purposes: he not only had to buy, sell, and enter into contracts according to his *lex praepositionis*, but also single-handedly employ and pay labourers [...].”⁹⁸⁹ Columella’s slave manager had greater financial freedom, although he warns the *vilicus* about becoming a trader instead of a farmer. The agricultural manuals of the time are rather cautious with giving the *vilicus* too many financial responsibilities because they were thought to have a bad track record in handling their master’s finances.⁹⁹⁰ Carlsen quotes a passage from Cicero in which he compares his addressee (Verres) with a fraudulent *vilicus*:

It is as if the manager of a farm that was rich enough to bring in a hundred pounds a year were to cut down and sell the timber, remove the roofing, sell off the equipment and live stock, and then send the owner two hundred pounds instead of a hundred, while pocketing another thousand for himself. The owner, knowing nothing of the damage done to him, would be much pleased at first, and delighted with his manager for making his farm bring in so large a return. But when he heard presently how everything on which the fertility and cultivation of his farm depended had been taken off and sold, he would think himself badly treated, and would punish that manager most severely.⁹⁹¹

I think this short discussion suffices to make plausible that the parable from Luke is in a way rooted in reality. What, then, is its message? The parable is part of a large string of parables, starting with the Parable of the Lost Sheep and continuing with the Parable of the Lost Coin and the Prodigal Son. The Parable of the Dishonest Slave Manager forms the end of the string, and is followed by a coda (verses 10-13).⁹⁹² There has been much speculation about the authenticity of and the relation between the coda and the parable, as well as about verse 8b and 9, which seem like two different applications to the parable.⁹⁹³ However, regardless of whether the parable should have an ethical message of financial investment or a theological message of eschatological preparedness,⁹⁹⁴ the exegetical problem remains that the parable seems to promote immoral behavior, since the οἰκονόμος forges the receipts of his master’s bills in order to gain popularity – and his master⁹⁹⁵ praises him for

⁹⁸⁸ See Carlsen, *Vilici and Roman Estate Managers Until AD 284*, 71.

⁹⁸⁹ Carlsen, *Vilici and Roman Estate Managers Until AD 284*, 73.

⁹⁹⁰ Carlsen, *Vilici and Roman Estate Managers Until AD 284*, 74.

⁹⁹¹ Cicero, *Verrine Orations* 2.3.50 (LCL 293, 141-143).

⁹⁹² “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.” For the last verse, see e.g. Shmuel Safrai and David Flusser, “The Slave of Two Masters,” *Immanuel* 6 (1976), 30–33.

⁹⁹³ See, for example, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “The Story of the Dishonest Manager (Lk 16:1-13),” *Theological Studies* 25 no. 1 (1964), 23-42, esp. 26-30; Bernard B. Scott, “A Master’s Praise. Luke 16,1-8a,” *Biblica* 64, no. 2 (1983), 173-188, esp. 174-177; Stephen Curkpatrick, “Dissonance in Luke 18:1-8,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 121, no. 1 (2002), 107-121.

⁹⁹⁴ Baergen, “Servant, manager or slave?” 34.

⁹⁹⁵ The reference to the master (κύριος) in verse 8 has sometimes also been explained as referring to Jesus, with verse 7 as the closing verse of the parable (see, e.g., Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, transl. S.H. Hooke, 2nd ed. [Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1972], 45-46). However, in the present study, I assume that verse 8a is part of the

that (Bovon calls him a “good loser”⁹⁹⁶). Recently, Rene A. Baergen has argued that “to the surprise of this audience, the defenseless slave, like the landless tenants and the voiceless widow, discovers the power which lies within his grasp and uses it effectively to win the day. For the powerless in Jesus’ audience, the parable must have come as particularly good news; for the powerful, however, the message was surely more nuanced.”⁹⁹⁷ I do not agree with Baergen on either statement. I do not think that this would be a great “surprise [to the] audience,” since it follows ancient literary examples (see below); nor do I think that the message would have come as “particularly good news,” since it was “domesticated” in a specific rhetoric discourse. I do think that the parable allows for interpretations that are beneficial for the powerless, but I take a more nuanced position than Baergen (I will come back to this). To explain the parable of the Unjust Steward, I take over Beavis’ suggestion to use *Vita Aesopi* and the Plautine comedies as lenses through which one should understand this parable.⁹⁹⁸ Following Beavis’ suggestion will lead us, I believe, into a more adequate understanding of the parable.

Beavis elaborates on the idea – earlier expressed by, e.g., Dan O. Via and Bernard Scott⁹⁹⁹ – that “the steward of the parable is a comic, picaresque character, an attractive rascal.”¹⁰⁰⁰ She observes how in *Vita Aesopi* often the following plot structure can be found (of which we have seen examples earlier): “(1) Aesop is in trouble with his master or mistress; (2) Aesop takes action to remedy the situation; (3) Aesop gets the better of his master or mistress,”¹⁰⁰¹ and she argues that the parable of the Unjust Steward develops along the same lines: (1) the *oikonomos* is accused of spoiling money; (2) the steward starts falsifying receipts without the master knowing; (3) the master acknowledges that this was a smart thing to do. Also, in the Plautine comedies Beavis finds many examples of clever slaves (the *servus callidus*), who achieve results with dubious methods that are often approved by their masters in the end.¹⁰⁰² If Beavis is right – and I think she is – the parable of the Dishonest Slave Manager is built on this well-known ancient plot structure.

In his article “The Tale of an Unrighteous Slave (Luke 16:1-8 [13]),” Fabian E. Udoh criticizes the position of Beavis. Although he agrees with her that the manager is a slave, he rejects her “literary, reader-response perspective.”¹⁰⁰³ Quoting Fitzgerald, Udoh states that “[b]ased on the topos of the wicked/unfaithful slave, the parable lacks ‘the comic symbiosis of master and slave that is central to the economy of Plautine comedy.’”¹⁰⁰⁴ And he continues: “If Plautine comedy brings ‘comic relief,’ it is because at the end of the plays,

parable (and the “master” thus refers to the owner of the steward), following a majority of modern scholarship, since without this verse the parable would have “no resolution, and one does not know whether the steward’s action was successful or abortive” (Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent. A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2008], 411). See also Scott, “A Master’s Praise,” 174-177; Bovon, *Luke* 2, 449.⁹⁹⁶ Bovon, *Luke* 2, 449. Bovon explains that to act “in a self-interested way for his own profit” is an intelligent strategy from the perspective of a rich man; hence his praise for his steward.

⁹⁹⁷ Baergen, “Servant, manager or slave?” 34.

⁹⁹⁸ See Beavis, “Ancient Slavery as an Interpretive Context,” esp. 43-54.

⁹⁹⁹ Dan O. Via, *The Parables. Their Literary and Existential Dimension* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 166; Scott, “A Master’s Praise. Luke 16,1-8a,” 187-188. Cf. Beavis, “Ancient Slavery as an Interpretive Context,” 44.

¹⁰⁰⁰ Beavis, “Ancient Slavery as an Interpretive Context,” 44.

¹⁰⁰¹ Beavis, “Ancient Slavery as an Interpretive Context,” 47

¹⁰⁰² Examples of these are the comedies *Asinaria* (the slaves Libanus and Leonida help their master’s son to rob his wife of her money), *Bacchides* (the slave Chrysalus helps his master’s son to make him pay for his concubine), *Epidicus*, (the slave Epidicus helps his master’s son to buy a female slave he loves, by using the money of his unknowing father), *Miles Gloriosus* (the slave Palaestrio helps his master to get his captive girlfriend back), *Mostellaria* (the slave Tranio helps the son of his master hide his misbehavior from his father – and is forgiven for that in the end), *Persa* (by organizing the fake sale of his daughter, the slave Toxilus succeeds in obtaining the money for liberating his mistress, also using money of another slave’s (Sagaristio) master), *Poenulus* (the slave Milphio helps his master to redeem a prostitute by getting her pimp in trouble), and *Pseudolus* (the slave Pseudolus helps his master to get his slave mistress back by stealing money). Bradley observes that “the *servus callidus* of Plautus’ comedies is often a *servus fidus*.” See Keith R. Bradley, *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire: A Study in Social Control* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 38-39; cf. Beavis, “Ancient Slavery as an Interpretive Context,” 48n61.

¹⁰⁰³ Udoh, “The Tale of an Unrighteous Slave,” 311.

¹⁰⁰⁴ Udoh, “The Tale of an Unrighteous Slave,” 334, William Fitzgerald, *Slavery and the Roman Literary Imagination, Roman Literature and its Contexts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 25.

after the reversals and chaos, order is restored and the existing social and economic arrangements are legitimized: ‘the spectators are sent home with the satisfying notion that, at least in the world of happy endings, stability among the orders and within the family is not only desirable but also feasible.’”¹⁰⁰⁵ Although I concur with Udoh that the parable lacks the obvious comic dimension of the Plautine plays, I would like to underscore the comic potential of the parable; only imagine the surprise of the slave manager when he hears his master’s praise (also notice the comic remark of the manager that he is not “fit to dig,” and “ashamed to beg”¹⁰⁰⁶). Furthermore, I disagree with Udoh that at the end of the Plautine comedies, order is restored – and thus *nothing has changed*. Indeed, the chaos of the comical developments has been replaced by the tranquility of a “happy” ending, but that ending often involves fathers being atoned with their sons, lovers being reunited, children being liberated from captivity, and slaves being manumitted (e.g., *Asinaria*, *Meneachmi*); in other words, the restoration of justice, and a new and good order. We could say the same for the parable of the Unjust Slave Manager: yes, order has prevailed (it is, in the end, the master who has agency and who dictates the frame through which we evaluate the slave’s actions; the slave has been domesticated again), but not without things having been changed, both in the relation between the master and his slave, and between the master and his debtors. Some exegetes even claim that the manager has corrected his master here.¹⁰⁰⁷ As a consequence, I would argue that the parable opens perspectives for a hidden transcript reading, since it is the slave who trumps his master in this parable, and does so by endangering his master’s financial interests. While this is not the application Luke offers, we might wonder whether the parable proposes a certain degree of human autonomy – room for debate – *vis-à-vis* God, comparable to the parable of the Unjust Judge (Luke 18:1-8). A thought-provoking interpretation of the parable is perhaps that since God’s actions are sometimes debatable (I assume a wealthy master would not unequivocally be seen as a good person in ancient Palestine¹⁰⁰⁸), there is some room for “our” human ethical agency too.

How do we interpret this parable from a *Bildfeld* perspective? At the very least, we have to remark that it is again God who is compared to a slave’s master and the believer to a slave.¹⁰⁰⁹ Also, there is a connection with debts here – which enables a possible intertextual relationship with the Parable of the Unforgiving Slave (just like the Slave has to mirror the behavior of his master, so – in a chiasmic way – the master in the parable of the Unjust Slave Manager has to follow the behavior of his slave. Both show the value of remitting debts as well). Moreover, some scholars have tried to connect the parable of the Unjust Slave Manager with the parable of the Prodigal Son that precedes it. In this line of interpretation, the son is equated with the slave, who is also accused of squandering his money (verse 1). The slave manager experiences a moment of conversion, expressed in a *monologue intérieur* (verse 3), which can be compared to the prodigal son’s speech in Luke 15:17-19). This moment of conversion ultimately leads to the slave’s renewed inclusion in community, just like the son was reunited with his family.¹⁰¹⁰

¹⁰⁰⁵ Udoh, “The Tale of an Unrighteous Slave,” 334, with reference to Annalisa Rei, “Villains, Wives, and Slaves in the Comedies of Plautus,” in *Women and Slaves in Greco-Roman Culture. Differential Equations*, ed. Sandra R. Joshel and Sheila Murnaghan (London: Routledge, 1998), 104.

¹⁰⁰⁶ Compare *Meneachmi* 979-980: “I can bear a chiding much more easily: I hate a hiding, and I much prefer to eat what has been milled to doing the milling. For this reason I’m following my master’s command and carry it out well and calmly” (translation: LCL 61, 527).

¹⁰⁰⁷ See, e.g., J.D.M. Derrett, “Fresh Light on St Luke XVI:1. The Parable of the Unjust Steward,” *New Testament Studies* 7 (1960-61), 198-219. For an overview of scholars who support his thesis, see Dennis J. Ireland, “A History of Recent Interpretation of the Parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-13),” *Westminster Theological Journal* 51 (1989), 311ff.

¹⁰⁰⁸ The New Testament is often very critical of the rich; see my discussion the Parable of the Talents below.

¹⁰⁰⁹ There is, however, a different reading possible. Eckard Reinmuth argues that in the acts of the slave manager, the “Praxis Jesu” becomes visible. Just like Jesus the manager is in an in-between position: he has his master above him (i.e., God) and the debtors below him (i.e., the believers). Just like Jesus, the manager decides to give away freely. Also, the parable addresses criticism regarding Jesus’ practice “der bedingungslosen und vergebungsbereiten Gemeinschaft mit Sündern.” See Eckart Reinmuth, “Der beschuldigte Verwalter (Vom ungetreuen Haushalter) – Lk 16,1-8,” in *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu*, ed. Ruben Zimmermann (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2007), 642.

¹⁰¹⁰ Michael R. Austin, “The Hypocritical Son,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 57 (1985), 307-315. Cf. David Landry and Ben May, “Honor Restored: New Light on the Parable of the Prudent Steward (Luke 16:1-8a),” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 119, no. 2 (2000), 287-309, esp. 305-308.

5.4.1.3. *Matthew 25:14-30//Luke 19:11-27*

With the Parable of the Unjust Slave Manager, we already saw how the financial tasks and the agricultural tasks of the slave managers might overlap. In the parable of the Talents/Pounds, the same might be observed. As we will see, it has as its background the agricultural economy, but it mainly deals with money and “doing business.” I quote here the Matthean version (the Parable of the Talents) but refer to the Lukan version of the parable (the Parable of the Pounds) as well in my analysis of the parable.

Matthew 25:14-30 (NA28)

14 Ὡσπερ γὰρ ἄνθρωπος ἀποδημῶν ἐκάλεσεν τοὺς ἰδίους δούλους καὶ παρέδωκεν αὐτοῖς τὰ ὑπάρχοντα αὐτοῦ,

15 καὶ ὃ μὲν ἔδωκεν πέντε τάλαντα, ὃ δὲ δύο, ὃ δὲ ἓν, ἐκάστῳ κατὰ τὴν ἰδίαν δύναμιν, καὶ ἀπεδήμησεν.

εὐθέως¹⁰¹¹ 16 πορευθεὶς ὁ τὰ πέντε τάλαντα λαβὼν ἡργάσατο ἐν αὐτοῖς καὶ ἐκέρδησεν ἄλλα πέντε·

17 ὡσαύτως ὁ τὰ δύο ἐκέρδησεν ἄλλα δύο.

18 ὁ δὲ τὸ ἓν λαβὼν ἀπελθὼν ὥρυξεν γῆν καὶ ἔκρυπεν τὸ ἀργύριον τοῦ κυρίου αὐτοῦ.

19 Μετὰ δὲ πολὺν χρόνον ἔρχεται ὁ κύριος τῶν δούλων ἐκείνων καὶ συναίρει λόγον μετ’ αὐτῶν.

20 καὶ προσελθὼν ὁ τὰ πέντε τάλαντα λαβὼν προσήνεγκεν ἄλλα πέντε τάλαντα λέγων· κύριε, πέντε τάλαντά μοι παρέδωκας· ἴδε ἄλλα πέντε τάλαντα ἐκέρδησα.

21 ἔφη αὐτῷ ὁ κύριος αὐτοῦ· εὖ, δοῦλε ἀγαθὲ καὶ πιστέ, ἐπὶ ὀλίγα ἦς πιστός, ἐπὶ πολλῶν σε καταστήσω· εἰσελθε εἰς τὴν χαρὰν τοῦ κυρίου σου.

22 Προσελθὼν [δὲ] καὶ ὁ τὰ δύο τάλαντα εἶπεν· κύριε, δύο τάλαντά μοι παρέδωκας· ἴδε ἄλλα δύο τάλαντα ἐκέρδησα.

23 ἔφη αὐτῷ ὁ κύριος αὐτοῦ· εὖ, δοῦλε ἀγαθὲ καὶ πιστέ, ἐπὶ ὀλίγα ἦς πιστός, ἐπὶ πολλῶν σε καταστήσω· εἰσελθε εἰς τὴν χαρὰν τοῦ κυρίου σου.

24 Προσελθὼν δὲ καὶ ὁ τὸ ἓν τάλαντον εἰληφώς εἶπεν· κύριε, ἔγνων σε ὅτι σκληρὸς εἶ ἄνθρωπος, θερίζων ὅπου οὐκ ἔσπειρας καὶ συνάγων ὅθεν οὐ διεσκόπισας,

Translation (MS)

For it is like a man, going abroad, who called his slaves and gave them his belongings,

And to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to every one according to his own ability, and he went abroad.

The one who had five talents immediately took off and traded with them and he gained five more:

In the same way the one with two gained two more.

But the one who had one went off and dug the earth and hid his master’s money.

After a long time the master of these slaves came back and he settled accounts with them.

And the one who had five talents came forward, bringing five other talents, saying: “Master, five talents you have given to me: see, five more talents I have gained.”

To him his master said: “Well done, good and reliable slave, about few things you were reliable, about many things you will be appointed: enter into the joy of your master.”

And the one with two talents came forward and said: “Master, two talents you have given me: see, two more talents I have gained.”

To him his master said: “Well done, good and reliable slave, about few things you were reliable, about many things you will be appointed: enter into the joy of your master.”

Then the one who received one talent came forward and said: “Master, I know that you are a hard man, harvesting where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter [seed],

¹⁰¹¹ Although most witnesses add εὐθέως to the previous sentence, the reading of the Nestle Aland (shown here) “best explains the origin of the others” according to Metzger. Moreover, it is most consistent with punctuation elsewhere in Matthew, as well as the parable’s plot. See Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament. A Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies’ Greek New Testament* (London: United Bible Societies, 1971), 63.

25 καὶ φοβηθεὶς ἀπελθὼν ἔκρυψα τὸ τάλαντόν σου ἐν τῇ γῇ· ἴδε ἔχεις τὸ σόν.
 26 Ἀποκριθεὶς δὲ ὁ κύριος αὐτοῦ εἶπεν αὐτῷ· πονηρὲ δοῦλε καὶ ὀκνηρέ, ἦδεις ὅτι θερίζω ὅπου οὐκ ἔσπειρα καὶ συνάγω ὅθεν οὐ διεσκόρπισα;
 27 ἔδει σε οὖν βαλεῖν τὰ ἀργύριά μου τοῖς τραπεζίταις, καὶ ἐλθὼν ἐγὼ ἐκομισάμην ἅν τὸ ἐμὸν σὺν τόκῳ.
 28 ἄρατε οὖν ἀπ’ αὐτοῦ τὸ τάλαντον καὶ δότε τῷ ἔχοντι τὰ δέκα τάλαντα·
 29 Τῷ γὰρ ἔχοντι παντὶ δοθήσεται καὶ περισσευθήσεται, τοῦ δὲ μὴ ἔχοντος καὶ ὁ ἔχει ἀρθήσεται ἀπ’ αὐτοῦ.
 30 καὶ τὸν ἀχρεῖον δοῦλον ἐκβάλετε εἰς τὸ σκότος τὸ ἐξώτερον· ἐκεῖ ἔσται ὁ κλαυθμὸς καὶ ὁ βρυγμὸς τῶν ὀδόντων.

And I was afraid, and I went off and hid your talent in the ground: here you have what is yours.”
 His master answered and said to him: “You worthless and lazy slave, you knew that I harvest where I did not sow and gather where I did not scatter;
 Now you should have given over my money to the bankers, so that, on my return, I would have received what is mine with interest.
 Now take the talent away from him and give it to the one who has ten talents:
 For to him who has much will be given [more] and he will have an abundance, but from him who does not have, even what he has shall be taken away.
 And throw the useless slave in the outer darkness: where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

This parable sketches a classical *absente ero topos*. A master gathers his slaves (ten in Luke, three in Matthew) to instruct them (at least in Luke¹⁰¹²) before he goes abroad. In Luke, a subplot unfolds when the master – who is looking for royal power – is followed by a delegation of citizens who want to deny him that claim. M. Zerwick was the first to claim that this story can be traced back to an actual historical core,¹⁰¹³ namely, the history of Archelaus who went to Rome to get his kingship over Judea confirmed and was followed by a Jewish delegation to resist that appointment.¹⁰¹⁴ Recently, this theory has been criticized by, among others, John P. Meier, who argues that the average follower of Jesus would not have captured the reference made by Jesus, some 35 years after the moment those events took place (and did not even lead to the rule of Archelaus).¹⁰¹⁵ But, as we will see later on, there are some good arguments to be made for a connection between the parable and Archelaus. Regardless of this connection, I want to point to the anti-hegemonic character of the story, portraying citizens (οἱ δὲ πολῖται) who oppose a man of noble birth (ἄνθρωπος τις εὐγενής).

After the master has gathered his slaves, the master is said to entrust his belongings (τὰ ὑπάρχοντα) to his slaves in the Matthean version, and he distributes his money (8 talents) over his slaves. In Luke, there is no mentioning of belongings; each slave simply gets a minah (rendered as a “pound” in most traditional translations). What is the value of these sums of money? The talent was worth approximately 6000 denarii (with 1 denarius being equal to a day’s wage¹⁰¹⁶). A minah is the equivalent of 100 denarii, and thus 1/60 of a talent.¹⁰¹⁷ Are these sums imaginable or possible? To answer this question, we might recall the anecdote that Cicero told about a bailiff who supervised a farm that could bring in 10,000 sesterces (per year, we assume).¹⁰¹⁸ A sestertius was worth 1/4 denarius,¹⁰¹⁹ and thus this *vilicus* managed approximately 2,500 denarii. So, the parable of The Pounds deals with substantial but not enormous amounts of money (amounts imaginable for a nobleman with

¹⁰¹² It is one of the peculiarities of the Matthean version of the parable that the slaves are judged for their work without knowing what that work entails.

¹⁰¹³ Max Zerwick, “Die Parabel vom Thronanwärter,” *Biblica* 40, no. 3 (1959), 654-674.

¹⁰¹⁴ See Josephus, *De Bello Judaico* 2.80-100, 2.111.

¹⁰¹⁵ See John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, Volume 5: Probing the Authenticity of the Parables*, Anchor Bible Reference Library Series (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 353-354.

¹⁰¹⁶ Lee Martin McDonald, “Money in the New Testament,” in *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*, ed. Joel B. Green, Lee Martin McDonald (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2013), 574.

¹⁰¹⁷ McDonald, “Money in the New Testament,” 574.

¹⁰¹⁸ Cicero, *Verrine Orations* 2.3.50 (LCL 293, 141-143).

¹⁰¹⁹ James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 154.

the ambition to become king), while the parable of The Talents mentions some very high numbers (5 talents: 30,000 denarii; a total of 8 talents: 48,000 denarii). As we have seen in chapter 3, the total amount of tax that was collected in ancient Judea accounted for 600 talents.¹⁰²⁰ On the basis of these numbers, we are safe to conclude that 8 talents is a huge amount of money.

Is it imaginable that a master would divide his money among several slaves instead of one? Here we hit upon the problem of exactly determining the slaves' roles. It has been suggested – as it was suggested with respect to the Parable of the Unforgiving Slave – that the task the slaves were assigned was tax collecting. Ernest van Eck points to a story relayed by Josephus, which says that Archelaus (the same Archelaus that went to Rome for his kingship) used slaves as tax collectors – something that was forbidden by Roman law – and rewarded them by appointing one of them over ten cities and another over five cities to collect taxes.¹⁰²¹ If we take tax collecting as the background of this parable, the fact that several slaves are appointed this task makes more sense than that of several *vilicii* on the same estate.¹⁰²² It also makes much more sense that the Lukan parable speaks about putting the good slaves in charge of cities.¹⁰²³

From a hidden transcript perspective, I would like to focus on the third slave, who is called “worthless and lazy” in Matthew 25:26. The reason for those negative words seems to be obvious (at least the “lazy”), because the slave did not do anything with the money he was entrusted with. He wrapped it in a piece of cloth (Luke) and buried it in the ground (Matthew). However, contrary to what we might expect, many commentators have remarked that the practice of burying money was prudent according to rabbinical standards.¹⁰²⁴ In the Babylonian Talmud, Rabbi Shmuel is quoted as saying: “For money, guarding is only [possible] in the ground (בִּקְרָקֶעַ)” (b. Bava Metzi’a 42a; translation MS). Thus, the third slave did a good job in storing the money, but was this the assignment? The text seems to suggest that it was the slaves' assignment to trade with the money: “When he returned, having received royal power, he ordered these slaves, to whom he had given the money, to be summoned so that he might find out what they had *gained by trading* (διεπραγματεύσαντο)” (Luke 19:15). So, the third slave resisted his master's implicit or explicit assignment. His reasons for this are voiced in an open-hearted critique of the master: “Master, I know that you are a hard man, harvesting where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter [seed], and I was afraid, and I went off and hid your talent in the ground: here you have what is yours” (Matthew 25:24-25/Luke 19:20-21). The slave's critique of the master is driven by that which is perhaps the most important force in a slave's life, and which gives his words a sense of authenticity: fear. We might recall the words of a slave in one of Plautus' comedies, quoted in the beginning of this chapter (section 5.2), that it is only because of his fear for punishments that he (the slave) is determined to be good (Plautus, *Menechmi* 967-985). In the parable, however, a strange twist is given to the discourse of fear. While the slave of Plautus is driven to strict obedience by his fear, the fear of the third slave in the New Testament parable leads to paralysis; since the slave thinks he cannot live up to the expectations of his master, he decides to do nothing (see section 5.5). Van Eck has interpreted the puzzling rationale of the third slave as a hidden transcript:

¹⁰²⁰ See Bernard B. Scott, “The King's Accounting: Matthew 18:23-34,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104, no. 3 (1985), 432, especially note 17.

¹⁰²¹ Ernest van Eck, *The Parables of Jesus the Galilean. Stories of a Social Prophet* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2016), 291-292, with reference to Josephus, *Antiquitates Judaicae* 17.299-314.

¹⁰²² Although we have examples of that as well: for example, two imperial slaves who run the Aqua Claudia together. See Jonathan Edmondson, “Slavery and the Roman Family,” in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery. Volume 1: The Ancient Mediterranean World*, ed. Keith R. Bradley and Paul Cartledge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 343.

¹⁰²³ Here we might bring up again the differences between both parables. Although Matthew's version does not mention cities or kings, the amounts of money are much higher than in Luke's variant, suggesting the context of tax harvesting as well.

¹⁰²⁴ E.g., Bernard B. Scott, *Hear then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 227; Catharine Hezser, “The Treasure Motif in Ancient Jewish and Christian Parables and Stories in the Context of Rabbinic Halakhah and Social Reality,” in *Overcoming Dichotomies. Parables, Fables, and Similes in the Graeco-Roman World*, ed. Albertina Oegema, Jonathan Pater and Martijn Stoutjesdijk, *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021 [forthcoming]).

First he ties the mina in a cloth to protect the existing share of the owner, “exactly what in the peasant view an honorable person should do.” Second, when confronted by his master, he does not characterize his master as a hard man to justify his fear and consequent inactivity with the mina. He rather employs the “weapons of the weak”: “I knew I had to be careful, and I have been.” How would the nobleman have heard this? Most probably in the sense of “Master, I have so much respect for you (I am honoring you) that I did not want to take a chance with your money. I did what I thought was the honorable thing to do, that is, to protect what belongs to you.” [...] And what did the nobleman do? Since he knew that the social control and power he enjoyed was built on fear, and that this led to the action of the third slave, the slave’s action in a sense was a result of his (the master’s) own doing. [...] He was a “bad slave,” compared to the other two. But yet he respected (honored) his master, although he made no profit. Consequently, the master let him go with only a label around his neck.¹⁰²⁵

Meanwhile, the peasant audience would have heard another message, namely, that the master was a thief (reaping where he did not sow) and that the slave did not want to be part of this anymore.¹⁰²⁶

However, the slave is, in my opinion, precariously balancing between a hidden protest and what Scott calls “breaking the silence,”¹⁰²⁷ since one can interpret the words of the slave (calling his master “hard,” and one who “reaps where he did not sow” – a description that is confirmed by the master) also as an openly-worded criticism of the master. This breaking of the silence is both a positive moment, which seems “to restore a sense of selfrespect and personhood,”¹⁰²⁸ but is also a moment of great risk, which often entails “the element of immediate physical danger,”¹⁰²⁹ since “[t]he moment when the dissent of the hidden transcript crosses the threshold to open resistance is always a politically charged occasion.”¹⁰³⁰

Whether we deal here with a hidden transcript or “breaking the silence,” in this line of interpretation it is the third slave who is the actual hero of the story, a perspective that was for the first time proposed by Richard L. Rohrbaugh in 1993. Rohrbaugh interprets the parable against the background of the first-century Galilean peasant society, which was a primarily subsistence economy.¹⁰³¹ Such an economy hardly produced any surplus, which means that “the pie is limited,” and “[a] larger share for one automatically means a smaller share for someone else.”¹⁰³² In such a context, traders were seen as evil exploiters,¹⁰³³ and every rich person must be “either a thief or the heir of a thief.”¹⁰³⁴ If one assumes that peasants formed the largest part of Jesus’ audience (they formed the biggest part of population without any doubt), their perspective on this parable might be the right one. From this perspective, it is the third slave who does the right thing, and it is the master who is unrighteous. Rohrbaugh, Dowling, and others find support for this reading in other sayings and parables by Jesus (for example, the parable of the Unforgiving Slave, Jesus’ critique on rich people in Luke 6:35, and elsewhere, e.g., Gospel of Thomas 95) and in later interpretations of the parable, which can be found in the Gospel of the Nazarenes.¹⁰³⁵ From this perspective, one can see the third slave as a whistle-blower, “exposing his master’s

¹⁰²⁵ Van Eck, *The Parables of Jesus the Galilean*, 297-298. In the Matthean version, he is also “thrown in the outer darkness.”

¹⁰²⁶ See, e.g., Richard L. Rohrbaugh, “A Peasant Reading of the Parable of the Talents/Pounds: A Text of Terror?” *Biblical Theology Bulletin: Journal of Bible and Culture* 23 (1993), 35.

¹⁰²⁷ Scott, *Hear then the Parable*, 206ff.

¹⁰²⁸ Scott, *Hear then the Parable*, 210.

¹⁰²⁹ Scott, *Hear then the Parable*, 209.

¹⁰³⁰ Scott, *Hear then the Parable*, 207.

¹⁰³¹ Rohrbaugh, “A Peasant Reading,” 33.

¹⁰³² Rohrbaugh, “A Peasant Reading,” 33.

¹⁰³³ Compare Gospel of Thomas 64, in which a parable of a banquet concludes with the remark that traders and merchants will not enter God’s place.

¹⁰³⁴ Rohrbaugh, “A Peasant Reading,” 34, with reference to Jerome’s *In Hieremiam* 2.5.2.

¹⁰³⁵ Cf. Brad H. Young, *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 87-88, and see his notes for references.

exploitative practices,”¹⁰³⁶ and refusing “to continue the extortion practised and endorsed by his master,”¹⁰³⁷ a view that connects the third slave with Jesus himself and his imminent death.¹⁰³⁸

The plausibility of this interpretation is challenged by (1) its perhaps somewhat outdated rendition of the Galilean rural economy,¹⁰³⁹ and (2) the rarity of the identification of a slave with Jesus/God. With regard to the latter, as we have seen before, it is much more common that a master is equated with Jesus/God than a slave.¹⁰⁴⁰ In our corpus, we only have a few possible instances of the latter (see also the next section and the next chapter).¹⁰⁴¹ It does raise all kinds of questions about, for example, the identity of the master and the other two slaves. On the other hand, Dowling makes good use of the parable of The Good Samaritan to argue for her interpretation; in this parable, there are also three main characters, of whom only the last one is righteous.¹⁰⁴² However, in the parable of The Good Samaritan – also designated as a *Beispielerszählung*¹⁰⁴³ – the *tertium comparationis* might only exist in the ethics it teaches, while the parable of The Talents/Pounds calls into mind a whole world of meaning by employing set metaphors and scenery. Taking my complete corpus into account – in which the absent master always represents God/the Son of Man – I am inclined to think that the more “traditional” explanation of the parable (about the return of the Son of Man and the warning that “we” have to be prepared for that moment) is the most plausible. Moreover, the “traditional” explanation is also part of the embedding of the story and, as Ulrich Luz underscores, is “in keeping with Jesus’ style”; there are more examples of his use of immoral characters to say something about God or the Kingdom of Heaven (e.g., The Unjust Slave Manager and The Unjust Judge).¹⁰⁴⁴ Still, we might speculate as to whether the third slave and his words of criticism (directed towards what we might call an imperial regime, to use the terminology of Warren Carter¹⁰⁴⁵) would have been received as a (hidden) message by the peasants and slaves among the audience of Jesus’ parables. Just like the parable of The Unforgiving Slave we discussed in 4.3.2, we might come across the unsolved paradox here of using imperial language to propose an anti-imperial message.

From a *Bildfeld* perspective, we have established that God is again equated with a master/king whose followers – again equated with slaves – should be vigilant and conscientious. As “slaves” of Christ, they have been given much and it is their duty to multiply what they have been given. As they will be rewarded for their good work (mostly with more responsibilities; see the next chapter), they will receive punishments when they neglect to do their jobs.

¹⁰³⁶ Elizabeth V. Dowling, *Taking Away the Pound. Women, Theology and the Parable of the Pounds in the Gospel of Luke*, Library of New Testament Studies (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 90, also see William R. Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech. Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1994), 150-168.

¹⁰³⁷ Dowling, *Taking Away the Pound*, 91.

¹⁰³⁸ Dowling, *Taking Away the Pound*, 96 and 97ff.

¹⁰³⁹ See, for example, David A. Fiensy, James Riley Strange, ed., *Galilee in the Late Second Temple and Mishnaic Periods*, 2 vols. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014-2015). In several chapters of this work it is argued that Second Temple Galilee had a relatively healthy economy, with quite a developed trade network.

¹⁰⁴⁰ Luke 17:7-10 (The Useless Slaves); Matthew 18:23-35 (The Unforgiving Slave); Matthew 24:45-51//Luke 12:42-46 (The Good and the Bad Slave Manager); Luke 16:1-8 (The Unjust Slave Manager); Mark 13:33-37//Luke 12:35-38 (The Doorkeeper/The Serving Master). In almost all tannaitic parables that I know of the master is equated with God: e.g., Tosefta Berakoth 6:18 (The Stupid Slave); Mekhilta de Rabbi de Shimon bar Yochai Sanya on Exodus 4:13 (The Chosen Slave Manager Retracts); Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael Beshallah on Exodus 14:21 (The Garden within the Garden); Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael Shirata on Exodus 15:1 (Blind and Lame Guards); Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael Bachodesh on Exodus 20:3 (The Patient King); Sifre Numbers 84 (The Slave who Arranges an Inheritance); Sifre Numbers 115 (The King who Bought the Son of a Friend); Sifre Numbers 161 (The King who is Always with his Son); Sifre Deuteronomy 8 (The King who gave his Slave a Field); Sifre Deuteronomy 26 (The Sale of a Debtor’s Children as Slaves); Sifre Deuteronomy 28 (A King, Wine and Two Slaves); Sifre Deuteronomy 323 (Same Day Delivery of a Slave); Sifre Zuta 10:35 (A Slave who Wakes the King).

¹⁰⁴¹ Shepherd of Hermas; and see the discussion about Mishnah Sukkah 2:9.

¹⁰⁴² Dowling, *Taking Away the Pound*, 80.

¹⁰⁴³ Adolf Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* (Freiburg: J.C.B. Mohr, 1888), 1:117.

¹⁰⁴⁴ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21-28. A Commentary*, transl. James E. Crouch, Hermeneia – A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 250.

¹⁰⁴⁵ Warren Carter, “Resisting and Imitating the Empire. Imperial Paradigms in Two Matthean Parables,” *Interpretation. Journal of Bible and Theology* 56, no. 3 (2002), 260-272

To summarize, in this section, we have explored four New Testament parables (The Serving Master, The Good and the Bad Slave Manager, The Unjust Slave Manager, The Talents/Pounds). While in all these parables following the master's orders (and related to that: receiving punishments and rewards) forms the central theme, in the parable of The Talents/Pounds, and especially the parable of The Dishonest Slave Manager, we have identified room for hidden transcripts and for critique of the master who is portrayed as a rich and (thus) ethically compromised person. This is a perspective that is absent in the following two *absente ero*-parables that are characterized by a more rural background.

5.4.2. Absent Masters and Agriculture

In the next two parables, we leave the New Testament behind us to look for green pastures elsewhere, namely, in the early Christian text, Shepherd of Hermas, and in the early rabbinic midrash, Sifre Deuteronomy.¹⁰⁴⁶ In the concluding part of this section, both parables will be compared to each other.

5.4.2.1. Shepherd of Hermas 55¹⁰⁴⁷

According to Bart Ehrman, “[t]he Shepherd of Hermas was one of the most popular books of early Christianity. Judging from the manuscript remains, it was copied and read more widely in the second and third centuries than any other noncanonical book, even more than many of the books that later came to be included in the New Testament.”¹⁰⁴⁸ In some churches, it was part of the canon, and it was mentioned by the Muratorian Canon as a book that could be read in the church.¹⁰⁴⁹ The book exists of three parts: five visions (chapters 1-25), ten commandments or mandates (26-49), and twelve parables or similitudes (chapters 50-114).¹⁰⁵⁰ It is the last part – the twelve parables or similitudes (Greek παραβολαι) – that is the focus of this section. Notwithstanding the ancient popularity of the Shepherd of Hermas, its parables have not received much attention in the modern field of parable research. Often, they have been denounced as “visions”¹⁰⁵¹ or even “not real parables.”¹⁰⁵² Until recently, the parables of the Shepherd of Hermas have not been discussed in light of parable research, even though they might constitute proof of an, admittedly short-lived, tradition of parable-telling after Jesus.

We will discuss below the fifth parable in the third part of the Shepherd of Hermas (chapter 55/V.2.), a parable about which it has been said that “[d]espite [...] many intertextual echoes, and the early date of the Shepherd, it is rare to see this story cited as an early Christian slave parable, possibly even traceable to Jesus.”¹⁰⁵³

¹⁰⁴⁶ Although it is debated whether the parable is about slaves, it is worthwhile to refer here to yet another parable from yet another early Christian text: Gospel of Thomas 21:1-4: “Mary said to Jesus: ‘Whom are your disciples like?’ He said: ‘They are like servants who are entrusted with a field that is not theirs. When the owners of the field arrive, they will say: “Let us have our field.” (But) they are naked in their presence so as to let them have it, (and thus) to give them their field.’” The word “servant” is normally translated with “little children” or, literally, “babies” (*šēre šēm*), but Pokorný and others assert that the Greek *pais* may have been used in the Greek original, in the sense of “servant.” The exact meaning of the parable is debated, but until verse 4 the parable is rather comparable to the parables we discuss in this chapter. Notice that the Gospel of Thomas speaks about the owners (plural) of the field, who are interpreted by Pokorný as God and his angels. For translation and commentary, see Petr Pokorný, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Thomas. From Interpretations to the Interpreted, Jewish and Christian Texts in Contexts and Related Studies* (New York: T&T Clark, 2009), 64-65 (esp. notes 77 and 81).

¹⁰⁴⁷ I presented parts of this section during an EABS-conference in Helsinki, 2018.

¹⁰⁴⁸ Bart D. Ehrman, *The Apostolic Fathers, Volume II: Epistle of Barnabas. Papias and Quadratus. Epistle to Diognetus. The Shepherd of Hermas*, Loeb Classical Library 25 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 162; cf. Carolyn Osiek, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Hermeneia - A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 1.

¹⁰⁴⁹ Muratorian Canon 73-80; Osiek, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, 6.

¹⁰⁵⁰ Joseph Verheyden, “The Shepherd of Hermas,” in *The Writings of the Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Paul Foster (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 65.

¹⁰⁵¹ Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 48.

¹⁰⁵² George A. Barton, “Parables Outside the Gospels,” *The Biblical World* 33, no. 5 (1909), 308.

¹⁰⁵³ Mary Ann Beavis, “The Parable of the Slave, Son, and Vineyard: An Early Christian Freedman's Narrative (Hermas Similitudes 5.2-11),” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 80 (2018), 657. However, some scholars did study the story from the Shepherd of Hermas as an early Christian parable. Among them are Jennifer A. Glancy, *Slavery in*

The purpose of this section is twofold. On the one hand, I would like to show that the fifth parable of the Shepherd of Hermas is a genuine parable and, even more so, a parable that makes use of one of the classical *topoi* of ancient storytelling and parable-telling, namely, that of *absente ero*. On the other hand, I will also show that the fifth parable of the Shepherd of Hermas is an innovative parable that adds new elements to well-known story patterns, elements that break with the tendencies we have identified so far. Before we start studying the parable itself, I first briefly introduce the background of the parable.

Following the majority of modern scholarship, I assume that the Shepherd of Hermas was written between the end of the first century and the first half of the second century¹⁰⁵⁴ by one author (possibly in multiple stages)¹⁰⁵⁵ who calls himself Hermas and who identifies as a former slave.¹⁰⁵⁶ The text of the Shepherd of Hermas was probably written in Rome, or at least in central Italy.¹⁰⁵⁷ The text refers to places in Rome, uses imagery that can be traced back to the surrounding rural area of Rome,¹⁰⁵⁸ and, as I shall argue below, shows signs of influences of specifically Roman social reality and literary conventions. The Shepherd of Hermas was originally written in Greek and has as its social location the Christian community of Rome, which was characterized by “deep Jewish theological roots”; Hermas was most likely a Jew himself.¹⁰⁵⁹ Hermas’ mixed identity of Christian-Jew-Roman¹⁰⁶⁰ might be helpful in explaining the peculiarities of the fifth parable.

In the introduction to the fifth parable of the Shepherd of Hermas, two characters play a role: a shepherd and an I-figure, Hermas. Hermas meets the shepherd during his fasting (section 55/V.1.¹⁰⁶¹), and the shepherd disapproves of Hermas’ way of fasting, since he claims that the right way of fasting should comprise the

Early Christianity (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 105; and Marianne Kartzow, “παράβολή and Parabolic Language in the Shepherd of Hermas,” in *Gleichnisse und Parabeln in der frühchristlichen Literatur. Methodische Konzepte, religionshistorische Kontexte, theologische Deutungen*, ed. Jens Schröter, Konrad Schwartz and Soham Al-Suadi, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021 [forthcoming]). See also Maxime Hermaniuk, *La Parabole Évangélique. Enquête exégétique et critique* (Bruges/Paris: Desclee, De Brouwer, 1947), 359-362, esp. 361-362.

¹⁰⁵⁴ Verheyden, “The Shepherd of Hermas,” 63; Mark R. C. Grundeken, “The Shepherd of Hermas and the Roman Empire,” in *People Under Power: Early Jewish and Christian Responses to the Roman Empire*, ed. Outi Lehtipuu and Michael Labahn (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 187n3; Osiek, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, 20.

¹⁰⁵⁵ See Grundeken, “The Shepherd of Hermas and the Roman Empire,” 188n5; Osiek, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, 10. The most notable examples of a multiple-authors theory can be found in Stanislas Giet, *Hermas et les pasteurs: Les trois auteurs du Pasteur d’Hermas* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963): three authors; and Lambartus W. Nijendijk, “Die Christologie des Hirten des Hermas exegetisch, religions- und dogmengeschichtlich untersucht” (PhD diss. Utrecht University, 1986), 175ff.

¹⁰⁵⁶ Marianne Bjelland Kartzow devotes a lot of attention to the “special connection” between Hermas’ autobiography and the fifth parable (“παράβολή and Parabolic Language in the Shepherd of Hermas”). Kartzow asks in her paper “what kind of connections the various first readers and hearers” made when they saw how slavery is present at three levels in the Shepherd of Hermas: Hermas’ own self-identification as slave, the slave parable, and the often used title “slave of God.” Was Hermas own life story the key to understand the parable? What we see in both stories (biography and parable) are slaves who – because they are able to control a household (vineyard) – deserve to be free, and even get more than they expected: the slave in the parable becomes an heir and son of his former master; Hermas inherits the title “slave of God.” For the connection between the autobiography of Hermas and the parable, see also Beavis, “The Parable of the Slave, Son, and Vineyard.” Cf. Alexander Weiss, “Hermas’ ‘Biography’: Social Upward and Downward Mobility of an Independent Freedman,” *Ancient Society* 39 (2009), 185-202.

¹⁰⁵⁷ James S. Jeffers, “Jewish and Christian Families in First-Century Rome,” in *Judaism and Christianity in First-Century Rome*, ed. Karl P. Donfried and Peter Richardson (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 128-150; Carolyn Osiek, “The Oral World of Early Christianity in Rome: The Case of Hermas,” in *Judaism and Christianity in First-Century Rome*, ed. Karl P. Donfried and Peter Richardson (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 152-153; cf. Osiek, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, 18.

¹⁰⁵⁸ Osiek, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, 18.

¹⁰⁵⁹ Osiek, “The Oral World of Early Christianity in Rome,” 155.

¹⁰⁶⁰ Also visible in his “rich allusions” to a variety of Jewish, Greco-Roman, and Christian writings (Osiek, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, 24; cf. Verheyden, “The Shepherd of Hermas,” 69-70).

¹⁰⁶¹ In this section, I will use both the old and the new reference system.

observation of commandments and the serving of God with a “pure heart.”¹⁰⁶² Then, the shepherd tells Hermas a parable (55/V.2). The text of that parable follows below. The parable is directly followed by a series of interpretations that I, for reasons of space, have not displayed below.

Greek text¹⁰⁶³

Ἄκουε τὴν παραβολήν, ἣν μέλλω σοι λέγειν, ἀνήκουσαν τῇ νηστείᾳ.

2. εἶχεν τις ἀγρὸν καὶ δούλους πολλούς, καὶ εἰς μέρος τι τοῦ ἀγροῦ ἐφύτευσεν ἀμπελῶνα· ἐκλεξάμενος οὖν δοῦλόν τινα πιστότατον¹⁰⁶⁴ καὶ εὐάρεστον αὐτῷ, ἀποδημῶν προσεκαλέσατο αὐτὸν καὶ λέγει αὐτῷ· λάβε τὸν ἀμπελῶνα τοῦτον, ὃν ἐφύτευσα, καὶ χαράκωσον αὐτὸν ἕως ἔρχομαι, καὶ ἕτερον δὲ μὴ ποιήσης τῷ ἀμπελῶνι· καὶ ταύτην μου τὴν ἐντολὴν φύλαξον, καὶ ἐλεύθερος ἔσῃ παρ’ ἐμοί. ἐξῆλθε δὲ ὁ δεσπότης τοῦ δούλου εἰς τὴν ἀποδημίαν.

3. ἐξελθόντος δὲ αὐτοῦ ἔλαβεν ὁ δοῦλος καὶ ἐχαράκωσε τὸν ἀμπελῶνα. καὶ τελέσας τὴν χαράκωσιν τοῦ ἀμπελῶνος εἶδε τὸν ἀμπελῶνα βοτανῶν πλήρη ὄντα.

4. ἐν ἑαυτῷ οὖν ἐλογίσατο λέγων· ταύτην τὴν ἐντολὴν τοῦ κυρίου τετέλεκα· σκάψω λοιπὸν τὸν ἀμπελῶνα τοῦτον, καὶ ἔσται εὐπρεπέστερος ἐσκαμμένος, καὶ βοτάνας μὴ ἔχων δώσει καρπὸν πλείονα, μὴ πνιγόμενος ὑπὸ τῶν βοτανῶν. λαβὼν ἔσκαψε τὸν ἀμπελῶνα καὶ πάσας τὰς βοτάνας τὰς οὐσας ἐν τῷ ἀμπελῶνι ἐξέτιλλε. καὶ ἐγένετο ὁ ἀμπελῶν ἐκείνος εὐπρεπέστατος καὶ εὐθαλής, μὴ ἔχων βοτάνας τὰς πνιγούσας αὐτόν.

5. μετὰ χρόνον τινὰ ἦλθεν ὁ δεσπότης τοῦ ἀγροῦ καὶ¹⁰⁶⁵ τοῦ δούλου καὶ εἰσῆλθεν εἰς τὸν ἀμπελῶνα. καὶ ἰδὼν τὸν ἀμπελῶνα κεχαρακωμένον εὐπρεπῶς, ἔτι δὲ καὶ ἐσκαμμένον καὶ πάσας τὰς βοτάνας ἐκτετιλμένας καὶ εὐθαλεῖς οὐσας τὰς ἀμπέλους, ἐχάρη λίαν ἐπὶ τοῖς ἔργοις τοῦ δούλου.

6. προσκαλεσάμενος οὖν τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ τὸν ἀγαπητόν, ὃν εἶχε κληρονόμον, καὶ τοὺς φίλους, οὓς εἶχε συμβούλους, λέγει αὐτοῖς, ὅσα ἐνετείλατο τῷ δούλῳ αὐτοῦ, καὶ ὅσα εὗρε

Translation (MS)

Listen to the parable that I will tell you about fasting.

Someone had a field and many slaves, and in a part of the field he planted a vineyard: now he chose a certain slave who was very reliable and pleasing to him, [and] when leaving he called him and said to him: “Take this vineyard, that I have planted, and build a fence around it before I return, and do nothing else to the vineyard: carry out this command of me, and you will receive freedom from me.” Then, the master of the slave went abroad.

When he had gone, the slave took the vineyard and build a fence around it. And when he was ready building the fence around the vineyard, he saw that the vineyard was full of weeds.

He thought in himself, saying: “I have completed the command of the master: now I will dig this vineyard, and it will look better when it is dug, and when it will not have weeds, it will produce more fruit, since it will not be choked by the weeds.” Taking it, he dug the vineyard and he pulled out all the weeds that were in the vineyard. And this vineyard became better looking and flourishing, since it did not have weeds that were choking it.

After some time the master of the field and of the slave came [back] and he went into the vineyard. And seeing that around the vineyard a fence was beautifully built, and that it was dug and that all the weeds were pulled out and that the vineyard was flourishing, he rejoiced greatly over the deeds of the slave.

Now he called his beloved son with him, who was to be his heir, and his friends, who were his advisors, and he told them what he had commanded his slave, and what he found done.

¹⁰⁶² “[F]ast to God as follows: Do no evil in your life, but serve as the Lord’s slave with a pure heart [ἀλλὰ δούλευσον τῷ κυρίῳ ἐν καθαρᾷ καρδίᾳ], keeping his commandments and proceeding in his injunctions; and let no evil desire rise up in your heart.” (LCL 25, 321)

¹⁰⁶³ For the Greek text see LCL 25, 320-324.

¹⁰⁶⁴ There is also a variant reading with πιστόν (see LCL 25, 320; compare Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers. Greek Texts and English Translations* [Grand Rapids: Michigan, 2007³], 570).

¹⁰⁶⁵ Some manuscripts omit τοῦ ἀγροῦ καὶ (LCL 25, 322; compare Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 570).

γεγονότα. κάκεῖνοι συνεχάρησαν τῷ δούλῳ ἐπὶ τῇ μαρτυρίᾳ ἣ ἐμαρτύρησεν αὐτῷ ὁ δεσπότης.

7. καὶ λέγει αὐτοῖς· ἐγὼ τῷ δούλῳ τούτῳ ἐλευθερίαν ἐπηγγειλάμην, ἐάν μου τὴν ἐντολὴν φυλάξῃ, ἣν ἐνετείλάμην αὐτῷ· ἐφύλαξε δέ μου τὴν ἐντολὴν καὶ προσέθηκε τῷ ἀμπελῶνι ἔργον καλόν, καὶ ἐμοὶ λίαν ἥρεσεν. ἀντὶ τούτου οὖν τοῦ ἔργου οὗ εἰργάσατο θέλω αὐτὸν συγκληρονόμον τῷ υἱῷ μου ποιῆσαι, ὅτι τὸ καλὸν φρονήσας οὐ παρενεθυμήθη, ἀλλ' ἐτέλεσεν αὐτό.

8. ταύτῃ τῇ γνώμῃ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ δεσπότης συνηυδόκησεν αὐτῷ, ἵνα συγκληρονόμος γένηται ὁ δοῦλος τῷ υἱῷ.

9. μετὰ ὀλίγας ἡμέρας δεῖπνον ἐποίησεν ὁ οἰκοδεσπότης αὐτοῦ καὶ ἔπεμψεν αὐτῷ ἐδέσματα ἐκ τοῦ δεῖπνου πολλά. λαβὼν δὲ ὁ δοῦλος τὰ ἐδέσματα τὰ πεμφθέντα αὐτῷ ἀπὸ τοῦ δεσπότης αὐτοῦ τὰ ἀρκούντα αὐτῷ ἤρε, τὰ δὲ λοιπὰ τοῖς συνδούλοις αὐτοῦ διέδωκεν.

10. οἱ δὲ σύνδουλοι αὐτοῦ λαβόντες τὰ ἐδέσματα ἐχάρησαν καὶ ἠρξάντο καὶ εὐχεσθαι ὑπὲρ αὐτοῦ, ἵνα μείζονα χάριν εὖρη παρὰ τῷ δεσπότη, ὅτι οὕτως ἐχρήσατο αὐτοῖς.

11. ταῦτα πάντα τὰ γεγονότα ὁ δεσπότης αὐτοῦ ἤκουσεν καὶ πάλιν λίαν ἐχάρη ἐπὶ τῇ πράξει αὐτοῦ. συνακαλεσάμενος πάλιν τοὺς φίλους ὁ δεσπότης καὶ τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ ἀπήγγειλεν αὐτοῖς τὴν πρᾶξιν τοῦ δούλου, ἣν ἔπραξεν ἐπὶ τοῖς ἐδέσμασιν οἷς ἔλαβεν· οἱ δὲ ἔτι μᾶλλον συνευδόκησαν γενέσθαι τὸν δοῦλον συγκληρονόμον τῷ υἱῷ αὐτοῦ.

These congratulated the slave with the testimony that the master had testified about him.

And he said to them: “I promised freedom to this slave, when he would carry out my command, that I commanded to him: and he has carried out my command and he added a good work to the vineyard, and he has pleased me greatly. Now in return for the work that he has done, I want to make him joint heir with my son, because when he thought of the good [deed], he did not ignore it, but completed it.”

The son of the master agreed with this intention, to make the slave fellow heir with the son.

After a few days,¹⁰⁶⁶ the householder organized a banquet and he sent to him [the slave] many foods from the banquet. When the slave received the foods that were sent to him by his master, he kept [only] what was sufficient for him, and the rest he gave to his fellow slaves.

When his fellow slaves received the foods, they rejoiced and began to pray for him, so that he may find [even] greater favor with the master, because he had treated them like this.

His master heard of everything that had happened and he again rejoiced greatly over his way of acting. When the master had again called together his friends and his son he told them the good news about his slave’s way of acting, what he had done with the foods that he had received: and they agreed even more that the slave would become fellow heir with the son.

If we look at this passage, we see that the parable perfectly fits this pattern of our greater group of *absente ero*-themed parables. As Chris de Wet writes: “the *Shepherd* is part of a longstanding Christian tradition in which agricultural slavery functions to highlight the workings of God and his kingdom.”¹⁰⁶⁷ At the same time (and we will come back to this issue later in this section), the fifth parable of the Shepherd of Hermas adds something significantly new to the *absente ero*-motive.

Since Hermas indicates that he does not understand the parable, a rather straightforward explanation of the parable is given by the Shepherd (the *first explanation*), namely, that he who keeps God’s commandments pleases God, but he who does good beyond the commandments shall win even more glory (56.2-3). Puzzling as

¹⁰⁶⁶ The last three verses of the parable have been identified by scholars like Carolyn Osiek and Martin Dibelius as a “coda,” that has been added later to the parable. See Osiek, *Shepherd of Hermas*, 171 and Martin Dibelius, *Der Hirt des Hermas*, Handbuch zum Neuen Testament/Die Apostolischen Väter IV (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1923), 564-565. According to Dibelius, the coda is a separate story that has been merged here with the parable of the vineyard to connect that parable with the theme of fasting and sharing from the introduction.

¹⁰⁶⁷ Chris L. de Wet, *The Unbound God. Slavery and the Formation of Early Christian Thought*, Routledge Studies in the Early Christian World (London/New York: Routledge, 2018), 82. De Wet also points to a difference between this tradition and the *Shepherd*’s parable (“this parable exhibits a far more complex metaphorical layering than any of those in the New Testament”), but as I will argue the parable itself does not show these layers.

it is, Hermas again states that he does not understand the parable. The shepherd is reluctant to explain the parable even more: “He answered me, ‘You are extremely brazen in your requests. You should ask nothing at all, for if anything needs to be explained to you, it will be.’”¹⁰⁶⁸ In the end, the Shepherd does give in, and a *second explanation* follows (58). Schematically, this second explanation looks as follows:

Parable	Application ¹⁰⁶⁹
Vineyard	This world
Owner of the vineyard	He that created all things, and set them in order, and endowed them with power (i.e. God)
Slave	Son of God ¹⁰⁷⁰
Vines	People whom He Himself planted
Fences	[Holy] angels of the Lord who keep together His people
Weeds	Transgressions of the slaves of God
Dainties	Commandments which He gave to His people through His Son
Friends and advisers	Holy angels which were first created
Absence of the master	Time which remaineth over until His coming

Still, Hermas does not understand the entire parable. His follow-up question to the Shepherd is why the Son of God is represented as a slave. The Shepherd does not agree: “‘Listen,’ he said; ‘the Son of God is not represented as a slave, but as one who has great authority and lordship.’ ‘I don’t see how, Lord,’ I replied. ‘Because,’ he said, ‘God planted the vineyard – that is, he created the people and handed them over to his Son. And the Son appointed the angels over them, to protect each one. And he cleansed their sins through great labor, bearing up under his many labors.’”¹⁰⁷¹

The interpretation of the Shepherd takes yet another turn (59) by discussing the way the slave and the master’s son will join in the heritage of the master. As Bogdan G. Bucur (relying on the work of Henne¹⁰⁷²) has shown, the only way to make sense of this section is by assuming a new level of interpretation has been reached, a phenomenon that is called “allegorical polysemy” by Henne,¹⁰⁷³ and is described by Bucur as “ascribing to the elements of a narration several levels of allegorical interpretation that are coherent in themselves, yet oftentimes incompatible among themselves.”¹⁰⁷⁴ According to section 59, the parable can be summarized with the following scheme (the *third explanation*):

Parable	Application
Owner of the vineyard	God
Slave	Flesh
Son	Holy Spirit

¹⁰⁶⁸ The theme of secrecy with respect to the explanation of parables is a theme we find in the New Testament as well (see Matthew 13:10-17). On the theme of secrecy regarding parables in early Christianity, see, e.g., Marcel Poorthuis, “Origen on Parables and Prayer. Tensions between the Esoteric and the Universal,” in *Prayer and the Transformation of the Self in Early Christian Mystagogy*, ed. Hans van Loon, Giselle de Nie, Michiel Op de Coul and Peter Van Egmond, *Late Antique History and Religion* 18 (Leuven: Peeters, 2018), 95-110.

¹⁰⁶⁹ The wordings in the right column are directly derived from the text of the Shepherd of Hermas (in the translation of Ehrmann).

¹⁰⁷⁰ Notice how in this explanation the son in the parable does not have a counterpart in the application.

¹⁰⁷¹ 58.5-59.2/V.5.5-V.6.2 (translation: LCL 25, 333-335).

¹⁰⁷² Philippe Henne, *La christologie chez Clément de Rome et dans le Pasteur d’Hermas*, Paradosis 33 (Fribourg: Éditions Universitaires Fribourg Suisse, 1992).

¹⁰⁷³ Henne, *La christologie*, 181.

¹⁰⁷⁴ Bogdan G. Bucur, “The Son of God and the Angelomorphic Holy Spirit: A Rereading of the Shepherd’s Christology,” *Zeitschrift für Neues Testament* 98 (2007), 133. We find this way of allegorizing also in the work of the (early) church fathers. See, for example, Archibald M. Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960); David B. Gowler, *The Parables after Jesus: Their Imaginative Receptions across Two Millennia* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017).

This new level of interpretation does not concern Jesus, but the Christian believer: “The election refers to any individual (any ‘flesh’) that has faithfully served the holy spirit and has not defiled it in any way.”¹⁰⁷⁵ From this, in the final part (60), the exhortation follows not to defile the spirit, nor the flesh, so that one can and shall live with God.

On the basis of these different applications, we might wonder about the original parable and its original meaning. As Lambartus Nijendijk rightly observed: “Die Lektüre von Sim. V erweckt bereits auf den ersten Blick den Eindruck, dass Gleichnis und Deutungen nicht als ein einheitliches, durchgehendes Stück entstanden sind, sondern sich vielmehr aus mehreren Teilen zusammengesetzt haben, die nur lose miteinander verbunden sind.”¹⁰⁷⁶ The complexity of the parable explanation can partly be explained, “as the unfortunate result of squeezing a Christological meaning out of a parable that was initially about fasting.”¹⁰⁷⁷ Wilson proposes that there was an “original” parable from oral tradition, which was taken up, appropriated, and reinterpreted by Hermas.¹⁰⁷⁸ Wilson does not indicate whether that “original parable” dealt with fasting, and given the tradition of parables with an *absente ero*-theme, I have my doubts about that. First, the theme of fasting only appears – if at all – in the slave eating only a little from the banquet.¹⁰⁷⁹ Second, if we compare this parable to the parable we have studied earlier, we might see some obvious resemblances between these parables. There is an absent master, there is a slave with a certain responsibility, there is a moment of reckoning (now only positive), and there is a reward. That reward exists of freedom and adoption (as we have seen with Plautus’ comedies, in ancient literature, freedom was sometimes promised to “good” slaves¹⁰⁸⁰). These elements do not point to a parable about fasting, but to a parable about good behavior in the absence of the (heavenly) master.

The elevation of the slave to the rank of son is quite remarkable, and is a great advancement in comparison to a “normal” manumission. As Leutzsch puts it: “Immerhin ist zu bedenken, dass Freilassung und Einsetzung als Erbe keineswegs ‘schon die höchste und unüberbietbare Gnade’ bedeutet. Eine Steigerung würde etwa in der manumissio vindicat liegen, mit der der Erwerb des römischen Bürgerrechts verbunden ist, oder in einer Adoption oder auch in einer Erhöhung des in Aussicht gestellten Erbteils.”¹⁰⁸¹

The adoption of slaves as children was firmly rooted in social reality.¹⁰⁸² This often happened because biological children were unavailable. With respect to the Jewish situation, Hezser discusses as an example a papyrus contract from Elephantine, dated to 416 BCE, in which a man named Uriah states that Jedaniah shall be known as his son instead of his slave:

¹⁰⁷⁵ Bucur, “The Son of God and the Angelomorphic Holy Spirit,” 136.

¹⁰⁷⁶ Nijendijk, “Die Christologie des Hirten des Hermas,” 84-85. Some scholars also doubt the unity of the parable itself. E.g., Dibelius divided the parables in two parables, a parable about a vineyard and one about a banquet with three meanings: Dibelius, *Der Hirt des Hermas*, 564ff.

¹⁰⁷⁷ Bucur, “The Son of God and the Angelomorphic Holy Spirit,” 132, with reference to Henne. One reason to reject a christological explanation of the parable as original is that such an interpretation would imply two sons of God in the parables: the slave and the son of the vineyard-owner (Nijendijk, “Die Christologie des Hirten des Hermas,” 87). In his study on the christology of the Shepherd of Hermas, Nijendijk concludes that “die eschatologische Deutung des Gleichnisses, von der wir [...] Spuren gefunden haben, verträgt sich nicht mit der Deutung des Sklaven als ‘Son Gottes’ in V,5,2b-V,6,4a” (89). The alternative is that the slave represents the believer, the vineyard God’s people, the vineyard-owner God, and his son God’s Son (89-90). Nijendijk also thinks that the identification of the fence with the angels is secondary, and the weeds do not represent sins either. Nijendijks simple summary of the parable’s message (at least the first part) is “mehr Tun als das Gefragte” (90).

¹⁰⁷⁸ Bucur, “The Son of God and the Angelomorphic Holy Spirit,” 132; John C. Wilson, *Toward a Reassessment of the Shepherd of Hermas: Its Date and Pneumatology* (New York: Mellen Biblical Press, 1993), 131.

¹⁰⁷⁹ Nijendijk has argued that the focus of the parable seems to be more on the copious banquet than on the fasting (“Die Christologie des Hirten des Hermas,” 85-86).

¹⁰⁸⁰ E.g., *Rudens* (Gripus) and *Menaechmi* (Messenio); cf. Stewart, *Plautus and Roman Slavery*, chapter 4, 114-155.

¹⁰⁸¹ Martin Leutzsch, *Die Wahrnehmung sozialer Wirklichkeit im “Hirten des Hermas,”* Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments 150 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989), 149.

¹⁰⁸² Ville Vuolanto, *Children and Asceticism in Late Antiquity. Continuity, Family Dynamics and the Rise of Christianity* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 32.

Jedaniah by name son of Tahwa, [you]r la[d] whom you gave me and about whom you wrote a document for me—I shall not be able, I, Uriah, or son or daughter of mine, brother and sister of mine, or man of mine to press him (into) slave(ry). He shall be my son. I, or son or daughter of mine, or man of mine, or another individual do not have the right to brand him. I shall not be able—I, or son or daughter of mine, brother or sister of mine, or man of mine—we (shall not be able) to stand up to make him a s[lave] or brand him.¹⁰⁸³

Margaret MacDonald notices that inscriptional evidence from antiquity suggests “that sometimes slaves were raised with the expectation that they would share completely in the fate of freeborn children; in other words, they would share in the inheritance.”¹⁰⁸⁴ As proof, she quotes an inscription from Rome: “To the gods of the underworld. Aulus Furius Crassus. Aulus Furius, the house-born slave of Festus, has been considered a son. He lived four years, six months, twenty-nine days.”¹⁰⁸⁵ MacDonald also attests to an inscription that seems to display a mother’s intention to raise her infant son and a house-born slave together, as brothers.¹⁰⁸⁶

With respect to the “Scottian” perspective of hidden transcripts, I would like to make two observations. Firstly, we see in this parable the importance of the public transcript. Advisers, friends, and family have to be called in for the special purpose of listening to the praise of the master for his slave. This may remind us of the parables of The Lost Sheep and The Lost Coin (Luke 15:3-7; 15:8-10). In both cases, the happy protagonists call their “friends and neighbors” (Luke 15:6; 15:9) to share in their joy of retrieving what was lost. The same is true for the feast on the occasion of the return of The Prodigal Son in the successive parable, mirroring “the joy in the presence of the angels, when a sinner repents” (Luke 15:10). However, I would argue that those feasts also serve another, second purpose: they are a public declaration of the (new) status of the party’s subject. In the case of the slave from the Shepherd of Hermas and the son from the parable of The Prodigal Son, this might even have a semi-official status, in a context in which not all changes of status were formally registered: “Die Einführung neuer Personen – des Sohns und der Freunde – ist nicht befremdlich, wenn man hier den juristischen Sachverhalt einer manumission inter amicos geschildert sieht. Die Freunde haben dabei die Funktion von Zeugen, die für den Vollzug dieser privaten Form der Freilassung nötig sind.”¹⁰⁸⁷

Another observation concerns 55.9, when the beloved slave is sent the leftovers of a party he himself is not attending.¹⁰⁸⁸ After the slave has distributed the leftovers from his meal to his fellow slaves, we read: “His fellow slaves took the food gladly, and began also to pray for him, that he might find even greater favor with the master, since he had treated them so well.” According to Scott’s theory, it is in the intimate context of people sharing the same status that public transcripts can be forgotten, and honest words can be spoken.¹⁰⁸⁹ This would mean that the rejoicing of the “choir” of unspecified fellow-slaves is sincere, and their wish for him to acquire an even greater favor with the master well meant. The choir of fellow slaves can be found in other New Testament parables as well, in different roles, as we have seen before (cf. section 4.3.4). For example, in the parable of The Unforgiving Slave, we read how “[w]hen his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed,

¹⁰⁸³ Bezalel Porton e.a., *The Elephantine Papyri in English. Three Millennia of Cross-Cultural Continuity and Change* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 235. Cf. Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 138.

¹⁰⁸⁴ MacDonald, *The Power of Children*, 54-55.

¹⁰⁸⁵ MacDonald, *The Power of Children*, 55 (with reference to *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* 6.18754).

¹⁰⁸⁶ MacDonald, *The Power of Children*, 5.

¹⁰⁸⁷ Leutzsch, *Die Wahrnehmung sozialer Wirklichkeit*, 148.

¹⁰⁸⁸ It is worthwhile to notice that the slave is absent during the meal mentioned in 55.9 (V.2.9). Is that because (1) he is already released but was not entitled to a place at the meal as only a freedman (not probable since he is still designated with the title “slave” by the story, and since the parable speaks of his fellow slaves); or (2) he was still a slave but was not needed at the meal to serve, since he was an agricultural slave and not a house slave? Whatever the reason for his absence, the fact that the master sent his slave a special envoy with food shows the high esteem of the master towards his (former) slave. In tractate Berakhot of the Babylonian Talmud, we read of a similar gesture when the blessed cup of wine is sent to the wife (not the slave) of Rav Nahman, who, apparently, stayed in a different room (b. Berakhot 51b). From an ethical-theological perspective, we should take notice of the way the slave mimics his master’s generosity of sharing food, thereby adding to his master’s honor and consequently receiving abundant praise. This brings the Parable of the Unforgiving Slave (Matthew 18:23-35) to mind, in which the same imitation of a master is expected from a slave; the slave’s failure to reproduce his master forgiveness induces a severe penalty.

¹⁰⁸⁹ James C. Scott, *Domination and Arts of Resistance. Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 26, 187ff.

and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place” (Matthew 18:30, NRSV with adaptations). Here, the “honest” response of the fellow slaves is one of horror, and solidarity is not expressed with the unforgiving slave, but with the slave that is not forgiven, and a judgment is sought with the master. In the parable of The Talents, most textual witnesses attest a choir of bystanders (slaves?) who protest against the verdict of the master: “He said to the bystanders, ‘Take the pound from him and give it to the one who has ten pounds.’ And they said to him, ‘Master, he has ten pounds!’” (Luke 19:24-25, NRSV with adaptations).

Both observations with regard to Scott’s theory support the univocal and genuine love or devotion of the master towards his slave, and the slave towards the master (as well as the slave to his fellows), a message that finds proof in the (first) application of the parable, in which the devoted fasting of the true believer is envisioned.

From a *Bildfeld* perspective, no surprises await us. If we take the first application as a point of departure, the following equations can be made:

Parable	Application
Estate	The world
Owner of the estate	God/Son of Man
Slave	Believer (Hermas)
Building fences	Keeping commandments (fasting in strict sense)
Pulling out weeds	Keep one aside from evil words and deeds; purify oneself
Sharing dainties	Giving food (remains from fasting) to poor, orphans and widows
“Going the extra mile”	More glory in the sight of God
Friends and advisors	“All those who shall hear and observe them” (they will be blessed)
Absence of the master	Time on earth? ¹⁰⁹⁰
Son	Jesus?

Again, we see God being compared to a master of slaves, and people being compared to slaves. We also encounter again the call to follow God’s commandments in his absence. A reward (freedom!) awaits those who live accordingly. However, some details of the parable deserve more attention. In the parable, the keeping of commandments is compared to the building of fences,¹⁰⁹¹ which suggests that commandments not only serve to regulate daily life, but also to demarcate the boundaries of the religious community. Whoever does not obey the commandments stays outside the assembly of believers. In contrast with the rabbinic parables we will study below, this parable stands out by stressing the value of doing more than is actually needed. This message is reinforced by other parables in the Shepherd of Hermas (especially parable 8 and 9) that do not only distinguish different degrees of malignancy, but also different degrees of excellence, ranging from the “normal” righteous believer to the bishop and, finally, the martyrs.¹⁰⁹² Moreover, the absence of the master is not thematized in the application of the parable. Is it the time we spend on earth, outside the heavenly realm, or is it the time we wait for the return of the Son of Man? I am inclined to say that the expectation of the Messiah’s return has already slightly faded away or was not the original meaning of the *absente ero*-theme in the first place (a plausible explanation when one takes the rabbinic *absente ero*-parables into account that also do not seem to refer to the return of a Messiah); influenced by the second and third application, the lonely work of the slave on his master’s field seems to be reinterpreted as humanity’s time on earth, detached from its creator. However, for more reflection on the master’s absence, it might be revealing to also take a rabbinic parable into account. Therefore, we turn now to Sifre Deuteronomy.

¹⁰⁹⁰ Both this element and the element below (the son) are not explained by the Shepherd in the first application.

¹⁰⁹¹ Note that fences and commandments are intrinsically related in the rabbinic literature. The best example of this relation is found in Mishnah Avot 1:1, where one is called to “make a fence around the Torah (ועשו סִיג לַתּוֹרָה),” i.e., to erect “extra” rules in order for the Biblical laws not to be broken. See, e.g., Yitzhak Twersky, “Make a Fence Around the Torah,” *The Torah U-Madda Journal* 8 (1998-1999), 25-42.

¹⁰⁹² The bishops and the martyrs represent, respectively, the 10th and 11th degree of excellence (104-105; IX.27-28). The most perfect believers are those “who are like young infants, who have never had evil arise in their hearts, nor have they known what is evil, but have always remained in their childlike innocence” (106, IX.29; LCL 25, 457).

5.4.2.2. *Sifre Deuteronomy 8*

The parable in *Sifre Deuteronomy 8* is a response to Deuteronomy 1:8: “See, I have set the land before you; go in and take possession of the land that I swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give to them and to their descendants after them.” The textual problem that the rabbis face is why the verse both speaks about “your ancestors,” and also mentions those ancestors (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob) by name.¹⁰⁹³ The answer from the midrash is that all the patriarchs were, *individually*, worthy to deserve Israel. Then this parable follows:

Translation (MS)

A parable:

It is like a king who gave his slave a certain field as a gift,¹⁰⁹⁵ gave it to him as it was.

This slave improved it, and he said,

“What I have is only that which was given to me as it was,”

Again, he planted a vineyard, and he said,

“What I have is only that which was given to me as it was.”

Text¹⁰⁹⁴

משל

למלך שנתן לעבדו שדה אחת במתנה לא נתנה

לו אלא כמות שהיא עמד

העבד ההוא והשביחה ואמר

מה בידי לא נתנה לי אלא כמות שהיא

חזר ונטעה כרם ואמר

מה בידי לא נתנה לי אלא כמות שהיא

The text continues with the following *nimshal*:

So, when the Holy One, blessed be He, gave to Abraham, our father, the land, he gave it only like it was (לא נתנה לו אלא כמות שהיא), as it is said: *Rise up, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you* (Genesis 13:17). Abraham rose (עמד) and improved it (השביחה), as it is said: *Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beer-sheba* (Genesis 21:33). Isaac rose and improved it, as it is said: *Isaac sowed seed in that land, and in the same year reaped a hundredfold* (Genesis 26:12). Jacob rose and improved it, as it is said: *And he bought the plot of land* (Genesis 33:19).¹⁰⁹⁶

From a socio-economical perspective, I would like to consider the problem of ownership by slaves, which is implied in this parable by the notion of giving gifts.¹⁰⁹⁷ Officially, in Roman law, it was not possible for a slave to own money or property: “Those in another’s power can hold a thing in *peculium*, but they cannot have and possess it, *because possession is a matter not merely of fact but also of right.*”¹⁰⁹⁸ As this quote indicates, the Romans found a solution to the problem of ownership by the establishment of the *peculium* – a term not found in rabbinic sources.¹⁰⁹⁹ The *peculium* was a sum of money (a fund) that slaves earned themselves during their time as slaves, and with which (some) masters allowed them to buy their freedom. Again, officially, the *peculium* remained the property of the master but, in practice, “the slave actually had complete use and control of its contents.”¹¹⁰⁰ This *peculium* could also be enlarged by rewards or other bonuses. As Hezser remarks: “Both Roman and rabbinic law allowed slaves to accept and make use of gifts they received from their masters or third parties.”¹¹⁰¹ She sees proof for this in this passage from the Jerusalem Talmud, y. Qiddushin 1:3, 60a:

It is self-evident that a slave may receive a gift (מתנה) from another to another, from another to his master, [but] not from his master to himself. From another to himself is in dispute between Rabbi Meir and the Sages. [If] one says: “Here is for you this money, but it is not for your master to have power over it,” the slave takes

¹⁰⁹³ See also Louis Finkelstein, “The Sources of the Tannaitic Midrashim,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 31, no. 3 (1941), 235n33.

¹⁰⁹⁴ Finkelstein and Horovitz, *Sifre on Deuteronomy*, 16.

¹⁰⁹⁵ *Sifre* as quoted in Midrash ha-Gadol reads במתנה instead of במתנה, resulting in: “who gives his slave a field. The gift was only given as it was.”

¹⁰⁹⁶ Translation: MS. Hebrew text: Finkelstein and Horovitz, *Sifre on Deuteronomy*, 16.

¹⁰⁹⁷ Cf. Hammer, *Sifre*, 394n3.

¹⁰⁹⁸ *Digesta* 41.2.49.1 (translation: Alan Watson, *The Digest of Justinian*, Volume 4 [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985], 30).

¹⁰⁹⁹ But see Boaz Cohen, “Peculium in Jewish and Roman Law,” *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 20 (1951), 135-234.

¹¹⁰⁰ Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves*, 125.

¹¹⁰¹ Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 166.

possession of it, [and] his master takes possession of it (זכה העבד זכה רבו) – the words of Rabbi Meir. But the Sages say: “The slave takes possession of it, [not] his master.”¹¹⁰²

This passage makes clear that (1) slaves received gifts from their masters; and (2) that there was discussion about the exact status of those gifts: were they also part of the master’s ownership or not, the latter being a position that would contradict Roman law? However, also in Roman law, slaves could accept gifts, which would be added to their *peculium* (and be *de facto* part of a slave’s property).¹¹⁰³ I do not think it is possible to ascertain with certainty whether the slave in our parable gets an actual gift, or a gift in form of a contribution to a *peculium*, but I agree with Hezser that “[o]n the metaphorical level the difference between the gift and the *peculium* may be irrelevant.”¹¹⁰⁴ The fact is that the slave, directly or indirectly, got ownership of the field.

In the parable, a king gives (שנתן) a slave a field as a gift (במתנה), on which the slave builds a vineyard.¹¹⁰⁵ The gift is already one deviation from the pattern that we are familiar with. Since the field is a gift, there is no pressure – positive or negative – for the slave to cultivate it; the slave will not be punished if he leaves the field as it is, but he will not get a reward for its flourishing either (apart from its yield). The parable adds that the field is “only given as it was” (ולא נתנה לו אלא כמות שהיא עמד). With this somewhat puzzling phrase, the parable seems to indicate that the field was not yet cultivated in any way; it was only a piece of ground lying in the open. The slave first improves the field (והשביחה) and then plants a vineyard (ונטעה כרם) in it. After both moments, the slave says (to himself?): “What I have is only that which was given to me as it was” (מה בידי לא נתנה לי אלא כמות שהיא). What do these words mean? The only way to understand them is, I allege, to look to the application of the parable.

The first line of the application states that God gave Abraham the land (Israel) as it was. But Abraham also improved it (והשביחה) and planted a tree (ויטע אשל; not a vineyard) in it. So, in the person of Abraham alone, the parable already finds its purpose (see the scheme below).

Parable	Application
King	God
Slave	Abraham
Field	Land Israel
Gave “as it was”	(God) gives
Improves “as it was”	(Abraham) improves
Plants vineyard “as it was”	(Abraham) plants tamarisk tree

However, the *nimshal* continues by describing how Isaac likewise went to work and improved it by sowing, and how Jacob did the same. The occurrence of the three fathers in the application makes sense, since the exegetical problem that governs this passage explicitly relates to the three of them. This opens up the possibility for another interpretation¹¹⁰⁶ in which the slave from the parable is “split up” to represent three patriarchs in the application:

Parable	Application
King	God
Gave field to slave “as it was”	Abraham receives the land Israel and improves it
Slave improves field “as it was”	Isaac receives the land Israel and improves it
Slave plants vineyard “as it was”	Jacob receives the land Israel and improves it

¹¹⁰² Translation: MS.

¹¹⁰³ Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 280.

¹¹⁰⁴ Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 358.

¹¹⁰⁵ Traditionally, the vineyard is an image for Israel. Cf. Isaiah 5:1-7. However, it seems that the field represents the land Israel.

¹¹⁰⁶ Supported by later versions of the parable, e.g., in Yalqut Shimoni §801.

In both interpretations – whether the parable pertains to only Abraham or to all three patriarchs – the question remains as to which feelings are expressed by the phrase “as it was.”¹¹⁰⁷ Hammer argues in his notes that, while improvements normally belong to the owner of a property, in this case, Israel is given both the land and the improvements made on it.¹¹⁰⁸ So, Hammer stresses the ownership of the land by the patriarchs and their descendants. Hezser, in contrast, emphasizes the slaves’ improvement of what they were given, seeking a connection with the parable of The Talents: “What matters is the master’s/God’s endowment of his slave/human beings with something, a property or talent, that can be used and improved. Both parables stress the advantages of making good use of what one owns. To refrain from using what one has received from God is almost equalled to disobedience towards one’s master in the gospel tale.”¹¹⁰⁹ With respect to the meaning of this parable, I think Hezser is right in stressing the “good work” motive of the story, a motive that finds plausibility in its frequency of occurrence in many other parables in- and outside this chapter. However, I also agree with Hammer that the fact that we do not have a “classical” *absente ero* here, but a master who gives fields away (and is not said to go abroad), has its significance. It singles out the special responsibility of the patriarchs (and *pars pro toto* the people of Israel) for their land: they should cultivate the land not (only) to serve God, but also because it belongs to their own heritage.

Another relevant Jewish text that I briefly want to refer to here is a passage from the Babylonian Talmud (Bava Metzi’a 83b). While its source is not tannaitic (the sages mentioned are), the text might help us in discerning an important theme in both the Shepherd of Hermas and Sifre Deuteronomy. In the passage Rabbi Eleazar helps the Romans to arrest thieves. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korcha is furious about this – in his view – betrayal of the people of Israel and sent Rabbi Eleazar an angry message, insulting him with the words “Vinegar, sone of wine” (הומץ בן יין). Eleazar replied to this message with the following words: “I am [only] destroying thorns from the vineyard (קוצים אני מכלה מן הכרם),” which evoked the following response from Yehoshua: “Let the owner of the vineyard come and destroy his thorns [himself] (יבא בעל הכרם ויכלה את קוציו).”¹¹¹⁰

In this parabolic discourse, again the *Bildfeld* of a vineyard that has to be taken care of is taken up. In the absence of the owner (a multilayered figure, probably representing both God and the Roman emperor¹¹¹¹), his slaves or servants fight over the question of the extent to which they are responsible for the maintenance of the vineyard (notice how the imagery of removing weeds – thorns in this case – is used to refer to the removal of thieves from society). While generally not as explicitly addressed as it is here, I think this question touches on an important underlying issue in a number of the parables in this chapter. In a similar fashion, a parable¹¹¹² from the third century Avot de Rabbi Nathan A 16 (/B 30)¹¹¹³ indicates that the poor harvest produced by a certain field is not so much the fault of those who work it, as it is the bad quality of the field itself. Rather directly, the parable asks the question: who, then, is to be held accountable for the meager yield: the owner of the field or the workers? I quote here the end of the parable with its application:

¹¹⁰⁷ In b. Ketubbot 16b-17a we come across a discussion of how one is to praise the bride, which might contain a similar use of the construction “as she is”: “The House of Shammai says: ‘The bride as she is (כלה כמות שהיא).’ And the House of Hillel says: ‘A good looking and amiable bride.’ The House of Shammai says to the House of Hillel: ‘If she is lame or blind, does one say about her: “A good looking and amiable bride”? And the Torah says: *Keep far from a false charge* (Exodus 23:7).’ The House of Hillel says to the House of Shammai: “[According] to your words, one who has made a bad purchase from the market, should he praise it in his eyes or condemn it in his eyes? You must say that one should praise it in his eyes. Hence, the Sages say: ‘Always should the disposition of a man be pleasant with mankind’” (translation MS). This passage supports a reading of the parable in which the improvements made by the patriarchs is the focal point. The exact phrase can only be found in Sifre Deuteronomy and its parallels in Yalqut Shimoni and Midrash Tannaim.

¹¹⁰⁸ Hammer, *Sifre*, 394n3.

¹¹⁰⁹ Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 358.

¹¹¹⁰ Translation: MS.

¹¹¹¹ In this passage political betrayal is fused with sectarian politics and the theological image of the vineyard and the absent owner is mixed with “imperial language” (for the latter, cf. section 4.3.4).

¹¹¹² Reminiscent in some ways of the parable of The Unforgiving Slave.

¹¹¹³ The structure of Avot de Rabbi Nathan A and B may be dated before 220 CE, but much narrative material has been added later (3rd to 5th century CE). See Antony J. Saldarini, *Scholastic Rabbinism. A Literary Study of the Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan*, Brown Judaic Studies 14 (Scholars Press: Chico, 1982), 140-141.

They said to him: “Our lord, the king, you know that from the field that you gave to us you did not harvest anything at first. And now that we have manured it, and we have cleared it, and watered it, we harvested only one *kor* of wheat from it.”¹¹¹⁴

So, shall Israel testify before the Holy One, blessed be He, saying: “Master of the world, you know that the evil impulse (יצר הרע) stirs us up in us, as it is said: *For he knows our impulse* (Psalm 103:14).¹¹¹⁵

The moral of the parable from Avot seems to be that God should not judge humans too hard, since they fall short by nature – something God himself knows all too well, as the Psalm verse indicates. Jonathan Wyn Schofer formulates it as follows: “God is an unfair landlord, demanding ‘rent’ in obedience that is far greater than the ‘land’ of human potential can produce.”¹¹¹⁶ Similarly, the words of Rabbi Yehoshua in the Talmud passage seem to criticize God for his absence on earth: if God wants certain things, he should come and do it himself. These two rabbinic texts show again the richness and the vast theological ramifications of the *absente ero* theme, especially when applied to the context of agricultural activities. Both texts contain an eschatological reference: in Avot, a moment is imagined in which Israel has to answer for its behavior before God; in the Talmud, there is the explicit expectation that at a certain moment in time, the owner will come to restore the world to justice. Hence, we see again how the *absente ero* theme in Christian and rabbinic literature envelops far more than what is covered by the New Testament term *parousia*. But let us return to our comparison of Sifre Deuteronomy 8 and the parable from Hermas.

5.4.2.3. Comparison

I see the following similarities between the Shepherd of Hermas and the parable in Sifre Deuteronomy 8: first of all, a king (a master) “gives” a field to his slave; secondly, the presence of a vineyard (connected in the application to the land of Israel); thirdly, the slave improves the field; and finally, the fact that this is positively evaluated.¹¹¹⁷ An interesting difference with the Shepherd of Hermas is that the slave in Sifre is not rewarded for his work. In the early rabbinic corpus, we do not find any examples of rewards for slaves in parables.¹¹¹⁸ A parable from Sifre Deuteronomy 28 makes clear that for a slave to go beyond his master’s orders is a precarious, perhaps even dangerous, thing to do.¹¹¹⁹ In the New Testament, this is slightly different. In the New Testament, we find at minimum two parables in which slaves are rewarded in Luke 12: the parable of The Serving Master¹¹²⁰ and in the parable of The Talents/Pounds.¹¹²¹ Also, in the parable of The Talents/Pounds, the element of doing more than is ordered plays a significant role. However, I do not know of any parable, neither in the synoptic gospels nor in the rabbinic literature, in which a slave obtains his freedom (for following his master’s orders, or otherwise). It has been noted that “[f]or readers acquainted with the gospels, the parable [of the Shepherd of Hermas] starts on a familiar note, but ends surprisingly.”¹¹²² That the slave is not only manumitted but also adopted is, according to Osiek, “a narrative element that would have been as surprising to second-century hearers

¹¹¹⁴ While they rented the field at ten *kor* per year.

¹¹¹⁵ Translation: MS. Hebrew text: Solomon Schechter, *Aboth de Rabbi Nathan: Edited from Manuscripts with an Introduction, Notes and Appendices* (Hebr.) (Vienna: Ch. D. Lippe, 1887), 64 .

¹¹¹⁶ Jonathan Wyn Schofer, *The Making of a Sage. A Study in Rabbinic Ethics* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 97.

¹¹¹⁷ That these elements appear in both a rabbinic parable and an early Christian parable might form proof of Dibelius’ claim that the fifth parable’s story elements “zweifellos aus dem Judentum [stammen]” (Dibelius, *Der Hirt des Hermas*, 565).

¹¹¹⁸ A famous saying from Pirkei Avot 1:3 might prove that this is not remarkable after all. See my discussion of this passage in 6.5.

¹¹¹⁹ See our discussion of Sifre Deuteronomy 28 in section 5.5. A similar message is conveyed by a parable in Sifra Nedavah 2:6 in which it is said about a slave who brings more than he is ordered to: “Behold, this is like transgressing his (i.e., God’s) words.”

¹¹²⁰ Luke 12:37: “Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them.” Cf. chapter 7 of this study.

¹¹²¹ Matthew 25:28-29 (//Luke 19:24-26): “So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance.”

¹¹²² Beavis, “The Parable of the Slave, Son, and Vineyard,” 655.

as to modern ones. Here the story could end.”¹¹²³ Jennifer Glancy has even called this reward “distinctive and countercultural.”¹¹²⁴ According to another scholar, this “unexpected outcome” may be due to “the author’s identity as a formerly enslaved person, real or fictionalized.”¹¹²⁵ In that case, “the many intertextual echoes of the synoptic parables in *Hermas*’ similitude suggest that this story is a reimagining of a slave parable by a formerly enslaved person.”¹¹²⁶ Without wanting to discount this possibility, I would like to draw attention to another aspect, namely, that of Greco-Roman manumission stories versus Jewish-Christian manumission stories. Although, to the best of my knowledge, there are almost no examples of early rabbinic or Christian parables or other stories in which slaves are freed (even Rabban Gamliel does not succeed in liberating his slave while he clearly wants to!¹¹²⁷), it was not an irregular *topos* in Greco-Roman stories.¹¹²⁸ We find the release of good slaves in several Plautine comedies, for example, in *Rudens*, *Epidicus*, *Miles Gloriosus*, and *Persia*.¹¹²⁹ Another famous ancient fictional slave who was manumitted was Aesop in *Vita Aesopi*. This might suggest that manumission of slaves as a reward for their good work was more a Greco-Roman literary *topos* than a Jewish(-Christian) one.

Absente ero in Greco-Roman Novels

In support of this argument, I would like to discuss briefly the story of *Daphnis and Chloe*, a Greco-Roman novel.¹¹³⁰ *Daphnis and Chloe* is a second-century pastoral prose romance written by the Greek novelist, Longus. It is about two exposed children who are raised by slaves, later discover that they are of noble blood, and then are reinstalled as children and heirs of their biological parents. In a number of scenes, the novel of *Daphnis and Chloe* shows similarities with the Shepherd of Hermas

Inspecting the estate

Shepherd of Hermas

5. After some time the master of the field and of the slave came [back] and he went into the vineyard. And seeing that around he vineyard a fence was beautifully built, and that it was dug and that all the weeds were pulled out and that the vineyard was flourishing, he rejoiced greatly over

Daphnis and Chloe

4.13.1-4: [...] Dionysophanes [the master] was arriving with Cleariste [...] The following days he spent inspecting Lamo’s [the slave] work (ταῖς δὲ ἄλλαις ἡμέραις ἐπεσκόπει τὰ τοῦ Λάμωνος ἔργα). When he saw the plains furrowed, the vines in shoot, the park in its beauty (for Astylus was

¹¹²³ Osiek, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, 171. Osiek adds (note 9) that in comparable slave-son relationships from the New Testament (John 8:35-36; Mark 12:1-12; Gal 3:26-4:11), the relation between slaves and sons is rather “antagonistic.”

¹¹²⁴ Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity*, 118.

¹¹²⁵ Beavis, “The Parable of the Slave, Son, and Vineyard,” 660.

¹¹²⁶ Beavis, “The Parable of the Slave, Son, and Vineyard,” 661.

¹¹²⁷ Y. Ketubbot 3:10, 28a; b. Bava Qamma 74b. A clear exception is the story of Judith who freed her slave (Judith 16:28). Another (possible) exception is a story in Mekhilta of Rabbi Yishmael pisqa 15, where a few slave women are “freed” by accident because they submerged in the mikveh – although they keep serving their mistress (cf. Elizabeth Leigh Gibson, *The Jewish Manumission Inscriptions of the Bosphorus Kingdom*, Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 75 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999], 87).

¹¹²⁸ I would like to stress that I speak about stories; the debate on actual manumission in antiquity falls outside the scope of this section. See for that subject, e.g., J. Albert Harrill, *The Manumission of Slaves in Early Christianity*, Hermeneutische Untersuchungen zur Theologie 32 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995); Gibson, *The Jewish Manumission Inscriptions*.

¹¹²⁹ Plautus, *Rudens*: “Yes, when I got up energetically in the middle of the night, I preferred profit to sleep and rest. In the wild storm I strove to try to alleviate my master’s poverty and my slavery, I didn’t spare my effort. He who is lazy is absolutely worthless, and I absolutely hate that type. A man who wants to do his duties in good time ought to stay awake. He ought not to wait until his master wakes him for his duty. Yes, those who like sleeping rest without profit and with thrashing. Well, I, who was energetic, have now found the means to be lazy if I wish [...]. Now, Gripus, you’ve got this chance for the praetor to free you [...]” (915-928; LCL 260, 487-499). For manumission as reward in other comedies of Plautus see, e.g., Messenio in *Menaechmi*, but also *Epidicus*, *Miles Gloriosus* and *Persia* (compare Stewart, *Plautus and Roman Slavery*, 132ff). Freedom as reward can also be found in *Vita Aesopi*, in which Aesop is (reluctantly) granted manumission by his master Xanthus (*Vita Aesopi* 78-90).

¹¹³⁰ Other examples of Greco-Roman novels are *Leucippe and Clitophon*, *Heliodorus*, *An Ethiopian Story* and *The Story of Apollonius*, *King of Tyre*.

the deeds of the slave (ἐχάρη λίαν ἐπὶ τοῖς ἔργοις τοῦ δούλου).

taking responsibility for the flowers), he was extraordinarily pleased (ἤδετο περιττῶς) [...] ¹¹³¹

This ancient tale follows exactly the order of the master's visit to his farm, as it is laid down in the ancient manuals – which, in turn, followed firmly established practices. It also resembles the situation of the Shepherd of Hermas.

Freeing the good slave

Shepherd of Hermas

6. Now he called his beloved son with him, who was to be his heir, and his friends, who were his advisors, and he told them what he had commanded his slave, and what he found done. These congratulated the slave with the testimony that the master had testified about him. 7. And he said to them: "I promised freedom to this slave (ἐγὼ τῷ δούλῳ τούτῳ ἐλευθερίαν ἐπηγγειλάμην) [...]."

Daphnis and Chloe

4.13.2-4: The following days he [the master, Dionysophanes] spent inspecting Lamo's [the slave] work. When he saw the plains furrowed, the vines in shoot, the park in its beauty (for Astylus was taking responsibility for the flowers), he was extraordinarily pleased, complimented Lamo, and promised to make him a free man (ἐλεύθερον ἀφήσειν ἐπηγγέλλετο).

In both stories, the reward for the good job done by the slave is manumission. Notice how in both stories the element of a promise plays a role. Manumission is not something that is implemented directly, but is used as an incentive by masters to stimulate their underlings in their enterprises.

Slave becomes son

Shepherd of Hermas

6. Now he called his beloved son with him, who was to be his heir, and his friends, who were his advisors, and he told them what he had commanded his slave, and what he found done. [...]

And he said to them: "I promised freedom to this slave, when he would carry out my command, that I commanded to him: and he has carried out my command and he added a good work to the vineyard, and he has pleased me greatly. Now in return for the work that he has done, I want to make him joint heir with my son (ἀντὶ τούτου οὖν τοῦ ἔργου οὗ εἰργάσατο θέλω αὐτὸν συγκληρονόμον τῷ υἱῷ μου ποιῆσαι), because when he thought of the good [deed], he did not ignore it, but completed it.

8. The son of the master agreed with this intention, to make the slave fellow heir with the son (ταύτη τῇ γνώμῃ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ δεσπότης συνευδόκησεν αὐτῷ, ἵνα συγκληρονόμος γένηται ὁ δούλος τῷ υἱῷ).

Daphnis and Chloe

4.22.3: [brother:] "Stop, Daphnis. Don't be afraid. I am your brother, and those who were your masters before are now your parents."

4.24.3-4: [father:] "And you, Astylus [brother], don't be upset at receiving part of my property instead of the whole; to sensible men nothing is more valuable than a brother (μέρος ληγόμενος ἀντὶ πάσης τῆς οὐσίας, κρεῖττον γὰρ τοῖς εὖ φρονούσιν ἀδελφοῦ κτῆμα οὐδέν) [...]. For I shall leave you both a great deal of land, a large number of useful servants, gold, silver, and all the other possessions that rich men have."

¹¹³¹ Longus 4.13.1-4 (LCL 69, 165-167). All following quotations from *Daphnis and Chloe* are also from the Loeb Series.

What is interesting in both accounts is how the real son is involved in the decision to elevate the slave to the level of heir. In *Daphnis and Chloe*, this decision is explicitly addressed as possibly disadvantageous for the real son given that he loses (at least some) property and money.

Sharing food

Shepherd of Hermas

9. After a few days, the householder organized a banquet and he sent to him (the slave) many foods from the banquet. When the slave received the foods that were sent to him by his master, he kept [only] what was sufficient for him, and the rest he gave to his fellow slaves (λαβὼν δὲ ὁ δοῦλος τὰ ἐδέσματα τὰ πεμφθέντα αὐτῷ ἀπὸ τοῦ δεσπότη αὐτοῦ τὰ ἀρκοῦντα αὐτῷ ἤρε, τὰ δὲ λοιπὰ τοῖς συνδούλοις αὐτοῦ διέδωκεν). 10. When his fellow slaves received the foods, they rejoiced and began to pray for him, so that he may find [even] greater favor with the master, because he had treated them like this.

Daphnis and Chloe

4.15.4: “They were all amazed, especially Cleariste [the master’s wife], who swore that she would indeed give him the presents, since he was a fine musician as well as a fine goatherd. They went up to the farm and had lunch and sent Daphnis some of what they were eating. He shared it with Chloe and enjoyed having a taste of urban cuisine (ὁ δὲ μετὰ τῆς Χλόης ἤσθιε καὶ ἤδετο γευόμενος ἀστικῆς ὀψαρτυσίας) [...]”

Finally, this similarity catches the eye: in both stories, the slaves receive some food from their master’s table – a reward in itself.¹¹³² The way they deal with that food – the way they imitate the generosity of their masters – shows that they truly deserve to be uplifted to the level of heirs.

To be clear, I do not want to argue that the author of the Shepherd of Hermas knew or was even influenced by the story of Daphnis and Chloe. What I do want to argue is that the aforementioned comparison shows that Hermas had a good knowledge of standard Greco-Roman story elements and scenes and that he fused that knowledge together with his apprehension of Christian and Jewish parable motifs.

Thus, the manumission of the slave in Hermas’ fifth parable can be explained by Hermas’ social location in (lower class) Rome, where manumission stories were more common than in the Christian and rabbinic literature of Roman Palestine. But there is also another factor that I would like to take into consideration, namely, that Hermas may have combined elements from synoptic and rabbinic slavery parables with Pauline slavery metaphors. The transition from slave to son that is described in the parable may remind us (as it might have reminded Hermas) of Galatians 4, especially verse 7: “So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God (ὥστε οὐκέτι εἰ δοῦλος ἀλλ’ υἱός· εἰ δὲ υἱός, καὶ κληρονόμος διὰ θεοῦ).” It might also remind us of Colossians 3:22-24 and Romans 8:21.¹¹³³ Hermas might have been inspired by this imagery and taken it up in the composition of his parable, perhaps also stimulated by his own biography. As it has recently been claimed: “Even if the freedman Hermas had not been adopted like the slave of the parable, he could well have regarded himself and others like him as adopted sons/heirs of God in the Pauline sense.”¹¹³⁴

To conclude, I claim that the “deeply Jewish” Hermas relies for his parable imagery on its rabbinic and New Testament counterparts (*absente ero*/slavery parables) and is truly part of a parable-telling tradition.

¹¹³² See, e.g., Seneca’s 47th letter, section 15: “Invite some to your table because they deserve the honor, and others that they may come to deserve it.” Translation: LCL 75, 309.

¹¹³³ Colossians 3:22-24: “Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord. Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ.” MacDonalds sees a countercultural, “hidden,” transcript in this passage, since both slaves and free people are entitled to a heritage (MacDonalds, *The Power of Children*, 56ff). Romans 8:21 reads: “that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.”

¹¹³⁴ Beavis, “The Parable of the Slave, Son, and Vineyard,” 666.

Considering its counterparts in rabbinic and New Testament literature, I do not see a single reason not to consider the fifth parable of the Shepherd of Hermas as a full-fledged parable.

Finally, I would like to argue that the fifth parable of the Hermas is a good (maybe the best) example of Christian parable-telling after Jesus:¹¹³⁵ the parable has a complete narrative with an introduction and an application. It is clearly influenced and inspired by New Testament, and possibly Jewish, parables and metaphors, but its creator has also taken creative liberty in changing the expected plot line. For these changes, three possible explanations can be given. First, a socio-historical explanation: Hermas might have adapted the parable to his own, Roman context in which manumission was a greater possibility (at least in literature, but perhaps in real life as well) than in the Jewish context. The second explanation pertains to a changed theology: the fact that the expectation of the return of the Son of Man might have been fading away in this phase of early Christianity could have influenced the imagery used here. Instead of emphasizing a grim moment of reckoning, the parable promises a status improvement for the followers of Christ. According to the third explanation, Hermas possibly adapted the parable to his own autobiography. Whatever explanation is correct (probably a combination of them), I hope this section has proven that Hermas created a truly Christian as well as innovative parable – a parable that deserves our attention.

5.4.3. Absent Masters and Doorkeepers

We continue now with another responsibility of slaves: watching the door. The image of a slave guarding the door, the so called *ostiarus*, is well known in antiquity. In their research on the material life of Roman slavery, Joshel and Hackworth Petersen notice how houses often had a special lodge at the entrance for the doorkeeper. The doorkeeper watched who went in and out of the house and, as a result of this function, was “invested [...] with a certain amount of the owner’s trust, and a place of his own.”¹¹³⁶ This does not mean that the position of the doorkeeper was better per se; often old slaves were used for this task, and the position of the porter had a low status; sometimes they were even chained to the house.¹¹³⁷ As Joel Marcus summarizes, “the role combined humility and responsibility.”¹¹³⁸ A well-known reference in ancient literature to a slave-doorman can be found in Petronius’ *Satyricon*:

We followed, lost in wonder, and came with Agamemnon to the door. A notice was fastened on the doorpost: “no slave to go out of doors except by the master’s orders. Penalty, one hundred stripes.” Just at the entrance stood a porter in green clothes, with a cherry-coloured belt (*ostiarus prasinatus, cerasino succinctus cingulo*), shelling peas in a silver dish. A golden cage hung in the doorway, and a black and white magpie in it greeted visitors. I was gazing at all this, when I nearly fell backwards and broke my leg. For on the left hand as you went in, not far from the porter’s office, a great dog on a chain was painted on the wall, and over him was written in block capitals “beware of the dog.”¹¹³⁹

In this passage, a few elements come to the fore: a porter at the entrance, who has his own office, and who clearly not only is there to show guests in, but also to prevent slaves from going out. He also suffers from competition in the form of a (real) dog, which forces him to make himself useful by shelling peas.

In ancient literature, the *topos* of the porter deals with his preparedness to be quick to open the door. The following quote from the Plautine comedy *Stichus* might elucidate this point sufficiently:

I can see that the door is locked. I’ll go and knock at it. (does so very loudly) Open up and hurry up, make sure that the door is wide open, get rid of delay! (to the audience) This business is being done far too carelessly. Look how long I’ve been standing here and knocking. (into the house again) Are you diligently occupied in sleep? I’ll try whether the door or my elbows and feet are stronger. (hits very hard) I very much

¹¹³⁵ For another post-New Testament early Christian parable, see section 6.4.3.

¹¹³⁶ Sandra R. Joshel and Lauren Hackworth Petersen, *The Material Life of Roman Slaves* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 41.

¹¹³⁷ Thomas Wiedemann, “Servi Senes: The Role of Old Slaves at Rome,” *Polis* 8 (1996), 289.

¹¹³⁸ Joel Marcus, *Mark 8-16. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible 27 (New Haven: Yale University, 2009), 919.

¹¹³⁹ Petronius, *Satyricon* 28-29 (LCL 15, 49).

wish that this door had fled from its master, so that it would get a great thrashing for it; I'm tired from knocking. This is the last time. (hits the door) Curse you!¹¹⁴⁰

And compare this scene from Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*:

With this observation I walked on a little farther and reached the entrance. The door was firmly bolted, and I began to knock and call vociferously. At long last a girl came out. "Well!" she said. "You certainly have been giving the door a mighty beating. [...]" "[T]ell me instead if I might find your master at home." "Certainly," she answered [...] With that she bolted the door again and made off inside the house. She returned shortly, opened the door, and announced, "He asks you to come in."¹¹⁴¹

In *Vita Aesopi*, the slave Aesop also once had to guard the door. As we might expect from Aesop, he makes use of this occasion to show his tricks. Aesop is ordered to let in only philosophers and rhetoricians by his master. By insulting the guests, he arranges it so that only one is able to enter the house.¹¹⁴²

In the New Testament, we also find instances of slaves being called to watch or open the door. In Acts 12:12-16, we find an example in the story of the slave girl Rhoda:

As soon as he (Peter) realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many had gathered and were praying. When he knocked at the outer gate, a maid named Rhoda came to answer (κρούσαντος δὲ αὐτοῦ τὴν θύραν τοῦ πωλῶνος προσῆλθεν παιδίσκη ὑπακοῦσαι ὀνόματι Ῥόδη). On recognizing Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed that, instead of opening the gate (οὐκ ᾔνοιξεν τὸν πωλῶνα), she ran in and announced that Peter was standing at the gate. They said to her, "You are out of your mind!" But she insisted that it was so. They said, "It is his angel." Meanwhile Peter continued knocking (ὁ δὲ Πέτρος ἐπέμενεν κρούων); and when they opened the gate, they saw him and were amazed.

Harrill wrote a study about this incident in 2000, claiming that the author of Acts made use of a stock figure of New Comedy, the *servus currens* (running slave), which consists of a humorous interpretation of the classic messenger scene. The *servus currens* is so eager to tell his news (also because he anticipates a reward) that he/she does not succeed in communicating it well, and ruins his/her big moment.¹¹⁴³ Harrill's theory has attracted some critical response by scholars. Kathy Chambers notices that (1) Rhoda does not seek a reward, (2) that the failure to comprehend her message is not hers but that of the congregation, and (3) that she reports a "real" event, and does not invent a story.¹¹⁴⁴ In other words, Rhoda does not fit the model of the *servus currens*. In a paper from 2017, Patrick E. Spencer goes a step further. He admits that the scene has a comical tone; apparently, "it is easier to escape from the clutches of Herod than to gain access to a house full of disciples."¹¹⁴⁵ However, it is Rhoda who is the model disciple by immediately recognizing and believing Peter – in contrast to the apostles at the resurrection of Jesus, and the people who are gathered in the house of Mary. Spencer also sees an intertextual relation between the madness Rhoda is accused of in verse 15 (μαῖνη) and the madness that Paul himself is charged with in Acts 26:24 ("You are out of your mind, Paul! Too much learning is driving you insane!"; μαῖνη, Παῦλε· τὰ πολλὰ σε γράμματα εἰς μανίαν περιτρέπει).¹¹⁴⁶

¹¹⁴⁰ Plautus, *Stichus* 307-314 (LCL 328, 49). Cf. J. Albert Harrill, "The Dramatic Function of the Running Slave Rhoda (Acts 12.13–16): A Piece of Greco-Roman Comedy," *New Testament Studies* 46 no. 1 (2000), 154.

See also the role of Sceledrus in Plautus, *Miles Gloriosus* 272-595.

¹¹⁴¹ Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 1.22 (LCL 44, 39).

¹¹⁴² *Vita Aesopi* 77b (translation Daly, "The Aesop Romance," 144).

¹¹⁴³ Harrill, "The Dramatic Function of the Running Slave Rhoda," 152.

¹¹⁴⁴ Kathy Chambers, "Knock, Knock – Who's There?" Acts 12.6-17 as a Comedy of Errors," in *A Feminist Companion to the Acts of the Apostles*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marianne Blickenstaff (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 89-97. See also F. Scott Spencer, "Out of Mind, Out of Voice: Slave-Girls and Prophetic Daughters in Luke-Acts," *Biblical Interpretation* 7, no. 2 (1999), 133-155.

¹¹⁴⁵ Patrick Spencer, "Mad' Rhoda in Acts 12:12-17: Disciple Exemplar," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 79 no. 2 (2017), 290.

¹¹⁴⁶ Spencer, "Mad' Rhoda in Acts 12:12-17," 288-294.

For the remainder of this section, it is worthwhile to investigate another intertextual linkage observed by Spencer, among others,¹¹⁴⁷ rooted in the observation that the story about Peter, which begins with Peter being liberated from prison by angels (Acts 12:5-10), takes place during Passover (see Acts 12:4): “intertextual echoes with the Israelite Passover account in Exodus have been identified by several scholars: the Israelites await their rescue with their loins girded, sandals on their feet, and staff in their hand, whereas Peter is told by the angel to fasten his belt, put on his sandals, and wrap his cloak around himself before departing (Exodus 12:11; Acts 12:8-10).”¹¹⁴⁸ The text in Exodus to which Spencer refers reads in the Hebrew Bible and in the LXX as follows:

וְכִכְרֵת אֶת־אֵלָיו אֶת־מִתְיָגָהּ יִלְבָּשׁ וְהָלַךְ בְּרַגְלָיו בְּחֹרֶם וְהָיָה בְּיָדוֹ מַזְלָה וְהָיָה בְּיָדוֹ מַזְלָה וְהָיָה בְּיָדוֹ מַזְלָה
οὕτως δὲ φάγεσθε αὐτό· αἱ ὀσφύες ὑμῶν περιεζωσμέναι, καὶ τὰ ὑποδήματα ἐν τοῖς ποσὶν ὑμῶν, καὶ
αἱ βακτηρίαι ἐν ταῖς χερσὶν ὑμῶν· καὶ ἔδεσθε αὐτὸ μετὰ σπουδῆς· πασχα ἐστὶν κυρίῳ.
This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand;
and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the Lord.

The Greek text in Acts, which indeed shows some lexical similarities¹¹⁴⁹ (underlined in the text) with the LXX is:

εἶπεν δὲ ὁ ἄγγελος πρὸς αὐτόν· ζῶσαι καὶ ὑπόδησαι τὰ σανδάλιά σου. ἐποίησεν δὲ οὕτως. καὶ λέγει
αὐτῷ· περιβαλοῦ τὸ ἱμάτιόν σου καὶ ἀκολούθει μοι.
The angel said to him [Peter], “Fasten your belt and put on your sandals.” He did so. Then he said to
him, “Wrap your cloak around you and follow me.”

If we follow Spencer’s suggestion, the author of Acts might have wanted to make a literary connection between the story of Peter and Passover, probably to show the continuity between the Exodus and the new story of nascent Christianity. As Dany Christopher writes: “In Acts 12, Luke not only shows that the God of Israel is seen as the God of the church, but also, above all, that the one who performs the exodus-like rescue of Peter is none other than the Lord Jesus himself.”¹¹⁵⁰ Let us look now at two parables (that were possibly originally one) that bear similarities to the Rhoda-story: Luke 12:35-38 (The Serving Master) and Mark 13:33-37 (The Doorkeeper).

5.4.3.1. Luke 12:35-38 and Mark 13:33-37

Text (NA 28)	Translation (MS)
35 Ἔστωσαν ὑμῶν αἱ ὀσφύες περιεζωσμέναι καὶ οἱ λύχνοι καίόμενοι·	Let your loins be girded and have your lamps lit.
36 καὶ ὑμεῖς ὅμοιοι ἀνθρώποις προσδεχομένοις τὸν κύριον ἑαυτῶν πότε ἀναλύσει ἐκ τῶν γάμων, ἵνα ἐλθόντος καὶ κρούσαντος εὐθέως ἀνοίξωσιν αὐτῷ.	And you, be like men who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding, so that they may directly open [the door] when he comes and knocks.
37 μακάριοι οἱ δοῦλοι ἐκεῖνοι, οὓς ἐλθὼν ὁ κύριος εὕρήσει γρηγοροῦντας· ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν	Blessed be the slaves who, when the lord comes, he finds alert. Truly I tell you that he will gird

¹¹⁴⁷ One of the first to study this connection in depth is August Strobel, “Passa-Symbolik und Passa-Wunder in Act. XII. 3ff.,” *New Testament Studies* 4 (1957-1958), 210-215. Since Strobel, many scholars have discussed this issue. For an overview of past scholarship and a recent discussion of the connection between Passover and the rescue story about Peter, see Dany Christopher, *The Appropriation of Passover in Luke-Acts*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe (Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2018), especially chapter 6.

¹¹⁴⁸ Spencer, “‘Mad’ Rhoda in Acts 12:12-17,” 288.

¹¹⁴⁹ More lexical similarities can be found between the Exodus story and the narrative from Acts. See, e.g., Strobel, “Passa-Symbolik und Passa-Wunder” and Kazuhiko Yamazaki-Ransom, *The Roman Empire in Luke’s Narrative*, Library of New Testament Studies (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 178.

¹¹⁵⁰ Christopher, *The Appropriation of Passover in Luke-Acts*, 186.

ὅτι περιζώσεται καὶ ἀνακλινεῖ αὐτοὺς καὶ παρελθὼν διακονήσει αὐτοῖς.	himself and make them recline and he will come and serve them.
38 κἂν ἐν τῇ δευτέρᾳ κἂν ἐν τῇ τρίτῃ φυλακῇ ἔλθῃ καὶ εὕρῃ οὕτως, μακάριοί εἰσιν ἐκεῖνοι.	If he comes in the second or in the third watch and he will find them so, blessed are those [slaves]!

Spencer draws attention to the parallelism in language between the scene in Acts 12:1-17 – Peter knocks (v. 13, 16: κρούων) and Rhoda fails to open (v. 14 ἤνοιξεν) – versus the master knocking in Luke 12 (v. 36: κρούσαντος) and the slaves opening (same verse: ἀνοίξωσιν).¹¹⁵¹ By comparing the two scenes, Spencer comes to a harsh judgment with respect to Mary and the disciples: “Unlike the servants in the parable, who carefully watch for their master’s return and immediately respond to his knocking and demonstrate preparedness in accordance with the instructions given to the Israelites at the Passover event, Mary and the disciples at her house initially ignore Peter’s knocking and ridicule Rhoda, refusing to believe her not once but twice. It is only after Peter’s unrelenting knocking that the gate is opened.”¹¹⁵² However, Peter is judged harshly by Spencer as well. Peter is in a deep sleep (a “coma” – κοιμώμενος), and must be awoken: “Unlike the Israelites, who await their miraculous deliverance with their loins girded, sandals on their feet, and staff in their hand, Peter must fasten his belt, put on his sandals, and wrap his cloak around himself before being rescued by the angel.”¹¹⁵³ As was the case with Peter’s rescue story, we might wonder whether the parable from Luke 12:35-38 (talking again about the girding of loins) contains an intertextual connection to Pesach or Passover. During Pesach, the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt is explicitly commemorated, and slaves were probably allowed to dine alongside their masters (cf. Luke 12:37b) who had to contemplate their own time of enslavement.¹¹⁵⁴ However, since we will analyze the parable of Luke 12 and its connection to Passover elaborately in chapter 7 (see also and section 5.4.1 in this chapter), I will not discuss this parable any further here. Instead, I will continue with a study of Mark 13:33-37 (often seen as a parallel to Luke 12:35-38) in which we see similar elements recur:

Text (NA28)

33 Βλέπετε, ἀγρυπνεῖτε· οὐκ οἴδατε γὰρ πότε
ὁ καιρὸς ἐστίν.
34 Ὡς ἄνθρωπος ἀπόδημος ἀφείλκε τὴν οἰκίαν
αὐτοῦ καὶ δούλους τοῖς δούλοις αὐτοῦ τὴν
ἐξουσίαν ἐκάστω τὸ ἔργον αὐτοῦ καὶ τῷ
θυρωρῷ ἐνετείλατο ἵνα γρηγορῇ.
35 γρηγορεῖτε οὖν· οὐκ οἴδατε γὰρ πότε ὁ
κύριος τῆς οἰκίας ἔρχεται, ἢ ὥσπερ ἢ
μεσονύκτιον ἢ ἀλεκτοροφωνίας ἢ πρωΐ,
36 μὴ ἐλθὼν ἐξαίφνης εὕρῃ ὑμᾶς
καθεύδοντας.
37 ὁ δὲ ὑμῖν λέγω πᾶσιν λέγω, γρηγορεῖτε.

Translation (MS)

Beware, be vigilant; for you do not know when
the time is.
Like a man going on a journey, who is away
from his home, and who has given his slaves
authority, to each his own work, and who
commanded the doorman to watch.
Watch now; for you do not know when the
master of the house will come, in the evening or
at midnight or at cockcrow or at dawn,
So that, when he suddenly comes, he will not
find you sleeping.
What I say to you, I say to you all, watch!

In this parable, a special Greek term for the porter occurs: θυρωρός. Also, the situation that is imagined has a closer resemblance to the parables we have discussed in the first part of this chapter, namely, the situation of a master going abroad (*absente ero*) and leaving his slaves in charge. The doorkeeper has to be on guard and cannot be asleep when the master returns. This situation is the illustration of the words spoken by Jesus some verses earlier that “this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place” (v. 30), but that since “no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (v. 32) about the day or the hour, everyone should be alert and awake.

¹¹⁵¹ Spencer, “‘Mad’ Rhoda in Acts 12:12-17,” 294.

¹¹⁵² Spencer, “‘Mad’ Rhoda in Acts 12:12-17,” 294-295.

¹¹⁵³ Spencer, “‘Mad’ Rhoda in Acts 12:12-17,” 295.

¹¹⁵⁴ Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 363ff and Catharine Hezser, “Passover and Social Equality: Women, Slaves and Minors in Bavli Pesachim,” in *A Feminist Commentary on the Babylonian Talmud*, ed. Tal Ilan (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2017), 91-107.

That slaves should stay awake in the absence of their master reminds us of the disciples who slept during Jesus' prayers in Gethsemane in the gospels of Mark and Matthew (Matthew 26:36-46//Luke 22:39-46//Mark 14:32-42). It was one of the usual critiques of slaves that they were lazy (cf. Matthew 25:26, and above) and always sleeping, a critique that was often played with in ancient literature.¹¹⁵⁵ A nice example of this phenomenon can be found in Plautus' comedy, *Miles Gloriosus*, in which one of the main characters, Periplectomenus, says to the slave Palaestrio:

Hurray! He's set himself up in a graceful position, right for a slave and a comedy. He'll never rest today until he's finished what he's seeking. He's got it, I think. (to Palaestrio) If you're going to do anything, do it now, stay awake, stop going to sleep, unless you prefer to keep night watches here striped with strokes. I'm talking to you! You didn't get drunk yesterday, did you? Hey, I'm speaking to you, Palaestrio! Wake up, I tell you, get up, I tell you, it's getting light, I tell you!¹¹⁵⁶

That the slave Palaestrio is at the same time suspected of drinking ties in with the larger discourse of slaves surrendering to all kinds of vices at the exact moment the master is out of sight – a theme that is also visible in the parable of the Wise and the Unwise Slave (Luke 12:42-46//Matthew 24:45-51¹¹⁵⁷).

In the comedy *Aulularia*, the slave Lyconides speaks in a *monologue interieure* about the fact that, as a slave, he never has a moment of rest.

This is the job of a deserving slave (*hoc est servi facinus frugi*), to do what I'm making it my aim to do: not to think of master's command as a botheration and a nuisance; a slave who wants to serve his master according to his wishes must give first place to his master and second place to himself. And if he sleeps, he should sleep in such a way that he doesn't forget that he's a slave [...].¹¹⁵⁸

In a poem by Ausonius, the lazy slave Parmenon, who does not awake fast enough, is rebuked with the words: "Up with you, you waster! What a thrashing you deserve! Up, or a long, long sleep will come on you from where you dread it least. Out with you, Parmeno, from your downy bed!"¹¹⁵⁹

That slaves are often portrayed as sleepy or lazy in ancient literature might find its roots in social reality. In a study on disciplining sleep in antiquity, Leslie Dossey argues: "The 'social patterning of sleep' in the modern era has been connected to social inequality. Those with less power – women in abusive marriages, night-shift workers – tend to be more sleep deprived than others. In the ancient world, as well, it was the slave, the craftsman, the beggar who suffered most from (involuntary) sleep deprivation."¹¹⁶⁰ The Romans themselves were also aware of the difference in sleeping regimes between slaves and higher classes, Dossey claims:

[...] Roman aristocrats displayed their imperium by sleeping, glorying in the fact that they could sleep while others work. This was architecturally demonstrated in the way that Roman heads of household spread their bedrooms around the house to such an extent that the sleeping space of the other members of the household becomes undetectable. At a more general level, the Roman siesta – which frequently took the form of a very public sleep – symbolized the freedom of the Roman, the privilege of a citizen over a slave.¹¹⁶¹

At the same time, slaves were often denied any privilege with respect to sleeping:

[P]ersonal attendants especially could expect to have to sleep in the owner's bedroom or outside the door on an improvised bed in case some service or other were required during the night: so a single ancilla attended

¹¹⁵⁵ Geoffrey S. Nathan, *The Family in Late Antiquity: The Rise of Christianity and the Endurance of Tradition* (London/New York: Routledge, 2000), 177.

¹¹⁵⁶ Plautus, *Miles Gloriosus* 212-219 (LCL 163, 163).

¹¹⁵⁷ For a discussion of these parables, see sections 5.4.1 and 6.3.4.

¹¹⁵⁸ Plautus, *Aulularia* 588-592 (LCL 60, 321, with adaptations by MS).

¹¹⁵⁹ Ausonius, *Ephemeris* 1.17 (LCL 96, 15). See for his laziness also Ausonius, *Epigrammata* 36-77.

¹¹⁶⁰ Leslie Dossey, "Watchful Greeks and Lazy Romans: Disciplining Sleep in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 21, no. 2 (2013), 238.

¹¹⁶¹ Dossey, "Watchful Greeks and Lazy Romans," 239.

Agrippina in her bedroom when Nero's assassin arrived to kill her. The importunate demands of owners must often have denied slaves whatever comforts and intimacy their cells might otherwise have given them, so that even to live in an opulent household brought no promise of material ease.¹¹⁶²

This remark by Bradley is backed up by the following description of the end of a party in the *Satyricon*, in which the lack of decent sleeping places for slaves immediately becomes clear:

By this time I too was tired out [with adventures] and had just taken the tiniest taste of sleep. All the servants, indoors and out, had done the same (*idem et tota intra forisque familia fecerat*). Some lay anyhow by the feet of the guests, some leaned against the walls, some even stayed in the doorway with their heads together.¹¹⁶³

So, in this section, we encountered the call to be watchful, as imagined by New Testament parables about slaves who are waiting for their masters. As I have established with a number of Greco-Roman texts, it was seen as the task of the slave to be vigilant and sacrifice his sleep for his (absent) master while, at the same time, there was – at least in literary texts, both Greco-Roman and Christian/rabbinic – the assumption that he would not be able to live up to this expectations. In these texts, hidden transcripts are not present; the slaves ought to behave and do not protest. At the same time, intertextual connections are made with the story of the Exodus, the slavery story from the Hebrew Bible *par excellence*. Just like the people of Israel had to be alert for their departure to the promised land, so, too, the early Christians were called to be alert for the arrival of the Son of Man. For those who succeed in their duty, rewards are waiting, just as liberation was waiting for the enslaved people of Israel in Egypt.

5.4.3.2. *Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael Beshallah on Exodus 14:21*

We will continue now with the discussion of two rabbinic parables. The first stems from the Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael.¹¹⁶⁴ It is part of a midrash on Exodus 14:21, which reads:

<p>Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided.</p>	<p>וַיִּשָּׂא מֹשֶׁה אֶת־יָדוֹ עַל־הַיָּם וַיִּזְלַךְ יְהוָה אֶת־הַיָּם בְּרוּחַ קָדִים עֹזָה כָּל־הַלַּיְלָה וַיִּגָּשֶׁם אֶת־הַיָּם לְחִרְבָּה וַיִּבָּקְעוּ הַמַּיִם:</p>
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The parable reacts to the fact that, although it is Moses who stretches out his hand, it is God who drove the sea back by a strong east wind. Or, as Catherine Keller puts it: “This the rabbis found in need of interpretation. For though Moses was empowered to part the sea – here is the gap – it is only a direct divine intervention that gets the sea to ‘flee.’”¹¹⁶⁵ In responses to this gap, the rabbis composed the following parable:

Translation (MS)	Text ¹¹⁶⁶
<p>They tell a parable. To what can it be compared? To a king who had two gardens, one within the other. He sold the inner one and the buyer came to enter, and the guard did not allow him. He [the buyer] said to him [the guard], “in the name of the king,” and he did not obey. He showed him the stamp and he did not obey him.</p>	<p>מוֹשְׁלוֹ מִשָּׁל לְמָה הַדָּבָר דּוּמָה לְמֶלֶךְ בֶּשֶׂר וְדָם שֶׁהָיוּ לוֹ שְׁתֵּי גִנּוֹת זֹו לִפְנֵים מִזֹּו מָכַר אֶת הַפְּנִימִיָּת וּבָא הַלּוֹקֵחַ לִיכְנֹס וְלֹא הִנִּיחוּ הַשׁוֹמֵר אָמַר לוֹ בֶּשֶׂם הַמֶּלֶךְ וְלֹא קִיבֵל הִרְאָה לוֹ אֶת הַטִּבֵּעַ וְלֹא קִיבֵל עָלָיו</p>

¹¹⁶² Bradley, *Slavery and Society at Rome*, 101

¹¹⁶³ Petronius, *Satyricon* 22 (LCL 15, 37).

¹¹⁶⁴ Parallel Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai (edition Epstein-Melamed, 61).

¹¹⁶⁵ Catherine Keller, *The Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (Oxon: Routledge, 2003), 119.

¹¹⁶⁶ Hebrew text according to Manuscript Oxford; see Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhiltot*, 180-181.

Until he brought the king and he [the king] came.

עד שניהג המלך ובא

Directly when he brought the king and he came, the guard started to flee.

כיון שניהג המלך ובא התחיל השומר לברוח

He said to him: "The whole day I spoke to you in the name of the king and you did not obey me.

אמ' לו כל היום הייתי אומ' לך בשם המלך ולא קיבלת עליך

And now, from what are you fleeing?"

ועכשיו מפני מה אתה בורח

[He said to him: "I do not flee from you,¹¹⁶⁷] but from the king."

אלא מפני המלך

In an article devoted to this passage,¹¹⁶⁸ Daniel Boyarin argues that "[o]ne of the important dynamics of midrash as reading is that it makes manifest the hidden dimensions of that mythic intertext by gathering together these fragments of allusion and figurative language and reinscribing them into narratives."¹¹⁶⁹ According to him, this passage from the Mekhilta does exactly that, since the midrash here evokes with its language the primordial battle between God and the forces of the sea. This reference of the midrash becomes clear in the *mashal*. The *mashal* underlines that in the direct interaction between God and the sea (the king and his guard), the sea fears and obeys God. That does not, however, apply to the interaction between Moses and the sea (the buyer and the guard); then the sea does not obey: "The very fact that the sea could be insubordinate [...] verifies the mythic reading of the landscape, which is still alive for the rabbis, but at the same time the text renders it crystal clear that the sea is not a god or a rival to God. The *mashal*, then, serves as an aid in the interpretation of the 'dangerous' material by containing it within safe limits."¹¹⁷⁰

Does this interpretation by Boyarin also help to explain some other difficulties with the parable? One of the problems with the *mashal* is that it distinguishes between an inner garden and an outer garden. Do these gardens represent Israel, to which the sea (the guard) gives access? Another puzzling element of the parable is its use of the metaphorical domain of purchasing. If the buyer (Moses) acquires the inner garden, what does that mean with regard to Israel? Has ownership of Israel been transferred from God to his people? Boyarin solves these two questions at the same time by interpreting the two gardens as symbols for two "sides" of the sea – both non-subject (can be bought) and subject. His solution is worthy of being quoted extensively:

The ambivalence of the verse is thematized in the midrash in the ambivalence of the sale of the garden to the king's friend. On the one hand, the Torah tells us that Moses has been given the power to subdue the sea and split it; the inner garden has been sold to him. I read this not as magic but as a reduction of the status of the universe to a willless nonsubject, a mere object of human desire, as its reification. On the other hand, owing to the contradiction in the verse and the "evidence" of the psalm, we see that will was not taken away from the sea. He still had the power and perhaps the right to resist; the outer garden was not sold. The garden which is sold and not sold, then, can be read as representing a kind of liminal moment in cultural history (indeed, in materialist terms, in economic history). However, it also plays a concrete function in the interpretation of our biblical narrative. It represents a deep-seated inner contradiction in the very situation of Moses' having been commanded to split the sea. One who sells an inner garden without selling the means of access to it is, after all, creating a self-contradictory moment.¹¹⁷¹

Although Boyarin is right in focusing our attention on the ambivalence of the story, I do not agree with his interpretation of the two gardens, which forces us to assume that both the inner and the outer garden are representing the sea, while the guard is not identified. I think it is much more plausible and economical to assume

¹¹⁶⁷ Not present in the Oxford manuscript, but present in all other textual witnesses (see Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhilot*, 179n473).

¹¹⁶⁸ Daniel Boyarin, "The Sea Resists: Midrash and the (Psycho)Dynamics of Intertextuality," *Poetics Today* 10 no. 4 (1989), 661-677.

¹¹⁶⁹ Boyarin, "The Sea Resists," 663.

¹¹⁷⁰ Boyarin, "The Sea Resists," 670.

¹¹⁷¹ Boyarin, "The Sea Resists," 669.

that the inner garden symbolizes the land that is promised to the people of Israel.¹¹⁷² Since the sea directly gives entrance to the desert that the people of Israel have to cross before entering the land, it makes sense to assume that the desert represents the not-bought outer garden.

Parable	Application
King/Seller	God
Buyer	Moses
Guard/doorkeeper	Sea
Inner Garden	Israel
Outer garden	Desert
Stamp	Staff ¹¹⁷³
Fleeing	Splitting up

From the perspective of social reality, we might see in the Mishnah (and the Talmud) a distinction between porters (doorkeepers) and guards (watchmen), both positions normally designated with the Hebrew שומר. While porters and guards are not necessarily slaves, given the response of this particular guard (the fact that he flees from the king), as well as the focus on obedience and following orders, I think it is plausible that he is a slave.

Porters often have their own lodges in the front of a (court)yard, which are mostly found in residential areas. So, we read in m. Bava Batra 1:5 how each resident of a courtyard “is forced [to contribute] to the building of a gatehouse and a door to the [jointly owned] courtyard (כופין אותו לבנות בית שער ודלת לחצר).”¹¹⁷⁴ Porters could also function to guard shipyards or the synagogue.¹¹⁷⁵ On the other hand, we have the guards of orchards, vineyards, and fields. In antiquity, gardens and fields that were filled with yield were often guarded against hungry animals or humans. That fields were watched might also be the consequence of rabbinic legal sayings – following biblical laws¹¹⁷⁶ – condoning that fruits not guarded might be eaten (e.g., m. Shevi’ith 9:4).

In the Bible, we find many references to guarding vineyards, sometimes from towers or cabins: “And daughter Zion is left like a booth in a vineyard, like a shelter in a cucumber field, like a besieged city” (Isaiah 1:6; cf. Isaiah 5:1-2). We find a famous example of a watchtower in the parable of The Tenants: “Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower (πύργον). Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country” (Matthew 21:33; cf. Mark 12:1). Archaeological traces from watchtowers also have been found in Israel.¹¹⁷⁷

Finally, it might be important for our understanding of the parable of the two gardens to notice that in social reality yards (and we might speculate fields as well) might give access to other yards sometimes, just like in our parable. Such a case can be found in m. Ma’aserot 3:5, in a discussion on which kind of courtyard is liable to tithing. In this discussion Rabbi Yehudah says: “There are two courtyards, one in front of the other (זו לפני זו), the inner one is liable, and the outer one is exempt (הפנימית חייבת והחיצונה פטורה).”¹¹⁷⁸ According to the commentary by Martin Jaffee the text of the Mishnah might lead to confusion in this passage, since there is not a situation of a yard *within* a yard envisioned here (which the last part of the text suggests), but rather the situation

¹¹⁷² For Israel as a garden (גן) see, e.g., Isaiah 58:11, Ezekiel 36:35. Compare Genesis 13:10, Isaiah 51:3, Joel 2:3.

¹¹⁷³ See the introduction of the parable. Here also some conflation with other Moses-traditions might appear (Exodus 17:7, Numbers 20:8-12).

¹¹⁷⁴ Translation: MS. Hebrew text: Manuscript Kaufmann (folio 140r).

¹¹⁷⁵ We find a beautiful history about the guarding of a synagogue in b. Yoma 35b. According to this story, Hillel once could not pay the guard at the house of learning. That is why he climbed up and sat near a window. Since it was winter, he was covered by snow and almost froze to death.

¹¹⁷⁶ Cf. Deuteronomy 23:25.

¹¹⁷⁷ See, for example, Aharon Kempinski, “Joshua’s Altar—An Iron Age I Watchtower,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 12, no. 1 (1986), 42-53. However, his view is contested by, e.g., Amihai Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible, 10,000-586 B.C.E.*, The Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1990).

¹¹⁷⁸ Translation: MS. Hebrew text: Manuscript Kaufmann (folio 31r).

of a yard with an outer yard *in front of it*.¹¹⁷⁹ Nevertheless, this means that – just like in the parable – one first has to be allowed to enter the outer yard in order to access the second yard.

The phenomenon of the guard at a garden is firmly established when it comes to ancient Palestine. Whether the idea of selling a garden inside another garden is historically really viable or a mere product of the narratological needs of the parabolist is difficult to assess. However, I am inclined to see it as the consequence of the comparison the parable-tellers want to make between Moses, the sea, and God on the one hand, and the seller, the guard, and the king on the other.

The third, hidden transcript, dimension of our analysis focuses on the relation between the master and his slave. We see that the guard is afraid of the king. The focus of their relationship is the verb “to receive, to obey” (קבל); the guard does not obey the buyer, but he does immediately obey the king. He does not obey the buyer since that would contradict (his interpretation of) the king’s command, and he flees from the king when he finds out that it was the king’s command after all to let the buyer enter – and we are safe to assume that he flees for the king because he is afraid of punishment. This indirectly characterizes the king as a “harsh man” (cf. Luke 19:21), who would punish a slave who took his assignment too seriously. Interestingly, the fleeing of the guard is not necessary for the application (the buyer’s final question seems to indicate that the parable-teller also knew that). Moses asks the sea to split, and after intervention by God, the sea does split. In the parable, the buyer asks the guard to allow him to enter, and – *mutatis mutandis* – it would have been sufficient for the guard to let the buyer enter after the king’s arrival. With the addition of the fleeing, the characterization of the sea/guard seems to change. While in the midrash on Exodus the sea seems rather reluctant (unwilling) to listen to Moses, in the parable the guard seems to be afraid of making the wrong decision. His incentive is anxiety rather than resistance (see also our discussion of the parable of The Talents above). Here, the parable might also play with a typical slavery-motive in literature we have seen before: the slave taking his master’s orders too literally, or too seriously (see, e.g., *Vita Aesopi*). If that motive is taken up here, it is not used for a comical effect given the guard’s rapid flight. In sum, I come to the conclusion that the parable is (also) used as, what Boyarin calls, “an intertext” to specify the sea’s character on the one hand (cf. Psalm 114 about the sea that flies) and confirm the power of God on the other.

From a *Bildfeld* perspective, we see how God’s sovereignty is underscored by this parable and how even former fierce adversaries such as the pivotal waters turn into obedient and anxious beings that flee as soon as they catch a glimpse of their master.

5.4.3.3. Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael Shirata on Exodus 15:1

A final parable in which guards occur can be found in Mekhilta Shirata. This parable has two peculiarities: first, it responds not so much to an exegetical problem as it does to a philosophical or theological issue (the relation between soul and body). Secondly, it does not contain the whole parable but only refers to the parable, which was apparently so well-known that a short reference might suffice for people to remember it.¹¹⁸⁰ The text of the parable is as follows (with some introduction):

Antoninus asked our master: “At the moment that a man dies and the body ceases to be, does the Holy One, Blessed be He, make him stand in judgment?” And he said to him: “Instead of asking me about the body which is impure, ask me about the soul, which is pure.”

Translation (MS)

They told a parable. To what can it be compared?

To a king of flesh and blood who had a beautiful garden.

Text¹¹⁸¹

מושלו משל למה הדבר דומה

למלך בשר ודם שהיה לו פרדס נאה

¹¹⁷⁹ Martin Jaffee, *Mishnah’s Theology of Tithing: A Study of Tractate Maaserot*, Brown Judaic Series 19 (Chico: Scholars Press, 1981), 107-108.

¹¹⁸⁰ For a discussion of its parallels, see Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhiltot*, 238-253. See also Lieve M. Teugels, “De Parabel van de Lamme en de Blinde in de Rabbijnse Overlevering: Externe en Interne Confrontaties,” *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 73 (2016), 236-45; Lieve M. Teugels, “The Contradictory Philosophical Lessons of the Parable of the Lamme and the Blind Guards in Various Rabbinic Midrashim,” in *From Creation to Redemption: Progressive Approaches to Midrash. Proceedings of the 2015 and 2016 SBL Sessions on Midrash*, ed. Rivka Ulmer and W. David Nelson (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2017), 153-171.

¹¹⁸¹ Hebrew text: manuscript Oxford, as quoted in Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhiltot*, 240-241.

The king placed in it two guards, one lame and one blind.

הושיב בו המלך שומרים שנים אחד חיגר ואחד

סומא

[the rest of the parable is missing]

Until and afterwards: *to judge with it* (Psalm 50:4).

עד ואחר כך לדין עמו

Since the Mekhilta of Rabbi Yishmael contains only a reference to the parable, I give, here, a complete version of the story, as found in the Mekhilta of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai.¹¹⁸² The Mekhilta Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai is the twin-text of the Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael, with the latter having chronological priority over the first, as well as being superior in quality.¹¹⁸³

They told a parable. To what can it be compared? To a king of flesh and blood who had an orchard. And there were in it beautiful first fruits. And he put in it two guards (שני שומרים), one lame and one blind. The lame said to the blind: “Beautiful first fruits, I see.” The blind said to him: “As if I see.” The lame said to him: “As if I can walk.” The lame rode on the back of the blind and they went and took the first fruits.

After [some] days the king came and he sat before them in judgment. He said to them: “Where are the first fruits?” Said the blind to him: “As if I see.” Said the lame to him: “As if can walk.” The king was bright. What did he do? He let one ride on the back of the other and they would walk. The king said to them: “So have you done it and so have you eaten.”

So the Holy One, blessed be He, brings body and soul and let them stand trial. He says to the body: “Why did you sin before me?” It says before him: “Master of the world, from the day that the soul went out from me, I am thrown away like a stone.” He says to the soul: “Why did you sin before me?” It says before him: “Master of the world, I sinned? The body sinned. Since the day I went out from it, have I not been pure before you?” The Holy One blessed be He takes the soul and brings it in the body and he judges them together, as it is said: *He calls to the heavens above* (Psalm 50:4) – to bring the soul. *And to the earth* (Psalm 50:4) – to bring the body. And afterwards: *that he may judge his people* (Psalm 50:4).¹¹⁸⁴

What do we make of this? With regard to the rhetorical point of view, there is not much to add to previous scholarship. The parable’s peg is Exodus 15:1: “Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord: ‘I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.’” The midrash speculates that in the final judgment horses will blame their Egyptian riders and the riders their horses. God, however, would put the riders on their horses and judge them together. Then the midrash takes a leap and introduces Antoninus. With this character, the midrash opens up a polemic between Jews and Pagans.¹¹⁸⁵ With the help of the parable, a broader discussion about the relation between body and soul in life and during the final judgment is instigated. In the parable, the horse and its rider are equated with a blind watchman and a lame watchman in an orchard. Neither is capable of anything on his own (either good or bad), but when they work together, they make one whole man – capable of stealing figs. When the absent owner (*absente ero*) returns and asks them about the figs, they say that they are disabled and cannot grasp those figs. However, the owner puts the lame man upon the blind man and discovers the truth. Obviously, the parable is not so much an explanation of the text (there is a big difference between throwing horses and their riders in the sea and placing a lame man upon a blind man¹¹⁸⁶), as it is a philosophical treatise (and commentary on the midrash) triggered by the biblical text. It is equally clear that the parable forms a rather absurd story, possibly especially designed to make the

¹¹⁸² The parable can be found in several rabbinic texts, e.g., b. Sanhedrin 91a-b; Leviticus Rabbah 4:5; Tanchuma Buber Vayikra 11-12.

¹¹⁸³ Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhiltot*, 70, with reference to, e.g., Menahem I. Kahana, “The Halakhic Midrashim,” in *The Literature of the Jewish People in the Period of the Second Temple and the Talmud*, ed. Shmuel Safrai, Ze’ev Safrai, Joshua J. Schwartz and Peter Tomson, vol. 3, *The Literature of the Sages. Second Part: Midrash and Targum*, Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum 3b (Assen: Royal Van Gorcum, 2006), 45, 76–77.

¹¹⁸⁴ Translation: MS. Hebrew text: Manuscript Paris (Alliance Israelite XI 126 5v-6r [F1] + XI 279.1), as quoted in Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhiltot*, 241-242.

¹¹⁸⁵ For this character and his (alleged) good relationship with Rabbi Yehudah the Prince, see, e.g., Stephen Newmeyer, “Antoninus and Rabbi on the Soul: Stoic Elements of a Puzzling Encounter,” *Koroth* 9 (1988), 108–124.

¹¹⁸⁶ Cf. Kister, “Allegorical Interpretations,” 179.

comparison with the relation between body and soul.¹¹⁸⁷ Probably, this parable wanted to refute a depreciation of the body.¹¹⁸⁸ As we have seen, it was quite normal for an owner to have guards on his property. It is also possible that he would have forbidden them to eat of his fruits. However, the simultaneous occurrence of a lame and a blind person seems to be rather farfetched.¹¹⁸⁹

From a hidden transcript perspective, we see how first the guards try to outsmart their master but in the end have to admit the superiority of their master. As such, the parable does not seem to contain a hidden transcript. However, we might wonder what the effect of the parable might have been on a rural, overall poor audience. Would they have sympathized with the disabled men? And would they have experienced the owner's behavior as greediness and callousness?

Again and again, we see how images like these stress God's superiority, both in power and in wisdom. In this parable, the almost natural inclination of people (slaves) to misuse their responsibility and to be disobedient is underscored too. If we take all the parables in this section together, we see how precarious the role of the doorkeeper/guard is in absence of his master. Not only does he have to be alert all the time, but letting the wrong people in might have grave consequences. Living in fear of (the arrival of) his master is, in this situation, both logical and perhaps even prudent.

5.5. Going the Extra Mile?

In the previous sections, we have often encountered the notorious "bad" slave – lazy, incapable, and corruptible especially when the master is gone. The bad slave is partly a caricature – mainly to be found in ancient literature – and also partly rooted in social reality. However, in the *absente ero* literature we have also encountered the paradigmatic "good" or faithful slave who works harder than is necessary and does more than he or she was ordered to do. The slave in the Shepherd of Hermas is a good example of a slave who "goes the extra mile," fencing and cultivating a field for his master. The stubborn guard from the parable of the inner and outer garden might be another example of such a slave (or is he?). We see good slaves in the parable of The Talents/Pounds too and, of course, the parable of Luke 12:35ff refers to good slaves who genuinely deserve the master's praise.

The faithful slave has found its everlasting place in scholarly literature by Finley's famous description of his virtues:

The "faithful slave" is a frequent enough theme among ancient writers, normally singled out as an exception and a model for which slaveowners were grateful in a situation in which they felt permanently exposed, in Pliny's words, to "dangers, insults and outrages." Something more than obedience was meant: obedience, after all, is the normal behaviour expected and commonly received by superiors in every hierarchical situation, whether in a work-force, slave or free, the army or a bureaucracy. Something more was meant, too, than merely responding to the promise of rewards, upgrading, eventually manumission.¹¹⁹⁰

In this section, we will discuss two parables from rabbinic literature in which we might find some of these faithful slaves who try to do "more." What we will discover as well is that it is difficult for a slave to go beyond his/her master's orders.

¹¹⁸⁷ Or perhaps only used. This particular story was widely known in antiquity. See Luitpold Wallach, "The Parable of the Blind and the Lame: A Study in Comparative Literature," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 62, no. 4 (1943), 333-339.

¹¹⁸⁸ Curiously, another parable seems to defend the sole responsibility of the body: Leviticus Rabba Wayikra 4:5. On this parable, see Marcel Poorthuis, "Gott, die Seele und der Leib. Kernfragen religiöser Anthropologie im Spiegel eines jüdischen Morgengebetes," in *Identität durch Gebet. Zur gemeinschaftsbildenden Funktion institutionalisierten Betens im Judentum und Christentum*, ed. Albert Gerhards, Andrea Doeker and Peter Ebenhauer (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2003), 413-428, esp. 423-424.

¹¹⁸⁹ Although disabilities like being lame and blind were rather common in the Ancient Near East and in antiquity in general and are mentioned often in biblical texts.

¹¹⁹⁰ Moses I. Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1980), 103-104. See also the work of Vogt, who devotes a complete chapter to the "good" slave: Joseph Vogt, *Ancient Slavery and the Ideal of Man*, transl. Thomas Wiedermann (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975).

5.5.1. Sifre Deuteronomy 28

The following parable forms a response to Deuteronomy 3:25, when Moses asks God to see Israel. Subsequently, the rabbis ask: “Is it possible that Moses could have asked God to let him enter in the land? Has it not already been written: *for you shall not cross over this Jordan* (3:27)?” Then this parable follows:

Translation (MS)	Text ¹¹⁹¹
A parable. It is like a king who had two slaves.	משל למלך שהיו לו שני עבדים
He ordered one of them not to drink wine for thirty days.	וגזר על אחד מהם שלא לשתות יין שלשים יום
He [the first slave] said: “Why did he order me not to drink wine for thirty days?”	אמר מה גזר עלי שלא לשתות יין עד שלשים יום
I will not taste [wine] for one year or even for two years.”	איני טועמו אפילו שנה אחת אפילו שתי שנים
And why all this?	וכל כך למה
To weaken the words of his master	כדי לפיג דברי רבו
Again he ordered the second [slave] not to drink wine for thirty days.	חזר וגזר על השני שלא לשתות יין שלשים יום
He [the second slave] said: “Is it possible for me to be without wine for even one hour?”	אמר איפשר שאני יכול לחיות בלא יין אפילו שעה אחת
And why all this?	וכל כך למה
To honor the words of his master.	כדי לחבב דברי רבו
So, Moses was honoring the words of God when he was asking from him to enter the land.	כך משה היה מחבב דברי המקום ומבקש מלפניו שיכנס לארץ

As we have seen, the midrash is puzzled by the fact that Moses asks God for something he knows he will not receive (i.e., entering the land of Israel). This situation is compared in the parable to two slaves who are ordered not to drink wine for thirty days. The first one wants to go much further and drink no wine for one or two years, while the second one doubts if he even can refrain from drinking wine for an hour. The question is which of the two slaves is like Moses, and whether this identification is positive or negative. The perhaps surprising answer is that the first slave was not honoring his master, since he made the thirty days look like nothing. The second slave, however, was honoring his master by emphasizing the gravity of his order. It is this slave who is compared to Moses. The parable teaches us that by asking God again and without success to enter the land, Moses showed the impact God’s penalty had on him, and (thus) is doing the right thing.

One of the peculiarities of the parable is that it is written like a riddle. Since the parable serves to elucidate only the behavior of one man (Moses), it keeps the audience wondering which of the two slaves is the “good” slave. The solution of the parable/riddle might also be surprising – the good slave is *not* the slave who seems willing to “go the extra mile.” From a structural point of view, the parable shows some similarities with the parable of The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). Similarly, in that parable more than one character is introduced, while only one performs exemplary behavior. In this case, the question of which person is the “good” one is even explicitly asked by Jesus (v. 36-37): “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He (the lawyer) said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’” In the parable of The Good Samaritan, there is an element of surprise as well. It is the most unlikely candidate who turns out to show the right behavior. An even greater similarity can be established with the parable of The Two Sons (Matthew 21:28-32), which is introduced by the question or “riddle”¹¹⁹² “what do you think?” This parable is preceded by two trick questions that are exchanged between the temple authorities and Jesus, with Jesus trumping the former:

When he [Jesus] entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” Jesus

¹¹⁹¹ Finkelstein and Horovitz, *Sifre on Deuteronomy*, 44.

¹¹⁹² For this designation, see Tom Thatcher, “Riddles, Wit, and Wisdom,” in *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus. Volume 1: How to Study the Historical Jesus?* ed. Tom Holmén and Stanley E. Porter (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 3358.

said to them, “I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” And they argued with one another, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.” So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.”

“What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.” (NRSV with adaptations)

In this text passage, we see how the parable is part of a “riddling session.”¹¹⁹³ Jesus and the priests and elders are engaged in a sophisticated game of riddles, questions, and counter questions. As Richard Cooke indicates, the use of riddles could aim at the creating of a community of knowledge, marking insiders and outsiders.¹¹⁹⁴ Earlier in this chapter, we learnt from Scott that another objective of veiled discourse like parables and riddles could be to hide the feelings and thoughts of the powerless *vis-à-vis* the powerful.¹¹⁹⁵ In the contexts of the parable of The Two Sons and the parable of The Good Samaritan, in which Jesus is put to the test by the authorities, a hidden transcript analysis as proposed by Scott might certainly find a solid basis.¹¹⁹⁶ One could even argue that Jesus takes some characteristics of a trickster figure here, creating for himself enough “plausible deniability” to prevent himself from being attacked, either verbally or physically.¹¹⁹⁷

Content-wise there are also similarities between the parable of The Two Sons and the parable about the two slaves from Sifre. Both parables play with the difference between what is said and what is done, and in both parables it is not immediately clear which of the characters is doing the right thing.¹¹⁹⁸ That good behavior of slaves is not always easy to identify is also shown by this story from Seneca:

Cleanthes makes use of the following example. “I sent,” he says, “two lads to look for Plato and bring him to me from the Academy. One of them searched through the whole colonnade, and also hunted through other places in which he thought that he might be found, but returned home alike weary and unsuccessful; the other sat down to watch a mountebank near by, and, while amusing himself in company with other slaves, the careless vagabond found Plato without looking for him, as he happened to pass by. The first lad, he says, will

¹¹⁹³ I borrow this term from Richard Cooke who uses it for the Parable of the Good Samaritan and its context. Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan as an answer (and at the same time, counter question) to the question a lawyer asks him to “test” (ἐκπείραζων) him. Richard Cooke, *New Testament*, SCM Core Text (London: SCM Press, 2009), 428. Cf. Douglas Estes, *Questions and Rhetoric in the Greek New Testament: An Essential Reference Resource for Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2017).

¹¹⁹⁴ Cooke, *New Testament*, 427.

¹¹⁹⁵ “The undeclared ideological guerrilla war that rages in this political space requires that we enter the world of rumor, gossip, disguises, linguistic tricks, metaphors, euphemisms, folktales, ritual gestures, anonymity. For good reason, nothing is entirely straightforward here; the realities of power for subordinate groups mean that much of their political action requires interpretation precisely because it is intended to be cryptic and opaque” (Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 137).

¹¹⁹⁶ See, e.g., William R. Herzog II, “On Stage and Off Stage with Jesus of Nazareth: Public Transcripts, Hidden Transcripts, and Gospel Texts,” in *Hidden Transcripts and the Arts of Resistance: Applying the Work of James C. Scott to Jesus and Paul*, ed. Richard A. Horsley, Semeia Studies 48 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 2004), 58.

¹¹⁹⁷ See William R. Herzog II, *Prophet and Teacher: An Introduction to the Historical Jesus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 189.

¹¹⁹⁸ The Parable of the Two Sons occurs in three variant textual forms, indicating that already in antiquity confusion existed about which sons showed the right behavior and with which people this son should be identified. See, for example Paul Foster, “A Tale of Two Sons: But Which One Did the Far, Far Better Thing? A Study of Matt 21:28-32,” *New Testament Studies* 47 (2001), 26-37; and Wendell E. Langley, “The Parable of the Two Sons (Matthew 21:28-32) against its Semitic and Rabbinic backdrop,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (1996), 228-243.

have our praise, for, to the best of his ability, he did what he had been ordered; the fortunate idler we shall flog.”¹¹⁹⁹

This passage is part of a bigger treatise in Seneca's *De Beneficiis* about the difference between actions and intentions. What should draw our attention is that Plato says that we will praise the slave who had worked so hard – i.e., it is about the intention. What I deduce from this is that what often *happened* is that the slave who is successful is praised instead. This story from Seneca might help us to understand the parable from Sifre. That parable deals not with acts, but merely with intentions. By overstepping the limits that his master ordered (at least orally), the first slave violates the honor of his master. The second slave, however, understood the intentions of his master and enlarged the honor of the master by taking an even humbler position. Assessing the real intentions of a master, both in real life and in literature, would have been hard sometimes. So, it is difficult to see why the slave from the Shepherd of Hermas was praised for his effort in going the extra mile, while his master also very explicitly indicated the limits of his responsibilities. A possible solution could be found in the relation between speaking (or learning) and acting – a difficult interplay that is thematized several times in the New Testament by Jesus¹²⁰⁰ and was also discussed by the rabbis in works like Pirkei Avot, where we read: “There are four types amongst them who go to the house of study: he who goes and does not practice (הולך ואינו עושה) – he has the reward of going. He who practices and does not go (עושה ואינו הולך) – he has the reward of practicing. He who goes and practices (הולך ועושה) – he is a pious man. He who does not go and does not practice (לא הולך ולא עושה) – he is a wicked man.”¹²⁰¹

From a socio-historical perspective, there is not much to say about the parable from Sifre. I do not deem it plausible that the prohibition to drink wine can be traced back to a specific historical situation. The parable implicitly rejects ascetic tendencies that go beyond what is written in the Torah. This anti-ascetic tendency is characteristic for rabbinic literature.¹²⁰² From a *Bildfeld* perspective, we might notice the theological relevance of this parable: we should not only follow God's commands, but also uphold the right attitude or intention.

5.5.2. Sifra Nedavah 2:6¹²⁰³

For the final parable of this section, we turn to a later midrash, a commentary on the book of Leviticus, Sifra, to be dated in the second half of the third century.¹²⁰⁴ The parable is part of a debate about the question of whether it is allowed to sacrifice wild animals to God, while Leviticus only speaks of the herd and the flock: “Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: When any of you bring an offering of livestock to the Lord, you shall bring your offering from the herd or from the flock” (Leviticus 1:2: דַּבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם אָדָם כִּי־יִקְרִיב מִכֶּם). After a quotation of this verse, the midrash asks: “And is it not possible to bring [wild] and if one brings [wild], is it allowed?” Then immediately a parable is included to answer this question (Nedavah, section 2, paragraph 6).

¹¹⁹⁹ Seneca, *De Beneficiis* 6.11.2 (LCL 310, 385). Interesting because of its similar structure and theme is a rabbinic parable from the Babylonian Talmud: “It was taught: Rabbi Meir used to say: ‘Greater is the punishment for [non-observance of] white [strings] than for purple-blue [strings]. A parable. To what can it be compared? To a king of flesh and blood who spoke to two of his slaves (למלך בשר ודם שאמר לשני עבדיו). To one he said: ‘Bring me a seal of clay,’ and to the other he said: ‘Bring me a seal of gold.’ And both of them were negligent and they did not bring these. Who of them will have a greater punishment? One must say that it is that [one] to whom he said: ‘Bring me a seal of clay,’ and he did not bring [it].” (b. Menachot 43b; translation MS).

¹²⁰⁰ See, for example, Jesus' saying “let your yes be yes, and your no be no” (Matthew 5:37).

¹²⁰¹ Pirkei Avot, 5:14. Translation: MS. Hebrew text: Manuscript Kaufmann (folio 173r-173v).

¹²⁰² See, e.g., Adiel Schremer, “Marriage, Sexuality, and Holiness: The Anti-Ascetic Legacy of Talmudic Judaism,” in *Gender Relationships in Marriage and Out*, ed. Rivkah Blau (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 2007), 36-64. However, the notion that rabbinic Judaism is anti-ascetic has also been contested by, e.g., Allan Lazaroff, Steven Fraade, Moshe Sokol and Eliezer Diamond. See the latter's volume *Holy Men and Hunger Artists: Fasting and Asceticism in Rabbinic Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). See also David Halivni, “On the Supposed Anti-Asceticism or Anti-Nazritism of Simon the Just,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 58, no. 3 (1968), 243-252.

¹²⁰³ Cf. b. Zebah 34a.

¹²⁰⁴ Hermann L. Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, transl. and ed. Markus Bockmuehl, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 163.

Translation (MS)

A parable. It is like someone whose master said to him:
 “Go and bring me wheat.”
 And he went and brought him wheat and barley.
 Behold, this is like adding to his words.
 Scriptures [says] about this: *herd or flock* (Leviticus 1:2).
 You will only bring animal offerings of herd or flock.
 Lo, what does this look like?
 It is like someone whose master said to him:
 “Bring me *only* wheat.”
 Lo, if he adds to the wheat:
 Behold, this is like transgressing his words

Text¹²⁰⁵

משל למי שאמר לו רבו
 לך והביא לי חיטים
 והלך והביא לו חיטים ושערים
 הרי זה כמוס[ן]ף על דברו
 תל' לו' בקר וצאן
 תקריבו אין לך בבהמה אילא בקר וצאן בלבד
 הא למה זה דומה
 למי שאמר לו רבו
 אל תביא לי אילא חיטים
 הא אם הוסיף זה על החטים
 הרי זה כעובר על דברו

From a rhetorical point of view, it is good to notice how parable and midrash are intertwined here. The parable is presented in two variants that are interrupted by a short interjection from the midrash writer. In the first parable, the master only orders the slave¹²⁰⁶ to bring wheat, without any further conditions or restraints. An addition to that order is possible, and so is it possible to use wild animals for an offering since God did not explicitly exclude them. In the second parable, however, the master commands his subordinate to *only* (אל ... אילא) bring him wheat. The parable concludes that an addition to an order that is formulated in this form cannot be ignored. If the slave brings more than wheat now, he is transgressing his master's words and, thus, disobeying (dishonoring) him.

Although it can be debated if this parable from Sifra really is about a slave and a master, it is clear its structure and thematics tie in with our previous parables. What this parable shows is that going beyond the master's orders is a very delicate matter. If one takes the wrong turn, one is easily accused of disobedience. That is why the orders of the master have to be studied and weighed carefully.

The difficulties that the rabbinic texts have with slaves doing more than is strictly ordered are not echoed by other ancient texts. It is striking that we do not have any New Testament examples of this anxiety either. Although there are no slavery parables about doing more than is ordered in the New Testament (*au contraire* – compare the parable of Luke 17),¹²⁰⁷ at the same time, doing more than is commanded *is* a theme in some New Testament passages (notably Matthew 5, as part of the Sermon on the Mount).¹²⁰⁸ The only early Christian parable of a slave who is rewarded for his extra work can be found in a post-New Testament text, the Shepherd of Hermas. Surprisingly, this slave is warned to do nothing more than he is ordered! What lies behind these differences might be a different view on the role of the law. As we have seen in the parable from Sifre Deuteronomy 28, the rabbinic parables discussed in this chapter seem to stress that in doing more than is ordered lies the risk of ridiculing the law.¹²⁰⁹ Jesus, on the other hand, stresses both his indebtedness to the law (cf.

¹²⁰⁵ Louis Finkelstein, *Sifra on Leviticus according to Vatican Manuscript Assemani 66 with Variants from the other Manuscripts, Genizah Fragments, Early Editions and Quotations by Medieval Authorities and with References to parallel Passages and Commentaries* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1983-1991), 2:22.

¹²⁰⁶ Nowhere is the identity of the person who is commanded further specified, but the reference to “his master” suggests that a slave is addressed. In the variant of the Talmud, the master orders a pupil or student (לתלמיד).

¹²⁰⁷ Luke 17:10: “So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, ‘We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!’”

¹²⁰⁸ Matthew 5:47: “And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?” See on this issue for example Francois P. Viljoen, “Jesus’ halakhic argumentation on the true intention of the law in Matthew 5:21–48,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 34, no. 1 (2013), 1-12. When it comes to doing more than is necessary in the material sense, the New Testament is very critical (e.g. the persona of Martha, Luke 10:38-42; the parable of The Rich Fool, Luke 12:16-1).

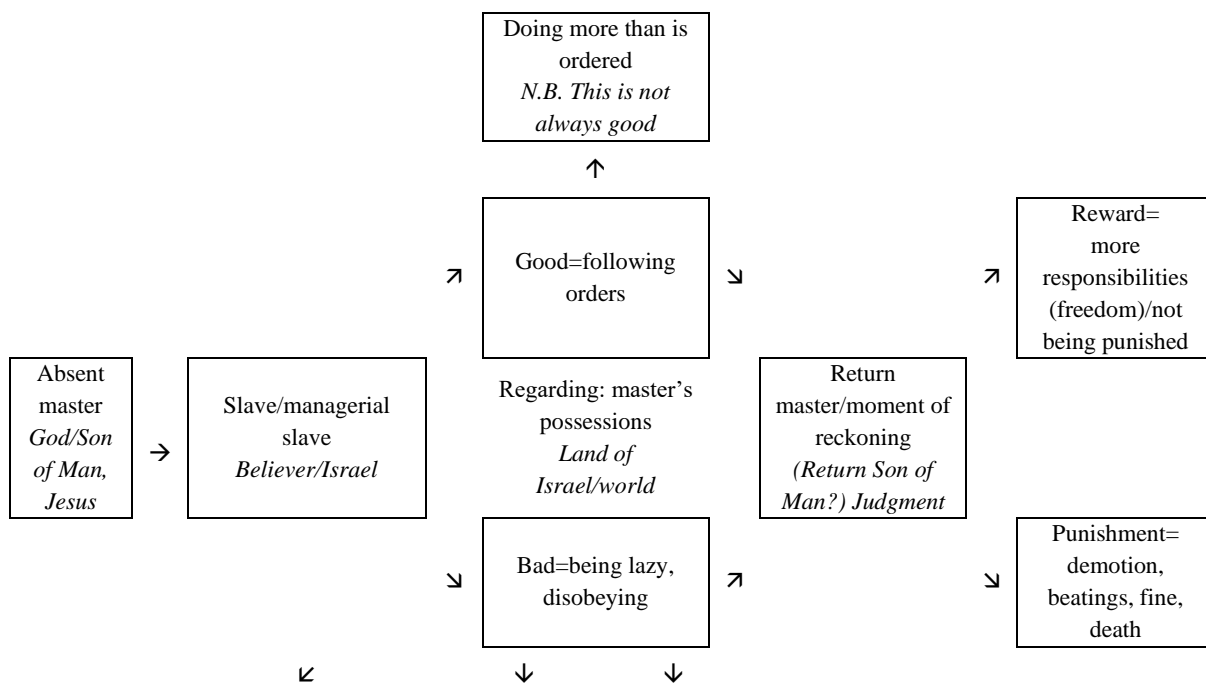
¹²⁰⁹ At the same time, the rabbis developed the concept of fencing the Torah, which in practice meant to protect the biblical commands by erecting even stricter commands. (This concept is also applied to Matthew 5 by Benno Przybylski, *Righteousness in Matthew and his World of Thought* [Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1980], 81). Also, the Talmudic concept of לפנים משורת הדין, literally “beyond the line of the law,” should be mentioned here. This principle refers to acts that are praiseworthy, but not legally required. See, e.g., Louis E. Newman, “Law Virtue

Matthew 5:17), and his call to do more than the law dictates (Matthew 5:21-48). Honoring the law is not fulfilling it exactly, but living in its spirit – transcending it, one could say.¹²¹⁰ Also note that the Sifra parable deals with what has been written in the Torah, to which nothing should be added. In contrast, the oral Torah asks for human creativity and allows additions, albeit the ancient rabbis saw these changes as a form of continuity *vis-à-vis* the written Torah.¹²¹¹

5.6. Reflection and *Bildfeld*

In this chapter, we have focused on the theme of *absente ero*, the absent master, in the early Christian and early rabbinic parables. Over the course of this chapter, it became clear that in all the *absente ero* parables obedience is the key theme. One has to obediently follow the orders (“commandments”) of the master (God/Son of Man) regarding his vineyard, garden, finances, possessions, or fellow-slaves.¹²¹² If one is not obedient, one receives punishments (demotion, beatings, a fine); if one is obedient, one receives more responsibilities (The Talents/Pounds, Matthew 25:14-30/Luke 19:12-27) or even manumission (The Faithful Slave, Shepherd of Heras 55). Below, I present a figure in which I have tried to summarize the active elements of the *absente ero Bildfeld*.

Bildfeld 2: Absente ero

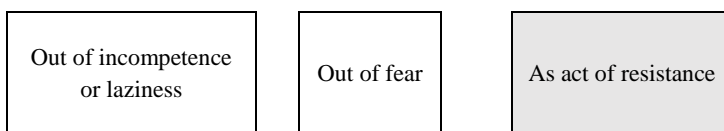


and Supererogation in the Halakha: The Problem of Lifnim Mishurat Hadin Reconsidered,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 40, no. 1 (1989), 61-88.

¹²¹⁰ About this issue, see Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology. The Proclamation of Jesus* (New York: MacMillan, 1971), 251ff; Viljoen, “Jesus’ halakhic argumentation,” 11.

¹²¹¹ E.g., Lawrence H. Schiffman, *From Text to Tradition. A History of Second Temple & Rabbinic Judaism* (Hoboken: Ktav Publishing House, 1991), 179-181; Elizabeth Shanks Alexander, “The Orality of Rabbinic Writing,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, ed. Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert and Martin S. Jaffee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 38-57.

¹²¹² E.g., The Faithful Slave, Shepherd of Heras 55; Garden within the Garden, Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael Beshallah on Exodus 14:21; The Blind and Lame Guards, Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael Shirata on Exodus 15:1; The Unjust Slave Manager, Luke 16:1-8; The Talents/Pounds, Matthew 25:14-30/Luke 19:12-27; The Good and the Bad Slave Manager, Matthew 24:45-51/Luke 12:42-46.



This *Bildfeld* shows the simple linearity of the *absente ero*-theme. First, there is a master and a slave, then the master goes away and the slave is on his/her own – either as manager or as “normal” slave. In the absence of the master, the slave has two choices, either to obey or not to obey what the master has ordered with regard to his/her belongings. When the master returns, a moment of reckoning occurs and rewards or punishments are distributed (in many cases the absence of a punishment is the sober reward for good behavior – which is, from the slave-owner’s perspective, the normal state of affairs). As we will elaborately discuss in the following chapter, rewards often have the form of more responsibilities, while punishments entail degradation or the stripping of responsibilities, but also beatings and fines. Finally, we may wonder why slaves in the slavery parables do not obey. We have seen that their reasons can be divided in roughly three categories: out of incompetence or laziness, out of fear, or as act of resistance. The latter only becomes visible through a hidden transcript analysis (hence the grey color of its box¹²¹³). It is important to notice that the negative image ancient masters had of their slaves (that they were lazy and disobedient) is translated in a negative anthropology in the parables. The assumption seems to be that Israel/the early Christians probably will fail to execute all the tasks their master has given them (cf. Mixing Wine with Water, Tosefta Sotah 11:3; The Stupid Slave, Tosefta Berakhot 6:18) and thus the warnings and calls to be vigilant are justified. Finally, it became clear that it is difficult to do more than is ordered; in this regard, the masters of the slave parables do not seem to offer a lot of autonomy to their slaves.

If we take this *Bildfeld* and short summary of the *absente ero* parables in this chapter and bring them to a theological level, the following observations are of value.

Firstly, both early rabbinic and early Christian slavery parables often make use of the *absente ero* theme, which is clearly rooted in a Greco-Roman socio-historical and literary context. Both signify, in my opinion, humankind’s (Israel’s/early Christianity’s) responsibility on earth. Since God is not directly supervising his slaves’ work, a moment of reckoning is foreseen in both traditions. In early Christianity, the *absente ero* theme has been embedded in the eschatological context of Jesus’ teaching (compare section 6.3.6). The image of the slaves and their absent master turned out to be perfectly suited to educate Jesus’ followers about the urgent task that they were given before the “Son of Man” arrived. To emphasize this message, graphic images with regard to violent punishments were employed in the early Christian parables, as we will see in the next chapter. The case of the Shepherd of Hermas made clear that when the expectation of the arrival of the Son of Man began to abate, the imagery of the *absente ero* theme began to shift too, with a new focus on freedom and elevation of status. At the same time, the tannaitic rabbis also told multiple and comparable *absente ero* parables about the duty to work the field or vineyard before the master would show up. Although their message perhaps misses the urgency the early Christian parables have, the importance of the image they use certainly equals those ascribed to Jesus. The arrival of the slave-owner is a moment to be feared by the rabbis, which is shown by the rabbinic parables about doorkeepers (as discussed in sections 5.4.3.2 and 5.4.2.3). Although not portraying slaves, the *absente ero* parable from Avot de Rabbi Nathan A 16 (5.4.2.2) visualizes the awe and fear Israel has for God when the moment of reckoning is there, and Israel has not enough to show for. This brings us to the concept of *parousia*, a concept that is often applied to *absente ero* parables in the New Testament. I would like to argue that a comparison of early Christian and tannaitic parables might urge us to rethink that concept, since it largely encapsulates an expectation we meet in the rabbinic parables as well. However, what the Christian parables add to that expectation is an eschatological perspective, a sense of direct immanence.

My second observation concerns the “negative anthropology” mentioned above. One could, mildly exaggerating, say that the slavery parables we have studied in this chapter do not present “good” slaves. While of course we have come across parables with slaves who do obey their masters’ orders (the parable of the Shepherd of Hermas, The Good and the Bad Slave Manager, The Talents/Pounds), the focus is on bad slaves and the conflict between masters and their slaves, as already Crossan noticed (see 3.3.2.2). Also, those slaves

¹²¹³ Direct critique of God as the absentee landowner is visible in the two rabbinic texts we discussed at the end of section 5.4.2.2 (Bava Metzi’a 83b and Avot de Rabbi Nathan A 16), but that critique does not cause disobedience per se.

that do behave “good” are often not really rewarded. Their being good is taken for granted as behavior that is expected from them. This might show the function of these parables: more than promoting good behavior they warn against immoral behavior and the (divine) punishments this behavior causes.

Thirdly, within the literary universe of *absente ero*, “escaping” is no option – unless it is by an untimely death. Slaves do not successfully flee in the parables, nor are they sold. But neither are they manumitted or receive the opportunity to buy themselves free. This matches, to a certain extent, the *absente ero*-themed Greco-Roman literary sources that focus on the relation between master and slave. However, both in *Vita Aesopi* and in several of the Plautine comedies, slaves are threatened to be sold, are actually sent to the stone quarries (*Captivi*), or are freed (*Vita Aesopi*, see also the ancient novella *Daphnis and Chloe*). Theologically, this might signify that while it is possible to be promoted or punished within the covenant between God and humanity, one does not easily drop out of this covenant (although it is not impossible; compare the parable of The Talents/Pounds). This can also explain the fact that manumission rarely occurs in the parables – since the intrinsically hierarchical, unequal relation between God and humanity cannot be evened by any human actions. In this sense, it is not surprising that the only manumission that we know of (in Shepherd of Hermas) directly leads to the inclusion of the free slave in another hierarchical relation, that of a (adopted) son versus his father. Moreover, as I indicated above, the bad fate of a slave might function as a warning rather than a factual description of what happens to Israel or the individual believer in case they misbehave. However, as previously mentioned, there is one way to put an end to the relationship between slaves and their masters in the parables, and that is by their death. Both the third slave in the parable of The Talents (Matthew 25:30) and the bad slave manager (Matthew 24:50-51//Luke 12:46) are killed by their masters for their disobedience, as well as a number of other parabolic slaves for different reasons.¹²¹⁴ I assert that their destiny can best be explained from the eschatological message of Jesus (compare again section 6.3.6), a message that needs strong language to set the followers of Jesus in motion and make them obey God’s commands.

Also, I feel that the element of disobedience often does not receive the attention in the parables and their applications it deserves. For example, we have a number of parables in which the fear of slaves *vis-à-vis* their master is addressed (e.g., The Garden within the Garden, Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael Beshallah on Exodus 14:21; The Talents/Pounds, Matthew 25:14-30//Luke 19:12-27). While this fear ties in with Greco-Roman sources and is easy to explain from a socio-historical point of view, theologically, it is much harder to interpret. We have seen in a number of cases how fear for the master is counterproductive. So, is this a warning that the behavior of humanity towards God should not be propelled by fear? While it is a much later parable, I would like to refer here a parable from Seder Eliyahu Rabbah 26 about a king with two slaves because it is illustrative in this regard. In this, quite lengthy, parable an absent king has two slaves, one who loves and fears him and one who only fears him. The one who loves and fears the king did very good work for the king (planted orchards, gardens etc.) and the one who only feared the king did nothing. Upon the return of the king a moment of reckoning finds place, in which it becomes clear that the king will not take care of the slave who only feared the king. Then, the nimshal reads:

So you have learned that the reward of the one who loves is two parts and the reward of the one who fears is one part. Accordingly, the nations of the world are only worthy to enjoy this world, but Israel is worthy to enjoy two worlds, this one and the world to come (העולם הזה והעולם הבא).¹²¹⁵

While I do not want to go into this parable extensively, I think it quite clearly shows how fear alone – albeit this emotion has its own place in the relationship between master and slave – is not what the rabbis strived for (nor the Christians – cf. 1 John 4:18).¹²¹⁶ Fear and love should be combined when serving the divine master.¹²¹⁷ David

¹²¹⁴ E.g., in the parable of The Tenants (Matthew 21:28-46//Mark 12:1-12//Luke 20:9-19); see the next chapter.

¹²¹⁵ Translation: MS. Hebrew text: Meir Friedmann, *Seder Eliahu Rabba and Seder Eliahu zuta (Tanna d’be Eliahu). Pseudo-Seder Eliahu Zuta*, 2nd ed. (Jerusalem: Bamberger & Wahrman, 1960), 140-141. For another slavery parable in Seder Eliyahu Rabbah on love and fear, see Seder Eliyahu Rabbah 16.

¹²¹⁶ See also the parable in 6.5. See for the theme of fear and love in rabbinic literature, e.g., Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages. The World and Wisdom of the Rabbis of the Talmud* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), especially chapter 14; and Adolf Büchler, *Studies in Sin and Atonement in the Rabbinic Literature of the First Century* (New York, Ktav, 1967), especially chapter 2.

¹²¹⁷ Compare Sifre Deuteronomy 32.

Flusser has even argued that in the earliest days of rabbinic Judaism “the awe of God was synonymous with the love of God.”¹²¹⁸ Similarly, Boccaccini shows that in Jesus Sirach keeping the law (=following orders) is the same as “fulfilling the fear of the Lord” (21:11), which is, in turn, the same as loving God.¹²¹⁹ As Sirach 2:15-16 reads: “Those who fear the Lord do not disobey his words, and those who love him keep his ways. Those who fear the Lord seek to please him, and those who love him are filled with his law.” It is only in later rabbinic texts that love, “irrespective of any compensation,” clearly prevailed over awe.¹²²⁰ So, we are safe to conclude that, while fear is not rejected in the relation to God, it has to go together with love (however, see my discussion of Avot de Rabbi Nathan B 10 in 6.5.2). As a consequence, we might assume that it is not so much the fear of God that is problematic in a number of slavery parables as it is the absence of love for God (the master). What is also of relevance for the theme of this chapter (*absente ero*) is that the fear for God is often the fear of being seen, as well as the punishments that may come with that.¹²²¹ In a simile by Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai (t. Bava Qamma 7:1), it is explained why a thief receives a heavier penalty than a robber: because a robber “regards the honor of the slave (i.e., the people he robs) as equal to the honor of his owner (God) (גולן הישוע כבוד עבד (לכבוד קונו),” since he works in broad daylight, visible to people and to God, “while a thief assigns more honor to the slave than to the master (גנב חלק כבוד לעבד יותר על כבוד קונו),” since he fears humans more than God (he works in the dark to avoid being seen by humans, but God can see him always).¹²²²

Finally, a few words about hidden transcripts and about the differences between Christian and rabbinic parables. With respect to hidden transcripts, we must conclude that even while the parables focused on the behavior of the slaves, most of the parables were told from the perspective of slave-owners, following, to a great extent, stereotypes and standard scenes from popular Greco-Roman story telling. However, several parables paint the slave-owner as someone who instills fear and who does not always give clear and/or just orders. Through this characterization, some criticism towards real and divine masters might become visible that – at least once – comes to the surface of the text (i.e., Avot de Rabbi Nathan A 16).

Aside from the previously mentioned differences between Christian and rabbinic parables, it is striking to see how the rabbinic parables discussed in this chapter are more concerned with the issue of doing more than is ordered (a subject that they approach with much caution) than the New Testament parables are (the Shepherd of Hermas is an exception in this regard as well). Also, in the rabbinic parables, overseers or managerial slaves are rarer than in the early Christian parables. Perhaps this can be explained by the preoccupation with community building and leadership in the early church.

5.7. Summary

From the ancient agricultural manuals we have learnt in this chapter that the masters of farms often were not present at their estates. In such situations (*absente ero*, the absence of the master), a trustworthy slave was appointed as manager (*epitropos*, *oikonomos*, *vilicus*) of the estate to oversee the work and his fellow slaves. The return of the master included a moment of reckoning: had the slaves and the estate been productive enough? The good slave awaited promotion and (other) rewards; the bad slave demotion and punishments. The socio-historical phenomenon of the absent master also turned into a fruitful literary theme in both Greco-Roman literature (e.g., comedies of Plautus) and the early rabbinic and early Christian parables. In the parable tradition, the *absente ero*-theme expressed the role and responsibility of humankind on earth in the “absence” of God. The parables seem to assume that in such a scenario it is probable that slaves will behave badly (which translates in a negative anthropology in the application), and hence most parables are focused on the conflict between master and slave that follows from the slave’s misbehavior. While in social reality death on the one hand and

¹²¹⁸ David Flusser, “A New Sensitivity in Judaism and the Christian Message,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 61, no. 2 (1968), 110.

¹²¹⁹ Gabriele Boccaccini, *Roots of Rabbinic Judaism. An Intellectual History, from Ezekiel to Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 148.

¹²²⁰ Flusser, “A New Sensitivity,” 111; Notley and Safrai, *Parables of the Sages*, 309.

¹²²¹ Cf. Büchler, *Studies in Sin and Atonement*, 141.

¹²²² Translation: MS. Hebrew text: Moses S. Zuckermann, *Tosephta. Based on the Erfurt and Vienna Codices with Parallels and Variants*, 3rd ed. (Jerusalem: Wahrmann Books, 1963), 357. See for a discussion of this passage also Büchler, *Studies in Sin and Atonement*, 141; and Jacob Neusner, *Development of a Legend. Studies on the Traditions Concerning Yohanan ben Zakkai* (Leiden: Brill, 1970), 70.

manumission on the other hand were possibly outcomes for the slaves at the moment of reckoning, the parables, with a few exceptions (e.g., the remarkable parable of the Shepherd of Hermas), do not allow for an “escape” out of the slavery universe. An important finding of this chapter is that the strong relation that former scholarship has made between the concept of *parousia* and the absent master turns out to be in need of correction, since the *absente ero* parables in rabbinic literature closely resemble those from early Christianity.

VI. Disciplining the Slave: The Threat of the Master

*Overseers will sometimes indulge in a witty word, even with the slaves; not so with Mr. Gore. He spoke but to command, and commanded but to be obeyed; he dealt sparingly with his words, and bountifully with his whip, never using the former where the latter would answer as well.*¹²²³

In the previous chapter, we studied whether and how slaves obeyed the orders of their masters. We have learnt that popular ancient literature depicts both the paradigmatic bad slave, who is lazy, drinks, and sometimes resists the master's commands, and the paradigmatic good or faithful slave who goes beyond mere obedience and is willing to go "the extra mile." Regardless of whether one is a good or a bad slave, Richard Saller claims that all slaves share the experience of physical punishment: "The lot of bad slaves was to be beaten and that of good slaves to internalize the constant threat of beating."¹²²⁴ According to Kyle Harper, fear dominated the relationship between the master and the slave: "It was the most keenly felt element of the relationship. [...] Fear was a means of maintaining the constant labor and subjective annihilation demanded of slaves. Violence commuted into its potential, spread out into all corners of the relationship, tinged all interaction between masters and their human property."¹²²⁵ In this chapter, we will see that this fear of the threat the master represented manifests itself in many rabbinic and Christian parables as well. Given the fact that the master in almost all cases represents God, we might wonder what we can learn from these parables about the way God was perceived in antiquity. Some scholars, like Luise Schottroff, have argued that we should not simply equate the violent masters of the parables with God.¹²²⁶ However, we will argue that the comparison between the relation of God and humans with the relation of harsh masters and their slaves should be taken seriously.

This chapter opens with a short section on the normalcy of the punishment of slaves in antiquity (6.1). In the second section, the variety of penalties for slaves in ancient literary sources is described. In section 6.3, we discuss a number of parables that contain penalties for slaves. Section 6.4 focuses on the use of food both to motivate and to threaten slaves. Section 6.5 is solely devoted to rewards, while section 6.6 discusses slaves who do not wait for judgment by their masters but escape their custody instead. In the final sections, we will summarize this chapter and present another *Bildfeld*.

6.1. Normalcy of Punishments for Slaves

In sources from antiquity, the normalcy of physical penalties stands out. To give only a few examples, in the Hebrew Bible (Proverbs 29:19), we read: "By mere words slaves are not disciplined, for though they understand, they will not give heed."¹²²⁷ In Wisdom of Sirach, it is stated: "Do not be ashamed [...] of frequent disciplining of children, and of drawing blood from the back of a wicked slave" (42:2-5). In the Aramaic version (5th century

¹²²³ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave. Written by Himself*, reprint of the original 1845 text (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2009), 34.

¹²²⁴ Richard Saller, "Corporal Punishment, Authority, and Obedience in the Roman Household," in *Marriage, Divorce, and Children in Ancient Rome*, ed. Beryl Rawson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 160.

¹²²⁵ Kyle Harper, *Slavery in the Late Antique World, AD 275-425* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 236.

¹²²⁶ E.g., Luise Schottroff, *The Parables of Jesus*, transl. Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 225.

¹²²⁷ NRSV with adaptations.

BCE¹²²⁸) of the Story of Ahiqar, we read: “A blow for a slave, a rebuke for a maid, and for all thy slaves discipline!” (83).¹²²⁹

In the New Testament, the parables show a horrible variety of penalties, as we will see below (section 6.2). Outside the parables, violence against slaves can also be found, for example, during the arrest of Jesus, when one of his disciples cuts off the ear of a slave (Mark 14:47//John 18:10//Matthew 26:51//Luke 22:50).¹²³⁰ Moreover, in the *Haustafeln* (household codes) of the New Testament, awareness of the brutalities that surrounded the lives of slaves is attested as well:

Slaves (Οἱ οἰκέται), accept the authority of your masters with all deference (ἐν παντὶ φόβῳ τοῖς δεσπόταις), not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh (ἀλλὰ καὶ τοῖς σκολιοῖς). For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? (ποῖον γὰρ κλέος, εἰ ἁμαρτάνοντες καὶ κολαφιζόμενοι ὑπομενεῖτε;) But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God’s approval. (1 Peter 2:18-20).

In the rabbinic literature, discussions about the punishing of slaves mainly pertain to a biblical command from Exodus 21:20: “When a slave-owner strikes a male or female slave with a rod and the slave dies immediately, the owner shall be punished. But if the slave survives a day or two, there is no punishment; for the slave is the owner’s property.” The Mishnah (m. Bava Qamma 8:3) rules with respect to this biblical command that, “He who injures a Hebrew slave, is guilty on all [counts], except for loss of time, at the moment that he was his [slave]. He who injures a Canaanite slave from others, he is guilty on all [counts]. Rabbi Yehudah says: ‘Slaves do not have shame (אֵין לַעֲבָדִים בּוֹשָׁת).’”¹²³¹ Aside from the legal discussions, not many stories have been preserved about the beating of slaves. An exception is the story of Rabban Gamliel and his beloved slave Tavi. When Rabban Gamliel knocked out Tavi’s tooth, he wanted to set him free, since he knew that Exodus 21:27 rules that, “[i]f the owner knocks out a tooth of a male or female slave, the slave shall be let go, a free person, to compensate for the tooth.” However, Rabbi Yehoshua prevented Rabban Gamliel from manumitting his slave by stating: “there is nothing in your hand; fines (קֶנֶסוֹת)¹²³² only are [imposed] with witnesses and in court.”¹²³³ It is needless to say that this “extra” rule did not benefit slaves. With respect to (bodily) penalties in the early rabbinic context, Hezser summarizes: “it seems that in both Roman and ancient Jewish society physical assaults upon one’s body were considered shameful and incompatible with the dignity of a free citizen. As far as slaves (and to some extent children) were concerned, however, beatings and other physical punishments were accepted as effective means of disciplining them.”¹²³⁴

If we turn to punishments in Roman society, we see that an enormous variety of penalties was available for ancient masters who wanted to chastise their slaves. Some masters were outright sadistic and found joy in inventing new penalties. To give a famous example, in Cassius Dio’s *Historia Romana* (54.23.2-4), the story is recounted of Emperor Augustus who visited Vedius Pollio (a friend and nobleman), who “kept in reservoirs huge lampreys that had been trained to eat men, and he was accustomed to throw to them such of his slaves as

¹²²⁸ Karel van der Toorn, *Becoming Diaspora Jews. Behind the Story of Elphantine*, The Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 26-27.

¹²²⁹ Translation with adaptations MS: Arthur Cowley, *Jewish Documents of the Time of Ezra*, Translations of Early Documents, Series I: Palestinian Jewish Texts (Pre-Rabbinic) (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1989), 87.

¹²³⁰ In the Gospel of John, the disciple is identified as Simon Peter. Also, the name of the slave (Malchus) is mentioned. Ronald Charles has recently analyzed the different accounts of the story in his book, *The Silencing of Slaves in Early Jewish and Christian Texts* (London: Routledge, 2020). He concludes: “Malchus becomes the body upon which the attack on the temple establishment becomes manifest, and the overthrow of the religious/political authorities in Judea is symbolically inaugurated through damaging one of the high priest’s chattels” (120). Also, he notices how in Luke Jesus heals the wound of the “dishonourable slave body” (118), while in Mark, Matthew, and John the violence towards the slave is met with mere indifference.

¹²³¹ Translation: MS. Hebrew text: Manuscript Kaufmann (folio 131v).

¹²³² Notice how the big compensation of manumission is replaced by a financial compensation.

¹²³³ Y. Shevu’ot 5:7, 36c.

¹²³⁴ Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 211.

he desired to put to death.”¹²³⁵ When, during Augustus’ visit, a slave broke a goblet, Pollio wanted to execute this gruesome penalty. However, Augustus did not approve of Pollio’s cruelty and broke all of Pollio’s drinking utensils as a punishment. Another example is the order from Commodus (then twelve years old) to put a bath attendant in the furnace (*Historia Augusta*, Commodus 1.9). However, references to “normal” punishments for slaves, like working in the mills or receiving lashes, also abound in ancient historical sources. With respect to the legal aspects of slave penalties, the dictum in Justinian’s law is indicative: “If a master beat a slave with a rod or whip or put him in chains to guard him, and the slave dies, the master need have no fear of prosecution [...] He should, of course, not use his right immoderately, but he will be charged with murder only if he killed the slave intentionally [...]” (*Codex Theodosianus* 9.12.1).¹²³⁶ The beating of slaves was so omnipresent in the ancient Roman world that Tacitus noted in amazement that the Germans seldom beat their slaves (*Germania* 25). As Bradley, well-known for his emphasis on the darker sides of ancient slavery, puts it: “the slave-owner was supreme in the power he wielded to reprove or punish and the ideal state was one in which the slave feared his master.”¹²³⁷

6.2. Punishments in Literary Sources

As in “historical” sources, in literary sources from the Greco-Roman world brutality towards slaves occurs often. In *Vita Aesopi*, beatings are regularly referred to, for instance: “When the guests left after dinner, Aesop was strung up and beaten. Xanthus said to him. ‘That for you, and if you don’t find me a man who is not a busybody, I’ll put you on the rack and break you.’”¹²³⁸ Threats with beatings, treadmills, the stone quarries and even crucifixion are present everywhere in the Plautine comedies.¹²³⁹ An example of an enumeration of penalties, recounted by the slave Libanus, can be found in Plautus’ *Asinaria* 544-556:

Great praise and thanks be to Perfidy as she deserves, since by our swindles, tricks, and clever moves, relying on the daring of our shoulder blades and the excellence of our forearms who went against cattle-prods, hot iron-blades, crosses and shackles, neck-irons, chains, prisons, collars, fetters, and yokes, the fiercest painters fully acquainted with our backs (*qui aduersum stimulos, lamminas crucesque compedesque, neruos, catenas, carceres, numellas, pedicas, boias, inductoresque acerrumos gnarosque nostri tergi*) [who have often before put scars on our shoulder blades] now these legions, troops and armies of theirs have been put to flight by fierce fighting and our perjuries. This was done through this colleague’s valor and my kind assistance. Who is braver than me when it comes to suffering blows?¹²⁴⁰

Elsewhere in the comedy *Asinaria*, all kinds of severe punishments regularly occur as well. As one slave says to another: “When an equal weight of a hundred pounds has been tied to your feet and when handcuffs have embraced your hands and have been brought to the beam (*ubi manus manicae complexae sunt atque adductae ad trabem*), then you hang neither too high nor too low [...] to stop you from being bad and useless (*quin malus nequamque sis*).”¹²⁴¹

Violence towards slaves can also be found in other literary sources. Take, for example, Petronius’ *Satyricon*, especially its dinner scene, which is permeated with violence towards slaves. As John Donahue argues, this scene uncovers some “dark truths” with regard to the treatment of slaves in antiquity: “that violence blighted the slave’s life in general, no matter what the context of interactions with the owner [...]”¹²⁴²

¹²³⁵ Translation: LCL 83, 339-341.

¹²³⁶ Translation: Alan Watson, *Legal Origins and Legal Change* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1991), 287.

¹²³⁷ Keith R. Bradley, “The Bitter Chain of Slavery” *Dialogues d’histoire ancienne* 41, no. 1 (2015), 171.

¹²³⁸ *Vita Aesopi* 58. Translation: Lloyd W. Daly, “The Aesop Romance,” in *Anthology of Ancient Greek Popular Literature*, ed. William Hansen (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 146.

¹²³⁹ Stewart speaks about “[t]he ubiquitous threats of physical violence, verbal abuse, and jokes about violence,” Roberta Stewart, *Plautus and Roman Slavery* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 95.

¹²⁴⁰ Translation: LCL 60, 201-203. Augustine mentioned flogging (*verberare*), chains (*compedes*), prison (*carcer*) and condemnation to the flour mill (*pistrinum*). Augustine, *Sermones* 161.9.

¹²⁴¹ *Asinaria* 302-306 (LCL 60, 175).

¹²⁴² John Donahue, “Party Hard: Violence in the Context of Roman *Cenae*,” in *The Topography of Violence in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. Werner Riess and Garrett G. Fagan (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 385.

In order to better contextualize the (physical) punishments for slaves in the parables, I have explored which and how often penalties for slaves occur in ancient literary sources, notably, Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, Petronius' *Satyricon*, *Vita Aesopi*, and the comedies of Plautus.¹²⁴³ Relevant, but not exhaustive, references to those literary works are given in the footnotes. Although our corpus of slavery parables with punishments is so small that conclusions based on the comparison between that corpus and the ancient sources can hardly qualify as valid, I would like to make some observations.

First of all, killing slaves as a punishment is rare in the rabbinic parables, with as only exception a veiled threat towards a slave in Sifre Deuteronomy 48 (see 6.3.5).¹²⁴⁴ In the early Christian sources, we come across more lethal violence. Some of these killings are done by third parties,¹²⁴⁵ but there also two instances of the murder of slaves by their masters. The first is the third slave in the parable of The Talents (Matthew 25:30); the second pertains to the somewhat puzzling statement in Matthew 24:51 (The Good and the Bad Slave Manager) that the master will cut his slave in pieces and "put him with the hypocrites" (i.e., that he will be condemned and suffer eternal pain¹²⁴⁶). Even so, the killing of slaves in rabbinic and Christian parables seems limited when compared to the abundance of references to the killing of slaves in Greco-Roman literature.¹²⁴⁷ However, we also have to remark that while in the Greco-Roman sources the killing of slaves is something that is often used as a threat, it is rarely really executed.

When it comes to physical punishments – by far the largest category of punishments in ancient literature¹²⁴⁸ – only one rabbinic and two Christian parables qualify.¹²⁴⁹ Those parables do not specify the nature of that beating, something that ancient Greco-Roman sources often seem to find joy in (the same goes for the inventive ways to kill slaves those sources describe). That physical punishments dominate our limited inventory of slave punishments in literary sources agrees with a study of social reality by Hillner: "Within the urban context of slavery, the predominant kind of punishment was whipping, the most ordered and direct submission of the

¹²⁴³ With respect to the comedies of Plautus, I have not aimed for completeness. Especially when it comes to "general beatings," the references are abundant.

¹²⁴⁴ In the Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai on Exodus 15:17-18 there is also a parable in which slaves are killed (even crucified) by robbers (not by their master).

¹²⁴⁵ Mark 12:1-12//Matthew 21:33-44 (The Tenants), Matthew 22:1-14 (The Banquet). Notice, however, that these slaves are not killed by their masters (cf. 6.3.6).

¹²⁴⁶ With "hypocrites" Matthew refers to, e.g., the scribes and the Pharisees (cf. 23:13-33). See Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21-28. A Commentary*, transl. James E. Crouch, Hermeneia – A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 225; William D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 3:391. The meaning of διχοτομήσει (here translated as "to cut in pieces") is more elaborately discussed in section 6.3.6, where I conclude that a literal translation is most plausible. The phrase about the hypocrites (or the unfaithful in Luke) "need not mitigate the force of our translation," as Friedrichsen has argued (Timothy A. Friedrichsen, "A Note on καὶ διχοτομήσει αὐτόν (Luke 12:46 and the Parallel in Matthew 24:51)," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 63, no. 2 [2001], 264), since it refers to a violent death.

¹²⁴⁷ Unspecified: *Vita Aesopi* 11; *Satyricon* 52; *Casina* 112-113, 301, 426; *Persa* 815; *Poenulus* 149, 309; *Pseudolus* 1229. Death by stoning: *Captivi* 600. Death by crucifixion: *Apuleius*, 10.12; *Vita Aesopi* 19; *Satyricon* 53; *Asinaria* 545ff; *Bacchides* 361-362, 688; *Miles Gloriosus* 279; *Mostellaria* 55-57, 744; *Persa* 295, 856; *Rudens* 1070. Death by being burnt alive: *Satyricon* 150; *Captivi* 597. Death by animals: *Metamorphoses* 8.22.

¹²⁴⁸ Lashes/beating: *Metamorphoses* 9.21; *Vita Aesopi* 2, 3 (stripped), 38, 43, 50, 56, 77; *Satyricon* 28, 30-31, 34, 49; *Amphitryo* 360, 721, 1030, 1035, i (fragments); *Asinaria* 267, 321, 406, 471, 475, 545ff, 571-573; *Aulularia* 408-414; *Bacchides* 364, 779-780, 1172; *Captivi* 681; *Epidicus* 28, 66, 93, 121, 140-146, 625; *Menaechmi* 974-975; *Mostellaria* 744, 859-884, 992, 1167; *Persa* 361-364, 787, 795; *Poenulus* 23-28, 136, 381, 1152-1155; *Pseudolus* 133ff, 445-446, 544, 1238, 1324; *Rudens* 109, 1401-1402; *Stichus* 443. Torture (for confession): *Apuleius* 7.2, 10.10 (rack, wheel), 10.28; *Vita Aesopi* 58; *Satyricon* 139; *Amphitryo* 590; *Asinaria* 300ff, 545ff, 565; *Mostellaria* 1086; *Rudens* 1059; *Truculentus* 777-784. Castration: *Asinaria* 237. Marking of runaway slaves: *Satyricon* 69, 103, 105-106.

¹²⁴⁹ Mekhilta Beshallah de Rabbi Yishmael on Exodus 14:5 (The Slave who Buys a Rotten Fish), Matthew 18:23-35 (The Unforgiving Slave); Matthew 24:45-51//Luke 12:42-46 (The Good and the Bad Slave Manager).

body and [...] at the heart of an ancient understanding of pain in the learning process of those considered ignorant due to age or status”¹²⁵⁰

Most punishments in rabbinic and Christian parables fall into the category of the “change of position.”¹²⁵¹ Slaves get demoted, stripped of their responsibilities, or sold (or see their children sold). These kinds of penalties are rare in Greco-Roman sources. It is, on the other hand, striking that two big threats for slaves in Greco-Roman literature – being sold to the mills or the stone quarries/mines; often a *de facto* death penalty¹²⁵² – do not occur at all in the Christian and rabbinic literature,¹²⁵³ while Hillner’s study claims that this happened often: “In the countryside, culprits could be assigned to work in the fields or to the industrial enterprises of the ancient household, like the manufacture of bricks. Most frequently, however, slaves seem to have been assigned to work in the flour mill (*pistrinum*) as a form of punishment.”¹²⁵⁴

In both ancient literature and the parables, we find references to imprisonment of slaves,¹²⁵⁵ although not often – which makes sense from a perspective of production.¹²⁵⁶

Finally, symbolic penalties, which refer to the fault or misdeed of the slave, strike as an important category for rabbinic parables,¹²⁵⁷ and the fine for a slave in Mekhilta Beshallah on Exodus 14:5 (The Slave who Buys a Rotten Fish) is unique.

6.3. Punishments in the Parables

After this general review of punishments for slaves in ancient literary sources, we now discuss a number of parables at more length in which punishments or the threat of punishments form the focus of the parable. We have (roughly) ordered the parables on the basis of the severity of the penalties, going from light to more heavy punishments.

6.3.1. On Account of Evil: Sifra Bechukotai 4:4

We start this section with a parable that only hints at a punishment. The parable can be found in Sifra (Bechukotai, chapter 4, section 4, on Leviticus 26:17). The parable seeks to clarify what it means when Leviticus 26:17 reads that God set his face *against* (בַּכֹּחַ) “you” (Israel). It does so by comparing this verse to Leviticus 26:9, where we read how God looks *towards* (אֵלַיִם) “you.” Looking towards something (or someone), Sifra explains, applies to the good, while looking against something or someone (בִּי) has a negative connotation. A good example of this phenomenon is Numbers 12:1: “Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses (בַּמִּשְׁחָה) because

¹²⁵⁰ Julia Hillner, *Prison, Punishment and Penance in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 164. According to Hillner, placing slaves in chains is the second most used form of punishment: “Indeed, after flogging, placing a slave in vincula or its Greek equivalent δεσμοί is the most attested form of slave punishment also in literary sources, and chains were often presented as a conspicuous symbol of slavery” (165).

¹²⁵¹ Degradation/demotion: Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai Sanya on Exodus 4:13 (The Chosen Slave Manager Retracts); Matthew 25:14-30/Luke 19:12-27 (The Talents/Pounds); Luke 16:1-8 (The Unjust Steward). Being sold and separated from family: Sifre Deuteronomy 26 (The Sale of a Debtor’s Children as Slaves); Matthew 18:23-35 (The Unforgiving Slave).

¹²⁵² Treadmill: *Asinaria* 34-35; *Bacchides* 779-780; *Epidicus* 121; *Menaechmi* 974-975; *Mostellaria* 15; *Persa* 22; *Poenulus* 829-830, 1152-1155; *Pseudolus* 494, 499, 533, 1100. Being sold to the mines/stone quarries: *Captivi* 721-726, 944, 999ff; *Poenulus* 829-830.

¹²⁵³ Slaves for mining were used by Salomon according to Isaac Mendelsohn (“State Slavery in Ancient Palestine,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 85 [1942], 17).

¹²⁵⁴ Hillner, *Prison, Punishment and Penance in Late Antiquity*, 171.

¹²⁵⁵ Greco-Roman literature: *Metamorphoses* 4.24; *Vita Aesopi* 65; *Amphitryo* 155; *Mostellaria* 744; *Poenulus* 1152-1155. Early Christian literature: Matthew 18:23-35 (The Unforgiving Slave); Gospel of the Nazarenes (The Talents). Moreover, in Greco-Roman literature we find many references to slaves in chains, see, e.g., *Bacchides* 779-796; *Captivi* 111-117, 357, 653, 657-659, 721-726, 944, 1025; *Epidicus* 684; *Menaechmi* 77ff, 974-975; *Persa* 787.

¹²⁵⁶ Hillner, *Prison, Punishment and Penance in Late Antiquity*, 171.

¹²⁵⁷ See Mishnah Sukkah 2:9 (Spilling Drink on the Master’s Face) and Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael Beshallah on Exodus 14:5 (The Slave who Buys a Rotten Fish). Compare *Satyricon* 64.

of the Cushite woman whom he had married.”¹²⁵⁸ God setting his face against Israel is further explained by means of a very short parable about a king and his slaves:

Translation (MS)

I will set my face against you (Leviticus 26:17, NRSV).
In the same manner that it says regarding the good, *I will look with favor towards you* (Leviticus 26:9, NRSV with adaptations),
so it says regarding the evil, *I will set my face against you* (Leviticus 26:17).
They told a parable.
It is like a king who said to his slaves:
“I will turn from everything and be occupied with you – on account of evil.”

Text¹²⁵⁹

ונתתי פני בכם
כשם שנאמר בטובה ופניתי אליכם
כך נאמר ברעה ונתתי פני בכם
משלו משל למה"ד
למלך שאמר לעבדיו
פונה אני מכל עסקי ועוסק עמכם ברעה

This parable stays very close in wording and content to the verse it seeks to explain. It narrates how a king says to his slaves (plural, probably to stress the parallel with Leviticus 26:17) that he will focus all his attention on them, on account of evil (ברעה). We have to assume that for the reader of Sifra it was immediately clear what it meant for the king to focus his attention on his slaves on account of evil. If we study the context of Leviticus 26:17, we see that from verse 14 penalties for Israel are listed by God if the people do not listen (vs. 18: “if [...] you will not obey me, I will continue to punish you sevenfold for your sins”). Furthermore, the remainder of verse 26:17 reads: “[I will set my face against you], and you shall be struck down by your enemies; your foes shall rule over you, and you shall flee though no one pursues you.” Probably, punishments like these are awaiting the slaves (the people) to whom the master (God) turns his gaze.

Let us pause for a moment to reflect on this parable. This parable is, in a way, representative for the parables in this chapter by displaying God as a threat. Most of the time, this threat only lingers in the background, but it can easily come forwards when the situation demands it, especially in the case of disobedience – one of the themes of the previous chapter. I contend that being a threat is one of the aspects of God in the (slavery) parables; even more so, that it is a vital and integral part of the metaphor of God as slave-owner. As we have seen in the two previous sections, threats and penalties were part of the everyday life of slaves. However, as mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, it has been argued by several authors, for example Luise Schottroff, that we should not read parables as an “invitation to equation (e.g. not: God is like a king, who...)”, but as “a challenge to critical comparison.”¹²⁶⁰ She argues, for example, that the owner of the vineyard in the parable of The Tenants (Matthew 21:33–46/Mark 12:1–12/Luke 20:9–19) does not represent God, and the householder in the parable of The Doorkeeper (Mark 13:28–37) does not stand for God either; instead these earthly kings are being *contrasted* with the heavenly king. Although he is critical of Schottroff’s solution, Marcel Poorthuis has argued that in similar parables (he discusses parables of kings that go to war, another example of kings who behave cruelly and aggressively), the application “is widely different from most *nimshalim*” in that it does not refer “in one way or another to God’s actions.”¹²⁶¹ While I agree with Schottroff and Poorthuis that the *focus* of parables like these is not always on the equation between God and a king or slave-owner (instead, the focus is, for example, on human behavior), I think that the present study shows that punishment, authority, and harshness cannot and should not be disassociated from God. These associations are pre-given in the choice for the metaphor

¹²⁵⁸ Compare Jacob Neusner, *Rabbinic Narrative: A Documentary Perspective. Volume Two: Forms, Types, and Distribution of Narratives in Sifra, Sifré to Numbers, and Sifré to Deuteronomy*, The Brill Reference Library of Judaism (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 53.

¹²⁵⁹ Hebrew text: Isaac Hirsch Weiss, *Sifra de-ve Rav: hu’ Sefer Torat Kohanim* (Vienna: Schlossberg, 1862), 111b.

¹²⁶⁰ Schottroff, *The Parables of Jesus*, 225.

¹²⁶¹ Marcel Poorthuis, “The Invasion of the King: The Virtual Mashal as Foundation of Storytelling,” in *Parables in Changing Contexts. Essays on the Study of Parables in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism*, ed. Eric Ottenheim and Marcel Poorthuis, Jewish and Christian Perspectives 35 (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 222. See for his critique of Schottroff, 210.

of slave-owner and king and would immediately have been identified and activated in the minds of the readers. I hope that the parables that we discuss next will make clear that, according to early Judaism and early Christianity, God *is* an entity who reigns over life and death and who *will* use his power to punish, as he uses his power to sustain his people.

6.3.2. Was it the Butler with the Cup? Or was it his Master? Mishnah Sukkah 2:9

In this section, a “legal parable”¹²⁶² from Mishnah Sukkah (2:9) will be studied. In my discussion of the parable, I will follow Eric Ottenheijm’s interpretation of the parable and his related argument that the parable has undergone later changes in the course of the establishment of a rabbinic parable tradition.¹²⁶³

The parable from Mishnah Sukkah is found in a debate on Sukkot and the question of when one is allowed to leave the booth.¹²⁶⁴ The passage reads:

Translation (MS)	Text ¹²⁶⁵
All seven days makes a man his booth permanent and his house temporary.	כל שבעת הימים עושה אדם את סוכתו קבע את ביתו עריי
If rain falls, when is he allowed to vacate [it]?	ירדו גשמים ממאמתי ומותר לפנות
When the porridge spoils.	משתיסרה המקפה
They told a parable. To what can it be compared?	מושלים אותו משל למה הדבר דומה
To a slave who came to mix with the <i>qithon</i> and he spilt the <i>qithon</i> in his face.	לעבד שבא למזוג לקתיו ושפך הקיתן על פניו

In this parable, the rain plays an important role; this time as the bad guy of the story (we will encounter below, in section 6.4, the positive effect of rain). During the Feast of Sukkot (“booths”) the people of Israel have to build booths as a commemoration of their time in the desert when they were without a permanent home.¹²⁶⁶ However, those booths, constructed out of “branches of palm trees, boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook” (Leviticus 23:40), formed not enough protection against bad weather. Therefore, the falling of rain is seen as a bad omen, a punishment by God, in the Mishnah. We read in m. Ta’anit 1:1 that “rain is not a sign of blessing during the festival (ואין גשמים סימן ברבה בחג).”¹²⁶⁷

Even if the rain is seen as a bad omen, the rabbis do not expect the people to suffer in their booths. So, the question of the Mishnah is: when are we allowed to leave the booth? Their answer is concise: when the porridge spoils. This situation is compared to a slave who is supposed to be serving his master¹²⁶⁸ by adding water to the wine in his cup; in doing so, “he” spills on or splashes “him” in the face with the contents from a *qithon*. The question here is: who spills on or splashes whom in the face? Either the slave spills the water from his *qithon* in his master’s face (from a perspective of syntax the most plausible reading), or the master throws or splashes the *qithon* in his slave’s face. In the first interpretation, God (who lets it rain in the booths) is equated with a slave (who drenches his master); in the second interpretation, God is compared to the master. In the Babylonian Talmud, which was completed centuries later, the sages explicitly bring up this matter:

¹²⁶² Term by Eric Ottenheijm to designate that the parable is used to clarify a halakhic issue and is not part of midrash. See his book *Telling Parables in Judaism and Christianity. History of a Regional Genre* (forthcoming), chapter “Legal Parables.”

¹²⁶³ Ottenheijm, *Telling Parables in Judaism and Christianity*, chapter “Legal Parables.”

¹²⁶⁴ See on this parable also Jeffrey Rubenstein, “The Sukka as Temporary or Permanent Dwelling: A Study in the Development of Talmudic Thought,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 64 (1993), 137-166.

¹²⁶⁵ Hebrew text: Manuscript Kaufmann (folio 70v).

¹²⁶⁶ Cf. Leviticus 23:42-43: “You shall live in booths for seven days; all that are citizens in Israel shall live in booths, so that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.”

¹²⁶⁷ Translation: MS. Hebrew text: Manuscript Kaufmann (folio 77r).

¹²⁶⁸ Whose presence is only implied in manuscript Kaufmann, but who is mentioned in Albeck’s edition (Chanoch Albeck, *Shishah Sidre Mishnah* [Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1952-1959], 2:265).

They told a parable. To what can it be compared? (i.e., Quotation from the Mishnah). An inquiry was [raised] before them: Who poured upon whom (מי שפך למי)? Come and hear, as it has been taught: His master poured the *qithon* over his face (שפך לו רבו קיתון על פניו) and said: “I do not want your service.” (Translation MS)

This interpretation has its merits, since we find comparable situations in other ancient texts.¹²⁶⁹ Compare, for example, this passage from the dinner-scene in *Satyricon*:

After some time Trimalchio calmed himself, and ordered a great bowl of wine to be mixed, and drinks to be served round to all the slaves, who were sitting at our feet, adding this provision: “If anyone refuses to take it, pour it over his head; business in the daytime and pleasure at night.” (“*Si quis*” inquit “*noluerit accipere, caput illi perfunde. Interdiu severa, nunc hilaria.*”)¹²⁷⁰



Figure 6.1¹²⁷¹

However, as Ottenheijm has argued, this interpretation does not fit the realia of the story.¹²⁷² As he has shown, the Hebrew *qithon* (קיתון) is a confound word from Greek κώθων, meaning “drinking vessel, used by soldiers,” and the Greek ὁ κῦθος, meaning “a ladle, for drawing wine out of the κρατήρ.”¹²⁷³ According to Ottenheijm the Hebrew *qithon* refers here to a special vessel used for mixing water in a wine cup. This might suit the context

¹²⁶⁹ This interpretation can also be found in, e.g., Jacob Neusner, *How Not to Study Judaism. Examples and Counter-Examples. Volume One: Parables, Rabbinic Narratives, Rabbis' Biographies, Rabbis' Disputes*, Studies in Judaism (Lanham: University Press of America, 2004), 15-16; Gary G. Porton, “The Parable in the Hebrew Bible and Rabbinic Literature,” in *The Historical Jesus in Context*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine, Dale C. Allison Jr., and John Dominic Crossan, Princeton Readings in Religions (Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), 212. In Jordan D. Rosenblum, *Food and Identity in Early Rabbinic Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 172-173, the question who poured upon whom is kept open. The same is true for Philip Colbertson's paper, “Who Splashed on Whom? Textual Equivocality and Rabbinic Exegesis,” *Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies, Volume I: Jewish Thought and Literature*, 17-24.

¹²⁷⁰ Petronius, *Satyricon* 64 (LCL 15, 145).

¹²⁷¹ Tombstone of Longinus Biarta, a cavalryman, part of a regiment that was probably raised by Emperor Sulpicius Galba in 68 A.D. Image: Romisch-Germanisches Museum, Cologne (Germany).

¹²⁷² For a description of social reality, see also Katherine M. D. Dunbabin, “Wine and Water at the Roman *convivium*,” *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 6 (1993), 116-141.

¹²⁷³ For both definitions, see Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott and Henry Stuart Jones. *A Greek-English Lexicon. With a Supplement*, 9th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), s.v. κώθων, 1016, and s.v. κῦθος, 1003.

of the dining hall (for an example of a slave holding a ladle, see figure 6.1). As research on rabbinic banquets has shown,¹²⁷⁴ the guests in a rabbinic meal (and the same goes for Roman *triclinia*) would recline, and the food and drinks would be brought to them. So, the slaves would be standing and going around serving food and drinks,¹²⁷⁵ while the guests would lie with their heads at the level of the slaves' waists (see figure 6.2). In this situation, it is easily conceivable that a slave could spill a bit of water in his or her master's face while using a ladle to mix the wine in his or her master's cup, which is approximately at the same level as the master's face. It is, on the other hand, difficult to imagine how a master would lift himself from the bed to throw the contents of the ladle upwards into his slave's face. Since evidence for real banquets in the Palestinian context is scarce, the situation envisioned might be a simpler one of a group people standing together, being served by a slave. Nonetheless, it would be the slaves going around with the *qithon* and the guests receiving water from the *qithon*.

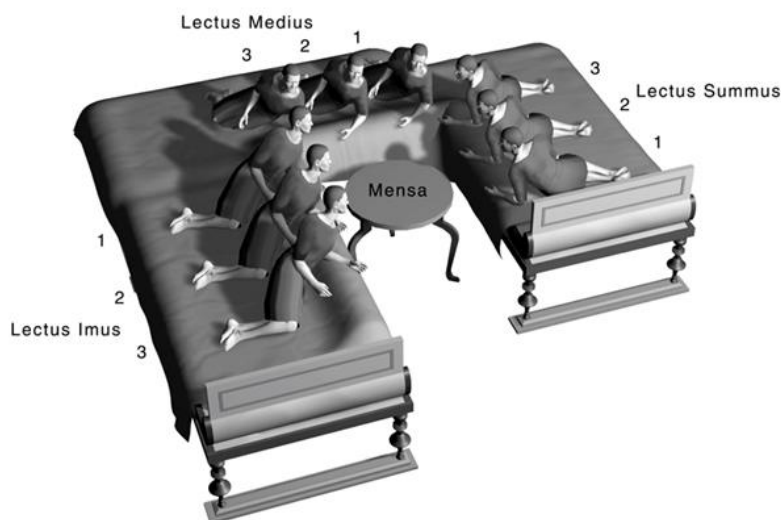


Figure 6.2¹²⁷⁶

Since I find Ottenheijm's interpretation convincing, this also sheds another light on the question of the rabbis in the Talmud. The fact that they raise this issue might reveal their insecurity about the way the Mishnah operates here. Schematically, the issue looks as follows:¹²⁷⁷

Application	God	Spoils the porridge	Of the man who made a booth
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¹²⁷⁴ Cf. Gil P. Klein, "Torah in Triclinia: The Rabbinic Banquet and the Significance of Architecture," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 102, no. 3 (2012), 325-370.

¹²⁷⁴ Cf. Klein, "Torah in Triclinia," 334ff; Rosenblum, *Food and Identity in Early Rabbinic Judaism*.

¹²⁷⁵ In ancient literature many references to the standing of slaves during meals are made. Cf. Seneca, *Epistulae morales* 47, section 2-3: "That is why I smile at those who think it degrading for a man to dine with his slave. But why should they think it degrading? It is only because purse-proud etiquette surrounds a householder at his dinner with a mob of standing slaves. [...] All night long they must stand about, hungry and dumb." Translation: LCL 75, 303. As we will see in the next chapter, rabbinic literature (including parables) also emphasized that the role of the slaves/waiters is to stand during the meal. An example of this is y. Pesachim 10:1, 37b: "Even the poorest man in Israel does not eat until he reclines (quotation Mishnah). [...] Rabbi Levi said: "For it is the way of slaves to be eating while standing, and here they are eating while they recline, to proclaim that they went out from slavery to freedom" (לפי שדרך עבדים להיות אוכליו מעומד וכאן להיות אוכליו מסובין להודיע שיצאו מעבדות לחירות)."

¹²⁷⁶ Possible triclinium layout for Room 23 at the Villa of Oplontis, created by Martin Blazeby, King's Visualisation Lab. Accessed April 10, 2020. http://www.kvl.cch.kcl.ac.uk/masks/chromakey_results/rm23/ws2-r23.html.

¹²⁷⁷ Philip Culbertson has even come up with four possible interpretations, but two of them are mere variants of the main division sketched in this scheme. See Culbertson, "Who Splashed on Whom?," 20.

Parable according to Ottenheim	The Slave	Throws the <i>qithon</i>	In the face of the owner
Parable according to the Talmud	The owner	Throws the <i>qithon</i>	In the face of the slave

The difference in the way one reads the parable has several theological consequences. First, in the Talmud's interpretation, the spilling of water is a deliberate action out of anger, while in Ottenheim's interpretation it seems merely an accident – which would weaken Ottenheim's argument. However, Ottenheim's reconstruction of the parable (which, as we have argued, makes more sense from a socio-historical perspective) comes closer to the application: like the man who was sitting in his booth when suddenly rain came from above for no obvious reason, so the master was sitting below his slave when he was suddenly drenched with water. In this reading, the parable seems to stay closer to the perspective of the man in the booth, while in the Talmud's reading, the parable follows God's perspective.¹²⁷⁸ Secondly, in the corpus of early rabbinic and early Christian slavery parables, a slave is never identified with God, and a king or master is seldom equated with Israel or humans.¹²⁷⁹ However, since this parable from Mishnah is rather early in comparison to the rest of our parables, it might precede the establishment of a fixed *Bildfeld* in which the king/master-God equation is a stable element. Ottenheim argues that the later rabbis, who were acquainted with this *Bildfeld*, felt uneasy with the parable and tried to remove the parable's ambiguity by interpreting it in line with the *Bildfeld* in the Talmud and later interpretations. If this is true – and I allege it is – this parable from Mishnah Sukkah gives us a great insight in the development of the *Bildfeld* this study presents.

Finally, we would like to analyze the motivation of the slave to spill water in the face of his owner. Although the parable does not indicate whether the spilling of water by the slave is caused by clumsiness or anger, the application makes the latter more plausible. According to the application of the parable, the rain is seen as sign of God's displeasure with his people (cf. m. Ta'anit 1:1). We might wonder what this means from a hidden transcript perspective. On the one hand, I would like to notice that from the parable a certain irritation about the rain becomes visible: the rain is not "just" a natural phenomenon; it is an act by God – a punishment – to disrupt a festival in his honor. Here, some (theological) criticism of God might become visible. On the other hand, it might be worthwhile to contemplate how the parable would have been received by slaves: how would they have perceived the equation of God with a person of their own status? And not only is God represented here by a slave, but he is a slave who is angry, has agency, and takes action *vis-à-vis* the master. Although it is difficult to answer that question, it is clear that a slave-owning society preferred to avoid this kind of "world-upside-down imagery" – hence the changed version in b. Sukkah 29a.¹²⁸⁰

6.3.3. The Parable of Punishments: Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael Beshallah on Exodus 14:5

In a chapter on disciplining slaves, the Parable of the Rotten Fish cannot be missed. It might be the only parable in which the penalties themselves are the focus of exegesis.

This passage in which the parable occurs has as its starting point Exodus 14:8. This verse describes how the heart of the Pharaoh hardened, and how he subsequently started the pursuit of the Israelites. The question that the midrash tries to answer is why the Pharaoh changed his mind. The midrash conjectures that Pharaoh and his slaves (his ministers, we assume) realized they had been punished three times. Not only did they lose their slaves, but they also had been plagued and they had lost their money. However, the rabbis do not agree with this interpretation. They set out their version of the events with the help of a parable (for the text of the parable, see section 5.3.2.3). The reasoning of this parable is that Egypt received several kinds of punishments because it did not succeed in completing each punishment when it was received. Schematically, the parable looks like this:

¹²⁷⁸ See also Rashi's discussion of the parable, about which an exposition can be found in Culbertson, "Who Splashed on Whom?," 22-23

¹²⁷⁹ A possible exception is t. Sotah 11:2-3 (as discussed in chapter 4). Outside the corpus of slavery parables, we also find examples of exceptions to fixed representations. For example: the king in the parable normally represents God, but in Luke 14:31-32 the king stands for the believer (Cf. Poorthuis, "The Invasion of the King," 216-217).

¹²⁸⁰ James C. Scott, *Domination and Arts of Resistance. Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1990), 198.

Parable

Slave

Master (“one”)

Going to the market and buying a fish (task)

Penalties

- Eat the fish
- Whipping
- Fine

Application

Pharaoh/the Egyptians

God

Letting Israel go?

Penalties

- Send away Israel? (=same as task)¹²⁸¹
- Plagues
- Money taken

One of the hermeneutical problems with this scheme is that the three penalties from the parable do not coincide with the penalties in the Bible. In the Bible, only the plagues (the whipping?), and the taking away of money and treasures (the fine) are mentioned. To solve this problem, the rabbis add as a sentence that Egypt had to send away their slaves. However, this was initially not one of the *penalties* of Egypt, but the *task* that Egypt was assigned to. The parable does not work in other respects either. Although it is clear in the parable that the slave receives another penalty each time he does not complete one, in the Bible we find no traces of this – except for the sending away of Israel (Pharaoh promised to send Israel away, but he did not follow through on his promise). This might suggest that the parable had a different use or even an independent status previously, an assumption that is supported by the tripartite structure of the parable and the stylized numbers (60, 100 – typically folktale elements), as well as the circulation and reception history of the parable.¹²⁸² However, as Thoma and Lauer write about, the variant of the parable¹²⁸³ in Pesiqta de rav Kahana “[w]oher der masal stammt, kann nur vermutet werden.”¹²⁸⁴

From a socio-historical perspective we might want to devote some space to a discussion of the three penalties the slave can choose from.

Eating the fish

The eating of the fish falls in the fascinating category of what I would like to call “mirror penalties.”¹²⁸⁵ Ka Leung Wong distinguishes three types of these mirror punishments: (1) the “punishment of a bodily part which is used directly in the offense”; (2) the “punishment by the same means which the offender used in the crime”; (3) and the “punishment determined according to the motivating force which forms the basis of the crime.”¹²⁸⁶ We are here mainly interested in the second type. As an example from the Apocalypse of Peter, Callie Callon notices how in the hereafter “slaves who have disobeyed their masters (presumably by talking back to them [...]), an action which cannot have been of continuous duration, are described as ‘men and women who ceaselessly chew their tongues and are tormented with eternal fire.’”¹²⁸⁷ Another example, not about the afterlife, is Samson, whose eyes were gouged out by the Philistines (Judges 16:12). This was, according to rabbinic tradition, an

¹²⁸¹ I have changed the order of the penalties, as enumerated at the end of the passage from Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael Beshallach on Exodus 14:5.

¹²⁸² As it turns out, many different medieval attestations of the parable of the rotten fish (more often the fish is replaced for onions or garlic) circulated through Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. Theodor Zachariae has collected all these variants in “Die indische Erzählung vom Zwiebelstief,” *Studien zur vergleichenden Literaturgeschichte* 6 (1906), 356-364. Haim Schwarzbaum has briefly written about the Jewish variant of the story in *Studies in Jewish and World Folklore* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1968), 248-249. See also my Dutch blog, “Van rotte vis tot knoflook, van India tot Frankrijk: de reis van een parabelmotief,” published online February 19, 2020, <https://parabelproject.nl/van-rotte-vis-tot-knoflook-van-india-tot-frankrijk-de-reis-van-een-parabelmotief/>.

¹²⁸³ Other parallels can be found in Midrash Mishle 27 and Tanchuma Buber Beshalach 8.

¹²⁸⁴ Clemens Thoma and Simon Lauer, *Die Gleichnisse der Rabbinen. Erster Teil. Pesiqta deRav Kahana (PesK)* (Bern: Verlag Peter Lang, 1986), 174.

¹²⁸⁵ Cf. Callie Callon, “Sorcery, Wheels, and Mirror Punishment in the Apocalypse of Peter,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 18, no. 1 (2010), 29–49.

¹²⁸⁶ Ka Leung Wong, *The Idea of Retribution in the Book of Ezekiel* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 227.

¹²⁸⁷ Callon, “Sorcery, Wheels, and Mirror Punishment,” 32. Note that these retributions are *post mortem*.

appropriate penalty for one who “rebelled through his eyes.”¹²⁸⁸ Given this piece of rabbinic exegesis, it should be no surprise that mirror penalties are firmly established in rabbinic tradition. In Pirkei Avot 2:7, we come across the following saying: “He (Hillel) saw a skull floating on the face of the water. He said unto it: ‘Because you drowned, they drowned you. And in the end they that drowned you will be drowned.’”¹²⁸⁹ In Hebrew, these kinds of penalties are known as *מדה כנגד מדה* (measure for measure).¹²⁹⁰ This concept goes back to the Hebrew Bible in which we read: “Woe to the guilty! How unfortunate they are, for what their hands have done shall be done to them” (Isaiah 3:11). These kinds of punishments also occurred in Greco-Roman contexts, for example, when the Roman Emperor had the hands of a stealing slave cut off (Suetonius, *Caligula* 32). It is in the same spirit that the slave who bought a rotten fish for his master to eat is now forced to eat the fish himself by way of punishment.

Whipping

Since Hillner writes that the “predominant kind” of punishing slaves was whipping,¹²⁹¹ it is not surprising that whipping is one of the penalties that the slave can choose from in this parable. What is striking, however, is the high number of lashes slaves could receive. According to Deuteronomy 25:3 and 2 Corinthians 11:24, forty lashes (or forty minus one) were the maximum – at least for free people; for slaves no separate rule is provided. The same applies to Greco-Roman laws: even when some (local) legal systems decreed a maximum number of lashes for free men,¹²⁹² when it came to a master disciplining his own slave, no provisions or limitations existed (although some of the most cruel practices were forbidden by Constantine in 319¹²⁹³). A passage in the Mekhilta (Bachodesh 6) suggests that one hundred lashes was a kind of standard, although the context (rebellion against Rome because of the persecution of the Jewish religion) is completely different.¹²⁹⁴ In the Plautine comedy *Asinaria*, we come across a penalty of even two hundred lashes:

leo	I’d be willing to be a slave all my life if only I can meet Libanus.
lib	(aside) You’ll never be freed any sooner through my help.
leo	I’ll even give two hundred blows ready to multiply from my back.
lib	(to the audience) He’s generous with his property; he carries his entire treasure on his back. ¹²⁹⁵

No matter what number of lashes was standard in antiquity, we can be sure that hundred lashes formed a heavy penalty. The same is true for the last penalty the slave was allowed to choose from: the fine.

Fine

Previously, we have established that it was possible for slaves to own some money (the *peculium*).¹²⁹⁶ But was it possible for them to pay the fine that is mentioned in the parable? According to Sperber, a minah (or

¹²⁸⁸ b. Soṭah 9b: “Our Rabbis have taught: Samson rebelled [against God] through his eyes, as it is said: And Samson said unto his father, *Get her for me, because she is pleasing in my eyes* (Judges 14:3); therefore the Philistines put out his eyes, as it is said: *And the Philistines laid hold on him and put out his eyes* (Judges 16:21).”

¹²⁸⁹ Translation: MS. For the Hebrew text see Manuscript Kaufmann (folio 170r).

¹²⁹⁰ See on this concept or paradigm, e.g., Yehoshua Amir, “Measure for Measure in Talmudic Literature and in the Wisdom of Solomon,” in *Justice and Righteousness. Biblical Themes and their Influence*, ed. Henning Graf Reventlow and Yair Hoffman, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 137 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 29-46. Amir describes the concept of measure of measure as a “correspondence between sin and punishment” (35).

¹²⁹¹ Hillner, *Prison, Punishment and Penance in Late Antiquity*, 164.

¹²⁹² Isabel Moreira, “Violence, Purification, and Mercy in the Late Antique Afterlife,” in *Violence in Late Antiquity: Perceptions and Practices*, ed. Harold Allen Drake (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2006), 149.

¹²⁹³ Harper, *Slavery in the Late Antique World*, 233. Alan Watson, however, nuances the image that slaves were better protected under Constantine’s rule; see his “Roman Law and Romanist Ideology,” *Phoenix* 37, no. 1 (1983), 59.

¹²⁹⁴ Why are you getting a hundred lashes?” “Because I performed the ceremony of the Lulab.” Translation Jacob Z. Lauterbach, *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, volume 2 (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 324-325.

¹²⁹⁵ *Asinaria* 274-275 (LCL 60, 171).

¹²⁹⁶ Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 277ff; compare section 5.4.2.

maneh/manah) was worth one hundred denarii.¹²⁹⁷ Furthermore, we know that one denarius formed an average day's wage (cf. Matthew 20:2, John 12:5). So, in this parable, we have the enormous amount of 10,000 denarii¹²⁹⁸ – which equals thirty years of work, if the slave would have been paid for his work, which normally would not have been the case. An even bigger surprise is that the slave fulfills this assignment: he pays the complete fine! We might wonder how the slave was able to come up with such a large sum of money. We could speculate about a slave with a high position, working in the royal court, who might have earned a lot (but then: why would such a slave be sent to the market for a fish?). It might be better to assume that the application penetrates the parable: the treasures of the Egyptians had to be equaled by a big sum of money in the parable. Also, exaggeration might be used as a style device in this parable: not only does the fine seem very high, but the number of lashes also seems considerably high.

Bildfeld and Hidden Transcript

We have concluded above that the punishments in the parable are rather severe. Concerning the *Bildfeld* we ought to notice that, in contrast with the bulk of our parables, the slave is not compared to Israel but to Pharaoh and the Egyptians – which could explain the heavy penalties that the slave faces. For this unusual comparison, the parable stands out in our corpus and needs to be evaluated as such. In the parable, a somewhat sadistic phantasy of the rabbis towards their former suppressor(s) – who are, in an ironic turn of events, portrayed as stupid or rebellious¹²⁹⁹ slaves themselves – might play a role. A hidden transcript analysis of this parable might be fruitful. In stories like parables, roles can be changed and evil can be requited. In this “world-upside-down imagery,” slaves can resist and take revenge on the master(s) narratives of the world they live in.¹³⁰⁰ However, I do not want to overstretch this argument: as we have seen, even in this “phantasy,” big fines are not exceptional, and neither are heavy corporal punishments.

Finally, I would like to briefly discuss the fact that the slave is offered a choice between punishments. This was, as one can imagine, not the usual practice in antiquity. However, in ancient literature, we regularly come across lists of penalties that might have served to give the auditors a “pleasant feeling of horror.” Compare this passage from the Roman novel *Metamorphoses* (The Golden Ass):

While bolting down all the food with voracious gluttony, they [the bandits] began to discuss among themselves our punishment and their revenge. As happens in a boisterous gathering, the opinions expressed were varied. One advised that the girl be burned alive; a second exhorted that she be thrown to the beasts; a third advocated that she be nailed to a cross; a fourth recommended that she be torn to pieces on the rack. But at least everyone voted that in any case she must die.¹³⁰¹

A combination of penalties can also be found in several places, for example, in Plautus' comedy *Mostellaria*:

Then there's a thrashing in prospect for your hide, then the place where fetters are worn away, at last the cross (*tunc malum corio tuo portenditur, ind' ferriterium, postea crux*).¹³⁰²

We can imagine how enumerations of (bloody) penalties might appeal to the (literary) imagination. We should, however, keep in mind that the three penalties in our rabbinic parable are not only a literary ornament but also represent three moments in the Exodus-story. Moreover, in contrast to the enumerations mentioned above, the rabbinic parable also offers two non-violent (or at least, bloodless) punishments. In this regard, the rabbinic parable seems to be less sensationalist than popular Roman literature. That does not mean, however, that the

¹²⁹⁷ Sperber, *Roman Palestine 200-400: Money and Prices*, 35-37. Sperber also describes how the *maneh* later (from the third century onwards) comes to be used as a term for one denarius. However, even if this later use also applies to the Mekhilta, the size of the fine is still very considerable.

¹²⁹⁸ Aside from the fact that the slave is able to pay the fine, this enormously large amount of money reminds us of the Parable of the Unforgiving Slave, who owed his master 10,000 talents.

¹²⁹⁹ See the previous chapter, section 5.3.2.

¹³⁰⁰ Cf. Scott, *Domination and Arts of Resistance*, 198.

¹³⁰¹ Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 6.31 (LCL 44, 305).

¹³⁰² *Mostellaria* 744 (LCL 163, 391).

physical punishment for the slave in this parable is unique, as we will see below (6.3.6) when we discuss a number of “Parables of Terror” from the New Testament.

6.3.4. You were the Chosen One! Mekhilta Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai Sanya on Exodus 4:13

The next rabbinic parable of this section deals with the theme of the beloved slave. This theme is absent in the New Testament parables. Philemon 15-16 seems even to suggest that a beloved slave is an oxymoron: “Perhaps this is the reason he (Onesimus) was separated from you (Philemon) for a while, so that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother.” As we have mentioned earlier, slaves that found special favor in the eyes of their masters were not an uncommon phenomenon in antiquity. Slaves could be lovers, friends, dear companions, or (pseudo)children (cf. *delicati*).¹³⁰³ Since the master and the slave are no equals in those relations, one might of course doubt the sincerity of their feelings. I would like to emphasize that the term beloved slave, as I use it, only suggests appreciation (and sometimes love) from the side of the master, an appreciation that is not necessarily answered by the slave. Remarkably, in the parable under scrutiny here, the beloved slave resists the special position his master wants to give him. This resistance leads to punishment, which is why we will discuss this parable.

The parable derives from the Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. As we discussed in chapter 5, the Mekhilta Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai is the twin-text of the Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael. While most of the material in both Mekhiltot is the same, sometimes the Mekhilta Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai contains parables the Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai does not have, and vice versa. The parable that we discuss in this section can only be found in the Mekhilta Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. The pericope in which it can be found forms a midrash on the appearance of God to Moses in the burning bush (Exodus 3-4). According to the Mekhilta God presented himself in a humble form (from a bush), so that “the nations” could not say that Moses only listened because God is the “master of his world.” Then the focus of the midrash shifts to the fact that Moses denied God’s request (“Please send someone else,” Exodus 4:13), with as his argument that he is not a man of words (Exodus 4:10). After this explanation, the following parable can be read.

Translation (MS)

They told a parable. To what can it be compared?
It is like a king who had a slave whom he loved with a complete love.
The king wanted to make him his manager (*epitropos*), to take care of the maintenance of the members of the king’s palace.
What did the king do?
He took the slave by hand and made him enter his treasury
and he showed him see silver objects and golden objects, precious stones, pearls, and everything that he possessed in the treasury.

Text¹³⁰⁴

משלו משל למה הדבר דומה
למלך שהיה לו עבד והיה אוהבו אהבה גמורה
ובקש המלך לעשותו אפטרופוס שלו להיות מפרנס בני פלטין של מלך
מה עשה אותו המלך
תפש את העבד בידו והכניסו לבית גנזיו
והראהו כלי כסף וכלי זהב אבני טובות ומרגליות וכל מה שיש לו בבית גנזיו

¹³⁰³ For lovers (not per se reciprocal) see, e.g., Joseph A. Marchal, “The Usefulness of an Onesimus: The Sexual Use of Slaves and Paul’s Letter to Philemon,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 130, no. 4 (2011), 749-770. For *delicati* see the poetry of Statius and the Satyricon. Cf. Margaret Y. MacDonald, *The Power of Children. The Construction of Christian Families in the Greco-Roman World* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014), especially chapter 1. For friends it might be good to notice the saying of the Scythians: “There is no friendship between master and slave” (Quintus Curtius Rufus, *History of Alexander* 7.8.28; LCL 369, 205), although Aristotle states that there can be a friendship between a master and a slave qua human being (*Nicomachean Ethics* 8.11.1161b5-6). See also Keith R. Bradley, *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire: A Study in Social Control* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 13-14, 113.

¹³⁰⁴ JTSA Rab 2404.1 (W), as quoted in Lieve Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhiltot. An Annotated Edition and Translation of the Parables in Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael and Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai*, with the assistance of Esther van Eenennaam, *Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism* 176 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 97-98.

And afterwards he went out and showed him trees,
gardens, parks, enclosed areas
and all that he had in the fields.
Afterwards the slave pressed his hand and said:
“I cannot become manager
to take care of the maintenance of the members of
the king’s palace.”
The king said to him:
“Since you could not become manager,
why did you put me to the trouble of making all
those efforts?”
And the king became angry with him
and decreed that he could not enter his palace.
So, the Holy One, blessed be He, pressed Moses
[for] six days
and on the seventh he (Moses) said to him: *please
send someone else* (Exodus 4:13).
The Holy One, blessed be He, swore that he would
not enter the land of Israel.
As it is said: *therefore you shall not lead* (Numbers
20:12).

ומאחר כן הוציאו והראהו אילנות גנות ופרדסים
וקרפיפות
וכל מה שיש לו בשדות
לאחר כן כבש העבד את ידו ואמר
איני יכול לעשות אפטרופוס
להיות מפרנס בני פלטין של מלך
אמ' לו המלך
הואיל ולא היית יכול לעשות אפטרופוס
למה הטרחתני כל הטורח הזה
וכעס עליו המלך
וגזר עליו שלא יכנס לפלטין שלו
כך כבש הקדוש ברוך בוא למשה ששה ימים
ובשביעי אמר לו שלח נא ביד תשלח
נשבע לו הקדוש ברוך בוא שלא לארץ ישראל
שנא' לכן לא תביאו וגו'

This piece of exegesis kicks off with the question why God showed himself to Moses from a bush. This question is answered in the next paragraph: so nobody could say that Moses only obeyed because it was a majestic manifestation of God who asked him. In the final paragraph before the parable, a new question is raised: why did Moses, only after six days, ask God to send somebody else?¹³⁰⁵ The parable responds to this question, but seems to focus on answering the question that is only raised in the application: why was Moses not allowed to enter the land?

In the parable, God is compared to a king who had a slave whom he loved completely (compared to Moses in the application). The king wanted to make him overseer, *epitropos* (notice the Greek loanword (אפטרופוס), of his household’s staff. The king decides to show his slave around, first his treasury, then his gardens and fields outside. After this grand tour, the slave tells the king he cannot take up the task the king offers him. The king gets angry (it was a waste of time) and denies the slave henceforth the entrance to his palace.

As we have seen before (e.g., Sifre Deuteronomy 28, Sifre Numbers 84, Sifre Zuta 10:35), Moses is often compared to a slave in the special service of God; in this case, he is even a beloved slave. The treasures and properties the king shows his slave (to create a bond, to impress him, to show him what he will have at his disposal?) should probably be equated with the “tricks” Moses is taught by God: turning his staff into a snake, making his hand leprous, and changing the Nile’s water into blood (Exodus 4:1-9). Nevertheless, the slave turns down the king’s offer, just as Moses asks God to send somebody else. In Exodus, Moses comes up with a reason to turn down God’s offer: he is not a man of words. In the parable, this defense has not been taken up. The reason for this might be found in the introduction in which the midrash treats Moses’ request, “Please, Lord, I am not a man of words,” and his question, “Make someone else your agent,” as exchangeable remarks. Seen from an honor and shame perspective the midrash might be right in acknowledging that Moses’ first request is not a real excuse, but a polite way to decline.

Furthermore, the application claims that when Moses asked to be replaced, God became so angry he decided not to allow him to enter Israel. The parable also gives a rationale for this severe punishment: because

¹³⁰⁵ The six days cannot be found in the biblical text; it is part of rabbinical tradition (see, e.g., Exodus Rabbah 3:14). For a study on the background of this tradition, see Ronit Nikolsky, “‘God Tempted Moses for Seven Days’: The Bush Revelation in Rabbinic Literature,” in *The Revelation of the Name YHWH to Moses. Perspectives from Judaism, the Pagan Graeco-Roman World, and Early Christianity*, ed. George van Kooten, Themes in Biblical Narrative 9 (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 89-104. Nikolsky traces the tradition back to Seder Olam, a second century rabbinic writing.

Moses would have wasted God's time – six days according to the midrash. In the application, the judgment of God is connected to the moment in the Torah that Moses is denied access to Israel (Numbers 20:12; the incident with the water from the rock at Kadesh). So, on a meta-level, the midrash is commenting on the Torah (Nikolsky speaks of changing the Torah¹³⁰⁶), giving additional (or alternative?) reasons for Moses' penalty. On the basis of the parable, it might be surprising, too, that Moses was, eventually, assigned as leader of Israel, since the parable does not indicate that the slave is appointed *epitropos*, overseer, after all. This might cause suspicions about the original application of the parable.

From a socio-historical perspective, it might be needless to say that slaves normally did not have the possibility to choose a certain career path, nor had they the possibility to refuse orders from their masters.¹³⁰⁷ This part of the plot is probably caused by the application, the comparison with Moses. What might be realistic, though, is the abrupt and radical change in the master's attitude in this parable – from “completely loving” a certain slave to becoming angry with him and denying him entrance to his palace in the duration of a walking tour. I think that this sudden change of heart signifies the vulnerability of slaves – even beloved ones – in ancient society.¹³⁰⁸ Also, the fact that a slave who has disappointed his master is no longer welcome in inner quarters, probably implying some sort of demotion (does he have to labor on the field now?¹³⁰⁹), forms a plausible scenario. As Hidalgo de la Vega remarks: “Slaves feared corporal punishment and demotion in their duties, as they could be demoted from cook to errand boy or from being a domestic servant with certain privileges to being sent to an outlying rural farm to work as an administrator or a simple servus [...]”¹³¹⁰

Finally, from a hidden transcript perspective, an ambivalent message appears: although the parable seems to lend some autonomy to the slave, the “free choice” of the slave turns out to be a farce. He has to do what his master wants or await punishment.

6.3.5. Better One Bird in the Hand: Sifre Deuteronomy 48

The next parable is found in Sifre Deuteronomy 48 as part of a discussion on Deuteronomy 11:22a, which reads (here with context, the complete verses 22-23):

If you will diligently observe this entire commandment that I am commanding you, loving the Lord your God, walking in all his ways, and holding fast to him, then the Lord will drive out all these nations before you, and you will dispossess nations larger and mightier than yourselves.

כִּי אִם־שָׁמַרְתָּ אֶת־כָּל־הַמִּצְוָה הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוְךָ לַעֲשׂוֹתָהּ לֹא־הִבָּה אֶת־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְלַקֵּחַ בְּכָל־דְּרָכָיו וּלְדַבְּקָה־בּוֹ: וְהוֹרִישׁ יְהוָה אֶת־כָּל־הַגּוֹיִם הָאֵלֶּה מִלִּפְנֵיכֶם וַיִּרְשׁוּכֶם גּוֹיִם גְּדֹלִים וְעֲצָמִים מִכֶּם:

The question that is raised by Sifre is why it was necessary to say that one should diligently observe the commandments. The rabbis answer that it is imaginable that someone has heard the Torah but remains idle, while one must keep studying the words of the Torah and live after them. A comparison is made between money, silver, and gold on the one hand, and the Torah on the other. The Torah and the precious metals share a great value and are, as a result, difficult to acquire. However, the text also suggests that money and the Torah are easy to lose or destroy. Then a new thought is introduced by Rabbi Yishmael who quotes Deuteronomy 4:9a: “But take care and watch yourselves [litt.: your soul] closely (רָק הַשָּׁמֶר לָךְ וְשָׁמַר נַפְשְׁךָ מֵאֵד)” Directly after this quotation the parable follows:

¹³⁰⁶ Nikolsky, “God Tempted Moses,” 94.

¹³⁰⁷ An interesting case in this regard is the, admittedly early, story recounted by Livy (*Ab Urbe Condita* 8.28) about a debt-slave (*nexus*) of the Roman consul Lucius Papirius. Papirius tried to seduce his young slave and when the slave refused him, Papirius threatened him and “had him stripped and scourged” (*nudari iubet verberaque adferri*; text and translation LCL 191, 108-109).

¹³⁰⁸ For the theme of the beloved slave, see also Seder Eliyahu Rabba 7, 15, 18.

¹³⁰⁹ Compare the parable of the Unjust Steward, who is afraid that he has to work the land henceforth: “I am not strong enough to dig” (Luke 16:3).

¹³¹⁰ María José Hidalgo de la Vega, “The Flight of Slaves and Bands of *latrones* in Apuleius,” in *Fear of Slaves – Fear of Enslavement in the Ancient Mediterranean*, ed. Anastasia Serghidou (Besançon: Presses universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2007), 328.

Translation (MS)**Text¹³¹¹**

A parable:

משל

It is like a king of flesh and blood who caught a bird and gave it in the hand of his slave.

למלך בשר ודם שצד צפור ונתנה ביד עבדו

He said to him: “be careful with this bird, which is for my son.

אמר לו הוי זהיר בצפור זו לבני

If you lose it, do not think that you have lost a bird of an *issar* but [think] as if you have lost your life.”

אם אבדת אותו לא תהא סבור צפור באיסר אבדת אלא אבדת כאילו נפשך

And so it says, *This is no trifling matter for you, but rather your very life* (Deuteronomy 32:47).

וכן הוא אומר כי לא דבר רק הוא מכם דבר שאתם אומרים ריק הוא הוא חייכם

The plot of the parable is rather straightforward: a king orders his slave to guard a bird for his son. If he fails, the slave will not only have lost the bird, but also his own life, or so the king seems to imply. In other versions of the parable, the threats of the king are less opaque. We focus here¹³¹² on a possibly earlier version from Avot de Rabbi Nathan B (third century; the B version is expected to be older than the A version).¹³¹³ Contrary to Sifre Deuteronomy, Avot de Rabbi Nathan B is not a (conventional) midrash; it is one of the minor or extracanonical tractates of the Babylonian Talmud. Avot de Rabbi Nathan B is dependent on the Mishnah tractate Avot and offers commentary on that tractate (sometimes it has been characterized as a midrash on Avot).¹³¹⁴ The parable can be found in chapter 35, which discusses the study of the Torah. In the passage preceding the parable, another image is used, vaguely reminiscent of the parable of the Two Builders in the New Testament (Matthew 7:24-27): “Elisha ben Abuyah says: ‘He who studies Torah in his youth: to what can he be compared? To plaster that is pasted on on a collection of stones. Even if all the rains fall, they do not weaken it. He who studies Torah in his old age: to what can he be compared? To plaster that is pasted on on a collection of bricks. When a drop of water [comes down on it], it vanishes and goes.’”¹³¹⁵ Then the parable of interest to us follows. While this parable is related to the theme of Torah studying, it is not a logical continuation of the former passage (namely, the factor of age in Torah study). After the parable, another Rabbi and another string of thoughts is introduced.

Translation (MS)**Text¹³¹⁶**

A parable. To what can it be compared?

מלה"ד

To a king who said to his slave:

למלך שאמר לעבדו

“Preserve the bird for my son.”

שמור את הצפור לבני.

The king said to his slave:

אמר המלך לעבדו

¹³¹¹ Louis Finkelstein and Haim S. Horovitz, *Sifre on Deuteronomy* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1969), 108.

¹³¹² See also Midrash Tannaim 32:47: “Take care of this bird because I desire [to give] it to my son. If you take care of it it will go well [for you]. If not, *I will take your life on account of it.*” Translation R. Steven Notley and Ze’ev Safrai, *Parables of the Sages. Jewish Wisdom from Jesus to Rav Ashi* (Jerusalem: Carta, 2011), 220. Other versions (or references) can be found in Yalkut Shimoni 1:878; b. Menachot 99b. Also, Avot de Rabbi Nathan A has a shorter version of the parable. For that version, see Solomon Schechter, *Aboth de Rabbi Nathan: Edited from Manuscripts with an Introduction, Notes and Appendices* (Hebr.) (Vienna: Ch. D. Lippe, 1887), 78.

¹³¹³ Hermann L. Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, transl. and ed. Markus Bockmuehl, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 227

¹³¹⁴ Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 225-226; Anthony J. Saldarini, *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan (Abot de Rabbi Nathan) Version B. A Translation and Commentary*, Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 4-6

¹³¹⁵ Translation: MS. Hebrew text: Schechter, *Aboth de Rabbi Nathan*, 77. On the rabbinic and Matthew’s parable as participating in an early Jewish discourse on prioritizing knowledge and practice, see Eric Ottenheim, “Learning And Practising: Uses Of An Early Jewish Discourse In Matthew (7: 24–27) And Rabbinic Literature,” in *Interaction between Judaism and Christianity in History, Religion, Art and Literature*, ed. Marcel Poorthuis, Joshua Schwartz, and Joseph Turner, Jewish and Christian Perspectives 17 (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 45-64.

¹³¹⁶ Hebrew text: Schechter, *Aboth de Rabbi Nathan*, 77.

“If you preserve the bird, you preserve your life.	אם משמר אתה את הצפור נפשך אתה משמר.
If you lose the bird, you lose your life.”	ואם מאבד אתה את הצפור נפשך אתה מאבד.
He [the slave] preserved the bird.	שמר את הצפור.
With respect to what he preserved, the slave said:	אותו העבד על מה שישמור הוא אומר
He was preserving his life.	נפשו הוא משמר.
With respect to what he could lose, he said:	על מה שיאבד הוא אומר
He loses his life.	נפשו הוא מאבד.
So, the Holy One Blessed be He said to Israel:	כך הקב"ה אומר לישראל
“My sons, if you preserve the Torah, you preserve your	בני אם אתם משמרים את התורה נפשכם אתם
lives,	משמרים
And if you lose the Torah, you lose your lives.”	ואם אתם מאבדים את התורה נפשכם אתם מאבדים
So, everyone who preserves one word from the Torah,	כך כל המשמר דבר אחד מן התורה נפשו הוא משמר
he will preserve his life,	
And everyone who loses one word from the Torah, he	וכל המאבד דבר אחד מן התורה נפשו הוא מאבד
loses his life.	
As it is said: <i>only preserve yourself and preserve your</i>	שנאמר רק השמר לך ושמור נשפך מאד וגו'
<i>soul carefully etc. (Deuteronomy 4:9)</i>	

As mentioned, in this version of the parable, it is rather clear that, for the slave, losing the bird means he will be killed: he will lose his life. If we look at the application, we see how different the two versions of the parables are embedded. While the parable in Sifre seeks to explain Deuteronomy 11:22a with the help of a reference to Deuteronomy 4:9a – and by doing so is part of rabbinic exegesis – the Avot parable is more of a philosophical-ethical treatise on the theme of studying Torah. In its application, it becomes much clearer that losing the bird – which is like losing the slave’s life – is compared to losing words from the Torah, which is like losing one’s life. It is interesting to see how in both versions a comparison within the parable is made that links the bird, one’s life, and the Torah to each other.

The image of a bird sitting vulnerably in someone’s hand is also found in a parable from the Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael Beshallah 7 on Exodus 14:30:

*Thus the Lord Saved Israel that Day (Exodus 14:30). [It is] like a bird that is given in the hand of a man who could squeeze his hand a little [and] he would immediately choke it (כצפור שהיא נתונה ביד אדם שאם יכבוש ידו) (מעט מיד הוא חונקה). For it is said: Our soul is escaped as a bird etc. (Psalm 124:7). Our help is in the name of the Lord etc. (Psalm 124:8). Blessed be the Lord who has not given us as prey etc. (Psalm 124:6).*¹³¹⁷

In this parable, the imagery of the bird in the hand is better worked out: one imagines how a man makes a little cage with his hand with a little bird in it that can easily be squeezed and killed. Here, however, it is the Egyptians who are pressing the Israelites, and it is God who saves them. In this parable, a verse from the Psalms is quoted (124:7, cf. 11:1¹³¹⁸) that seems to inspire both our parable from Sifre and this parable from the Mekhilta:

Our soul has escaped as a bird from the snare of the fowlers;
The snare is broken, and we have escaped. (NKJV)

נפְשֵׁנוּ כְּצִפּוֹר בְּמִלְטָהּ מִפֶּחַ יוֹקְדִים הִפַּח נִשְׁפָּר וְאֶגְחוֹנוֹ בְּמִלְטָנוֹ:

The Psalm’s comparison of a bird with a human soul is firmly rooted in ancient metaphoric language, from the ancient Egyptians to the Greeks and the early Christians.¹³¹⁹ The point that seems to be made is that a (small)

¹³¹⁷ Translation: MS. Hebrew text: Jacob Z. Lauterbach, *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 1:165.

¹³¹⁸ Psalm 11:1 (NKJV): “In the Lord I put my trust; How can you say to my soul, ‘Flee as a bird to your mountain’?”

¹³¹⁹ See, for example, Morris Jastrow, Jr., Wilhelm Nowack, Louis Ginzberg and Kaufmann Kohler, “Birds,” in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, ed. Isidore Singer (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1901-1906), 3:217-219. Cf. Maria-Àngels

bird is both fragile and not so easy to replace, as is a human's soul. The connection between the parable and the previous discussion seems to be that one who does not observe the commandments endangers one's own life – one is like a slave who does not take good care of the bird that was entrusted to him/her.

From a socio-historical perspective, two elements stand out. First, the parable in Sifre suggests that the bird of the parable does not represent a big financial value – it is only worth an *issar*, a Roman copper coin, worth 1/24 of a denarius.¹³²⁰ We encounter the same idea (that a bird was not expensive) in the New Testament:

Are not two sparrows (σπουθία) sold for an *issar* (ἄσσαρίου)? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows. (Matthew 10:29-31; NRSV with small changes)¹³²¹

This passage from the Gospel of Matthew contains the same paradox as our parable from Sifre Deuteronomy: a bird, representing a small (financial) value in the eyes of humans, is compared to a human life, which is far more precious in the eyes of God.

We might wonder what, in both cases, the purpose of the buying of birds is (notice that in contrast with the New Testament passage, Sifre Deuteronomy does not specify the kind of bird). Since it is clear in our parable that the bird should stay alive, it is probable that the king wanted to keep it as a pet for his child. The generic term that is used here (צפור) – which points to a small songbird¹³²² – supports that assumption. Next to being kept as pets, (small) birds were also used to carry mail (doves), for offerings, and, of course, as food. The birds in the New Testament passage are unambiguously identified as sparrows or even little sparrows (σπουθία is a diminutive form), who were, apparently, inexpensive.¹³²³

The other element that stands out in the parable from Sifre Deuteronomy 48 is the death threat by the master. As far as I know, this is the most explicit reference to the killing of slaves by a master in the early rabbinic parables.¹³²⁴ In their collection of parables, Steven Notley and Ze'ev Safrai indicate that they experience problems with the identification of God with the king because of this threat. They write: "The king is described in the parable as capricious and behaving arbitrarily. Certainly the sage did not think that the figure was similar to the Lord."¹³²⁵ In my opinion, the king does not act arbitrarily or capriciously at all; he gives his slave a simple order and tells him in advance what punishment awaits him should he fail. I do not think that the sages would have had any problems with identifying the parable's king with God either. As I have shown above, the language used here was well-known from Scripture and midrash and was, to some extent, stereotypical. Of course, one still could call the king ferocious or harsh.¹³²⁶ Even compared to other literary ancient sources, the punishment stands out for its severity, given the modest financial value that is at stake here. We find examples of death penalties for slaves in cases of murder of a master (Tacitus, *Annales* 14.43), "damning the soul" of a god (Petronius, *Satyricon* 53), and causing the death of two other slaves (Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 8.22). Each of

Roque, "Birds: Metaphor of the Soul," *Quaderns de la Mediterrània* 12 (2010), 96-108; Beryl Rowland, *Birds with human Souls: A Guide to Bird Symbols* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1978).

¹³²⁰ On the *issar*, see Daniel Sperber, *Roman Palestine 200-400: Money and Prices* (Jerusalem: Ahva Press, 1974), 29, 227 (note 49). For another parable in which the modest value of the *issar* is underlined, see Midrash Rabbah on Songs of Songs 1.1.8.

¹³²¹ Par. Luke 12:6.

¹³²² Randall W. Younker, "Birds," in *Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. David Noel Freedman (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2000), 187-189.

¹³²³ Walter Bauer and Frederick W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature. Based on Walter Bauer's "Griechisch-deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der frühchristlichen Literatur," sixth edition*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. σπουθιον, 949.

¹³²⁴ In later rabbinic parables, slaves are sometimes really killed by their masters; see, e.g., Leviticus Rabbah 12 and Exodus Rabbah 15.

¹³²⁵ Notley and Safrai, *Parables of the Sages*, 186.

¹³²⁶ Cf. The Parable of the Talents in which the king (who, as we have argued, represents God) is called a "harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed" (Matthew 25:24//Luke 19:21). See also the parable of the Great Banquet in Matthew 22:1-14 that ends with the king throwing the guest who was not appropriately dressed into the "outer darkness."

these examples represent a situation of gravity and/or a situation of big (financial) loss. However, these are death penalties that have actually been executed. Death threats, on the other hand, can be found everywhere in ancient literature and for all kinds of (small) errors. Compare this passage from *Satyricon*:

As he was speaking, a boy dropped a cup. Trimalchio looked at him and said, “Quick, off with your own head, since you are so stupid.” The boy’s lip fell and he began to petition. “Why do you ask me?” said Trimalchio, “as if I should be hard on you! I advise you to prevail upon yourself not to be stupid.” In the end we induced him to let the boy off. As soon as he was forgiven the boy ran round the table [...].¹³²⁷

In light of passages like these, how should we evaluate the threat by our “king of flesh and blood” (who represents God in the application)? I argue that we should take this threat at face value because the application of the parable has a grim message as well. Since we know that the non-observance of the commandments leads to death, the parable “needs” a heavy punishment as well – even when that punishment itself is out of proportion. In this way, the *nimshal* and the intertextual web that is woven by the midrash penetrates the *marshal proper* and alters its logic, thereby finding support in ancient literature where big threats for small transgressions are ubiquitous.

With regard to our search for hidden transcripts, our analysis of the parable does not turn out to be fruitful. Although it lends some autonomy to the slave – who is responsible for his own well-being – its focus is on the master who decrees and threatens.

From a *Bildfeld* perspective, it might be striking that a positive image of a bird flying (not sitting in a cage or another form of captivity) equals the negative image of a soul getting lost because it “escapes” the confines of Torah-study and -observance.¹³²⁸ Another challenging problem is the counterpart of the king’s son (see the table below). I cannot imagine an obvious *comparandum* in the theology of the midrash,¹³²⁹ and must assume that it is a non-actualized element of the parable. Still, it remains puzzling why the parable needed this element in the first place.¹³³⁰

Parable	Application
King	God
Slave	Human
Guard bird	Guard Torah
- As your life [comparison within the parable]	- As your life
Escape bird	Non-observance Torah
Death slave	Death
Son	?

To conclude: the parable has a grim plot which suits its rather grim application: studying the Torah is not so much for leisure as it is a matter of life and death.

6.3.6. Cut Him to Pieces! New Testament Parables of Terror

Like the parable of The Slave who Buys a Rotten Fish (6.3.3), the parables in this section have been discussed to some extent already. Therefore, in this section, I will solely focus on the punishments mentioned in these parables. I will start my discussion with the parable of The Good and the Bad Slave Manager (Matthew 24:45-51/Luke 12:42-48).

Translation (MS)	Text (NA28)
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¹³²⁷ *Satyricon* 52 (LCL 15, 107).

¹³²⁸ Notice that the metaphor of the bird is also used in one of Plautus’ comedies to refer to a new slave’s longing for freedom: “A free man taken prisoner is like a wild bird: once he’s given a chance of escape, it’s enough, you can never catch him afterwards” *Captivi* 115 (LCL 60, 519).

¹³²⁹ Possibilities could be Israel or the earth.

¹³³⁰ It is not unimaginable that the parable first served another purpose, for instance, to elucidate the relation between body (slave) and soul (bird), cf. the parable of the Blind and the Lame guard (Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael Shirata on Exodus 15:1).

Matthew 24:51¹³³¹

And he will cut him in half and he will place his part with the hypocrites: there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Luke 12:46-48b

The master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect [him] and at an hour that he does not know, and he will cut him in half and he will place his part with the unbelievers. And that slave who knew the will of his master and did not prepare or did his will, he will be beaten many [times]; and the one who did not know, and did things worthy of stripes, he will be beaten [only] few times.

καὶ διχοτομήσει αὐτὸν καὶ τὸ μέρος αὐτοῦ μετὰ τῶν ὑποκριτῶν θήσει· ἐκεῖ ἔσται ὁ κλαυθμὸς καὶ ὁ βρυγμὸς τῶν ὀδόντων.

ἤξει ὁ κύριος τοῦ δούλου ἐκείνου ἐν ἡμέρᾳ ἣ οὐ προσδοκᾷ καὶ ἐν ᾧ ἡ οὐ γινώσκει, καὶ διχοτομήσει αὐτὸν καὶ τὸ μέρος αὐτοῦ μετὰ τῶν ἀπίστων θήσει. Ἐκεῖνος δὲ ὁ δοῦλος ὁ γνοὺς τὸ θέλημα τοῦ κυρίου αὐτοῦ καὶ μὴ ἐτοιμάσας ἢ ποιήσας πρὸς τὸ θέλημα αὐτοῦ δαρήσεται πολλὰς· ὁ δὲ μὴ γνοὺς, ποιήσας δὲ ἅξια πληγῶν δαρήσεται ὀλίγας.

When it comes to the parable of The Good and the Bad Slave Manager, the punishment for the bad slave immediately catches our eye. It is said that the slave is “cut in pieces” or “cut in two” (New English Translation). As Kloppenborg has described, a number of interpreters have tried to mitigate the meaning of these words by reading them as “give him blows” or even “cut him off” (from society).¹³³² However, as Kloppenborg concludes on the basis of a comparison of its use in other ancient sources, “[t]here are no defensible grounds for avoiding the plain meaning”;¹³³³ furthermore, he asserts that the penalty is “gruesome, but still within the realm of the realistic.”¹³³⁴ As evidence, he quotes a passage from the Babylonian Talmud, tractate Sanhedrin 52b (on murderers and “inhabitants of a seduced city”), which proves that the rabbis at least knew of the possibility to be cut in two (דעביד ליה גיסטרא – “that the be cut in half”). Maybe even more interesting for us is the addition of Luke to the parable (verses 47-48).¹³³⁵ In the first verse, it says that the slave who purposely did the wrong thing (is this the same category as the one who is cut in two?) will receive a severe beating (δέρω originally means “to skin” or “to flay”¹³³⁶), while a slave who did wrong, but not on purpose, will receive a light beating. As Elizabeth Dowling has correctly noticed, this passage suggests that “[s]laves who displease their master will receive some sort of beating regardless of whether or not they know their master’s wishes.”¹³³⁷ On this basis, Dowling is, in my opinion, right to qualify the parable from Luke as “a text of terror.”¹³³⁸

How do we interpret these brutal forms of violence? Kloppenborg simply operates from the perspective of social reality: in parables like the one from Matthew/Luke, “a realistic tone is preserved and metaphors are invoked that are based on the ordinary practices and patterns of exchange in Mediterranean society – housebreaking, and household management.”¹³³⁹ This might be true, but then we still wonder why these images

¹³³¹ I have omitted slaves beating fellow slaves (vs. 49), since I focus here on punishments of masters *vis-à-vis* their slaves.

¹³³² E.g., Otto Betz, “The Dichotomized Servant and the End of Judas Iscariot,” *Revue de Qumran* 5 (1964), 43–58; John R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable: Metaphor, Narrative, and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 100.

¹³³³ John S. Kloppenborg, “The Representation of Violence in the Synoptic Parables,” in *Synoptic Problems. Collected Essays*, ed. John S. Kloppenborg, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 329 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 617.

¹³³⁴ Kloppenborg, “The Representation of Violence in the Synoptic Parables,” 615.

¹³³⁵ The division in four kinds of slaves (1. Slaves at work – will be put in charge; 2. Slaves who beat others slaves and get drunk – will be cut in half; 3. Slaves who knew what their masters wanted, but did not do it – will receive a severe beating; 4. Slaves who did not know their master’s will and misbehaved – will receive a light beating) might remind us of similar divisions in Avot 5.10-15.

¹³³⁶ Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. “δέρω,” 380.

¹³³⁷ Elizabeth V. Dowling, “Slave Parables in the Gospel of Luke: Gospel ‘Texts of Terror’?,” *Australian Biblical Review* 56 (2008), 61-68, 64.

¹³³⁸ Dowling, “Slave Parables in the Gospel of Luke,” 64.

¹³³⁹ Kloppenborg, “The Representation of Violence in the Synoptic Parables,” 620.

of “exploitation and vulnerability of slaves”¹³⁴⁰ have to be used here; different images could have been chosen. Furthermore, heavy punishments in New Testament parables are not limited to the one discussed above. Other examples can be found in the parable of The Talents/Pounds, especially in its Matthean variant, where we read how the “worthless slave” (τὸν ἀχρεῖον δοῦλον) is cast into outer darkness (Matthew 25:30), devoid of his working capital, or, in the Gospel of the Nazarenes, thrown into prison.¹³⁴¹ Yet another example is the parable of The Unforgiving Slave (see also section 4.3.2) in which the unmerciful slave is handed over to the torturers (Matthew 18:34) after his master threatened first to sell him, his wife, and his children (Matthew 18:25). Glancy speaks in this context of the slave as a “body awaiting discipline.”¹³⁴² As mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, Luise Schottroff struggles with the interpretation of these New Testament parables. She states: “I consider it absolutely impossible that the Gospel of Luke tells these stories [e.g. the parable of The Good and the Bad Slave Manager] to God’s slaves in order to say something to them allegorically about their relationship to God as God’s slaves.”¹³⁴³ She substantiates this claim by arguing that the application of the parable of The Good and the Bad Slave Manager (vs. 48) only takes up one feature of the parable, namely, the message about great responsibilities.¹³⁴⁴ The parable of the Talents, in turn, describes, according to Schottroff, an exploitative king who represents the Roman imperium, which was “brutally erected on money and power.”¹³⁴⁵ Again, she “really cannot understand how Jesus’ messiahship could ever have been interpreted in this way.”¹³⁴⁶ While I agree that one should always keep in mind what the exact point or comparison is a parable wants to make, in my view, Schottroff too hastily moves aside the substantial corpus of slavery parables with its fixed roles (master=God, slave=human/Israel) that the ancient Jewish and Christian audiences were familiar with.¹³⁴⁷ As this chapter shows, the depiction of sometimes cruel penalties was not a “slip of the tongue” of the parable teller, but a regularly occurring motif that served to underscore the serious message that many parables conveyed. Moreover, in another series of parables, slaves turn out to be vulnerable to violence too, but not from the side of their masters (although the masters seem not very interested in their destiny), but from third parties. In the different accounts of the parable of The Tenants, we see how slaves are seized, beaten, insulted, stoned, killed, or thrown out:

Translation (MS)

Mark 12:2-5

And he ordered a slave to go to the tenants in the season, to collect from the tenants [his share] from the produce of the vineyard: and they *took* him, *beat* him and *sent* him away empty handed. And again he sent to them another slave: and this one they *beat up* [struck on the head] and *dishonored*. And another he sent: this one they *killed*; and many others, some they *beat*, some they *killed*.¹³⁴⁸

Text (NA28)

2 καὶ ἀπέστειλεν πρὸς τοὺς γεωργοὺς τῷ καιρῷ δοῦλον ἵνα παρὰ τῶν γεωργῶν λάβῃ ἀπὸ τῶν καρπῶν τοῦ ἀμπελῶνος· 3 καὶ λαβόντες αὐτὸν ἔδειραν καὶ ἀπέστειλαν κενόν· 4 καὶ πάλιν ἀπέστειλεν πρὸς αὐτοὺς ἄλλον δοῦλον· κακῆινον ἐκεφαλίωσαν καὶ ἠτίμασαν· 5 καὶ ἄλλον ἀπέστειλεν· κακῆινον ἀπέκτειναν, καὶ πολλοὺς ἄλλους, οὓς μὲν δέροντες, οὓς δὲ ἀποκτείνοντες.

¹³⁴⁰ Dowling, “Slave Parables in the Gospel of Luke,” 68.

¹³⁴¹ For a more elaborate discussion of this parable, see 5.4.1.

¹³⁴² Jennifer A. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 112.

¹³⁴³ Schottroff, *The Parables of Jesus*, 176.

¹³⁴⁴ Schottroff, *The Parables of Jesus*, 176.

¹³⁴⁵ Schottroff, *The Parables of Jesus*, 187.

¹³⁴⁶ Schottroff, *The Parables of Jesus*, 185.

¹³⁴⁷ Barbara Reid has strongly argued against such an interpretation as well (Barbara E. Reid, “Violent Endings in Matthew’s Parables and Christian Nonviolence,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 66, no. 2 [2004], 250-252). As Kloppenborg writes with respect to Matthew: “it is impossible to deny that Matthew identifies God as an agent of astonishing violence” (Kloppenborg, “The Representation of Violence in the Synoptic Parables,” 604).

¹³⁴⁸ Again, we see here how sonship and slaveship are competing metaphors (and the way heirship figures in these images), since the parable continues: “He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ But those tenants said to one another, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.’”

Matthew 21:34-36

Since the harvest season had come, he ordered his slaves to go to the tenants to collect his produce. And the tenants *took* his slaves: one the *beat*, one they *killed*, one they *stoned*. Again he ordered other slaves to go, more than the first, and they did to them in the same manner.

34 ὅτε δὲ ἤγγισεν ὁ καιρὸς τῶν καρπῶν, ἀπέστειλεν τοὺς δούλους αὐτοῦ πρὸς τοὺς γεωργοὺς λαβεῖν τοὺς καρποὺς αὐτοῦ. 35 καὶ λαβόντες οἱ γεωργοὶ τοὺς δούλους αὐτοῦ ὃν μὲν ἔδειραν, ὃν δὲ ἀπέκτειναν, ὃν δὲ ἐλιθοβόλησαν. 36 πάλιν ἀπέστειλεν ἄλλους δούλους πλείονας τῶν πρώτων, καὶ ἐποίησαν αὐτοῖς ὡσαύτως.

Luke 20:10-12

And in the season he sent a slave to the tenants so that they could give to him from the produce of the vineyard. But the tenants *beat* him and sent him away empty handed. And again he sent another slave: this one they *beat* and *dishonored* and sent away empty handed. And he again sent a third: and this one they *wounded* and *threw out* as well.

10 καὶ καιρῷ ἀπέστειλεν πρὸς τοὺς γεωργοὺς δοῦλον ἵνα ἀπὸ τοῦ καρποῦ τοῦ ἀμπελῶνος δώσουσιν αὐτῷ· οἱ δὲ γεωργοὶ ἐξαπέστειλαν αὐτὸν δείραντες κενόν. 11 καὶ προσέθετο ἕτερον πέμψαι δοῦλον· οἱ δὲ κακῶν δείραντες καὶ ἀτιμάσαντες ἐξαπέστειλαν κενόν. 12 καὶ προσέθετο τρίτον πέμψαι· οἱ δὲ καὶ τοῦτον τραυματίσαντες ἐξέβαλον.

Thomas 65¹³⁴⁹

He sent his slave so that the tenants might give him the produce of the vineyard. They *seized* his slave and *beat* him, all but *killing* him. The slave went back and told his master. The master said, “Perhaps [they] did not recognize [him].” He sent another slave. The tenants *beat* this one as well. Then the owner sent his son [...]

What stands out in this parable is the distinction that is being made by the master between his slaves (dishonorable bodies) and his son (honorable body).¹³⁵⁰ The laconicism¹³⁵¹ with which the master sends out new batches of slaves stands in stark contrast to his reaction after his son’s death. As Glancy puts it: “Not until the tenants murder the son does the vineyard owner retaliate, destroying the disrespectful tenants and deeding the vineyard to new tenants. Mark’s Jesus thus exhibits awareness of the conditions in which slaves lived—in a permanent state of dishonor, which left them vulnerable to bodily abuse.”¹³⁵² The difference in response when it is a slave, a son, or the master himself who appears is also thematized in a rabbinic parable (Sifre Deuteronomy 357). According to this parable, when a bailor himself would collect his deposit, he would be treated with respect; while if the bailor sent his son, slave, or messenger, the bailee would take very long to hand over the deposit.¹³⁵³ From a hidden transcript perspective, one might wonder how a slave would have conceived the parable of The

¹³⁴⁹ Translation: Thomas O. Lambdin, “The Gospel of Thomas (II, 2),” in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, ed. James M. Robinson (Leiden: Brill, 1984²), 125-126 (with small adaptations by MS).

¹³⁵⁰ See Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity*, 105.

¹³⁵¹ Collins suggests that the owner’s behavior might be rooted in ancient socio-historical reality. From the Zenon papyri it becomes clear that absent estate owners and their agents sometimes had a hard time collecting what they were entitled to from their tenants/workers. See Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark. A Commentary*, Hermeneia – A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 545.

¹³⁵² Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity*, 104.

¹³⁵³ Sifre Deuteronomy 357: “By the mouth of the Lord (Deuteronomy 34:5): when God takes the souls of the righteous, he takes from them with a gentle disposition. They told a parable. To what can it be compared? To someone who was [considered] trustworthy in a city and everyone deposited what they wanted to deposit with him. And when someone came to demand what was of him, he would take it out and give it to him, for he knew where it was. And when he came to send his son, his slave (עבד), or his messenger, he would turn everything upside down, for he did not know where it was. So does God take the souls of the righteous; he takes them with gentleness. And when he takes the souls of the wicked, he seizes them with evil angels, with cruel angels, in order to drag forth their soul. And so it says: *And a cruel messenger will be sent against them* (Proverbs 17:11).” Translation: MS. Hebrew text: Louis Finkelstein and Haim S. Horovitz, *Sifre on Deuteronomy* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1969), 428.

Tenants, which communicates that he and his “colleagues” are throwaway products that a master sends to die without much ado.

Reminiscent of these scenes, the parable of The Banquet in its Matthean version (22:6) also speaks about slaves who are seized (κρατήσαντες), mistreated (ὑβρίσαν) and killed (ἀπέκτειναν). It is interesting to see how the abusing and killing of slaves is the third element of an enumeration in which the first two elements seem so trivial (making up excuses to not go to a party), while the third is so gruesome.¹³⁵⁴ The destiny of the slaves seems not to account for anything in the parable. As Dowling has stated: “[t]he bodies of the slaves in these parables [...] are vulnerable, subject to violence and exploitation.”¹³⁵⁵ Glancy has stressed that while the slaves are, in the end, ordered to gather beggars and the poor to sit at his table, the host of the banquet never comes up with the idea to let his slaves sit down to eat with him – they are outside the “game of honor,” as she calls it.¹³⁵⁶

There is also a variant of the parable of The Banquet in Luke 14 (vs. 15-24) and in the Gospel of Thomas (chapter 64), but those parables do not contain any violence to slaves. That Matthew does contain violence might be due to the connection the gospel makes with the prophetic tradition from the Hebrew Bible, in which prophets (who often carried the title “slave of God” in the Hebrew Bible) also had to experience violence and humiliation as part of their calling. The importance of this prophetic tradition has first been identified by Odil Hannes Steck, who summarized the tradition in four points: (1) the history of Israel is one of an often disobedient people; (2) God sends messengers, prophets, to turn Israel around; (3) Israel neglects these messengers or even mistreats and kills them; and (4) God has to punish Israel for its wrongdoings.¹³⁵⁷ Similar in some respects to the parable of The Tenants is a rabbinic parable from the Mekhilta on Exodus 15:17-18. That parable reads (here in the version of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai):

They told a parable. To what is can it be compared? To robbers who entered inside the palace of the king. They seized some his slaves (תפסו מעבדיו), and they killed some of them (והרגו מהן), and they impaled some of them (וצלבו מהן), and they burned some of them (ושרפו מהן), and they destroyed his palace. After some time the king came and sat in judgement over them. He seized some of them, and he killed some of them, and he impaled some of them, and the burned some of them. And he put his palace in place, and his reign was known in the world.¹³⁵⁸

What we see in this parable is how, in the absence of the king, the slaves have to carry all the burden of an attack of evildoers (compare the high priest’s slave we mentioned in 6.2). As in the parable of The Tenants, different slaves suffer different kinds of violence (seizing, killing, impaling, burning). Just like the presence of the vineyard owner was necessary to restore order, the return of the king similarly ushers in a moment of reckoning. What is remarkable is how the penalties of the king mirror the violence of the robbers.

What the New Testament “parables of terror” have in common is that extreme forms of physical violence seem to be mentioned *only in passing*.¹³⁵⁹ While the punishments in the parable of The Slave who Buys

¹³⁵⁴ While Luz calls this transition “abrupt” for modern readers, he speculates that an ancient audience – “familiar with Jewish parable tradition” – would not have been that surprised, as they were known with (1) exaggerations from the parables; and (2) “the Deuteronomistic tradition regarding prophet murders” (Luz, *Matthew* 21-28, 53).

¹³⁵⁵ Dowling, “Slave Parables in the Gospel of Luke,” 68.

¹³⁵⁶ Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity*, 110.

¹³⁵⁷ See Odil Hannes Steck, *Israel und das Gewaltsame Geschick der Propheten. Untersuchungen zur Überlieferung des deuteronomistischen Geschichtsbildes im Alten Testament, Spätjudentum und Urchristentum*, Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament 23 (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1967), especially 6-80. Compare Ivor H. Jones, *The Matthean Parables. A Literary & Historical Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 403-404; Reid, “Violent Endings,” T237-255, esp. 241ff; Michael Knowles, *Jeremiah in Matthew’s Gospel: The Rejected Prophet Motif in Matthean Redaction*, JSNT Supplement Series 68 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993).

¹³⁵⁸ Translation MS. Hebrew text: Manuscript Firkovich, 26b (F1), as quoted by Lieve Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhiltot*, 331-333. See the same pages for the parallel version in the Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael (in that version it is less clear whether the staff of the king exists of slaves).

¹³⁵⁹ This is not limited to violence towards slaves, but also applies for free people, e.g., the killing of the son in the parable of the Tenants (Mark 12:8 and parallels), the violence towards the Tenants themselves (Mark 12:9 and parallels), the king’s vengeance towards his people in the parable of the Talents (Luke 19:27), the torturing of the rich man in the parable of the Rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:24)

a Rotten Fish serve a clear exegetical purpose, most parables mentioned above could have easily been imagined without or with softer punishments. Moreover, as some exegetes have noticed, sometimes the parables seem to approve of the violence that occurs in their narratives.¹³⁶⁰ Should these punishments, then, be explained out of their “normality” in ancient Palestine – as Glancy has suggested?¹³⁶¹ Or should we assume with Kloppenborg that “[e]xcessive cruelty and humiliation belonged to heroes and gods”?¹³⁶² Applicable for both these explanations is that it is remarkable that early rabbinic sources are rather silent about bodily punishments for slaves, as are most of the rabbinic parables (see the five previous sections in which explicit physical violence is rare). That is why I would like to pursue a more theological line of reasoning, for which I gratefully make use of an article by Klyne R. Snodgrass.¹³⁶³

Like many other scholars we came across in this section, Snodgrass acknowledges that parables use a “violent language” that is nowadays “not politically correct.”¹³⁶⁴ Snodgrass tries to explain this language by referring to the prophetic tradition that Stock identified. Snodgrass rhetorically asks: “What prophet did not use strong, violent language to confront the nation?”¹³⁶⁵ As examples, he refers to, e.g., Hosea 13:8 (“I [God] will fall upon them [Israel] like a bear robbed of her cubs, and will tear open the covering of their heart; there I will devour them like a lion, as a wild animal would mangle them.”); Jeremiah 7:32-34 (33: “The corpses of this people will be food for the birds of the air, and for the animals of the earth; and no one will frighten them away.”); and Isaiah 2:19 (“Enter the caves of the rocks and the holes of the ground, from the terror of the Lord, and from the glory of his majesty, when he rises to terrify the earth.”). In connection to the prophetic tone of the parables, Snodgrass emphasizes that the language of violence that the parables employ serves to emphasize the gravity of their message: “The parables do not teach or condone violence; they use strong language to warn and shock people into taking their situation seriously.”¹³⁶⁶ Finally, he argues that the New Testament parables are foremost a call to action, for which he uses, in my view, the very appropriate term, “obedient actions.”¹³⁶⁷ Luz has called this perspective with regard to the gospel of Matthew an “[e]schatology in the service of ethics.”¹³⁶⁸

While I do not entirely agree with Snodgrass that the parables only use language of violence to warn and to shock (I assert that the ancient audience did think of God as really capable of violent punishments), I do think that his line of reasoning better addresses the differences between rabbinic and Christian parables. The embedding of most rabbinic parables – without the direct eschatological threat and the prophetic warnings that relate to this threat – would not require the fierce images that the gospels did demand. However, before coming to a final conclusion on this issue, I would like to review a series of Christian and rabbinic parables that either thematize the use of food in the relation between slave and master (6.4), or the use and necessity of rewards (6.5).

6.4. Using Food as Carrot and Stick

In this section, I want to discuss three parables in which God’s providence is used as a double-edged sword: it can be wielded to reward and to punish. To formulate it less poetically: God’s care for his people can be used to “blackmail” his people into obedience: if they do not follow the rules, they will not share in his abundance. As Kyle Harper writes with regard to “real” Roman masters: “Food was used to discipline the slaves to intensive labor: a mistress swore to her slave-girl that unless she completed her quota of work she would go to sleep

¹³⁶⁰ While he argues against this interpretation, Michael Robert Desjardins writes about “violence-promoting components” in the parables (*Peace, Violence and the New Testament* [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997], 45). Ernest van Eck even writes that the parables (specifically the Tenants) seem to condone violence (Review of *Stories with Intent, Review of Biblical Literature*, published online October 18, 2008, <https://www.bookreviews.org/bookdetail.asp?TitleId=6403>).

¹³⁶¹ E.g., Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity*, 128.

¹³⁶² Kloppenborg, “The Representation of Violence in the Synoptic Parables,” 607.

¹³⁶³ Klyne R. Snodgrass, “Key Questions on the Parables of Jesus,” *Review and Expositor* 109 (2012), 173-185.

¹³⁶⁴ Snodgrass, “Key Questions on the Parables of Jesus,” 182.

¹³⁶⁵ Snodgrass, “Key Questions on the Parables of Jesus,” 182.

¹³⁶⁶ Snodgrass, “Key Questions on the Parables of Jesus,” 182. Similarly, Reid emphasizes that violence has its place in the end-time and not in the present. Reid, “Violent Endings,” 253.

¹³⁶⁷ Snodgrass, “Key Questions on the Parables of Jesus,” 174, 183.

¹³⁶⁸ Luz, *Matthew 21-28*, 288.

without food.”¹³⁶⁹ And he concludes on this topic: “What our authors meant by the claim that masters ‘often’ used hunger against their slaves is unknowable, but the certain fact is that hunger was potentially a blunt, bloodless weapon in the hand of the master.”¹³⁷⁰

6.4.1. Sifre Deuteronomy 40

The first parable comes from Sifre Deuteronomy 40. This pisqa is devoted to Deuteronomy 11:12, a verse that describes the land of Israel. According to this verse, Israel is “a land that the Lord your God looks after. The eyes of the Lord your God are always on it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year.”¹³⁷¹ In the pisqa, the different clauses that this verse consists of are discussed in succession. The parable is part of the fourth section of the pisqa, which is focused on the last clause of verse Deuteronomy 11:12: “from the beginning of the year to the end of the year.” In the midrash, the meaning of this clause is debated. A first interpretation is that it is determined already in the beginning of the year how much rain will fall upon the land and how much the sun will shine for the rest of the year. After a rather elliptic second interpretation, the third interpretation remarks that no crops are in the fields for the whole year; therefore, the midrash concludes that the blessing extends to the crops in the houses, barns, and storehouses.¹³⁷² In a brief argument, pervaded with biblical quotes, the midrash shows that it is in God’s power to bless and curse (for example, with vermin, rot, and sourness) the fields and (store)houses. Then, without a preceding question or statement, the parable is introduced:

Translation (MS)	Text ¹³⁷³
Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai said:	רבי שמעון בן יוחאי אומר
“A parable. It is like a king of flesh and blood who had many sons and slaves.	משל למלך בשר ודם שהיו לו בנים ועבדים הרבה
And they were nourished and supported from his hand,	והיו נוזנים ומתפרנסים מתחת ידו
And the doors [‘keys’] of his storehouse were in his hands.	ומפתחות של אוצר בידו
When they did his will he opened the storehouse and they ate and they were sated.	כשהם עושים רצונו הוא פותח את האוצר והם אוכלים ושבעים
But when they did not do his will, he closed the storehouse and they died from starvation.	וכשאין עושים רצונו הוא נועל את האוצר והם מתים הרעב
So, [it is with] Israel.	כך ישראל
When they do the will of God, <i>The Lord will open for you his rich storehouse, the heavens</i> (Deuteronomy 28:12, NRSV).	כשעושים רצונו של מקום פתח ה' לך את אוצרו הטוב את השמים
And when they do not do his will, what will he say?	וכשאננם עושים רצונו מה הוא אומר
<i>For then the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you and he will shut up the heavens, so that there will be no rain</i> (Deuteronomy 11:17, NRSV).”	וחרה אף ה' הכם ועצר את השמים ולא יהיה מטר

In the legendary story that follows the parable, and that is also attributed to Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai, Isaiah 1:19-20a is quoted: “If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword [...]” This quote from Isaiah succinctly summarizes the message of

¹³⁶⁹ Harper, *Slavery in the Late Roman World*, 237 (with reference to John Chrysostom, *Ad populum Antiochenum* 14.1).

¹³⁷⁰ Harper, *Slavery in the Late Roman World*, 238.

¹³⁷¹ The whole passage reads: “For the land that you are about to enter to occupy is not like the land of Egypt, from which you have come, where you sow your seed and irrigate by foot like a vegetable garden. But the land that you are crossing over to occupy is a land of hills and valleys, watered by rain from the sky, a land that the Lord your God looks after. The eyes of the Lord your God are always on it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year.”

¹³⁷² E.g., it refers to Deuteronomy 28:8: “The Lord will command the blessing upon you in your barns (בִּצְמִיךְ), and in all that you undertake.”

¹³⁷³ Louis Finkelstein and Haim S. Horovitz, *Sifre on Deuteronomy* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1969), 83.

the parable. The parable shows that it is in God's hands to give or not to give food. The food of the storehouse in the parable is compared with the rain that comes from the heavenly storehouse. It also shows God's motivation to open his store: his providence is dependent upon the obedience of the "sons and slaves."¹³⁷⁴ It is important to notice the crude language of the parable: when the king has locked the storehouses, the sons and slaves will "die of starvation" (מתים הרעב). It is needless to say that the lack of rain in the application would, in the end, have the same result: the lack of rain (and, thus, crops) would lead to famine – a terrible but regular phenomenon in ancient civilizations.¹³⁷⁵ In this parable, the storehouse plays an important role, a feature that we also find in the New Testament parable of The Rich Fool (Luke 12:13-21). In this Christian parable, the storehouse stands for the treasures a human collects in his life.¹³⁷⁶

How does the parable from Sifre Deuteronomy relate to social reality? Since climatic instability and regular droughts were to a great extent part of normal (Galilean) life,¹³⁷⁷ Garnsey argues that Mediterranean farmers had adopted methods of risk-reduction like mixed farming.¹³⁷⁸ Gildas Hamel concludes regarding Roman Palestine that another method of risk-reduction for individual farmers was to set aside each year a part of the harvest for more difficult years to come – although it was difficult to store crops for more than a year.¹³⁷⁹ However, the more probable background for the parable in Sifre Deuteronomy are the grain storages that were maintained by city administrations. As Hamel asserts: "Grain inventories were a very important aspect of city politics in the ancient world."¹³⁸⁰ During droughts and/or famines, it was the task of (local) political leaders to obtain grain from elsewhere and distribute it amongst the people. During the drought that Josephus dated at 45 or 46-48, it was Queen Helena (Helena of Adiabene) who took care of this important responsibility:

It was in the administration of Tiberius Alexander that the great famine occurred in Judea, during which Queen Helena brought grain from Egypt for large sums and distributed it to the needy.¹³⁸¹

A famous biblical account of a king and his grain stores, which may function as an intertext, can of course be found in the story of Joseph.¹³⁸²

¹³⁷⁴ Compare a parable in Sifre Numbers 94 (only in the Vatican text) in which both sons and slaves steal, bring what they have stolen to the king, and the king accepts the stolen goods. The king (=God) tolerates their behavior, just like God tolerates the behavior of his people and stays, by means of the Shekhina, in their midst (Numbers 11:20). For an interpretation of this parable, see Arie C. Kooyman, *Als een koning van vlees en bloed. Rabbijnse parabellen in midrasjiem* (Baarn: Ten Have: 1997), 97-98.

¹³⁷⁵ David Flusser, "Qumran and the Famine During the Reign of Herod," *Israel Museum Journal* 6 (1987), 7-16; Zeev Safrai, *The Economy of Roman Palestine* (London/New York: Routledge, 1994), 64, 125 (reference to Herod's famine in, e.g., Josephus, *Antiquitates judaicae* 14.299-316); David A. Fiensy, *The Social History of Palestine in the Herodian Period: The Land is Mine*, Studies in the Bible & Early Christianity 20 (Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1991), 99.

¹³⁷⁶ Cf. Matthew 6:26 ("Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns [οὐδὲ συνάγουσιν εἰς ἀποθήκας], and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?"), par. Luke 12:28. In other sayings, the storehouses in the New Testament seem to mainly symbolize the place where God/Jesus gathers the humans during the final judgment. See Matthew 3:12 ("His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary [καὶ συνάξει τὸν σῖτον αὐτοῦ εἰς τὴν ἀποθήκην]; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."), par. Luke 3:17. Cf. Matthew 13:30 - the parable of The Tares among the Wheat ("Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn [τὸν δὲ σῖτον συναγάγετε εἰς τὴν ἀποθήκην μου]).

¹³⁷⁷ See Morten H. Jensen, "Climate, Droughts, Wars, and Famines in Galilee as a Background for Understanding the Historical Jesus," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 131, no. 2 (2012), 314-315.

¹³⁷⁸ Peter Garnsey, *Famine and Food Supply in the Graeco-Roman World. Responses to Risk and Crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 49.

¹³⁷⁹ Gildas Hamel, *Poverty and Charity in Roman Palestine, First Three Centuries C.E.*, Near Eastern Studies 23 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 49-50.

¹³⁸⁰ Hamel, *Poverty and Charity*, 51.

¹³⁸¹ Josephus, *Antiquitates judaicae* 20.101 (LCL 456, 55).

¹³⁸² Especially Genesis 41. In the story of Joseph, storehouses are, however, only indirectly referred to.

The connection between kings and their storehouses with grain, and God and his storehouses with rain, is firmly established in the Hebrew Bible. The verse Deuteronomy 28:12 – which is used in the parable and serves as its metaphorical point of departure – might be the best example of this. Some other examples are Job 38:22-23, Psalm 135:7, and Jeremiah 51:16 (//Jeremiah 10:13).

From the perspective of hidden transcripts, not much can be said with respect to the parable from Sifre Deuteronomy. As shown, the parable is part of a larger *Bildfeld* in which the inhabitants of the earth are the passive recipients (sons and slaves taken together here) of the benevolence of God. The only way to increase their chances to share in the food and treasures God has stored is by following his commands. However, the connection between behavior and reward or punishment in the form of (lack of) food is not always clear, as the next series of parables from the Talmud shows.

6.4.2. y. Ta'anit 1 and b. Ta'anit 25b

The following parable is part of a discussion in the Mishnah about fasting and rain, which may remind us of the parable about the porridge that spoils in the rain (6.3.2). While the parable stems from the Babylonian Talmud, which has a late date, in this case, I find it plausible that the parable has older roots. Not only is the parable ascribed to a first century sage, Shmuel the Little,¹³⁸³ but a simpler predecessor of the parable can be found in the Jerusalem Talmud. We start with the discussion of that passage. The problem that the rabbis discuss in the Jerusalem Talmud is when one should add “Power of rains” to the Amidah (an important prayer of Jewish liturgy¹³⁸⁴) during the Feast of Sukkot: on the first day, the last day, or some other moment? The Feast of Sukkot is a harvest festival that ushers in the winter and with it the rain season. The formula of the “Power of rains,” said in the second benediction of the Amidah, is only used in this season.¹³⁸⁵ To answer the question of when one should add “Power of rains,” the rabbis take up the following imagery:

Another explanation: At the moment that the slave serves all the wishes of his master, he asks for his ration (*paras*) from him (הוא תובע פרסו ממנו). Rabbi Yehoshua said to him: “Is it not from the moment that the slave serves all the wishes of his master and the spirit of his master is pleased with him (וריה רבו נוחה הימנו) that he asks [his portion] from him? Another explanation: The slave only asks for his ration when his ration is due (אין העבד תובע פרסו אלא סמוך לפרסו). (y. Ta'anit 1, 63c)¹³⁸⁶

In this passage, three positions are set out that correspond with three positions regarding the issue from which moment the formula “Power of rains” has to be added to the Amidah (which is the subject of debate after the simile). I have displayed these three positions below schematically.

The slave asks for his ration:

1) When he serves his master

When does Israel start to pray for rain

During all days of Sukkot (so already from the start of the festival week)

¹³⁸³ Shmuel the Little belonged to the second generation Tannaim (he worked between 90-130 AD). See, e.g., Wilhelm Bacher, *Die Agada der Tannaiten. Erster Band: Von Hillel bis Akiva. Von 30 vor bis 135 nach der gew. Zeitrechnung* (Straßburg: Verlag von Karl Trübner, 1903²), 370-373; Shulamis Frieman, *Who's Who in the Talmud* (Northvale: Jason Aronson Inc., 1995), 305-306.

¹³⁸⁴ It reads: “1. You are forever mighty, Adonai: giving life to the dead, You are a mighty savior. [From *Sh'mini Atseret* to the first day of Passover, add: 2. You cause the wind to blow and you cause the rain to fall. From the first day of Passover to *Sh'mini Atseret*, add: 3. You bring down the dew.] 4. You sustain life with kindness, giving life to the dead with great mercy, supporting the fallen, healing the sick, and freeing the captive, and keeping the faith with sleepers in the dust. 5. Who is like You, master of might, and who resembles You, a King who causes death and causes life, and causes salvation to flourish! [From *Rosh Hashanah* to *Yom Kippur*, add: 6. Who is like you, father of mercy, who in mercy remembers his creatures for life.] 7. You faithfully give life to the dead. 8. Blessed are You, Adonai, who gives life to the dead.” Translation: Lawrence A. Hoffman, ed., *My People's Prayer Book. Traditional Prayers, Modern Commentaries. Volume 2: The Amidah* (Woodstock: Jewish Light Publishing, 1998), 57-58.

¹³⁸⁵ See Heinrich W. Guggenheimer, *The Jerusalem Talmud. Second Order: Mo'ed. Tractates Ta'anit, Megillah, Hagigah, and Mo'ed Qatan (Mašqin)*, *Studia Judaica* 85 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2015), 3n1.

¹³⁸⁶ Translation: MS.

- | | |
|--|---|
| 2) When he has served his master and his master is satisfied | As 1) but with the absence of rain during Sukkot seen as God's approval ¹³⁸⁷ |
| 3) Only close to the time when the ration is due | At the end of Sukkot (which symbolically starts the rain season) |

What we are interested in here is not so much the issue of praying for rain as the image that is used, namely, that of a slave who asks his master for a ration of food (פרס; we will come back to this word below).

Let us turn again to tractate Ta'anit, but now in the Babylonian Talmud (25b), where the same imagery is used.¹³⁸⁸ There we read the following passage in which the tannaitic teacher Shmuel the Little tells several parables:

Translation (MS)	Text
Shmuel the Little decreed a fast and rain came down for them before sunrise.	שמואל הקטן גזר תעניתא וירדו להם גשמים קודם הנץ החמה
The people thought that it was because of the praiseworthiness of the community.	כסבורין העם לומר שבחו של צבור הוא
He said to them: "I will tell you a parable. To what can it be compared?"	אמר להם אמשול לכם משל למה הדבר דומה
To a slave who asked a ration from his master.	לעבד שמבקש פרס מרבו
He [the master] said to them: 'Give [it] to him, so that I will not hear his voice.'"	אמר להם תנו לו ואל אשמע קולו
Again, Shmuel the Little decreed a fast and rain came down for them after sunset.	שוב שמואל הקטן גזר תעניתא וירדו להם גשמים לאחר שקיעת החמה
The people thought that it was because of the praiseworthiness of the community.	כסבורים העם לומר שבחו של צבור הוא
Shmuel said to them that it was not because of the praiseworthiness of the community.	אמר להם שמואל לא שבחו של צבור הוא
"Rather, I will tell you a parable. To what can it be compared?"	אלא אמשול לכם משל למה הדבר דומה
To a slave who asked a ration from his master.	לעבד שמבקש פרס מרבו
And he [the master] said to them: 'Wait until he pines away and suffers and after that, so give it to him.'"	ואמר להם המתינו לו עד שיתמקמק ויצטער ואחר כך תנו לו
And according to Shmuel the Little, the praiseworthiness of the community, how can it be imagined?	ולשמואל הקטן שבחו של צבור היכי דמי
[When] he says [the prayer]: "He who blows the wind" and a wind blows; [when] he says [the prayer]: "He who makes the rain come down" and it rains.	אמר משיב הרוח ונשב זיקא אמר מוריד הגשם ואתא מיטרא

These parables are interesting in different respects. First of all, they are not exegetical parables, but parables that fall in the category of what Eric Ottenheim calls "legal parables."¹³⁸⁹ Second, Shmuel the Little's use of parables displays both humor and a subtle critique of popular religious reasoning (and of the use of parables as well?). Let us investigate what happens here. The issue that is at stake here is slightly different from our passage in the Yerushalmi. Again, rain is equated with a ration of food (פרס) and the people with a slave, but now the question is how one should envision the causal relationship between fasting and the moment of rainfall. In the first part of the passage, Shmuel the Little has ordained a fast for rain, and rain fell before sunrise. The people – in line with the Mishnah – interpret this as a good sign, a sign of merit of the community. Shmuel warns the people against making too hasty conclusions by comparing God with a master who does not want to listen for long to

¹³⁸⁷ Guggenheimer, *The Jerusalem Talmud*, 4n8.

¹³⁸⁸ In b. Ta'anit 19b comparable parables about rations for slaves can be found, but these are ascribed to a later Tanna, Rabbi Eleazar ben Perata (second/third century, see Bacher, *Die Agada der Tannaiten. Erster Band*, 403).

¹³⁸⁹ See our discussion in 6.3.2.

the begging of his slave and, thus, gives him his ration right away. With this explanation, the positive explanation of the early rain is refuted or at least nuanced.¹³⁹⁰ But then another situation is recounted in the passage: one time Shmuel ordered a fast and rain fell only after sunset, at the end of the day. The people reasoned that the rain fell because of their fasting; in other words, they did a good job. Again, Shmuel is there to spoil the party with a parable: he compares this situation with a master who lets his slave wait for his piece of bread to teach him submissiveness. The conclusion of both parables together is that you should not ascribe the moment at which rain falls to the praiseworthiness of the community. The effectiveness of the fasting itself is not at stake, but the direct relation between the moment of rain and the decision of God to honor his people's request is problematized. The third step the Talmud takes is to ask what would account for a "real" connection between the moment of rain falling and the merit of the community. According to Shmuel, the only possibility for that would be in a prayer: when one prays for rain and it immediately starts to rain. At that moment, the connection between the prayer and the natural phenomenon is so obvious that even Shmuel acknowledges its causality.

In these parables, it is clear that Shmuel shows himself to be skeptical about the merits of the community and warns about having a more modest attitude. So, although the rhetorical setting is different (exegesis versus practical discussion of rules), we could read Shmuel the Little's parables as a nuance to the parable from Sifre Deuteronomy we discussed in the previous section. Notice, however, that also the imagery has changed partially:

Sifre Deuteronomy 40

<i>Parable</i>	<i>Application</i>
King	God
Sons and slaves	Israel
Doing his will	Doing his will
Food	Rain
Storehouse	Heavens

b. Ta'anit 25b

<i>Parable</i>	<i>Application</i>
Master	God
Slave	Community
Asking (begging)	Fasting
Ration	Rain

In this scheme, the element of a storehouse has been omitted, and the following of commandments is swapped for the act of begging. This change is noteworthy, and the most probable explanation that I find for it is the demands of the parable imagery, which is chosen because of the real-life problem it tries to encapsulate. The situation envisioned in the Talmud is not that of the "normal" state of affairs in which the people of Israel follow the commandments and God gives food; rather, it is one of a crisis in which a lack of rain might cause a drought and, subsequently, a famine. The only thing that the local community can do is to "wear out" God (cf. the parable of The Unjust Judge¹³⁹¹). Whether or not the community has followed the Torah in the first place is not of interest anymore; now the only thing it can do is to repent and beg for mercy. It is of great importance that the most obvious parable-image to work with at such a moment is that of a slave begging his master, i.e., the situation of a powerless person (if a person at all) begging to a person who governs his life (cf. the begging of the Unforgiving Slave in Matthew 18). From a hidden transcript point of view, it is interesting to see that this parable is not a critique of God's way with the world; it is a description of the state of affairs. The same seems to apply to the parable; the crude didactics of the master (or his remark that he does not want to hear the whining of the slave for the whole day) are not criticized in any way. At the same time, one may wonder whether the acts of the master in the parable would be much appreciated by an average ancient audience.

¹³⁹⁰ Bacher writes that Shmuel warned the community to be modest ("mit denen [die Gleichnisse] er die Gemeinde zur Bescheidenheit mahnte"); see Bacher, *Die Agada der Tannaiten. Erster Band*, 371.

¹³⁹¹ Luke 18:1-8. Cf. the article by Annette Merz, "How a Woman Who Fought Back and Demanded Her Rights Became an Importunate Widow: The Transformations of a Parable of Jesus," in *Jesus from Judaism to Christianity: Continuum Approaches to the Historical Jesus*, ed. Tom Holgrén, Library of New Testament Studies 352 (London: T&T Clark International, 2007), 49–86. Cf. Jonathan Pater, Albertina Oegema and Martijn Stoutjesdijk, "It Is Like a Woman Who? Women in Early Rabbinic and Early Christian Parables," in *Parables in Changing Contexts: Interreligious and Cultural Approaches to the Study of Parables*, ed. Eric Ottenheijm and Marcel Poorthuis, Jewish and Christian Perspectives (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 236–264.

From a socio-historical perspective, the Hebrew word used for ration (פרס) is relevant. In several translations, this word is translated with “gratification” or “reward.”¹³⁹² This would, however, make less sense in light of the application and the *Bildfeld* in which the parable operates. Moreover, in general, it is not the most common translation of the word.¹³⁹³ The word is derived from the verb “to break” or “to split” and refers to the breaking of bread. According to Jastrow, the secondary use of the word (based on its initial meaning) is the “fare received by members of the household or by slaves.”¹³⁹⁴ Although I am not entirely convinced of his argument,¹³⁹⁵ the פרס is, in this case, a small amount of money that has to be used for food,¹³⁹⁶ and is not a “for-all-purposes” usable “gratification” as many translations have it. Finally, in the second parable, the order of the master is to let the slave “pine away” or “starve” (שיתמקמק).¹³⁹⁷ From a *Bildfeld* perspective, we must conclude that the image used in the parables is that of a hungry – possibly starving – slave who asks his master for his food ration so that he may live. It is this image that is compared to God and his people, who beg him for invigorative rain. The parables paint a not very attractive image of God: he is a master who puts his own interests first (he does not want to hear the voice of his slave) or lets his slave suffer without any clear reason.

In the third and last parable of this section, we see that one cannot only distinguish *when* a master gives food, but also *what* he gives.

6.4.3. Gospel of Philip 80-81

For the last parable in this section, which builds on the imagery of the previous two, we consult the apocryphal Gospel of Philip, a gospel that was discovered at Nag Hammadi (Egypt) in 1945. The book is written in Coptic, just like the better-known Gospel of Thomas; together they were bound in the same codex. The book is dated to the third century by most scholars, and derives its name from the fact that Philip is the only disciple that is explicitly mentioned in the text.¹³⁹⁸ The Gospel of Philip does not form a continuous story; instead, it consists of more or less independent sayings, stories, and dialogues that often lack embedding and explanation.¹³⁹⁹ Of these text units, only some (17, of which 8 are not found in the New Testament) have been attributed to Jesus. The content of the Gospel of Philip, similar to many other texts that have been found at Nag Hammadi, can be

¹³⁹² Soncino uses “gratification”; Steinsaltz chooses “reward.” For the latter see Steinsaltz, *Koren Talmud Bavli. Ta’anit. Megilla*, 145.

¹³⁹³ In this regard, the article “Food, status, and the *peculium* of agricultural slaves” by Ulrike Roth makes an interesting case. She argues that the Roman *peculium* originally referred to the ownership of some cattle by slaves in order to produce food for themselves (280).

¹³⁹⁴ Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (Leipzig: W. Drugulin, 1903), s.v. פרס, 1233.

¹³⁹⁵ Most of the textual evidence he refers to can also simply be translated as food portion.

¹³⁹⁶ Cf. the Greek term for food portion (τροφή), used in the Parable of the Wise and the Unwise Slave (Matthew 24:45).

¹³⁹⁷ Jastrow translates with “until he is made submissive (by starvation) and feels pain” (Jastrow, *A Dictionary*, s.v. מקמק, 832).

¹³⁹⁸ Wesley W. Isenberg, “The Gospel of Philip,” in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, ed. James M. Robinson (Leiden: Brill, 1984), 131; Hans-Martin Schenke, “Das Evangelium nach Philippus (NHC II,3),” in *Nag Hammadi Deutsch: Studienausgabe. NHC I–XIII, Codex Bezae Cantabrigiae 1 und 4, Codex Tchacos 3 und 4*, ed. Ursula Ulrike Kaiser and Hans-Gebhard Bethge, 3rd ed. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 141; Hans-Martin Schenke, “The Gospel of Philip,” in *New Testament Apocrypha, Volume One: Gospels and Related Writings*, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 179-187.

¹³⁹⁹ Martha Lee Turner has argued that the gospel is more of a compilation than a literary composition in its own right. See her *The Gospel According to Philip: The Sources and Coherence of an Early Christian Collection*, Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies 38 (Leiden: Brill, 1996); Bentley Layton has called the gospel an “anthology” in “The Gospel According to Philip, A Valentinian Anthology,” in *The Gnostic Scriptures*, ed. Bentley Layton (London: SCM Press, 1987), 325-353.

characterized as gnostic,¹⁴⁰⁰ more specifically, Valentinian.¹⁴⁰¹ When it comes to slaves and slavery language, the Gospel of Philip contains some rather interesting sayings, which illustrate the gnostic character of the text. Take, for example, this quotation (77/110a):

He who has knowledge of the truth is a free man, but the free man does not sin, for *He who sins is the slave of sin* (John 8:34). Truth is the mother, knowledge the father. Those who think that sinning does not apply to them are called “free” by the world. Knowledge of the truth merely makes such people arrogant, which is what the words, *it makes them free* (John 8:32) mean. It even gives them a sense of superiority over the whole world. But *love builds up* (1 Corinthians 8:1). In fact, he who is really free, through knowledge, is a slave, because of love for those who have not yet been able to attain to the freedom of knowledge. Knowledge makes them capable of becoming free.¹⁴⁰²

In this passage, it becomes clear how gnostic texts like the Gospel of Thomas, on the one hand, assign great value to knowledge or truth but, on the other hand, cloak their message in enigmatic wording. Is the person that has knowledge free, as the beginning of the passage says, or is he still a slave, as the second part indicates? Perhaps the key to understanding this passage is to assume that the free person becomes a slave through knowledge by free volition. Compare 1 Corinthians 9:19: “For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them” (for a more elaborate discussion on the relation between the Gospel of Philip and 1 Corinthians, see below).¹⁴⁰³ Becoming a slave voluntarily both affirms and denies the autonomy of the slave. Also notice how this passage tries to make its point by quoting from and building on quotations from the New Testament.

Let us turn now to the parable (80-81/119). Even more than the parable from the Shepherd of Hermas, this parable has been overlooked by parable scholars.¹⁴⁰⁴ To the best of my knowledge, there do not exist any separate studies of this parable even though, from both content and form, is it evident that this a full-fledged parable in the Christian and rabbinic parable-telling tradition. The text of the parable is as follows:

There was a householder¹⁴⁰⁵ who had every conceivable thing, be it son or slave or cattle or dog or pig or corn [or] barley or chaff or grass or castor oil or meat and acorn. [Now he was] a sensible fellow, and he

¹⁴⁰⁰ For the debate on the term “gnostic” see, e.g., Michael Allen Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism.” An Argument for Dismantling A Dubious Category* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); for a description of the debate that followed, see Todd E. Klutz, “Re-Reading 1 Corinthians after Rethinking ‘Gnosticism,’” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 26, no. 2 (2003), 193-216, esp. 201-206. In this section, I use the term “gnostic” in a rather limited sense, as referring to those groups or texts that seem to distinguish different levels of knowledge, of which some are difficult to achieve.

¹⁴⁰¹ For a study of the Valentinian characteristics of the gospel, see Einar Thomassen, “How Valentinian is *The Gospel of Philip?*,” in *The Nag Hammadi Library After Fifty Years*, ed. John D. Turner and Anne McGuire (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 251-279.

¹⁴⁰² Isenberg, “The Gospel of Philip,” 146.

¹⁴⁰³ On the relation of the passage of Gospel of Philip 77 and 1 Corinthians see Klutz, “Re-Reading 1 Corinthians,” esp. 209ff.

¹⁴⁰⁴ Elaine Pagels is one of but a few scholars who calls this passage a parable in her *The Origin of Satan: How Christians Demonized Jews, Pagans, and Heretics* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 172. Another example is Hans-Martin Schenke who speaks of a “Gleichnis” in his *Das Philippus-Evangelium (Nag-Hammadi-Codex II,2)*, *Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur* 143 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1997), 491. Most scholars, however, do not acknowledge the parable as such. See, for example, Jennifer C. Glancy who calls it a “saying” (*Slavery in Early Christianity* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002], 98) or Pieter J. Lalleman who uses the term “allegory” (*The Acts of John: A Two-stage Initiation Into Johannine Gnosticism* [Leuven: Peeters, 1995], 54). Moreover, there is no study of early Christian parables that I know of that mentions the parable in the Gospel of Philip. For example, in his study, *The Parables after Jesus*, David B. Gowler does observe that the Gospel of Philip contains echoes to certain New Testament parables but fails to recognize the Gospel of Philip’s own creativity in that field. See David B. Gowler, *The Parables after Jesus. Their Imaginative Receptions across Two Millennia* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 20-21.

¹⁴⁰⁵ Schenke suggests that the Coptic term used here goes back to the Greek οἰκοδεσπότης (*Das Philippus-Evangelium*, 491).

knew what the food of each one was. He [himself] served the children¹⁴⁰⁶ bread [and meat]. He served the slaves [castor oil¹⁴⁰⁷] and meal.¹⁴⁰⁸ And [he threw barley] and chaff and grass to the cattle. He threw bones to [the] dogs, and to the pigs he threw acorns and scraps of bread.

Compare the disciple of God:¹⁴⁰⁹ if he is a sensible fellow, he understands what discipleship is all about. The bodily forms will not deceive him, but he will look at the condition of the soul of each one and speak with him. There are many animals in the world which are in a human form. When he identifies them, to the swine he will throw acorns, to the cattle he will throw barley and chaff and grass, to the dogs he will throw bones. To the slaves he will give only the elementary lessons,¹⁴¹⁰ to the children he will give the complete instruction.¹⁴¹¹

In this parable, the by now well-known image of a master feeding his slaves is taken up. Compare, for example, the rabbinic parable from Sifre Deuteronomy 40 that we have discussed above. Just like the parable from Sifre Deuteronomy, the parable from the Gospel of Philip features a master (in Sifre a king¹⁴¹²) who distributes food both to his sons and slaves (cattle is not mentioned in Sifre). Clearly, there are also differences between the parable in Sifre Deuteronomy and the Gospel of Philip: first, in Sifre Deuteronomy, no differentiation is made between the food for both groups. Moreover, while the parable of Sifre Deuteronomy compares the master with God, in the Gospel of Philip, it is the disciple (the follower of Jesus) who is compared to the master. The application of the Gospel of Philip is typically gnostic, and according to Wilson “quite straightforward”:¹⁴¹³ as the wise householder distinguishes what kind of food he gives to which animal or person, so too does the true gnostic distinguish between the different natures of the soul that are present in this world. Only to beings of the highest level – compared to the sons or children in the parable – does he give the best “food,” the most sophisticated teachings. The slaves, representing the lower level of souls, are given teachings of lower quality (“elementary lessons”). The “animals in human form” do not receive food that is compared to a certain kind of instruction. This may remind us of Matthew 7:6b: “Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine.” According to Lalleman, the parable is even an “extension” of this saying, “[I]ike so much in the Gospel of Philip.”¹⁴¹⁴ Thus, content-wise as well, we may conclude that, while the Gospel of Philip gives its own, gnostic, twist to the parable, the themes of the parable are in line with (parable) traditions from the New Testament and early rabbinic literature.¹⁴¹⁵ Finally, we notice how in the application, the imagery of the parable continues, which is rather inelegant compared to many rabbinic and New Testament parables. This might indicate the decreasing ability to create new, sound parables in early Christianity. In the scheme below, the elements in italics are the same in the parable and the application.

¹⁴⁰⁶ Not per se small children, as Schenke emphasizes (*Das Philippus-Evangelium*, 492).

¹⁴⁰⁷ Wilson remarks that castor oil as food for slaves may lead to amazement for the modern reader; it might also refer to the tree or its fruits. Robert McLachlan Wilson, *The Gospel of Philip. Translated from the Coptic Text, with an Introduction and Commentary* (London: A.R. Mowbray & Co, 1962), 178.

¹⁴⁰⁸ Hans-Martin Schenke translates: “[D]en Sklaven aber legte er [] und M]ehl [vor].” See Schenke, *Das Philippus-Evangelium*, 71.

¹⁴⁰⁹ Schenke translates “pupil,” literally: “younger” (“Jünger Gottes”). Schenker, *Das Philippus-Evangelium*, 71.

¹⁴¹⁰ Schenke: “Den Sklaven wird er das Vorläufige geben.” Schenker, *Das Philippus-Evangelium*, 71.

¹⁴¹¹ Translation: Isenberg, “The Gospel of Philip,” 148. See for its Coptic Text: Schenke, *Das Philippus-Evangelium*, 70.

¹⁴¹² A standardization in rabbinic parables. See the two classic works on this issue: Alan Applebaum, *The Rabbis’ King-parables: Midrash from the Third-century Roman Empire* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2010); Ignaz Ziegler, *Die Königsgleichnisse des Midrasch beleuchtet durch die römische Kaiserzeit* (Breslau: Schottländer, 1903).

¹⁴¹³ Wilson, *The Gospel of Philip*, 178.

¹⁴¹⁴ Lalleman, *The Acts of John*, 54n120.

¹⁴¹⁵ See also Matthew 13:10-17 (10-11: “Then the disciples came and asked him, ‘Why do you speak to them in parables?’ He answered, ‘To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.’”) that seems to point out that there are different levels of knowledge in Jesus’ preaching as well. Remarkably, Origen has tried to interpret this text from Matthew anti-agnostically. See, e.g., Marcel Poorthuis, “Origen on Parables and Prayer. Tensions between the Esoteric and the Universal,” in *Prayer and the Transformation of the Self in Early Christian Mystagogy*, ed. Hans van Loon, Giselle de Nie, Michiel Op de Coul and Peter Van Egmond, *Late Antique History and Religion* 18 (Leuven: Peeters, 2018), 95-110.

Parable

Householder
 Animals
Swine – receive acorns
Cattle – receive barley, chaff, grass
Dogs – receive bones
Slaves
 Receive castor oil/meal
Children
 Receive bread and meat

Application

Disciple of God
 “animals in human form”
Swine – receive acorns
Cattle – receive barley, chaff, grass
Dogs – receive bones
Slaves
 Receive elementary lessons
Children
 Receive complete instruction

From a socio-historical perspective, it is clear that slaves were indeed fed differently than their masters. Not only how they ate (cf. chapter 7 of this study) but also what they ate distinguished them from their owners. From rabbinic sources we know that rich people ate bread made of finer wheat flour, while the people of lower status and cattle ate barley bread.¹⁴¹⁶ Also, because of its different production modes, the barley bread that was eaten by the poor “often contained inclusion of other impurities.”¹⁴¹⁷ In Josephus’ *De Bello Judaico*, it is remarked: “Many clandestinely bartered their possessions for a single measure—of wheat, if they were rich, of barley, if they were poor” (5.427).¹⁴¹⁸ From rabbinic parables, we learn that eating the right food was not only about health, but also about status.¹⁴¹⁹ Eating animal proteins was rare for the poor and for slaves, since it was the most expensive food.¹⁴²⁰ In the archive of Theophanes (4th century CE), a story is found about a traveling party, consisting of both slaves and free people. The story recounts how two levels of bread were bought: fine for the free, common for the slaves.¹⁴²¹ Moreover, the following Greek story (even referring to different kinds of animals), quoted by Harper, closely resembles our parable, proving that the imagery of the parable comes close to ancient social reality:

The good *oikonomos* grinds the grain and that which is better and cleaner he makes into bread for the masters and the free ones, that which is worse he gives to the slaves, and that which is still worse, from the husks, he gives to the pigs and the cocks.

ὁ ἀγαθὸς οἰκονόμος τοῦ ἀλληλεσμένου σίτου τὸ μὲν καθαρώτερον καὶ βέλτιον, οἷον τὸ σταῖς, ἀπεργάζεται ἄρτον τοῖς ἐλευθέροις καὶ τοῖς δεσπόταις, τὸ δὲ χεῖρον τοῖς δούλοις, τὸ δ’ ἔτι χεῖρον, οἷον τὰ πίτυρα, χοίροις καὶ ἀλεκτρυόσι¹⁴²²

When it comes to the imagery of the application, we see that the images used tie in (partly) with ancient teaching practices. Sometimes the more talented slaves (for example, slaves that managed the master’s property in his absence) did receive some form of education, but this was normally only limited to practical skills, skills that would help slaves do their jobs (for example, reading their master’s instructions and being able to calculate).¹⁴²³ It goes without saying that most slaves would not receive any form of formal education at all (the same goes for

¹⁴¹⁶ E.g., David Kraemer, “Jews in Palestine,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Diet and Nutrition in the Roman World*, ed. Paul Erdkamp and Claire Holleran (Oxon: Routledge, 2019), 209-210.

¹⁴¹⁷ Gregg G. Gardner, *The Origins of Organized Charity in Rabbinic Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 50; see also Gildas Hamel, *Poverty and Charity in Roman Palestine, First Three Centuries C.E.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 22-23.

¹⁴¹⁸ Translation: LCL 210, 137.

¹⁴¹⁹ See Oegema’s discussion of Sifre Numbers 87 (Albertina Oegema, *Negotiating Paternal Authority and Filial Agency. Fathers and Sons in Early Rabbinic Parables*, Quaestiones Infnitae 130 [Utrecht, 2021], 201-225).

¹⁴²⁰ Gardner, *The Origins of Organized Charity in Rabbinic Judaism*, 50; Jordan D. Rosenblum, *Food and Identity in Early Rabbinic Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 20-21.

¹⁴²¹ See Harper, *Slavery in the Late Roman World*, 238.

¹⁴²² John Philoponus (c. 490-570 CE), *In libros de generatione animalium commentaria* 114. Greek text: Michael Hayduck, *Ioannis Philoponi (Michaelis Ephesii). In libros de generatione animalium commentaria*, Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca 14.3 (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1903), 114. Translation: Harper, *Slavery in the Late Roman World*, 237.

¹⁴²³ Cf. Columella, *De Re Rustica* 1.8.4.

most children, and, of course, for animals). Also, both in rabbinic and in Greco-Roman school curricula, a differentiation was made between different levels of knowledge. For example, in rabbinic teaching, first the Torah was studied, then Mishnah, midrash, and, finally, Talmud; in Greco-Roman curricula, a difference was made between the *ludus*, *grammaticus*, and *rhetor* stage, while “real” philosophy was reserved for only those few who continued studying after the third stage.¹⁴²⁴

Whether the Gnostics really taught slaves is, of course, not the issue at stake in this parable. What the parable in the Gospel of Philip aims to explain is how souls of different qualities (animals – slaves – children) receive lessons of different kinds (no education – elementary lessons – complete instruction). This brings us to the gnostic (Valentinian) doctrine of the three natures, the lens through which we should probably read the parable from the Gospel of Philip. These three natures are: Spiritual/Pneumatic, Psychical, and earthly or Choic (see, e.g., another Nag Hammadi text, the *Tripartite Tractate* 118). The people with an earthly nature are destined for corruption; they cannot be saved. The Psychical type is placed in between. They can find a solid place in the middle and later develop towards the Pneumatics, but they can also degrade to the status of the Choics. The Pneumatic elements, “trained and brought up here (on earth) since [they were] sent out in immaturity,” are “sown into righteous Psychai” and are “deemed worthy of perfection.”¹⁴²⁵ If approached from this doctrine of the three natures, it is clear that the children from the parable represent the Pneumatics. The slaves, in turn, stand for the Psychical, while, finally, the “animals in human form” are the Choics who will perish.

It is interesting to see that in both Judaism and Christianity we find many texts in which differentiation of food is connected with differentiations in teachings, especially the teaching of divine wisdom, be it of esoteric kind or “plainly” Torah. For example, in several of his works, the Hellenistic Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria (20 BCE-c. 50 CE) uses the metaphor of food differentiation, comparing a tripartite scheme consisting of milk (babies), soft food (infants), and stronger meat (adults) to three levels of education: pre-education, school subjects, and philosophy.¹⁴²⁶ In the New Testament, this imagery can be found in Hebrews 5:11-14, among others, in which those who are “dull in understanding” are compared to an infant (νήπιος) who lives on milk, while those who can distinguish good from evil are mature (τελείων) and can process solid food. In this section, we focus, however, on 1 Corinthians as we hope to show that the Gospel of Philip and the first letter to the Corinthians play with similar but not identical imagery.

The relation between Gnosticism and 1 Corinthians has been studied and discussed intensively.¹⁴²⁷ Robert McLachlan Wilson argued that Corinthian Christianity was a predecessor of Gnosticism, “not yet

¹⁴²⁴ Marc Hirshman, *The Stabilization of Rabbinic Culture, 100 C.E. -350 C.E.: Texts on Education in Their Late Antique Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 13; Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 8-14. On the Roman education system, as well as for some criticism of the classic division of Roman education in three clear cut stages, see, e.g., Lisa Maurice, *The Teacher in Ancient Rome: The Magister and His World* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013), 1-22.

¹⁴²⁵ The gnostic Ptolemy, as quoted by Ireneaeus, *Adversus haereses* 1.7.5. Translation from Robert Haardt, *Gnosis. Character and Testimony* (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 120-141, 141. Cf. *Excerpts of Theodotus* 56.2-3. See on this division, e.g., Benjamin H. Dunning, “Tripartite Anthropologies and the Limits of the Human in Valentinian Christian Creation Myths,” in *The Bible and Posthumanism*, ed. Jennifer L. Koosed (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014), 175-198.

¹⁴²⁶ See Philo’s *Quod Omnis Probus Liber* 159-160. For an overview of references in Philo, see Richard Horsley, “Pneumatikos vs. Psychikos. Distinctions of Spiritual Status among the Corinthians,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 69, no. 3/4 (1976), 281; and the older work of Ronald Williamson, *Philo and the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Leiden: Brill, 1970), 281ff. James W. Thompson speaks even about a “common place” in Philo (*Strangers on the Earth. Philosophy and Rhetoric in Hebrews* [Eugene: Cascade Books, 2020], 134).

¹⁴²⁷ For an overview, see David G. Horrell and Edward Adams, “The Scholarly Quest for Paul’s Church at Corinth: A Critical Survey,” in *Christianity at Corinth. The Quest for the Pauline Church*, ed. David G. Horrell and Edward Adams (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2004), 1-50, esp. 16-23. Some notable works in this field are (aside from those mentioned in other notes): Birger Albert Pearson, *The Pneumatikos-Psychikos Terminology in I Corinthians: A Study in the Theology of the Corinthian Opponents of Paul and its Relation to Gnosticism*, Society of Biblical Literature: Dissertation Series 12 (Missoula: Society of Biblical Literature for the Nag Hammadi Seminar, 1973); Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Paul. Gnostic Exegesis of the Pauline Letters* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), esp. 53-94; Robert McLachlan Wilson, “How Gnostic were the Corinthians,” *New Testament Studies* 19, no. 1 (1972), 65-74.

Gnosticism, but a kind of *gnosis*.¹⁴²⁸ However, since the appearance of Michael A. Williams' *Rethinking "Gnosticism"* (1996), this category has increasingly been held under scrutiny because Williams showed that groups that were labelled as such were often not characterized by most of the common traits of Gnosticism. In turn, Richard Horsley emphasized the continuity between Hellenistic Judaism and the Corinthians community by referring, mostly, to Philo.¹⁴²⁹ For the dependence of his theory on Philo – who might not be representative for Judaism in this time – Horsley is critiqued as well.¹⁴³⁰ More recently, scholars have turned to Greco-Roman philosophy to find the source of Corinthian religiosity¹⁴³¹ or, like George H. van Kooten, have tried to combine influences from ancient philosophy with early Judaism.¹⁴³² It is not the purpose of the present study to go into the depths of these discussions. Instead, we limit ourselves here to the observation – following a lead from Gerd Theissen and Todd E. Klutz – that the group Paul argues against in his letter was “close in spirit” to the author of the Gospel of Philip.¹⁴³³ What we do want discuss is the concrete comparison of two similar images in both texts, since I would argue that a comparison of both texts sheds light on the nuances in meaning they seek to make, as we will show below. We start with our discussion with 1 Corinthians 3:1-3:

And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people (πνευματικοίς), but rather as people of the flesh (σαρκίνοις), as infants in Christ (νηπίους ἐν Χριστῷ). I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations?

Just like the parable from the Gospel of Philip and the imagery from Philo, this simile from Corinthians makes a distinction between different kinds of food that are suitable for different kinds of people: milk for “people of the flesh,” who are “infants in Christ,” and solid food for “spiritual people” (cf. 1 Corinthians 2:15).¹⁴³⁴ Moreover, from passages in 1 Corinthians 2:6-7 and 1 Corinthians 13:9-12, it becomes clear how different life stages are connected to different kinds of knowledge:

Yet among the mature (ἐν τοῖς τελείοις) we do speak wisdom [...]. But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden (ἀλλὰ λαλοῦμεν θεοῦ σοφίαν ἐν μυστηρίῳ τὴν ἀποκεκρυμμένην), which God decreed before the ages for our glory. (1 Corinthians 2:6-7)

For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete (τὸ τέλειον) comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child (νήπιος), I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult (ἄνθρωπος), I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known (ἄρτι γινώσκω ἐκ μέρους, τότε δὲ ἐπιγνώσομαι καθὼς καὶ ἐπεγνώσθην.). (1 Corinthians 13:9-12)

Next to the spiritual people (πνευματικοίς) and the people of the flesh (σαρκίνοις) from 1 Corinthians 3:1-3, in 1 Corinthians 2:14-15 the Psychological people (ψυχικός)¹⁴³⁵ appear:

¹⁴²⁸ Robert McLachlan Wilson, “Gnosis at Corinth,” in *Paul and Paulinism: Essays in Honour of C.K. Barrett*, ed. Morna D. Hooker and Stephen G. Wilson (London: SPCK, 1982), 102-119.

¹⁴²⁹ E.g., Horsley, “Pneumatikos vs. Psychikos.”

¹⁴³⁰ Horrell and Adams, “The Scholarly Quest for Paul's Church at Corinth,” 21.

¹⁴³¹ For an overview, see Horrell and Adams, “The Scholarly Quest for Paul's Church at Corinth,” 21-23.

¹⁴³² George H. van Kooten, *Paul's Anthropology in Context. The Image of God, Assimilation to God, and Tripartite Man in Ancient Judaism, Ancient Philosophy and Early Christianity*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 232 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008).

¹⁴³³ Klutz, “Re-Reading 1 Corinthians after Rethinking ‘Gnosticism’”; Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth*, trans. J.H. Schütz (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1982), 140. Klutz speaks about “a significantly high degree of ideological continuity” between both texts (215).

¹⁴³⁴ Cf. the Qumran text 1QH^a15(old 7): 20-21: “They [men of marvel] have opened their mouths like a child at the breast of its mother.” Quoted by Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Yale Bible 32 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 187.

¹⁴³⁵ Either translated as unspiritual or natural/wordly; cf. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, 182.

The Psychical man (ψυχικός δὲ ἄνθρωπος) does not receive the gifts of God's Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually (πνευματικῶς) discerned. Those who are spiritual discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else's scrutiny.

The question that arises now is whether the Psychicals and the people of the flesh belong to the same category, or if one of these groups belong to an intermediate category as we find in Philo or in the Gospel of Philip. To answer this question, it might help to review yet another passage from 1 Corinthians, chapter 15:44-49:

It is sown a Psychical body (σῶμα ψυχικόν), it is raised a Spiritual body (σῶμα πνευματικόν). There is a Psychical body, and there is a Spiritual body. And so it is written, "The first man Adam became a living being (ψυχὴν ζῶσαν)." The last Adam became a life-giving spirit (πνεῦμα ζωοποιόν).

However, the Spiritual is not first, but the Psychical, and afterward the Spiritual. The first man was of the earth, made of dust (ὁ πρῶτος ἄνθρωπος ἐκ γῆς χοϊκός); the second Man is the Lord from heaven. As was the man of dust, so also are those who are made of dust; and as is the heavenly Man, so also are those who are heavenly. And as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly Man.

In this passage, it becomes clear that the Psychical are made from dust, i.e., are material or earthly in a very literal sense. Hence, it seems best to assume that the Psychicals and the People of the Flesh are the same category. So, different from the Gospel of Philip and the writings of Philo, the New Testament (both Hebrews and 1 Corinthians) seems to work with a bipartite scheme. This brings me again to the comparison of the Gospel of Philip and 1 Corinthians. I will limit myself here to two observations with regard to that comparison.

First, it is very remarkable that 1 Corinthians does not acknowledge an intermediate category of beings between infants and adults, a category that, according to Philo, "must be."¹⁴³⁶ How can this be explained? While the imagery of the Corinthian infants is similar to Philo's first category (babies drinking milk), their status cannot be compared to the status of the first category of beings in neither the Gospel of Philip nor Philo. They already know of God's wisdom but have forgotten it (Hebrews 5:11-12); moreover, they are already saved (1 Corinthians 15:2) – they are not lost or doomed as the Choic people are. Since the New Testament authors were speaking to an "in-crowd," so to say, they might have felt that they did not need the category of material people, for whom salvation is out of reach (or they did not acknowledge a category of people that could not be saved).

My second observation pertains to the choice of imagery. The imagery chosen in 1 Corinthians (and Philo) is rather positive. The choice for different life stages and for different levels of education inherently suggest the impression of progress. One cannot become a baby again if one is an adult; nor does one (normally) return to drinking only milk if one is already accustomed to solid food. Hence, Paul uses the baby-adult metaphor to exhort those who are already part of the Corinthian church not to give in; he does not use the imagery to cut them off from the community. The situation in the Gospel of Philip is, however, completely different. First of all, it is clear that it is impossible for animals to become either slaves or children; similarly, a transition from food for animals to food for humans is hardly imaginable. This demonstrates the fixed position of material people: they are beyond saving. Between the category of slaves and (free) children, some mobility could exist: free people could be kidnapped or could sell themselves to pay debts.¹⁴³⁷ However, in a "normal" situation, a free person would remain free, which ties in with Valentinian anthropology that dictates that Spiritual people "will receive complete salvation in every way" (*Tripartite Tractate* 118¹⁴³⁸). The slaves (Psychicals) are in the middle. For them, theoretically – again according to Valentinian theory – both degradation and promotion is possible. Here, we come across some tension between Valentinian theory and the parable: for a slave to become

¹⁴³⁶ Philo, *De agricultura* 9.

¹⁴³⁷ On kidnapping see, e.g., Catherine Hezser, "Der Loskauf von Sklaven und Kriegsgefangenen im antiken Judentum," in *Gefangenenloskauf im Mittelmeerraum: Ein interreligiöser Vergleich*, ed. Heike Grieser and Nicole Priesching, *Sklaverei - Knechtschaft - Zwangsarbeit* 13 (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2015), 3-23; on self-sale, see Marc Kleijwegt, "Debt Bondage and Chattel Slavery in Early Rome," in *Debt and Slavery in the Mediterranean and Atlantic Worlds*, ed. Gwyn Campbell and Alessandro Stanziani (Oxon: Routledge, 2016), 29-38.

¹⁴³⁸ Translation: Harold W. Attridge and Dieter Mueller, "The Tripartite Tractate (I, 5)," in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, ed. James M. Robinson (Leiden: Brill, 1984), 90.

an animal is of course impossible as well (although, legally, a slave was often categorized as cattle¹⁴³⁹), and for a slave to become free was not his/her own choice. Even if slaves had the opportunity to raise funds for their own manumission (many slaves would not have had that possibility), they still needed their master's approval.¹⁴⁴⁰ This matches with the food in the parable: the food of the slaves is of another nature and quality than that of the children; these different kinds of food do not represent different stages in the meal or different food for different ages – hence, there is no natural sequence imagined from being a slave to being a child. What we learn from this comparison is that the differences between the three groups of those who know, those who do not know, and those who are in an intermediate position is much bigger and more difficult to bridge in the Gospel of Philip than in 1 Corinthians. Nevertheless, the fact that the Gospel of Philip chooses the slave-metaphor might suggest a rather optimistic view on slavery and the social mobility that is possible within the confines of that institution. Building on this, I would like to devote a few words to a hidden transcript perspective of the parable. What stands out is that the Gospel of Philip's distribution of different kinds of food and different kinds of teachings for different kinds of people and animals is not questioned in any way but strongly confirmed: slaves are *in their essence* different from free people, the parable seems to suggest. It reminds us of the famous saying of Aristotle that some are slaves by nature (*Politika*, 1254b16-21). Hence, it is only prudent and logical to feed them differently from the other beings that are in the care of the householder. On the other hand, as mentioned above, the parable also seems to imply that upward mobility is not impossible for slaves: just like the Psychicals, they have the potential to become free citizens, be it in this life or the next.

6.5. Serving for Rewards?

Slaves could try to avoid punishment by fleeing (see section 6.6.), but they could also try to avoid it by meticulously following their master's orders. If slaves were really successful in pleasing their masters, it was even possible for them to be rewarded. What these rewards were could vary: "In the Roman estates, rewards for the enthusiastic work of a slave included additional food and clothing, exemption from work, permission to graze a beast of his own, and other similar privileges. [...] According to Columella, apart from the customary material rewards, acknowledgment for the services of a diligent slave took the form of a dinner invitation by the overseer."¹⁴⁴¹ Aside from these examples, the ultimate form of reward was, of course, manumission.¹⁴⁴² In this section, we will explore some parables in which rewards for slaves occur, starting with the New Testament parables.

6.5.1. Early Christian Parables

With regard to the early Christian parables, I will limit myself to a brief description of relevant passages because we have discussed most of these parables already at length elsewhere in this study. Since rewards for slaves are not very common in the parables, in this section, I will test Giuseppe Dari-Mattiacci's thesis that punishments

¹⁴³⁹ See, e.g., Keith R. Bradley, "Animalizing the Slave: The Truth of Fiction," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 90 (2000), 110-125. In rabbinic literature the following quotation from y. Berakhot 2:8, 5b might be illustrative (see also chapter 1): "And have they not said: 'They should not accept condolences on behalf of slaves, because slaves are like cattle (אין מקבלין תנחומין על העבדים מפני שהעבדים כבהמה)'? If one does not accept condolences on behalf of other freemen, all the more so on behalf of slaves. To one whose slave or animal died, one says: 'May God replace your loss.'" (Translation: MS)

¹⁴⁴⁰ Keith R. Bradley, *Slavery and Society at Rome*, Key Themes in Ancient History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 165; Matthew Dillon and Lynda Garland, *Ancient Rome. From the Early Republic to the Assassination of Julius Caesar* (London: Routledge, 2005), 329, 333. See for a general study on this subject David Daube, "Two Early Patterns of Manumission," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 36, no. 1-2 (1946), 57-75; and Thomas E.J. Wiedemann, "The Regularity of Manumission at Rome," *The Classical Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (1985), 162-175. Also notice that manumitted slaves still had duties and other ties to their former masters: see e.g. Rachel Zelnick-Abramovitz, *Not Wholly Free. The Concept of Manumission and the Status of Manumitted Slaves in the Ancient Greek World* (Leiden: Brill, 2005) and Henrik Mouritsen, *The Freedman in the Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

¹⁴⁴¹ Enrico Dal Lago and Constantina Katsari, "Ideal models of slave management in the Roman world and in the ante-bellum American South," in *Slave Systems. Ancient and Modern*, ed. Enrico Dal Lago and Constantina Katsari (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 198.

¹⁴⁴² See, e.g., Henrik Mouritsen, *The Freedman in the Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

(“sticks”) were more often used for simple tasks, “while more complex tasks requiring thinking and initiative often went hand in hand with carrots,” i.e., rewards.¹⁴⁴³ His thesis includes manumission; he states that slaves with “high human capital” and “little propensity to revolt” were most likely to be freed.¹⁴⁴⁴ We start with the parable of The Talents/Pounds. Because of the application of the parable, our focus normally is on the slave who did not make a profit with his talent/pound. However, we should not fail to see how his fellow slave is rewarded for his work:

Now take the talent away from him and give it to the one who has ten talents (ἄρατε οὖν ἀπ’ αὐτοῦ τὸ τάλαντον καὶ δότε τῷ ἔχοντι τὰ δέκα τάλαντα·): For to him who has much will be given [more] and he will have an abundance, but from him who does not have, even what he has shall be taken away. (Matthew 25:28-29, own translation)¹⁴⁴⁵

Here, punishment and reward are two sides of the same coin. The punishment of the third slave *is* the reward of the first slave. Notice also how the second slave is completely ignored, and how the double measure of punishment and reward is paired to the saying “he who has will be given more, and from the one who has not will be taken away” (NRSV). This suggests that the reward is not so much a “real” reward, but a symbolic gesture that adds weight to the punishment of the first slave. Moreover, although the position and task of the first slave might put him in the category of what Dari-Mattiacci would call a “high human capital” slave, the same could be said about the third slave. So, the parable seems not to differentiate rewards and punishments on the basis of position and capabilities. This reinforces the impression that the punishment-reward mechanism has its own logic and rhetoric power in the parables.

Another New Testament parable in which slaves are being rewarded can be found in Luke 12:35-38 (The Serving Master). There we read (v. 37): “Blessed be the slaves who, when the master comes, he finds to be watchful. Truly I tell you that he will gird himself and he will have them recline and he will come and serve them.” This parable will be discussed at length in the next chapter.

Finally, I would like to recall the Christian parable that tops the previous three when it comes to rewards: the parable about the vineyard in *Shepherd of Hermas* (for an elaborate discussion of this parable, see section 5.4.2). When the master returns and finds his vineyard in excellent condition, he calls his son, his friends, and his advisors together, and says:

I promised freedom to this slave (ἐγὼ τῷ δούλῳ τούτῳ ἐλευθερίαν ἐπηγγειλάμην), when he would carry out my command, that I commanded to him: and he has carried out my command and he added a good work to the vineyard, and he has pleased me greatly. Now in return for the work that he has done, I want to make him joint heir with my son (θέλω αὐτὸν συγκληρονόμον τῷ υἱῷ μου ποιῆσαι), because when he thought of the good [deed], he did not ignore it, but completed it.

In all respects, this is a generous and, compared to our other parables, extraordinary master. First, it is remarkable that a seemingly “normal” field-slave (contra Dari-Mattiacci) will be granted freedom for only building a fence around a vineyard. Secondly, when the slave has done more than he ought to do, the master decides to make him his heir, next to his son. That his son would be happy about this is not likely, as Osiek remarks.¹⁴⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴³ Giuseppe Dari-Mattiacci, “Slavery and Freedom. Reasons and Consequences of the Use of Rewards,” unpublished conference paper, 2. Accessible April 18, 2020. <https://www.aeaweb.org/conference/2011/retrieve.php?pdfid=432>.

¹⁴⁴⁴ Dari-Mattiacci, “Slavery and Freedom,” 3. With reference to Keith Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves*, Sociological Studies in Roman History 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 117-118.

¹⁴⁴⁵ Par. Luke 19:24-26.

¹⁴⁴⁶ Carolyn Osiek, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Hermeneia - A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 171.

6.5.2. Avot de Rabbi Nathan B 10

At first sight, it might be surprising that in the rabbinic corpus we do not find examples of rewards for slaves. On the other hand, a famous saying from m. Avot 1:3 (sometimes seen as a parable¹⁴⁴⁷) may help to explain that this is not so remarkable after all:

Antigonus of Soko received [the law] from Simeon the Just. He used to say: “Be not like slaves that serve the master for the sake of receiving a ration (פרס), but be like slaves that serve the master not for the sake of receiving a ration; and let the fear of Heaven be upon you.”¹⁴⁴⁸

This passage is often quoted as evidence that one should not work for a “ration” or reward (again, the term פרס is used), but only out of respect or fear for God.¹⁴⁴⁹ It might remind us of Colossians 3:22: “Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord.” Interestingly, after quoting m. Avot 1:3, a “real” parable follows in Avot de Rabbi Nathan B 10 that addresses the issue whether one should obey out of fear or out of love (compare 5.6.1).

Translation (MS)

A parable. It is like a man who does the will of his master, while his heart is emboldened against the will of his master.

[or a man who does the will of his father], while his heart is emboldened against the will of his father.

This is not like someone who acts from love, but like someone who acts from awe or fear.

He who acts out of love inherits the life of this world and does not inherit the life of the world to come. He who acts out of awe and fear inherits the life of this world and the life of the world to come.

So, we find that the patriarchs, who served from awe and fear, inherited life of this world and life of the world to come.

What does it say about Abraham?

For now I know that you fear God (Genesis 22:12, NRSV).

Text¹⁴⁵⁰

משל לאדם עושה רצון רבו ולבו גס ברצון רבו

[אדם עושה רצון אביו] ולבו גס ברצון אביו

לא דומה זה שהוא עושה מאהבה לזה שהוא עושה באימה ויראה

זה שהוא עושה מאהבה נוחל חיי העוה"ז ואינו נוחל חיי העוה"ב וזה שהוא עובד באימה ויראה נוחל חיי העוה"ז וחיי העוה"ב¹⁴⁵¹

שכן מצינו באבות הראשונים שעבדו באימה ויראה ונחלו חיי העולם הזה וחיי העולם הבא.

באברהם מהו אומר

כי אתה ידעתי כי ירא אלוהים אתה"

¹⁴⁴⁷ Notley and Safrai, *Parables of the Sages*, 74. See also David Flusser who suggested that Mishnah Avot 1:3 was the first (attested) Jewish parable: David Flusser, *Die Rabbinischen Gleichnisse und der Gleichniserzähler Jesus*, Vol. 1 of *Das Wesen der Gleichnisse*, Judaica et Christiana 4 (Bern: Peter Lang, 1981), 31, 55, 142-143.

¹⁴⁴⁸ Translation MS. Hebrew text: Manuscript Kaufman (folio 169r).

¹⁴⁴⁹ William Berkson, *Pirke Avot: Timeless Wisdom for Modern Life* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2010), 19; Walter S. Wurtzbarger, “Orthodox Judaism and Human Purpose,” in *Religion and Human Purpose: A Cross Disciplinary Approach*, ed. William Horosz and Tad Clements (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987), 118.

¹⁴⁵⁰ Hebrew text: Schechter, *Abot de Rabbi Nathan*, 26.

¹⁴⁵¹ I concur with Saldarini that manuscript Halberstam (displayed here) has the better text in this line. There is also a variant, chosen by Schechter (manuscript Romi) which states that he who acts from love will inherit both this world and the world to come. However, this variant contradicts the conclusion of the passage with the reference to the patriarchs. See Saldarini, *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan*, 87-88n13. He also refers to Finkelstein who prefers manuscript Halberstam as well, with reference to b. Sotah 22b. In Sotah, one finds a list of seven groups of Pharisees in which the group that fears God deserves the most praise. See Louis Finkelstein, *Introduction to the Treatises Abot and Abot of Rabbi Nathan* [Hebrew] (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1950), 32-35.

What does it say about Joseph?
I fear God (Genesis 42:18).
 What does it say about Jonah?
And I fear God (Jonah 1:9).

ביוסף מהו אומר
 את האלהים אני ירא
 ביונה מהו אומר
 ואת האלהים אני ירא

This parable is interesting in many regards. Firstly, although framed as a parable, the passage lacks a real plot, and misses a proper introduction of the application. Secondly, this “parable” serves to explain another saying or simile, which almost makes it a meta-parable. What the parable seeks to clarify is the last part of m. Avot 1:3: “let the fear of Heaven be upon you.” This saying is compared to both a slave and a son (by now, a familiar combination), who do the will of their master and father (clearly representing God), while they look down on that will (from גוס: to be arrogant, haughty¹⁴⁵²). Malachi 1:6a might have functioned as an intertext for this parable: “A son honors his father, and a slave his master. If then I (God) am a father, where is the honor due me? And if I am a master, where is the respect due me?” (NRSV with adaptations). That the son and the slave in the parable nevertheless do God’s will is explained in the application by their fear for their master and father. From this it follows that it is better to act out of fear than out of love. This claim is established by a reference to the scriptures, to three patriarchs about whom it is said that they feared God.

This parable takes a surprising position in the early rabbinic discussion on whether one should love or fear God. As the parable we discussed in 5.6.1 shows, love is normally preferred over fear as motivation to serve God,¹⁴⁵³ although often both could go together.¹⁴⁵⁴ In his classic study, *The Sages*, Ephraim Urbach argues that the dichotomy of love and fear is of a later date (two generations after Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai); in an earlier stage of rabbinic Judaism, the concept of fear was richer and encapsulated love and awe as well. Later, fear increasingly became associated with fear of punishment.¹⁴⁵⁵ Given its early date, the passage from Avot de Rabbi Nathan B is characterized by Urbach as “strange.”¹⁴⁵⁶ However, Büchler shows that already in nascent rabbinic Judaism discussions abound over the question whether one should serve God out of love or out of fear.¹⁴⁵⁷

From a hidden transcript perspective, this passage opens up vast horizons. First of all, it offers us an insight into the minds of slaves, who would often have been confronted with orders they found useless, humiliating, or plainly stupid.¹⁴⁵⁸ For example, the series of conflicts between the slave Aesop and his master Xanthus starts with Aesop disapproving of his master’s orders:

Aesop said to himself, “Masters who show an unnecessarily stern attitude about the service they want have themselves to blame for the trouble they get into. I’ll give this philosopher a lesson in how to give orders.”¹⁴⁵⁹

Aesop takes the position that he is better at giving orders than his master. This position was seen as very problematic and possibly dangerous in antiquity. Slaves ought to be humble; slaves who thought they knew better were seen as arrogant. As one reads in Plautus’ comedy *Asinaria*, “A slave ought not to be haughty” (*non decet superbum esse hominem servom*).¹⁴⁶⁰ Or compare this epigram from Martial about a former slave: “Don’t

¹⁴⁵² Jastrow, *A Dictionary*, s.v. גוס, 224.

¹⁴⁵³ Notley and Safrai, *Parables of the Sages*, 309.

¹⁴⁵⁴ Cf. Sifre Deuteronomy 32.

¹⁴⁵⁵ Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages. The World and Wisdom of the Rabbis of the Talmud* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 408. Cf. David Flusser, “A New Sensitivity in Judaism and the Christian Message,” *Harvard Theological Review* 61, no. 2 (1968), 107-127.

¹⁴⁵⁶ Urbach, *The Sages*, 403. While I do agree with this characterization, I do not agree with Urbach’s interpretation of the parable. According to him, “a servant who serves his master without expectation of reward may possibly be presumptuous in regard to his master’s will” (403); hence it is better to act out of fear. However, I think that the parable shows someone who acts out of fear (the introduction “it is like” forms a connection with the last part of Mishnah Avot 1:3) and thus follows his orders, *despite* what he thinks of those orders.

¹⁴⁵⁷ Adolf Büchler, *Studies in Sin and Atonement in the Rabbinic Literature of the First Century* (New York, Ktav, 1967), especially chapter 2 (119-211).

¹⁴⁵⁸ Cf. *Vita Aesopi* 51: “I’ll show him not to give me stupid orders” (Translation Daly, “The Aesop Romance,” 133).

¹⁴⁵⁹ *Vita Aesopi* 38. Translation: Daly, “The Aesop Romance,” 128.

¹⁴⁶⁰ *Asinaria* 470. Translation: LCL 60, 193.

think me contumacious (*contumacem*) because I greet you by your name nowadays, whereas formerly I used to call you ‘patron’ and ‘lord’” (2.68).¹⁴⁶¹ It is exactly this sensitivity for a (perceived) arrogance that is visible in the parable from Avot de Rabbi Nathan. From this, we might learn that the parable is rooted in real slave sentiments; slaves most certainly would have been confronted with orders that they would look down upon. However, the parable does not call for protest or correction; instead, it emphasizes the importance of obedience – even, or especially, when one does not comprehend the will of the master (God). Taken to the theological plane, the parable might warn against hubris of people versus God: even if his commandments do not seem to make sense, it is neither the station nor the responsibility of humans to criticize them. As Abraham, who was willing to sacrifice his only son even though this order did not make sense (had not God promised him that his son would father a great nation?), humankind should be obedient to all God’s verdicts.¹⁴⁶² Boldly put, this parable asks for blind obedience – not in order to receive rewards, but solely out of fear for God.

6.6. Fight or Flight: Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael Pischa on Exodus 12:1

If slaves could not live up to the expected obedience, or if they feared punishments, or desired freedom for another reason, they could decide to flee from their master’s house. A parable that is entirely devoted to the flight of a slave can be found in Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael Pischa.

The relevant Mekhilta passage forms a midrash on Exodus 12:1 (“And the Lord spoke to Moses and to Aaron in the land of Egypt, saying”). In the first section, it is discussed to whom the Lord addressed his words exactly. In the next section, the discussion is about the phrase “in the land of Egypt.” The Mekhilta states in this section that before the land of Israel had been chosen, all lands theoretically were suitable for divine revelations. This passage contains a reference to Ezekiel (1:3), from which it follows that God spoke to Ezekiel outside Israel. Now we get to our passage. I propose that we should read the introduction to the *mashal* as a counterargument or objection to the idea that God would reveal himself outside Israel (as Ezekiel seems to imply). This counterargument is formed by referring to Jonah: Jonah thought he could flee from God’s presence (the Shekinah) by leaving Israel; thus, apparently, God cannot reveal himself outside of Egypt. This idea is, in turn, attacked by the Mekhilta by quoting several Bible passages (Psalms 139:7ff, Zechariah 4:10, Proverbs 15:3, Amos 9:2-4, Job 34:22) that all show that one cannot hide from God. Again, a reference to Jonah follows, after which we find our *mashal*.

Translation (MS)

They tell a parable:

It is like a slave who belonged to a priest.

He said: “I flee between the graves, a place where my master cannot come after me.”

His master said to him:

“I have helpers¹⁴⁶⁴ like you.”

So Jonah said:

“I will go outside etc. [to a place where the Shekinah does not reveal itself]; otherwise the gentiles come near to repentance, in order that Israel will not be found guilty.

The Place said to him:

“I have messengers like you.”

Text¹⁴⁶³

משלו משל

לעבד שהיה לכהן

אמ' אברה לי לבין הקברות

יכול לבוא אחרי מקום שאין רבי

אמ' לו רבו

יש לי כניות כמותך

כך אמ' יונה

אלך לי לחוצה וג' שהגוים

קרובים תשובה הם לא לחייב

ישר'

אמ' לו המקום

יש לי שלוחים כיוצ' בד'

¹⁴⁶¹ Translation: LCL 94, 173.

¹⁴⁶² Some later exegetes interpret Abraham’s obedience to sacrifice Isaac by his love of God (see, e.g., b. Sota 31a); the same is said about Job (see, for example, m. Sotah 5:5: “Job only served the Holy One Blessed be He from love,” although Job’s service is often not as high valued as that of Abraham, because of his protest against God). Compare Büchler, *Studies in Sin and Atonement*, 123ff, who describes how the sages debated about the question of whether the patriarchs served from love or from fear.

¹⁴⁶³ Ms Oxford, as cited in Lieve Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhiltot*, 101.

¹⁴⁶⁴ For the translation of כניית see Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhiltot*, 102. I agree with her that Lauterbach’s rendition (with Canaanite slaves) does not make sense.

As it is said: *But the Lord hurled a great wind etc.* (Jonah 1:4, NRSV)

שנ' ויני הטיל רוח גדלה וגר'

According to the *mashal*, the case of Jonah is like a slave who fled from his master (who was a priest) to a cemetery. A short dialogue follows (one wonders how, while the slave stood inside the graveyard and his master outside?). The slave claims that his master cannot follow him. It is not made explicit why the master cannot follow his slave, but we can safely assume it is because his master – a priest – is not allowed to come close to the deceased; cf. Leviticus 21:1-3.¹⁴⁶⁵ However, the master replies that he has more like him (i.e., slaves). The *mashal* ends here, and it is left to the reader to conclude that the priest is, apparently, threatening the slave that he will send other slaves to get him back from the graveyard.

In the *nimshal*, the situation with the slave and the priest is applied to Jonah and God. As the slave in the *mashal*, Jonah forgets that God (or *pars pro toto*, the Shekinah) has more helpers – in this case, the powers of nature, more specifically, the wind.¹⁴⁶⁶ If God is compared to the priest, this apparently also means that God is not allowed (or does not allow himself) to be outside the land of Israel. The appearance of the priest as a master is rare (kings are more often found) but is, in this case, functional (a priest is forbidden to cross places with dead bodies).¹⁴⁶⁷

To a certain extent, the *nimshal* contradicts (or perhaps one should say: harmonizes) the introduction to the *mashal* in which several Bible verses are quoted that state that God sees and is everywhere. According to the *mashal*, God himself is not everywhere, but his messengers/agents are.

Parable

Runaway slave
Priest-master
Graveyard
Others like you (slaves)

Application

Jonah
God/Shekinah
Outside Israel (graves=gentiles?)
Powers of nature – wind

From a sociohistorical perspective, the fleeing of the slave is not very surprising. References to fleeing slaves are found everywhere, both in fictional and in non-fictional texts (cf. the Letter to Philemon). As it is formulated in *Vita Aesopi*:

If you are good to your slaves, no one is going to run away from what is good to what is bad and condemn himself to vagrancy with the prospect of hunger and fear to face. But if you are bad to your slaves, I won't stay with you for an hour, not even for a half-hour or a minute.¹⁴⁶⁸

We have already discussed in chapter four another example of a parable in which a slave flees (Mekhilta Beshallah on Exodus 14:21): the guard of a garden who flees from his master. As the citation from *Vita Aesopi* shows, the main reason slaves flee from their owners has to do with their treatment. That is why Michael Martin argues that the slave's flight was a form of protest – a rebellion even – against his or her master.¹⁴⁶⁹ Should we

¹⁴⁶⁵ “The Lord said to Moses: Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them: No one shall defile himself for a dead person among his relatives, except for his nearest kin: his mother, his father, his son, his daughter, his brother; likewise, for a virgin sister, close to him because she has had no husband, he may defile himself for her.”

¹⁴⁶⁶ This may remind us of our discussion in section 4.3.3 about intermediaries of God in the execution of penalties.

¹⁴⁶⁷ Comparable a parable in Tanchuma Warsaw Vaera 2, in which a “stupid slave” looks for his master, who is a priest, in the graveyard. Some people, who see the slave looking, shout to him: “You fool, who sees a priest in the graveyard!?” See for this translation and a discussion of the parable Ronit Nikolsky, “Parables in the Service of Emotional Translation,” in *Parables in Changing Contexts. Interreligious and Cultural Approaches to the Study of Parables*, ed. Eric Ottenheim and Marcel Poorthuis, Jewish and Christian Perspectives 35 (Brill: Leiden, 2020), 53-54.

¹⁴⁶⁸ *Vita Aesopi* 26. Translation: Daly, “The Aesop Romance,” 122.

¹⁴⁶⁹ He calls flight “the most common form of individual resistance”: Michael Martin, *City of the Sun. Development and Popular Resistance in the Pre-Modern West* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2017), 117. See also Harper, *Slavery in the Late Roman World*, 276-277.

suspect the guard's master and the priest of bad treatment? In the case of the priest, no reason for his slave's flight is given – just as the story of Jonah does not give a clear answer to the question of why Jonah fled (cf. Jonah 1:1-3, but also 4:2; the midrash is clearer about his motivation).¹⁴⁷⁰ This might simply be due to the focus the parable has: it wants to explain the far reaching power of God (the priest-master). However, we might also suspect a hidden transcript here, since a slave would normally not flee without cause; hence, perhaps a theological critique of God is present in this passage. If that is the case, the critique might entail that God seems to care more about “the dead,” the gentiles that are not part of his covenant anyway, than about Israel. Moreover, what stands out is the routine depiction of the priest as a slave-owner who has “other slaves like you” (יש לי כניית (כמותך)).

6.7. Reflection and *Bildfeld*

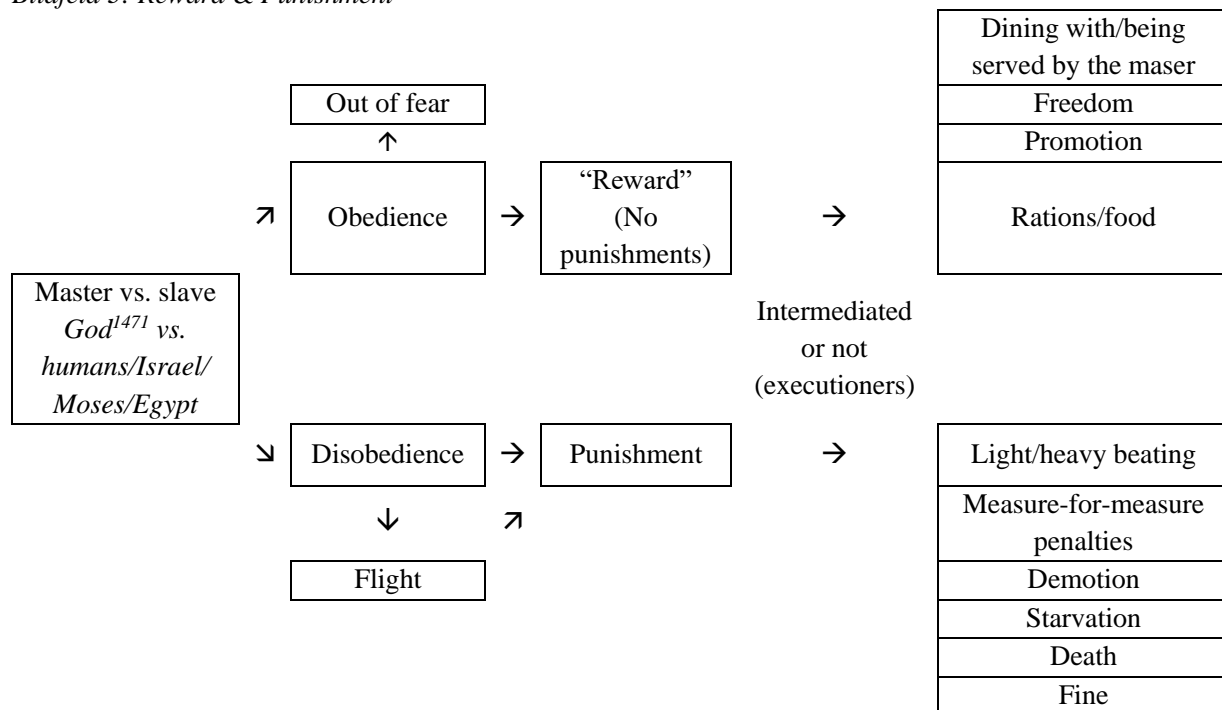
In this chapter, we have reviewed the way masters punish their slaves in the early rabbinic and early Christian parables: with death, fines, lashes, demotion, starvation, and measure-for-measure penalties. These punishments are visible in the lower right corner of the *Bildfeld* that we present below. While penalties are not always executed (Sifra Bechukotai 4:4, On Account of Evil; Sifre Deuteronomy 40, The King and his Storehouses), it is clear that a constant threat lingers over the heads of the slaves. It has also become clear that almost all parables about punishments seem to be guided in their application by the principle of obedience to God.

Generally speaking, the parables seem to favor punishments over rewards, the stick over the carrot. Rewards only occur rarely. And, if they occur, they form, at the same time, a punishment for another slave (The Talents/Pounds) or they are not a true reward but consist of only the food portion (the *paras*) that is necessary for a slave to survive (e.g., The King and his Storehouses, Sifre Deuteronomy 40). Rewards are visible in the upper right corner of the *Bildfeld*. As indicated in the scheme, often the “reward” is not as much a reward as it is an escape from penalties. Both rewards and punishments can be handed out by the character that represents God himself, but we have also come across intermediaries in multiple parables.

A very interesting observation with respect to the *Bildfeld* is that God is always compared to the master and humans are always compared to slaves, albeit that these slaves can have different positions (from a simple dinner attendant to a managerial slave with a considerable fortune). When, in a rather early source (Mishnah Sukkah 2:9, Spilling Drink on the Master's Face), it is God who is compared to a slave, this is “repaired” in later texts. This shows that the *Bildfeld* of punishments and rewards has reached a rather well-developed stage in our parables in which most elements have a fixed and clear meaning (see below). Furthermore, one should notice that many elements of the *Bildfeld* do not need a “translation” but mean more or less the same in the “bildspendender Bereich” and “bildempfangender Bereich.” Finally, one could also try to escape the dichotomy of obedience and disobedience by trying to escape from the master. However, when caught, a severe penalty would await the fugitive slave, a threat that the parable of the slave in graveyard only hints at.

¹⁴⁷⁰ According to the midrash Jonah did not want Israel to look bad in comparison to the gentile nations.

Bildfeld 3: Reward & Punishment



We continue now with the theological ramifications of the analysis that this chapter offers. In a sixth century sermon, ascribed to the Coptic monk Macarius, we read: “If a slave is under fear of the lash, and immediately trembles when anything is said to him by the master, lest he hear he is to be beaten, certainly the master rejoices in this situation.”¹⁴⁷² Indeed, one of the things we learnt from the parables discussed in this chapter is that the fear that slaves in parables have for their masters is positively evaluated by the early rabbinic commentators (e.g., Avot de Rabbi Nathan B 10, Acting out of Fear), as well as the gospel writers (e.g., Luke 19:21a: “for I was afraid of you [...]”). While in the previous chapter (5.6) we remarked that fear for the master might be counterproductive, the parables in this chapter emphasize the value of fear in inducing slaves to obedience. On the level of the application, this means that the early Christian and rabbinic parables valued the importance of fear (and awe) towards God. As Avot de Rabbi Nathan B 10 states: “He who acts out of awe and fear inherits the life of this world and the life of the world to come.”

This brings me to our second observation, which concerns the comparison between the slave-owner and God. Schottroff’s questions with regard to this comparison arise out of her “theological refusal to believe that the same people who recognize God’s Son in the tortured body of Christ could have looked right past the tortured bodies of slaves. I cannot believe that the slave parables justify the sufferings of slaves, willingly or unwillingly.”¹⁴⁷³ There are a few points to make here. First of all, I think that the *Bildfeld* presented above clearly shows that the equation of the slave-owner with God was well-established in early rabbinic and early Christian parable-telling. Secondly, the positive evaluation of fear in the parables proves, in my opinion, that the ancients were not bothered by the image of God as a threatening and frightening master; even more so, it matched their theology. The use of violence and other forms of punishments are only a logical element of that same image and that same theology. Thirdly, when it comes to the question whether this meant that the slave parables justified the sufferings of slaves, we should be very cautious. We should at least distinguish that (1) the parables are literary fiction that showed less violence and bloodthirstiness than popular Greco-Roman texts; and (2) that the fiction of the parables served very specific, theological goals. Especially in Christianity, the gory details of the parables were probably meant to scare the listeners in obedience to God, precisely in order to avoid violent,

¹⁴⁷¹ With the exception of m. Sukkah 2:9.

¹⁴⁷² Pseudo Macarius, *Sermones* 47.1.7. Translation: Harper, *Slavery in the late Roman World*, 236.

¹⁴⁷³ Schottroff, *The Parables of Jesus*, 171.

eternal punishments. At the same time, I do not want to look away from the very real historical damage that these images have caused. In combination with the household codes, the blending of God and slave-owner has given masters an almost divine authority, which included their right to beat and kill their slaves.¹⁴⁷⁴

The third observation relates to the comparison between rabbinic, Christian, and Greco-Roman texts. As we have seen, violence towards slaves seems more intense and more frequent in Christian parables than in rabbinic parables. In section 6.3.6, we have tried to explain this difference by the different rhetorics that are at play in both corpora. While most rabbinic parables have an exegetical function – e.g., the parable of The Slave who Buys a Rotten Fish explains Egypt’s punishments in the Hebrew Bible – the Christian parables operate on an ethical-eschatological axis: they call for a direct change of behavior before it is too late. They do so by activating prophetic images and references. When we compare the parables to popular Greco-Roman texts, it stands out that references to the death of slaves are much less ubiquitous in the parables. This might be explained by the fact that one does not easily drop out of the covenant, as we have remarked before (5.6), but it might also follow from the fact that the parables call for change – something that death prevents.

Finally, I would like to address the possibility of hidden transcripts in the parables that we have discussed in this chapter. While in most parables the obedience that is expected from slaves does not seem to be questioned, sometimes irritation or plain unwillingness about the master’s orders and decisions seem to seep through the cracks of the stories. In the parable of the slave at the graveyard (Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael Pisha on Exodus 12:1, 6.6), we might wonder why the slave flees from his master. The parable about the slave who begs for his ration (b. Ta’anit 25b, 6.4.2) shows, in a way, the unpredictability of both the divine and the earthly master. The parable of the spilling slave (m. Sukkah 2:9, 6.3.2) makes clear how the Israelites were unpleasantly surprised by rain in their booth. While it would be very hard to characterize these narratives as liberating or emancipating since they strongly affirm God’s supreme power, they indicate, at the same time, how difficult it sometimes is to understand God’s decrees.

6.8. Summary

In the first sections of this chapter, it has been proven that punishments were an integral part of the life of a slave, both in social reality and in literary sources. Masters were entitled to treat their slaves as they saw fit and were not constrained in their violent fantasies by any laws. In ancient literature, bloody details about the most sadistic punishments thinkable abound. Compared to Greco-Roman literature, the parables turned out to be less gory; in comparison to the comedies of Plautus and *Vita Aesopi*, the Christian and rabbinic parables more often feature degradation or demotion of bad slaves. Having said that, we were able to collect and analyze a considerable corpus of slavery parables about punishments in this chapter. From these parables, it becomes clear that the ancient parable-tellers, especially in early Christianity, did not shun the image of God as a threatening and punishing slave-owner who scared his people into obedience – probably to prevent them from changing their ways after it was too late. The distribution of food was also used to enforce obedience: those who behaved well would receive their share, their ration (*paras*), but those who did not behave ran the risk of starvation. Rewards were given too, but only in very few parables; moreover, the biggest reward of all – manumission – occurs only once. A way out of the threat of hunger and violence is flight, but those who were caught had to face punishment. In sum, the parables discussed in this chapter emphasize the fear one should feel for God, a fear that stimulates one to follow God’s commandments, even or especially when the reasons for these commandments are unclear.

¹⁴⁷⁴ One might recall the motto to my first chapter, in which Frederick Douglass narrates how he saw his master whipping a young female slave, while quoting from Luke 12:47: “He that knoweth his master’s will, and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes” (Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 64). In a scene in the movie *12 Years a Slave* (2013), an American slave-owner quotes the same verse to his slaves during a Sunday morning service on the plantation, after which he states: “Now many signifies a great many – forty, a hundred, a hundred and fifty lashes. That’s Scripture.”

VII: Slaves and Meals: Elevation and Reversal

From what I know of the effect of these holidays upon the slave, I believe them to be among the most effective means in the hands of the slaveholder in keeping down the spirit of insurrection. Were the slaveholders at once to abandon this practice, I have not the slightest doubt it would lead to an immediate insurrection among the slaves. These holidays serve as conductors, or safety-valves, to carry off the rebellious spirit of enslaved humanity.¹⁴⁷⁵

In the Greco-Roman world, the meal formed the main stage of power and honor. Participation in meals, as well as one's position during the meal and the status of the host and the other guests, were all important indications of one's place in society.¹⁴⁷⁶ The role of slaves during meals was normally limited to the serving of guests. However, at special occasions, in special contexts, or as a special gesture, slaves sometimes were invited to join the meal. The symbolic meaning of such an invitation cannot be emphasized enough: partaking in the meal represented the equal position of slaves to free people,¹⁴⁷⁷ albeit only temporarily. This chapter focuses on these special moments, as depicted in early Christian and early rabbinic parables.¹⁴⁷⁸

For the analysis this chapter offers, it is important to distinguish two images of slaves joining the meal. The first image is that of a slave who is treated the same as the master during the meal, as they sit alongside each other. In such a situation, the slave's status is *elevated* to the level of the master for the duration of the banquet. The second image is that of a slave who is served by the master during the meal. In this case, we do not speak about elevation of the slave, but about a *reversal of roles*. Both images of dinner-participation will be discussed side-by-side in this chapter, as they are related and often overlap or even merge. As we will see, this is at least partly due to the fact that when slaves recline like masters, the practical issue of who will serve them arises. However, in our analysis we will try to separate these two images, since their meanings diverge. What both images have in common is that they break with the "horizon of expected normalcy" (i.e., slaves serving their masters), to use a term by John Dominic Crossan.¹⁴⁷⁹ The question that this chapter seeks to answer is *to what extent* the parables contradicted the expected normalcy. To address this question, in the first section of this chapter, an overview is given of the possible roles of slaves during ancient meals. We will learn that the conventional role of a slave during a dinner is to serve the host and guests. We will also learn that there existed a variety of contexts (festivals, cults/sects, *collegia*) in antiquity in which slaves had the opportunity to join the meal. Christian and rabbinic parables seem to connect to those traditions. In section 7.2 the parable of The Serving Master (Luke 12:35-38) is discussed in relation to Luke 17:7-10 and some New Testament passages in which the audience is called to serve as a slave. The parable from Luke forms the heart of this chapter because it is the clearest example of a reversal of roles in a parable. Therefore, I will discuss it extensively. In the third section of this chapter (7.3), we look at a selection of possible rabbinic counterparts of the Lukan parable from

¹⁴⁷⁵ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave. Written by Himself*, reprint of the original 1845 text (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2009), 79.

¹⁴⁷⁶ Plutarchus, *Moralia* 149A-B, F, and *Moralia* 615D-619; cf. Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 6.245; Sirach 7:4, 32:1-2; Luke 14:7-11. I thank Jonathan Pater for some of these references.

¹⁴⁷⁷ It should be noticed that as a rule both free women and slave women were not allowed to dine with free males, regardless of the context. See, e.g., Fanny Dolansky, "Celebrating the Saturnalia: Religious Ritual and Roman Domestic Life," in *Families in the Greek and Roman Worlds. A Companion to Families in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, ed. Beryl Rawson (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 493-494.

¹⁴⁷⁸ For a more detailed discussion of meals in the parables I refer to Jonathan Pater's dissertation "Banquet Scenes in Early Rabbinic and Early Christian Parables" (PhD diss., Tilburg University, forthcoming).

¹⁴⁷⁹ As we have seen in chapter 3, Crossan meant by "normal" that "good servants are rewarded and/or bad ones are punished." See John Dominic Crossan, "The Servant Parables of Jesus," *Semeia* 1 (1974), 38.

Sifre Deuteronomy, the Babylonian Talmud, and a number of homiletical midrashim (the latter in form of an excursus). This section will show that Edward Kaneen is wrong in stating that slave stories in rabbinic literature do not demonstrate reversal.¹⁴⁸⁰ In the fourth and final section, I present a *Bildfeld* and my concluding analysis. The main point of my analysis is that, while reversal of roles is a theme that is present in a (small) number of early Christian and early rabbinic parables, it is foremost used to stress God's distinctiveness in comparison to humans, leaving only a very limited mark on the "real" relations between slaves and masters in antiquity.

7.1. Meals and Slaves in Antiquity

7.1.1. Conventional Roles of Slaves

In the previous chapters, we have come across parables with slaves and meals in several conventional contexts. We have seen how slaves are sent out to invite guests (Matthew 22:1-14/Luke 14:15-24/Thomas 64, The Banquet), go to the market (Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael Beshallah on Exodus 14:5, The Slave who Buys a Rotten Fish), prepare meat (Luke 15:11-32, The Prodigal Son, esp. verse 23) or broth (t. Berakhot 6:18, The Stupid Slave), and how they serve beverages (m. Sukkah 2:9, Spilling Drink on the Master's Face; t. Sotah 11:3, Mixing Wine with Water). These and other texts presuppose a more or less formal dining context (either public or private), in which a host invites several guests who recline during the meal and who have to be served food and drink.¹⁴⁸¹ It was common in the ancient Greco-Roman world for the upper class to regularly organize festive meals (*symposia*, *convivia*) with entertainment and/or sophisticated debates. As Rosenblum argues, these customs were also adopted by the early rabbinic (and early Christian) elites; their "elaborate meals, usually dinners, appear to be quite similar to extant depictions of contemporaneous Roman and Greek banquets."¹⁴⁸² Some quotes from Seneca's famous 47th letter will help to provide an image of the regular role of slaves during these meals. According to this letter, the householder was at his dinner "surrounded" by "a mob of standing slaves."¹⁴⁸³ These slaves were not allowed to make noises or eat: "All night long they must stand about, hungry and dumb."¹⁴⁸⁴ They also took care of a variety of chores that come with a meal:

When we recline at a banquet, one slave mops up the disgorged food, another crouches beneath the table and gathers up the left-overs of the tipsy guests. Another carves the priceless game birds; [...] Another, who serves the wine, must dress like a woman and wrestle with his advancing years; [...] Another, whose duty it is to put a valuation on the guests, must stick to his task, poor fellow, and watch to see whose flattery and whose immodesty, whether of appetite or of language, is to get them an invitation for tomorrow. Think also of the poor purveyors of food, who note their masters' tastes with delicate skill [...].¹⁴⁸⁵

While Seneca perhaps pictures a (too) grim image of the role of slaves during banquets, there are many other ancient texts that support Seneca's general description of slaves' tasks during the meal.¹⁴⁸⁶ What is important to notice is that slaves normally were not expected (or even allowed) to recline at meals: "Whether celebrated in the private home or in a civic space designed for public dining, the reclining banquet was a meal specifically set

¹⁴⁸⁰ Edward Noble Kaneen, "Discipleship is Slavery: Investigating the Slavery Metaphor in the Gospel of Mark" (PhD diss., Durham University, 2017), 179.

¹⁴⁸¹ I follow John H. D'Arms in not over specifying the different forms of meals. See John H. D'Arms, "Slaves at Roman Convivia," in *Dining in a Classical Context*, ed. William J. Slater (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1991), 171-172.

¹⁴⁸² Jordan D. Rosenblum, *Food and Identity in Early Rabbinic Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 30-31.

¹⁴⁸³ Seneca, *Epistulae morales* 47.3. Translation: LCL 75, 303.

¹⁴⁸⁴ Seneca, *Epistulae morales* 47.3. Translation: LCL 75, 303.

¹⁴⁸⁵ Seneca, *Epistulae morales* 47.5-8. Translation: LCL 75, 305.

¹⁴⁸⁶ E.g., a famous one is the description of Trimalchio's banquet in Petronius' *Satyricon*. For the connection between sex (prostitution) and meals, see, e.g., Carly Daniel-Hughes, "The Sex Trade and Slavery at Meals," in *Meals in the Early Christian World. Social Formation, Experimentation, and Experimentation at the Table*, ed. Dennis E. Smith and Hal Taussig (New York: MacMillan Palgrave, 2012), 166-180.

aside for social and political peers, namely men of citizen status.”¹⁴⁸⁷ Hence, to quote Seneca again, most people “think it degrading for a man to dine with his slave.”¹⁴⁸⁸

As the early rabbis had adopted most of the Greco-Roman banquet culture, they also shared its view on the participation of slaves in meals. Together with women, children, and non-rabbinic Jews or heathens, slaves were normally excluded from the meals; the slaves had to serve and the women and children ate separately.¹⁴⁸⁹ Let us review, for example, the Feast of the Booths (Sukkot), during which the Jewish households had to eat and sleep in temporary dwellings. According to the Mishnah, “women and slaves and children are free from the obligation of sukkah” (m. Sukkah 2:8). Although “an exemption does not necessarily equate to an exclusion,”¹⁴⁹⁰ it seems important to Rosenblum “[...] that the Tannaim exempt women, slaves, and minors from the very obligation that is central to their reinterpretation of the festival of Sukkot itself.”¹⁴⁹¹

Aside from the rabbinic sources, other Jewish texts also make clear that slaves were presumed to be standing during the meal. Philo, for example, discusses how Therapeutae were different from “normal” Jews because they did not have slaves and (thus) had to attend to each other during meals: “In this sacred banquet there is as I have said no slave, but the services are rendered by free men who perform their tasks as attendants not under compulsion nor yet waiting for orders, but with deliberate goodwill anticipating eagerly and zealously the demands that may be made.”¹⁴⁹² With the Therapeutae we arrive at the next section in which we explore ancient deviations from the “horizon of expected normalcy.”

7.1.2. Dining with Masters and Being Waited on by Masters

We have established that the normal role for slaves during the meal was to wait on their master and guests and not join the meal themselves, at least not by reclining. However, at certain times in the year, another role for slaves was possible. In the Athenian State Calendar, slaves were allowed to recline at a number of festivals: the Anthesteria, the rural Dionysia, and the Cronia.¹⁴⁹³ The Spartans probably also included the festival of Hyacinthia in which slaves were invited to dine with free citizens.¹⁴⁹⁴ Furthermore, the tradition of the Eleusinian Mysteries allowed slaves to participate in religious worshipping.¹⁴⁹⁵ For our purposes, the Roman traditions might, however, be of more relevance. Apart from festivals, there were, in the Roman Empire, two other contexts that offered slaves a certain extent of freedom at the meal: the *collegia* (dining groups organized around a deity of shared trade) and certain religious groups that worshipped and dined together like the cult of Mithras and the early Christian communities with their “Meal of the Lord” (see further below).¹⁴⁹⁶ With respect to festivals, the feasts of Lectisternia, Compitalia, the Nonae Caprotinae, and the festival of the Matronalia probably allowed slaves a more active and “free” role.¹⁴⁹⁷ However, the most important festival in this regard was the Saturnalia

¹⁴⁸⁷ Nancy A. Evans, “Evidence for Slaves at the Table in the Ancient Mediterranean: From Traditional Rural Festival to Urban Associations,” in *Meals in the Early Christian World. Social Formation, Experimentation and Conflict at the Table*, ed. Dennis E. Smith and Hal E. Taussig (New York: MacMillan Palgrave, 2012), 149.

¹⁴⁸⁸ Seneca, *Epistulae morales* 47.2. Translation: LCL 75, 303.

¹⁴⁸⁹ Rosenblum, *Food and Identity in Early Rabbinic Judaism*, 91, cf. 128, 130-131.

¹⁴⁹⁰ Rosenblum, *Food and Identity in Early Rabbinic Judaism*, 131.

¹⁴⁹¹ Rosenblum, *Food and Identity in Early Rabbinic Judaism*, 131.

¹⁴⁹² *De Vita Contemplativa* 70-71 (LCL 363, 157). For more information on the Therapeutae, see, e.g., Mary Ann Beavis, “Philo’s Therapeutai: Philosopher’s Dream or Utopian Construction?,” *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 14, no. 1 (2004), 30-42. The major study on their social structure is Joan E. Taylor, *Jewish Women Philosophers of First-Century Alexandria: Philo’s “Therapeutae” Reconsidered* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

¹⁴⁹³ Evans, “Evidence for Slaves at the Table,” 152.

¹⁴⁹⁴ Evans, “Evidence for Slaves at the Table,” 158.

¹⁴⁹⁵ Evans, “Evidence for Slaves at the Table,” 159.

¹⁴⁹⁶ Evans, “Evidence for Slaves at the Table,” 162.

¹⁴⁹⁷ Angela Standhartinger, “The Saturnalia in Greco-Roman Culture,” in *Meals in the Early Christian World. Social Formation, Experimentation, and Experimentation at the Table*, ed. Dennis E. Smith and Hal Taussig (New York: MacMillan Palgrave, 2012), 180. Rachel Zelnick-Abramovitz adds to this list the cult of Diana in Aricia “in which the priest, the Rex Nemorensis, was traditionally a runaway slave, who had to kill the previous priest to take his place” See Rachel Zelnick-Abramovitz, “Slaves and Role Reversal in Ancient Greek Cults,” in *Slaves and Religions in*

(and its Greek counterpart the Cronia), because it did not only allow for reclining slaves, but also for reversal, with masters serving their slaves. Because of this, and because the Saturnalia are the most extensively discussed and best attested example of such a feast, I will focus on the Saturnalia for the remainder of this section. Before doing so, it is worthwhile mentioning that the feast of Saturnalia was widely known in antiquity, also among the ancient rabbis, as texts from the Mishnah and the Tosefta indicate.¹⁴⁹⁸

During the festival of Saturnalia, which started on 17 December, the God Saturn took over the throne of Zeus for a couple of days. Under the slogan or greeting, “Io Saturnalia,” people convened for private meals and parties and almost no one – slaves included – worked.¹⁴⁹⁹ During this feast, the “normal” state of affairs was reversed: instead of their normal clothes, Romans wore short dresses and put a *pilleus* on their head, the head covering of a free(d) person. Gambling was also allowed in this period of the year. The main source for the custom of slaves dining with their masters is found in the work of the Roman poet Accius (170-86 BCE), who was cited by Macrobius in his *Saturnalia*:

Most of the Greeks, and especially Athens, conduct rites in honor of Saturn, which they call the Cronia, and they celebrate the day: throughout the countryside and almost all the towns they carry on feasting and *wait on* their slaves (*famulosque procurant*), each one his own: just so did our countrymen receive the custom of slaves *dining together with* their masters (*cum dominis famuli epulentur ibidem*).¹⁵⁰⁰

Notice how, in this passage, a Greek festival in which owners *wait on* their own slaves shifts to a Roman festival in which slaves *dine with* their masters. This points to a discomfort masters felt with eating together with their slaves, let alone serving them. Fanny Dolansky enumerates the different solutions that ancient masters invented for their discomfort: some served their slaves but did not dine with them afterwards; others ordered their children to take over the slaves’ duties, including serving them their meal; yet others ate separately from their slaves but saw to it that they ate the same meal as the masters.¹⁵⁰¹ A final category of masters tried to escape the festival altogether.¹⁵⁰² A good example of this behavior can be found in one of Pliny the Younger’s (61-c. 113 CE) letters:

When I retire to this suite [a second bedroom] I feel as if I have left my house altogether and much enjoy the sensation: especially during the Saturnalia when the rest of the roof resounds with festive cries in the holiday freedom, for I am not disturbing my household’s merrymaking nor they my work.¹⁵⁰³

Hence, it should not come as a surprise that ancient texts exhorted masters to celebrate the festival in the proper way. The following passage from Lucian’s *Saturnalia* (22-23), featuring several standing slaves during the Saturnalian dinner, evokes the question of whether the practice of slaves dining with their masters was really observed in antiquity:

Graeco-Roman Antiquity and Modern Brazil, ed. Stephen Hodkinson and Dick Geary (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 97.

¹⁴⁹⁸ E.g., m. Avodah Zarah 1:3 and T. Avodah Zarah 1:4. See Emmanuel Friedheim, *Rabbinisme et Paganisme en Palestine romaine. Étude historique des Realia talmudiques (I^{er}–IV^{ème} siècles)*, Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 157 (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 329, 335. Compare Giuseppe Veltri, “Römische Religion an der Peripherie des Reiches. Ein Kapitel rabbinischer Rhetorik,” in *The Talmud Yerushalmi and Graeco-Roman Culture II*, ed. Peter Schäfer and Catherine Hezser, Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 79 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 123-126.

¹⁴⁹⁹ Standhartinger, “The Saturnalia in Greco-Roman Culture,” 180.

¹⁵⁰⁰ Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 1.7.37. Cf. 1.10.22; 1.11.1. Translation: LCL 510, 85 (with small adaptations and italics by MS).

¹⁵⁰¹ Dolansky, “Celebrating the Saturnalia,” 493.

¹⁵⁰² E.g., “even in the Saturnalia you fled here for refuge,” Horace, *Satires* 2.3; Plutarch, *Moralia* 1098b; also compare Lucian’s *Saturnalia*, a satirical piece in which a priest complains about the fact that the festival is not celebrated anymore as it should be: “the rich have shut out the poor in order to celebrate the festival among themselves in their own homes” (quoted by Erik M. Heen, “The Role of Symbolic Inversion in Utopian Discourse: Apocalyptic Reversal in Paul and in the Festival of the Saturnalia/Kronia,” in *Hidden Transcripts and the Arts of Resistance. Applying the Work of James C. Scott to Jesus and Paul*, ed. Richard A. Horsley, Semeia Studies 48, [Leiden: Brill, 2004], 134).

¹⁵⁰³ Pliny the Younger, *Epistulae* 2.17.24 (LCL 55, 141-143).

Tell them moreover to invite the poor to [the Saturnalian] dinner, taking in four or five, not as they do nowadays though, but in a more democratic fashion, all having an equal share, not one man stuffing himself with dainties with the servant (οικέτην) standing waiting for him to eat himself to exhaustion, then when this servant comes to us he passes on [...]. If you correct and adjust this, [Kronos], you will have made living really living and your festival a real festival.¹⁵⁰⁴

Seneca, in turn, stressed that the spirit, so to say, of Saturnalia, should not be limited to one day: “They [‘our ancestors’] established a holiday on which masters and slaves should eat together, – not as the only day for this custom, but as obligatory on that day in any case.”¹⁵⁰⁵

All these passages show that the Saturnalia traditions with regard to dining were debated but, as one could also argue, that these traditions were still alive and adhered to by some as well. Nevertheless, Standhartinger concludes that if the feast were celebrated at all (she speaks of “small literary evidence”), it “would have been restricted to very few”; the big number of estate (*latifundia*) workers certainly would not have had the opportunity to dine with their master.¹⁵⁰⁶ Dolansky, in turn, stresses that some slaves were expected to fulfill their normal tasks, “especially those associated with dining and entertainment,” and that masters and slaves realized that their actions during the festival might have consequences after the holiday was over.¹⁵⁰⁷

Another matter is what the relevance of the Saturnalia would be. As Standhartinger remarks: “These allusions to the Saturnalia in comedy and satire refer to a topsyturvy world of the reversal of roles between masters and slaves. But by restricting this freedom to a festival in December, they reinforce traditional role models.”¹⁵⁰⁸ She concludes: “To be sure, Saturnalia is, if at all, an authorized transgression of normality.”¹⁵⁰⁹ Standhartinger seems to express the current state of scholarship with these words. Dolansky arrives at a similar conclusion,¹⁵¹⁰ and Glancy writes: “at a Saturnalian celebration a slaveholder might serve and a slave recline, but the slaveholder served qua slaveholder whereas the slave was served qua slave.”¹⁵¹¹

While I agree with these scholars that the Saturnalia did not lead to a lasting reversal of roles (could that be expected?), it might still have been beneficial for slaves. As we have argued earlier in this study, certain story genres, but also certain festivals, enable the suppressed to voice their “real” feelings and their views of a better world. As Scott puts it:

Inversions [...] play an important imaginative function [...] they do, at least at the level of thought, create an imaginative breathing space in which the normal categories of order and hierarchy are less than completely inevitable [...]. When we manipulate any social classification imaginatively—turning it inside out and upside down – we are forcibly reminded that it is to some degree an arbitrary human creation.¹⁵¹²

In this respect, it is also interesting to connect the Saturnalia to utopian traditions, as Angela Standhartinger does at the end of her paper, as do Erik M. Heen and Karin Neutel more elaborately.¹⁵¹³ This utopian connection is

¹⁵⁰⁴ Translation: LCL 430, 119-121.

¹⁵⁰⁵ Seneca, *Epistulae morales* 47.14 (LCL 75, 309).

¹⁵⁰⁶ Standhartinger, “The Saturnalia in Greco-Roman Culture,” 183.

¹⁵⁰⁷ Dolansky, “Celebrating the Saturnalia,” 498, with reference to, e.g., Horace, *Satire* 2.7, especially 117–18; Martial 14.79.

¹⁵⁰⁸ Standhartinger, “The Saturnalia in Greco-Roman Culture,” 183.

¹⁵⁰⁹ Standhartinger, “The Saturnalia in Greco-Roman Culture,” 183.

¹⁵¹⁰ Dolansky, “Celebrating the Saturnalia,” 498. For another view, see, e.g., Hendrik S. Versnel, “Saturn and the Saturnalia. The question of origin,” in *De Agricultura: in Memoriam Pieter Willem de Neeve*, ed. Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg, Robert J. van der Spek, Hans Carel Teitler and Herman T. Wallinga (Amsterdam: Gieben, 1993), 118.

¹⁵¹¹ Jennifer A. Glancy, “Slaves at Greco-Roman Banquets: A Response,” in *Meals in the Early Christian World. Social Formation, Experimentation, and Conflict at the Table*, ed. Dennis E. Smith and Hal Taussig (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 209.

¹⁵¹² James Scott, *Domination and Arts of Resistance. Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1990), 168.

¹⁵¹³ Heen, “The Role Of Symbolic Inversion In Utopian Discourse”; Karin Neutel, *A Cosmopolitan Ideal. Paul's Declaration “Neither Jew Nor Greek, Neither Slave Nor Free, Nor Male and Female” in the Context of First-Century*

formed by Saturn's reappropriation of his son's (Zeus) throne. Saturn's age was, in the Greco-Roman mythology, a golden age, in which distinctions between slaves and free people did not exist yet.¹⁵¹⁴

The first inhabitants of Italy were the aborigines, about whose king Saturn it is said that he was so righteous that under his rule nobody had a subordinate function nor private possession. All things were common property and this was not distributed, as if there was one patrimony for all people together. *By way of commemoration of this example it was instituted that during the Saturnalia all differences in juridical position be suspended and that everywhere slaves dine with their masters (passim in conviviis servi cum dominis recumbent).*¹⁵¹⁵

Or, as Lucian allows Saturn to say in his *Saturnalia* (7):

I thought it best to filch these few days [...] and take over the sovereignty again to remind humankind what life was like under me, when everything grew for them without sowing and without ploughing. [...] This is the reason for my short-lived dominion, and why everywhere there is clapping and singing and playing games, and everyone, slave and free man, is held as good as his neighbor. *There was no slavery, you see, in my time.*¹⁵¹⁶

According to Karin Neutel, texts like this show a utopian ideal of the equality between all people, a universal ideal in antiquity that was also expressed, for example, by Philo in his description of Essenes and Therapeutae.¹⁵¹⁷ The Sibylline Oracles, a collection of Jewish and Christian texts, are indicative of this ideal:

The earth belongs equally to all, undivided by walls or fences [...]. Lives will be in common and wealth will have no division. For there will be no poor man there, no rich, and no tyrant, no slave, no one will be either great or small anymore, there will be no kings, and no leaders: all are equal there.¹⁵¹⁸

In Neutel's view, Pauline remarks like Galatians 3:28 ("there is no longer slave or free [...]; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus") should be interpreted in this light, albeit in "future-oriented apocalyptic scenario rather than in nostalgia for a legendary past".¹⁵¹⁹ "His [Paul's] attitude towards slaves was also not as absolute as in Philo's description of Essenes and Therapeutae. Rather, we see attempts in Paul to think through what the eschatological reality means for the current interactions between slave and free."¹⁵²⁰

This brings us to the early Christian meals. A cursory reading of the New Testament suffices to see that "food and dining played a significant role in the formative period of early Christianity":¹⁵²¹ many gospel scenes occur during meals, many parables refer to meals, and Paul addresses dining regulations in several of his letters. Since churches were only built later in the history of Christianity, the early Christian communities convened at

Thought (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015). See also Mary Ann Beavis, "Christian Origins, Egalitarianism, and Utopia," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 23, no. 2 (2007), 27-49

¹⁵¹⁴ Cf. Dolansky, "Celebrating the Saturnalia," 495-500.

¹⁵¹⁵ Justinus, *Epitoma historiarum Philippicarum Pompei Trogi* 43.1.3-4. Translation: Hendrik S. Versnel, *Inconsistencies in Greek and Roman Religion. Volume 2: Transition and Reversal in Myth and Ritual* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 189. Italics MS.

¹⁵¹⁶ Translation: LCL 430, 99.

¹⁵¹⁷ Neutel, *A Cosmopolitan Ideal*, 168. With regard to the Therapeutae see footnote 1492. With regard to the Essenes, see Philo's *Quod omnis probus liber sit* 75-91. According to Philo, the Essenes did not have slaves (75) and only had communal meals. Josephus also wrote on the meals of the Essenes in *De bello Judaica* 2:128-134.

¹⁵¹⁸ Sibylline Oracles 2.319-329. Translation: Neutel, *A Cosmopolitan Ideal*, 170.

¹⁵¹⁹ Glancy, "Slaves at Greco-Roman Banquets," 209.

¹⁵²⁰ Neutel, *A Cosmopolitan Ideal*, 172.

¹⁵²¹ Dennis E. Smith, "Food and Dining in Early Christianity," in *A Companion to Food in the Ancient World*, ed. John Wilkins (Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 357. For more on Early Christian dining practices see, e.g., Soham Al-Suadi and Peter-Ben Smit, ed., *T&T Clark Handbook to Early Christian Meals in the Greco-Roman World* (London: T&T Clark, 2019); Dennis E. Smith and Hal Taussig, ed., *Meals in the Early Christian World. Social Formation, Experimentation, and Conflict at the Table* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012); and Hal Taussig, *In the Beginning was the Meal. Social Experimentation & Early Christian Identity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009).

homes, often during meals. According to Dennis Smith, these meals were modelled after the Greco-Roman banquets, the *convivia*. This makes Jennifer Glancy ask the question: “Who served Christian Meals?”¹⁵²² Although this is a difficult question to answer with certainty, Glancy assumes that these servants would be slaves in most cases: “it seems that in Luke’s world slaveholding (and other) Christians would have found it comfortable to be attended by slaves when they dined.”¹⁵²³ On the other hand, was it possible for slaves to recline at meals, she asks. Such a practice would have been consistent with other ancient cults and (mystery) religions, and thus Glancy concludes it must have occurred at Christian meals as well. However: “Whether such inclusion of enslaved diners had broader implications for relations among enslaved Christians and free Christians – especially slaveholding Christians – is a more difficult question.”¹⁵²⁴ She emphasizes that after seasonal festivals like the Saturnalia things went back to “normal,” while at the same time expressing her hope that Christian meals “transcended distinctions between slave and free” in their focus on the oneness of the community.¹⁵²⁵ To conclude: while early Christian communities might have offered slaves occasionally or regularly the possibility to join the meal (elevation), it probably was not a *locus* for reversal of roles.

We have discussed the possibilities for slaves to dine with or be waited upon by their masters during festivals or in the context of other religious activities. In antiquity, it was, however, also conceivable to invite slaves to join the meal as a token of appreciation. Again, Seneca’s 47th letter forms a good introduction to this phenomenon:

“Do you mean to say,” comes the retort, “that I must seat all my slaves at my own table? No, not any more than that you should invite all free men to it. You are mistaken if you think that I would bar from my table certain slaves whose duties are more humble, as, for example, yonder muleteer or yonder herdsman; I propose to value them according to their character, and not according to their duties. Each man acquires his character for himself, but accident assigns his duties. Invite some to your table because they deserve the honor, and others that they may come to deserve it. For if there is any slavish quality in them as the result of their low associations, it will be shaken off by intercourse with men of gentler breeding.”¹⁵²⁶

In this passage, which is not connected to a festival in any way, Seneca calls the reader to (occasionally?) invite slaves to the table, sometimes as a treat or reward, sometimes as an impetus to improve themselves, stimulated by the good company of “men of gentler breeding.” While Seneca might be suspected of being an idealistic elitist thinker who wants to morally challenge and uplift his slaves, the practical agricultural manuals of antiquity also encourage slave managers to use dinners as a reward for faithful slaves. As Columella writes:

But be the overseer what he may, he should be given a woman companion to keep him within bounds and yet in certain matters to be a help to him; and this same overseer should be warned not to become intimate with a member of the household, and much less with an outsider, *yet at times he may consider it fitting, as a mark of distinction, to invite to his table on a holiday one whom he has found to be constantly busy and vigorous in the performance of his tasks.*¹⁵²⁷

What we learn from this passage is that being invited to dinner is not (only) about the food but concerns honor and status as well (“as a mark of distinction”). In parable five of the Shepherd of Hermas, there is even a

¹⁵²² Glancy, “Slaves at Greco-Roman Banquets,” 206. See also the contribution by Lilian I. Larsen in the same volume which surveys the role of slaves during Early Christian banquets in a variety of sources, from which she concludes that their role would have been “variable.” At the same time, she stresses how Early Christian practices were “inextricably intertwined with language and structures drawn from the ledgers of chattel slavery (“Early Christian Meals and Slavery,” in *Meals in the Early Christian World. Social Formation, Experimentation, and Conflict at the Table*, ed. Dennis E. Smith and Hal Taussig [New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012], 191-203, spec. 201-202).

¹⁵²³ Glancy, “Slaves at Greco-Roman Banquets,” 208.

¹⁵²⁴ Glancy, “Slaves at Greco-Roman Banquets,” 210.

¹⁵²⁵ Glancy, “Slaves at Greco-Roman Banquets,” 209.

¹⁵²⁶ Seneca, *Epistulae morales* 47.15 (LCL 75, 309).

¹⁵²⁷ Columella, *De Re Rustica* 1.8.5 (LCL 361, 87; italics MS). Cf. Enrico Dal Lago and Constantina Katsari, “Ideal models of slave management in the Roman world and in the ante-bellum American South,” in *Slave Systems. Ancient and Modern*, ed. Enrico Dal Lago and Constantina Katsari (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 198.

connection being made between joining the meal (of the master) and freedom. First, the slave who is to be announced as free is sent food by his master – indicating his transition to a new status. Second, when the master learns of the fact that the slave has shared his food with his fellow slaves, he once again assembles his friends and his son to underscore that this slave deserves his new status as a free man and heir. Why? Because he imitates and reciprocates his free master: he shares the food that was shared with him, with his fellow slaves and soon-to-be subordinates.¹⁵²⁸ Finally, it should be mentioned that, according to some sources, the intention to liberate a slave (or even the deed of manumission) could be expressed by inviting the slave to the slave-owner's table, the so called *manumissio per mensam*, *manumissio in convivio* or *manumissio inter amicos*.¹⁵²⁹ All these phenomena have one thing in common: they show the great symbolic value of a slave being invited to join a master's (or a superior's, in the case of Columella) banquet.

7.1.3. The Pesach Meal

When it comes to meals and slavery, the Pesach meal cannot go undiscussed. In the biblical description of the festival, Israel is called to commemorate Israel's liberation from slavery: "Remember this day on which you came out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, because the Lord brought you out from there by strength of hand; no leavened bread shall be eaten" (Exodus 13:3). Based on this verse, Catherine Hezser writes: "Once a year, during the seder ritual, everyone should experience redemption from slavery to freedom, irrespective of his or her actual standing in this world. The Passover seder can thus be seen as a symbolic celebration of human equality before God."¹⁵³⁰ While in theory this might be true, we may wonder, as Schwartz does, whether the memory of Israel's own past as slaves would lead to a different treatment of its current slaves in practice: were they allowed to recline at the meal? From the description of the Seder meal in the Mishnah, it is clear that *someone* serves.¹⁵³¹ As we will see, in most cases it was probably slaves who, as usual, served their masters. As Schwartz notes: "In the earliest post-biblical sources, reclining is singled out as a display of freedom, but once the category of 'display' was established, additional practices accrued, including the conspicuous display of servants, material possessions, and indebtedness."¹⁵³² He calls this a "bitter irony,"¹⁵³³ an irony that Schwartz tries to put on the scholarly agenda.¹⁵³⁴ To study this tension, we explore a number of passages from ancient rabbinic sources.

The following passage from the Jerusalem Talmud makes it clear that all *free* people, regardless of their wealth, must recline during the Pesach meal.

¹⁵²⁸ Shepherd of Hermas 55.9-11 (V.2.9-11). See chapter 5 of this volume.

¹⁵²⁹ See Adolf Berger, *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Roman Law*, Transactions of the American Philosophical Society 43, no. 2 (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1953), 576; William Warwick Buckland, *The Roman Law of Slavery. The Condition of the Slave in Private Law from Augustus to Justinian* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1908), 446, 548; and Kyle Harper, *Slavery in the Late Roman World, AD 275–425* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 466n19.

¹⁵³⁰ Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 376; see also Catherine Hezser, "Passover and Social Equality: Women, Slaves and Minors in Bavli Pesachim," in *A Feminist Commentary on the Babylonian Talmud. Introduction and Studies*, ed. Tal Ilan (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2007), 91-107.

¹⁵³¹ See m. Pesachim 7:13 and 10 in which it is repeatedly implied that others take care of the organization of the meal for those who recline. Cf. Earl Schwartz, "Server and Served at the Seder," *Conservative Judaism* 63, no. 4 (2012), 23n44.

¹⁵³² Schwartz, "Server and Served at the Seder," 8.

¹⁵³³ Schwartz, "Server and Served at the Seder," 8.

¹⁵³⁴ This issue has not received much scholarly attention. The best work on the matter is, in my view, Schwartz, "Server and Served at the Seder," which discusses a variety of haggadot and commentaries. A more historical study is that of Hezser, "Passover and Social Equality," and her comments on this issue in her book, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 371-376. Different from the roles of women during the Seder, the role of slaves is rarely studied. For women see, e.g., Judith Hauptman, "Thinking about the Ten Theses in Relation to the Passover Seder and Women's Participation," in *Meals in Early Judaism. Social Formation at the Table*, ed. Susan Marks and Hal Taussig (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), 43-58; Marjorie Lehman, "Women and Passover Observance: Reconsidering Gender in the Study of Rabbinic Texts," in *Women and Judaism*, ed. Leonard J. Greenspoon, Ronald A. Simkins, and Jean A. Cahan, *Studies in Jewish Civilization* 14 (Omaha: Creighton University Press, 2003), 45-66.

Even the poorest man in Israel does not eat until he reclines (quotation Mishnah). [...] Rabbi Levi said: “For it is the way of slaves to be eating while standing, and here they are eating while they recline, to proclaim that they went out from slavery to freedom” (לפי שדרך עבדים להיות אוכליו מעומד וכאן להיות אוכליו) (מסובין להודיע שיצאו מעבדות לחירות). (y. Pesachim 10:1, 37b)¹⁵³⁵

With a reference to the Exodus, this passage shows how standing and slavery, on the one hand, and reclining and freedom, on the other hand, were intimately connected. But were slaves themselves allowed to recline during Passover as well? Was Pesach a feast like Saturnalia, in which the normal state of affairs was reversed? According to Hezser, “sometimes even slaves” participated in the Passover dinner, as already the Hebrew Bible stipulates pertaining to circumcised slaves (Exodus 12:44, cf. T. Pesachim 8:18).¹⁵³⁶ However, on the basis of y. Gittin 4:4, 45d, she concludes that the Jerusalem Talmud takes a very pragmatic stance: “it maintains the general biblical permission for circumcised slaves to participate in the meal; but it also considers the interests of the slave-owning householder who depends on his slaves’ service even at the time of the Passover festival. [...] Slaves whose service was required in order to bring the food to the table would be unable to join the family in its ritual meal. No reversal of roles, known from the Saturnalia, is imagined here.”¹⁵³⁷ On the other hand, slaves that were allowed to join the meal, the Jerusalem Talmud rules (y. Pesachim 10:1, 37b), were allowed to eat in a reclining position instead of standing: “Rabbi Yose asked before Rabbi Simon: ‘Even a slave before his master (אפילו עבד לפני רבו), even a woman before her husband?’”¹⁵³⁸

If we turn for a moment to the different context of the Babylonian Talmud, texts like b. Pesachim 108a seem to suggest that slaves (although that word is not used) reclined, albeit perhaps only for a little while/a little snack:

An inquiry was [put] before them: What about a waiter (שמש)? Come and hear, as R. Yehoshua ben Levi said: “A waiter, who ate an olive size of unleavened bread while reclining, he has fulfilled [his obligation] (השמש שאכל כזית מצה כשהוא מיסב יצא).” If he was reclining – yes, if he wasn’t reclining – no. Understand from his: it requires reclining. (Translation MS)

Earl Schwartz writes about this:

The Gemara, in fact, envisions the possibility of a shammas both waiting on tables and reclining. It does not, however, go on to envision how a reclining shammas might be served. Specifically, no reciprocity is prescribed, i.e., that a reclining shammas is served by another recliner. “Turning the tables” in this way would have provided a simple and direct route to the center of the narrative, where God’s eye is on the server, but the tables remained as they were.¹⁵³⁹

To conclude this section, we briefly discuss a story from the Babylonian Talmud (Pesachim 116a). In this passage, we read how the slave Daru together with his master Rabbi Nachman attends a Pesach meal. According to the narrative Daru also participates in the questions that are traditionally asked during the festival:

Rav Nachman said to his slave Daru: “It happened that a master decided to liberate his slave, and to give him silver and gold (עבדא דמפיק ליה מריה לחירות ויהיב ליה כספא וזהבא) – what should he (i.e., the slave) say to him (the master)?” He (i.e., Daru) said to him (Rav Nachman): “He should thank and praise him (בעי לאדורי) (ולשבוחי).” He said to him: “You have dismissed [us] from saying: ‘Why is [this night] different?’” He began and said: “We were slaves.” (Translation MS)

¹⁵³⁵ Translation: MS.

¹⁵³⁶ Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 372.

¹⁵³⁷ Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 374.

¹⁵³⁸ Translation: MS. Compare y. Pesachim 1:1, 27b, where it is said that in the search for leaven “even women, even slaves” are allowed to participate.

¹⁵³⁹ Schwartz, “Server and Served at the Seder,” 11.

In his commentary on this passage, Schwartz remarks how Daru is asked to reflect on the experience of liberation, while he himself had not been manumitted – and, as far as we know, would not be. Without much further ado, the evening continues after Daru answers the question. As Schwartz writes: “Nothing more is said about the slave who remained in their midst, passed over by the seder itself.”¹⁵⁴⁰ Schwartz calls this lack of sensitivity for the position of the slave representative of the “comfort with social inequality” the Jews in antiquity felt.¹⁵⁴¹

So, it is difficult to provide an unambiguous image of the Pesach meal when it comes to slaves, both in the Jerusalem Talmud and the Babylonian Talmud. The best we can say is that some slaves might have joined the Pesach meal, but, if that was the case, no reversal of roles was foreseen. The master would not have served his slaves, but other (non-circumcised?) slaves might, or slaves might have combined serving and eating.

7.2. Reversal and Elevation in the New Testament

In this section, we focus on a parable with a rather unique plot – a master serving his slaves – in Luke 12:35-38. We also discuss another parable (Luke 17:7-10) that seems to stress that one should not serve his slaves, and a variety of New Testament passages that come close to Luke 12:35-38 in message and imagery. By working through these materials, we hope to find out whether the parable in Luke 12 was unique in its image and message, or if it is representative of a general early Christian concept with regard to serving leaders and reversal of roles.

7.2.1. The Serving Master: Luke 12:35-38

The text of the parable of the Serving Master is (in my own translation):

Text (NA 28)

35 Ἐστώσαν ὑμῶν αἱ ὀσφύες περιεζωσμέναι καὶ οἱ λύχνοι καίόμενοι·

36 καὶ ὑμεῖς ὅμοιοι ἀνθρώποις προσδεχομένοις τὸν κύριον ἑαυτῶν πότε ἀναλύσῃ ἐκ τῶν γάμων, ἵνα ἔλθόντος καὶ κρούσαντος εὐθέως ἀνοίξωσιν αὐτῷ.

37 μακάριοι οἱ δοῦλοι ἐκεῖνοι, οὓς ἔλθων ὁ κύριος εὕρήσει γρηγοροῦντας· ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι περιζώσεται καὶ ἀνακλινεῖ αὐτοὺς καὶ παρελθὼν διακονήσῃ αὐτοῖς.

38 ἢ ἂν ἐν τῇ δευτέρᾳ ἢ ἐν τῇ τρίτῃ φυλακῇ ἔλθῃ καὶ εὕρῃ οὕτως, μακάριοί εἰσιν ἐκεῖνοι.

Translation (MS)

Let your loins be girded and have your lamps lit.

And you, be like men who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding, so that they may directly open [the door] when he comes and knocks.

Blessed be the slaves who, when the master comes, he finds alert. Truly I tell you that he will gird himself and make them recline and he will come and serve them.

If he comes in the second or in the third watch and he will find them so, blessed are those [slaves]!

To a great extent, this parable is built of elements that we have familiarized ourselves with in the previous chapters. First of all, the parable is a fine example of the theme of *absente ero*, the absent master (cf. 5.4.1), a phenomenon that was ubiquitous in ancient social reality. In the parable, the listeners are called to be like slaves who are waiting for the return of their master from a wedding. When their master returns, a moment of reckoning is foreseen.¹⁵⁴² However, in this case, only rewards and no punishments are promised to those he finds awake (cf. 6.5.1). Another familiar element is the task of the slaves. They do not have to work the land or prepare a meal, but they have to guard the door and open it as soon as the master arrives (cf. 5.4.3). As we have seen in chapter 5, guarding the door was one of the paradigmatic slave tasks in antiquity. Slaves who failed to open the

¹⁵⁴⁰ Schwartz, “Server and Served at the Seder,” 5.

¹⁵⁴¹ Schwartz, “Server and Served at the Seder,” 5.

¹⁵⁴² See also the following parable from the Babylonian Talmud (Hagigah 12b): “*The earth was a formless void* (Genesis 1:2; NRSV). Now, it (i.e., the Bible) began with heaven first, why is it (i.e., the second verse) different – [why] does it recount the manufacturing of the earth [first]? The School of R. Yishmael taught: ‘A parable. It is like a king of flesh and blood who said to his slaves (משל למלך בשר ודם שאמר לעבדיו): “Come early to my door.” He came early and found women and men (השכים ומצא נשים ואנשים). Who does he praise? Those who are not used to come early and came early [anyway].’” (Translation MS)

door fast enough, or who did not let the right persons enter the house (cf. *Vita Aesopi* 77b), awaited punishments. As Van Tilborg noted in 1988, the slave tasks described in this parable are self-evident points of departure: “The master expects as a matter of course that his slaves will stay awake when he goes to a marriage feast and that they will open the door immediately when he knocks (v 36), no matter what the hour, till the second and even third watch – that is, way beyond midnight.”¹⁵⁴³ Since a wedding feast in antiquity could last for days to a week, much patience and watchfulness was needed.¹⁵⁴⁴

As opposed to the first two elements, the third element of the parable is new and surprising, and does not appear in Mark 13:33-37, a passage that is often seen as a parallel to Luke 12:35-38.¹⁵⁴⁵ It pertains to the substantial reward the slaves receive when their master returns. When the master finds his slaves awake and alert, he invites them to his table and serves them. Here, a true reversal of roles is anticipated – Schottroff speaks about an “amazing deed” of the slave-owner,¹⁵⁴⁶ and Bovon writes that the audience is “astounded to witness a reversal of roles.”¹⁵⁴⁷ In the Roman world that ancient Palestine was part of, a connection with the feast of Saturnalia is easily made. As Christine Gerber writes: “Die Szene erinnert an die römischen Saturnalien, jährliche Feiern zu Ehren des Saturn. Wie im Karneval wurden die Standesrollen gelockert, ja z.T. verkehrt. [...] Wir sehen, wie sehr die Lk Szene die sozialen Gepflogenheiten durchbricht.”¹⁵⁴⁸ While the similarities between the Lukan scene and the feast of Saturnalia are significant (see also section 7.1.2 in this chapter), the Lukan passage clearly *is* not such a feast: references to a festival-context are missing and the reversal is not so much a ritual as it is a reward. Hence, Marshall might be right in speaking out against a connection with the Saturnalia: “The imagery is Jewish, and there is no need to find influence from the Roman Saturnalia.”¹⁵⁴⁹ Indeed, as we will see in section 7.3 of this chapter, parables with reversal of roles also occur in the early rabbinic texts. However, instead of looking for the background of the Lukan parable in either Jewish texts or Roman feasts, it is probably more fruitful to assume a shared cultural concept according to which the meal forms an important *locus* for status deliberation.

¹⁵⁴³ Sijef van Tilborg, “An Interpretation from the Ideology of the Text,” *Neotestamentica* 22, no. 2 (1988), 205.

¹⁵⁴⁴ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53. Volume 2*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament 3B (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 1174.

¹⁵⁴⁵ The question of whether both parables go back to the same narrative is still a matter of scholarly debate. For example, Bauckham is of the opinion that Luke 12:42-48 and Mark 13:33-37 represent the same parable (Bauckham, “Synoptic Parousia Parables and the Apocalypse,” 166ff), whereas Dodd and Jeremias think they have a common source (Charles H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 5th ed [London: Fontana Books, 1967], 129; Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, transl. S.H. Hooke, 2nd ed. [Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1972], 53-55). Meier, on the other hand, calls the connection between the two parables “questionable” (John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus. Volume 5: Probing the Authenticity of the Parables*, Anchor Bible Reference Library Series [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016], 213). The argument that he and other scholars have formulated mainly pertains to the wording of the two parables. As Blomberg has noted, the two passages have a “sheer lack of verbal agreement.” Only two words appear in both passages in exactly the same word and place (*ho kyrios*) – but these two words belong to the standard vocabulary of Jesus’ parables. Another four words appear in a different grammatical form, but these words (e.g., *doulos*, *anthropos*) can hardly be missed in a story about a man leaving his slaves. See Craig L. Blomberg, “When is a Parallel really a Parallel? A Test Case: The Lucan Parables,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 46 (1984), 83-85. For us, it suffices to see that both parables work with the same basic plot of slaves who are waiting for their master (Marshall speaks about “different forms in which Jesus conveyed the same basic teaching.” See Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 537), and that the scene of the master serving his slaves is unique and only occurs in Luke.

¹⁵⁴⁶ Luise Schottroff, *The Parables of Jesus*, transl. Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 173.

¹⁵⁴⁷ François Bovon, *Luke 2. A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 9:51-19:27*, transl. Donald S. Deer, Hermeneia – A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 233.

¹⁵⁴⁸ Christine Gerber, “Wann aus Sklavinnen und Sklaven Gäste ihres Herren werden (Von den wachenden Knechten). Lk 12,35-38,” in *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu*, ed. Ruben Zimmermann (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2007), 576. Compare Balch: “In Greco-Roman society this is an astounding reversal, characteristic of Jesus’ parables, elsewhere seen once a year at the festival of the Saturnalia [...]” (David L. Balch, “Luke,” in *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, ed. James D.G. Dunn and John W. Rogerson [Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003], 1133).

¹⁵⁴⁹ Ian Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke. A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978), 536. Cf. Bovon, *Luke 2*, 233n37.

When we approach the parable from a *Bildfeld* perspective, it is clear that it makes use of what Gerber calls “das vertraute Bildfeld” of humans as slaves, and the slave-owner as God or Christ.¹⁵⁵⁰ The meal may represent the eschatological meal (see, e.g., 7.3.2), but it might also be chosen as a suitable *locus* for a change of roles, as Gerber argues.¹⁵⁵¹ The lighting of the lamps and the girding of loins¹⁵⁵² are best understood as intertextual, lexical references to the Exodus story, I would claim. As Lövestam has argued, the parable “contains a special allusion to the paschal night situation, when the Children of Israel on the eve of their approaching liberation should eat the paschal lamb with their loins girded [...]”¹⁵⁵³ However, the intertextuality between the Passover story and the parable of The Serving Master goes beyond mere lexical similarities. Dany Christopher has recently shown in his *The Appropriation of Passover in Luke-Acts* that Luke and Act are permeated with references and allusions to the Exodus story.¹⁵⁵⁴ He argues that in Luke 12:35-40 “strong allusions to the Passover”¹⁵⁵⁵ can be found: apart from the girding of loins is that the night setting of both the Passover story and the parable, and its message that matches Luke’s claim that “the celebration at the Parousia is the ultimate Passover feast.”¹⁵⁵⁶ Christopher sees a direct parallel between the parable and the Exodus story: “The expectation of Parousia requires a Passover-like vigilance. Just as the Israelites were on constant alert, waiting obediently for God’s rescue, likewise the believers need to be on constant alert, waiting faithfully for the Parousia.”¹⁵⁵⁷ A reading of the parable along these lines would underscore the servile position of the people; they are either slaves of the Pharaoh or of Christ/God (cf. chapter 4). Secondly, the parable and the Exodus story sketch, to a certain extent, a utopian perspective, of freedom and improvement of social position/status. Thirdly, it stresses the redemptory work of God, as well as the fact that God does not adhere to human norms.

From a hidden transcript perspective, we might remark that no (direct) critique of the master is visible. Instead, all responsibility for their destiny is ascribed to the slaves themselves; when they do the will of the master, the master will reward them. At the same time, the fact that the master serves his slaves *is* a very visible and impactful break with the public transcript – but from a position of power, not from below. It is interesting to notice that this break is not framed or introduced as something out of the ordinary, like the contrast parables in section 7.3.3 (e.g., “According to the way of the world the slave [...], *but* in this case the Holy One Blessed be He [...]”). We may wonder why, since the symbolic significance of the plot of this parable is substantial and would probably be recognized as such by the ancient reader/listener.¹⁵⁵⁸ In addition, we may wonder whether the audience would have interpreted the parable as a call to imitation of the master’s behavior (*imitatio dei*). To answer these questions, it is good to take into account the broader context of the parable: how does the parable of The Serving Master connect to the parable about The Good and the Bad Slave Manager, and how does it connect to the parabolic saying about The Burglar that breaks into the house?

The parable of The Serving Master is followed by a parable we have already discussed to some extent in chapter 5, Luke 12:42-48 (The Good and the Bad Slave Manager, section 5.4.1, see also 6.3.6). These two parables share a number of traits. They both take the absence of the master as the parable’s point of departure.

¹⁵⁵⁰ Gerber, “Wann aus Sklavinnen und Sklaven Gäste ihres Herren werden,” 576.

¹⁵⁵¹ Gerber, “Wann aus Sklavinnen und Sklaven Gäste ihres Herren werden,” 576.

¹⁵⁵² A comparison between Exodus 12:11 in the Greek of the Septuagint and Luke 12:35 shows that the same verbs are used for the girding of loins (Luke: ἑστῶσαν ὑμῶν αἱ ὀσφύες περιεζωσμέναι; Exodus: αἱ ὀσφύες ὑμῶν περιεζωσμέναι). See also section 5.4.3.1. However, while the expression might have originated in the Exodus-story, “the expression became in the OT a common instruction for readiness or service” (Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV*, The Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries 28A [Garden City: Doubleday, 1985], 987n12). See e.g. 2 Kings 4:29; 9:1; Job 38:3; Jeremiah 1:17.

¹⁵⁵³ Evald Lövestam, *Spiritual Wakefulness in the New Testament*, transl. W. Francis Salisbury, Lund universitets årsskrift 55, no. 3 (Lund: C.W.K. Gleerup, 1963), 94.

¹⁵⁵⁴ Dany Christopher, *The Appropriation of Passover in Luke-Acts*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament – 2. Reihe 476 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018).

¹⁵⁵⁵ Christopher, *The Appropriation of Passover in Luke-Acts*, 138.

¹⁵⁵⁶ Christopher, *The Appropriation of Passover in Luke-Acts*, 137.

¹⁵⁵⁷ Christopher, *The Appropriation of Passover in Luke-Acts*, 144. Christopher finds proof for his position in Philo (*De Sacrificiis* 63) who also combines the imagery of Exodus with a call for readiness. However, Bovon points out that the use of the Exodus imagery “is not [...] necessarily eschatological,” but also allegorical (*Luke* 2, 231n19).

¹⁵⁵⁸ As Derrett writes: “The picture was obviously an intelligible one in Luke’s day” (John D.M. Derrett, *New Resolutions of Old Conundrums. A Fresh Insight into Luke’s Gospel* [Shipston-on-Stour: P. Drinkwater, 1986], 31).

Both also warn the listener that the arrival of the master will not be expected (vs. 39, 40//46) and that the slaves better be working at that moment (36, 38, 40//43, 46). However, the theme and application of both parables differ significantly. The parable of The Serving Master focuses on the readiness and vigilance of the slaves and only presents a reward for the good slaves. The parable of The Good and the Bad Slave Manager focuses on one particular kind of slave, the slave manager, and features not only rewards, but also punishments. It also specifies the sort of behavior one can find amongst the manager-slaves and matches those sorts of behaviors with certain rewards or penalties.

In between the parable of The Serving Master and the parable of The Good and the Bad Slave Manager is yet another parable: the parable of The Burglar.¹⁵⁵⁹ This is one of only a few instances in which a clearly negative image is used in a parable.¹⁵⁶⁰ The parable compares the Son of Man with a thief that breaks into a house, thereby comparing the audience to the master of the house (while the master of the house normally represents God).¹⁵⁶¹ Since this comparison is lacking in Jewish eschatological literature, it has often been seen as an invention by Jesus.¹⁵⁶² A more elaborate version of the parable can be found in Matthew 24:42-44 (cf. Gospel of Thomas 21b, 103), where it precedes a parallel of the parable of The Good and Bad Manager Slave (Matthew 24:45-51). The parable seems to stress the unexpectedness of the arrival of the Son of Man, but might also hint at the destructive nature of his coming.¹⁵⁶³ Bauckham suggests that the parable of The Burglar forms a contrast with the parable of The Serving Master: “The Watching Servants focuses on the *parousia* as blessing to those who are found ready; the Thief focuses on the *parousia* as threat to the unprepared.”¹⁵⁶⁴ The third parable brings both sides together: “The double aspect of the master’s return as blessing or judgment is spelt out in the third parable.”¹⁵⁶⁵

To summarize, we have here a series of three parables that are connected in their call to be watchful but vary in imagery and emphases. As Lövestam puts it elegantly: “We find here in different variations one and the same basic theme: devotion to God and the divine opposed to concession to and absorption in the things of this world and age.”¹⁵⁶⁶ In situating the parable of The Serving Master in its context – a parable series on vigilance, rewards, and punishments – the potentially disruptive message of the parable might have lost some of its power, since it is counterbalanced by parables without that same disruptive character. However, the theme of a slave-owner serving like a slave is not limited to Luke 12:35-38 and neither is the call to imitate the (heavenly) master in his remarkable behavior. Echoes of the story are found throughout the New Testament. However, before we review these passages (see 7.2.3), we will discuss a parable that is often juxtaposed to Luke 12:35-38: the parable of The Useless Slaves.

7.2.2. Who Would Serve his Slave? Luke 17:7-10

Very often, a debate on the (possibly provocative) meaning of Luke 12:35-38 is accompanied by a discussion of Luke 17:7-10, the parable that Weiser says offers a “completely different image” (“ganz anderes Bild”) than the parable from Luke 12 and creates “a peculiar tension” with it.¹⁵⁶⁷ In contrast to Luke 12:35-39, Luke 17:7-10 has, according to Thomas Braun, “die Funktion eines Anti-Karnevals am Ende des Abschnittes (die Umkehrung

¹⁵⁵⁹ I follow Schneider (Gerhard Schneider, *Parusiegleichnisse im Lukas-Evangelium*, Stuttgarter Bibelstudien 74 [Stuttgart: KBW Verlag, 1975], 16), Bock (*Luke 9:51–24:53*, 1172) and others in speaking of three parables. Other scholars emphasize that the Parable of the Thief is “nothing more than a parabolic saying” (Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 538), or the “remnant of a parable” (Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke X-XXIV*, 986).

¹⁵⁶⁰ Other examples: Luke 14:31-33; Mark 3:27.

¹⁵⁶¹ Cf. for the same image 1 Thessalonians 5:2, 4; 2 Peter 3:10; Gospel of Thomas 21b, 103; Didache 16:1 (and, according to Bauckham, Revelations 3:3, 16:15; see Richard Bauckham, “Synoptic Parousia Parables and the Apocalypse,” *New Testament Studies* 23, no. 2 [1977], 162-176).

¹⁵⁶² Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent. A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing House, 2008), 752n109 with reference to e.g. John Nolland, *Luke 9:21-18:34*, Word Biblical Commentary 35b (Dallas: Word Books, 1982), and Lövestam, *Spiritual Wakefulness*, 96.

¹⁵⁶³ Lövestam, *Spiritual Wakefulness*, 97-98.

¹⁵⁶⁴ Bauckham, “Synoptic Parousia Parables and the Apocalypse,” 165.

¹⁵⁶⁵ Bauckham, “Synoptic Parousia Parables and the Apocalypse,” 165.

¹⁵⁶⁶ Lövestam, *Spiritual Wakefulness*, 93.

¹⁵⁶⁷ Alfons Weiser, *Die Knechtsgleichnisse der synoptischen Evangelien*, Studien zum Alten und Neuen Testament 29 (München: Kösel-Verlag, 1971), 170.

innerhalb der Umkehrung).¹⁵⁶⁸ That both parables are often analyzed together is understandable, given the fact that already the first line indicates, with the help of a rhetorical question, that it is absurd for a master to ask his slave to recline. The complete text of the parable is (in my own translation):

Text (NA28)

7 Τίς δὲ ἐξ ὑμῶν δοῦλον ἔχων ἀροτριῶντα ἢ ποιμαίνοντα, ὃς εἰσελθόντι ἐκ τοῦ ἀγροῦ ἐρεῖ αὐτῷ· εὐθέως παρελθὼν ἀνάπεσε,
8 ἀλλ' οὐχὶ ἐρεῖ αὐτῷ· ἐτοίμασον τί δευνήσω καὶ περιζωσάμενος διακόνει μοι ἕως φάγω καὶ πίω, καὶ μετὰ ταῦτα φάγεσαι καὶ πίεσαι σύ;

9 μὴ ἔχει χάριν τῷ δούλῳ ὅτι ἐποίησεν τὰ διαταχθέντα;
10 οὕτως καὶ ὑμεῖς, ὅταν ποιήσητε πάντα τὰ διαταχθέντα ὑμῖν, λέγετε ὅτι δούλοι ἄχρηστοί ἐσμεν, ὃ ὠφείλομεν ποιῆσαι πεποιθήκαμεν.

Translation (MS)

Who of you who has a slave, who comes in from the field after plowing or tending cattle, will ask him: “come here immediately and recline”? Won’t he ask him instead: “Prepare what I will eat and serve me after you have girded [yourself] while I eat and drink; and after these thing you may eat and drink”?

Will he give thanks to the slave, because he had done what him was ordered? So you also, when you have done all that you have been ordered, say: “We are useless slaves, we have done what we were ordered to do.”

As I argued in chapter 4 (section 4.1.1), the *mise-en-scène* of this parable is not that of a great agricultural enterprise, but instead that of a small farm where the same slave can take care of the cattle or the fields, and has to cook when he is back at home as well.¹⁵⁶⁹ The plot of the parable is simple: Jesus asks his audience, which only consists of his disciples here (17:1), to imagine that they are slave-owners (perhaps there were some amongst them?). In that (hypothetical) scenario, would they serve their slaves after a hard day’s work? Would they thank the slaves for following their orders? Or would they ask the slaves instead to prepare and serve their meal? The expected answer is clearly that they, indeed, would ask their slaves to prepare their meal and not the other way around. In the application, the parable turns again to the audience but addresses them now in the role of slaves instead of that of slave-owners:¹⁵⁷⁰ just like the slaves from the parable, the disciples simply should do what they were ordered and should not expect to be awarded.¹⁵⁷¹ Even when they complete their tasks, the slaves still receive a grim, but for them not unusual, reproach, being called “useless slaves” (cf. Matthew 25:30), or “unworthy” slaves.¹⁵⁷²

While the message of the parable – not to serve for a reward¹⁵⁷³ or for honor¹⁵⁷⁴ – is not unique for early Christian and early rabbinic parables, the plot of Luke 12 (a master serving his slaves) obviously is in tension with that of Luke 17 (a slave should not be served by his master). As Huffman succinctly summarizes: “Luke 12:35-38 (cf. Mark 13:33-37) relates to the eschatological crisis and contains the atypical feature of the returning

¹⁵⁶⁸ Thomas Braun, “‘Dinner for one’ oder vom Sklavenlohn (Vom Knechtslohn),” in *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu*, ed. Ruben Zimmermann (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2007), 665.

¹⁵⁶⁹ Cf. Schottroff, *The Parables of Jesus*, 179; Bovon, *Luke 2*, 496.

¹⁵⁷⁰ Because of this “turn” in the parable, some commentators have debated its authenticity. For an overview and discussion, see Paul S. Minear, “A Note on Luke 17:7-10,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93, no. 1 (1974), 82-87; Bovon, *Luke 2*, 493n23; Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV*, 1145. In Marcion’s text of Luke verse 10b is left out.

¹⁵⁷¹ Compare the discussion about the rewards that some disciples expected in Mark 10:35-45. To those disciples Jesus said: “whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.”

¹⁵⁷² For “unworthy,” see Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 647. An alternative translation is: “we are slaves to whom no favor is owed.” Cf. John J. Kilgallen, “What Kind of Servants Are We? (Luke 17,10),” *Biblica* 63 (1982), 549-551. On this translation issue, see also A. Marcus Ward, “Uncomfortable Words IV: Unprofitable Servants,” *Expository Times* 81, no. 7 (1970), 200-203. It is clear that this word connotes “contempt and condemnation,” as the only other time it is used in the New Testament is in Matthew 25:30 (“And throw the useless slave in the outer darkness”). Cf. Bovon, *Luke 2*, 497n59.

¹⁵⁷³ Compare our discussion of Mishnah Avot 1:3 in 6.5.2.

¹⁵⁷⁴ See Luke 17:11-18. As Marshall writes: “the disciples are not to seek thanks, but to give thanks” (Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 645).

Master serving his Watchful Servants. In Luke 17:7-10, however, Jesus rejects this possibility, and the story ends with the ‘unworthy servants’ thanklessly waiting on the master at the end of the long day’s work.”¹⁵⁷⁵ Could there also be a different interpretation of Luke 17 that is more in line with the parable of The Serving Master? One scholar who has tried to defend such an interpretation is John Crossan. According to Crossan, the parable of The Useless Slaves is surprising, since it shows that “even good servants are not rewarded.”¹⁵⁷⁶ As we have seen in chapter 3, Crossan works with a horizon of expected normalcy, in which “good servants are rewarded and/or bad ones are punished.”¹⁵⁷⁷ This also means that Crossan takes the position that the parable of The Serving Master is *not* surprising, since it states that servants who do their duty are rewarded: “The story is coherent, possible, and even mildly amusing.”¹⁵⁷⁸ However, as we have seen above, the parable of Luke 12:35-38 does represent a striking reversal of roles, comparable to what happens during the feast of Saturnalia. Also, although Crossan’s parameter of the horizon of expected normalcy might be a useful tool in the interpretation of slavery parables, I agree with Beavis that he did not make a good assessment of what normalcy in this situation would have comprised of. As Beavis writes:

[T]he point of the parable is not that the *doulos* is an outstandingly good or faithful one, but merely that he does what is expected of a slave in Greco-Roman society: he attends to his master’s needs without question. [... T]his parable is rather conservative in that it casually assumes that the listener is a slave owner who treats his/her slaves without undue consideration. For a Greco-Roman audience, a much more “subversive” parable would be one in which a master invited a slave to dine with him as an equal after a hard day’s work, or one like the parable of the waiting servants (Luke 12:35-38), where the master rewards his faithful slaves by waiting on them!¹⁵⁷⁹

Beavis adds that the only possible “unexpected” element of the passage would be that it calls its hearers first to identify with the master (vs. 7), but shifts that identification in the application to that of the slaves – “an idea that would have been distasteful to some listeners (cf. Matthew 20:26-27; 23:11-12; Mark 9:35; 10:43-44; Luke 22:26).”¹⁵⁸⁰ Weiser even more strongly confirms the normalcy of the parable: “Von allen Knechtsgleichnissen Jesu drückt das vorliegende am deutlichsten und radikalsten aus, was es heißt, Sklave zu sein.”¹⁵⁸¹ I agree with these scholars, contra Crossan, that Luke 17 represents the normal situation of a slave *vis-à-vis* his master, and I would like to explain this from the function or embedding of the parable: Jesus emphatically takes the status quo (the world as it is now) as the departure point of this parable, while the parable of The Serving Master is situated in the future, when the master returns. Moreover, the parable has a specific target audience;¹⁵⁸² it forms a direct or indirect rebuke of the disciples to whom it is addressed: they are not entitled to (extra) rewards and/or a better position because of their special service. Instead, we may infer from other New Testament passages (see below, 7.2.4), that the disciples should find joy in serving their neighbors, just like Jesus was willing to serve them (e.g., Mark 10:43-45//Matthew 20:26-27//Luke 22:26-27 and John 13:13-16).

Finally, let us look at the parable of Luke 17:7-10 through the lenses of *Bildfeld* theory and hidden transcript analysis. From a *Bildfeld* perspective, it is remarkable to notice that, in this case, the listeners (“you,” specifically addressing the disciples) are identified with two different figures from the parable. First, they are

¹⁵⁷⁵ Norman A. Huffman, “Atypical Features in the Parables of Jesus,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 97, no. 2 (1978), 207-220, 217.

¹⁵⁷⁶ Crossan, “The Servant Parables,” 27. See for a differently formulated, but comparable thesis Michael P. Knowles, “Reciprocity and ‘Favour’ in the Parable of the Undeserving Servant (Luke 17.7–10),” *New Testament Studies* 49, no. 2 (2003), 256-260.

¹⁵⁷⁷ Crossan, “The Servant Parables,” 38.

¹⁵⁷⁸ Crossan, “The Servant Parables,” 21.

¹⁵⁷⁹ Mary Ann Beavis, “Ancient Slavery as an Interpretive Context for the New Testament Servant Parables with Special Reference to the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-8),” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111, no. 1 (1992), 41.

¹⁵⁸⁰ Beavis, “Ancient Slavery as an Interpretive Context,” 42.

¹⁵⁸¹ Weiser, *Die Knechtsgleichnisse der synoptischen Evangelien*, 105.

¹⁵⁸² That the parable originally was meant to address the disciples is debated by some (e.g., Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, transl. S.H. Hooke, 2nd ed. [Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1972], 42). However, I think that Minear has convincingly shown the plausibility of the disciples as addressees (Minear, “A Note on Luke 17:7-10,” 82-87, esp. 84-87).

compared to a slave-owner (vs. 8), but in a twist of the parable, which is in fact part of the application (introduced with “so,” οὕτως, in verse 10), it turns out that they are compared to slaves after all, with, presumably, the slave-owner representing God/Christ. This remarkable rhetorical move (Thomas Braun speaks of a “mehrdimensionales Figureninventar”¹⁵⁸³) helps to drive home the point of the parable, namely, that the disciples are slaves before God. By inviting them to imagine the comfortable position of a slave-owner first, the disciples have the opportunity to explore the social interactions between a master and his slave. Then the shock follows: *coram deo* their position is completely different (Bovon speaks of a “transfer from the social sphere to the religious one”¹⁵⁸⁴). The parable makes clear that, as slaves, obedience is expected from them (compare chapters 5 and 6 of this study). Moreover, the parable assumes ancient Mediterranean cultural norms by assessing the slaves by their usefulness. This brings us to the hidden transcript analysis. Schottroff writes that with this parable “the structure of slavery is being described in all its bitterness.”¹⁵⁸⁵ Despite this bitterness, the system is not disputed in any way, unless one would read the change in perspective as an invitation to look through the eyes of persons in other positions – which is exactly what Schottroff does. She writes: “Consciousness of injustice and the violence that brings people to the point of calling themselves worthless slaves is evident in the Gospel of Luke, and especially in this parable. The identification with this humiliation creates a solidarity with the lowly – not a justification of the violence that humiliates them”¹⁵⁸⁶ This identification might form a kind of hidden transcript, since it allows for empathy with and a humanization of the “useless slaves” who were normally invisible.¹⁵⁸⁷ But, again, we should stress that the image chosen here does not represent an eschatological moment, but takes the socio-historical horizon of normalcy as its point of departure.

In this discussion of Luke 17:7-10, we already referred to a number of other, non-parabolic, New Testament passages. In the next section, we will review a selection of relevant passages in more detail.

7.2.3. Serving as a Slave in other New Testament Passages

According to Marshall, the concept of Christ serving as master, as portrayed in the parable from Luke 12, is “firmly anchored in the teaching and activity of Jesus.”¹⁵⁸⁸ Moreover, the reversal of roles envisioned here often takes place in the context of a banquet. In this section, I briefly discuss two passages in which both the elements of reversal and of a banquet occur (Mark 10:42-45//Matthew 20:25-27//Luke 22:25-27 and John 13:13-16), while referring to a few others.

We start with a passage that is found in all synoptic gospels and that is “no doubt authentic.”¹⁵⁸⁹ As the parable in Luke 17, this section is addressed to the disciples. In Luke, the passage is part of a discussion on their position and status that occurs during the Passover dinner(!). Luke’s introduction to the conversation reads: “A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest” (22:24, NRSV). As opposed to Luke, in Mark and Matthew, the conversation takes place on the road to Jerusalem, after the third time that Jesus foretells his death and resurrection. According to both Mark and Matthew, the conversation starts because James and John (their mother in Matthew) ask Jesus for them to be seated at his right and left side in his kingdom (Matthew 20:21, Mark 10:37). The text of the passage is, in the different accounts (all NRSV):

<i>Luke 22</i>	25 ὁ δὲ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς· οἱ βασιλεῖς τῶν ἔθνων κυριεύουσιν αὐτῶν καὶ οἱ ἐξουσιάζοντες αὐτῶν εὐεργέται καλοῦνται. 26 ὑμεῖς δὲ οὐχ οὕτως, ἀλλ’ ὁ μείζων ἐν ὑμῖν γινέσθω ὡς ὁ νεώτερος καὶ ὁ ἡγούμενος ὡς ὁ διακονῶν. 27 τίς γὰρ	25 But he said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who
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¹⁵⁸³ Braun, “‘Dinner for one’ oder vom Sklavenlohn (Vom Knechtslohn),” 662.

¹⁵⁸⁴ Bovon, *Luke 2*, 493.

¹⁵⁸⁵ Schottroff, *The Parables of Jesus*, 179.

¹⁵⁸⁶ Schottroff, *The Parables of Jesus*, 180.

¹⁵⁸⁷ With respect to the invisibility of ancient slaves, see, e.g., Sandra R. Joshel and Lauren Hackworth Petersen, *The Material Life of Roman Slaves* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 37-40; as well as Robert Knapp’s *Invisible Romans* (London: Profile Books, 2011).

¹⁵⁸⁸ Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 537.

¹⁵⁸⁹ Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 811.

	μείζων, ὁ ἀνακείμενος ἢ ὁ διακονῶν; οὐχὶ ὁ ἀνακείμενος; ἐγὼ δὲ ἐν μέσῳ ὑμῶν εἰμι ὡς ὁ διακονῶν.	is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.
Mark 10	42 καὶ προσκαλεσάμενος αὐτοὺς ὁ Ἰησοῦς λέγει αὐτοῖς· οἴδατε ὅτι οἱ δοκοῦντες ἄρχειν τῶν ἐθνῶν κατακυριεύουσιν αὐτῶν καὶ οἱ μεγάλοι αὐτῶν κατεξουσιάζουσιν αὐτῶν. 43 οὐχ οὕτως δὲ ἐστὶν ἐν ὑμῖν, ἀλλ' ὅς ἂν θέλῃ μέγας γενέσθαι ἐν ὑμῖν ἔσται ὑμῶν διάκονος, 44 καὶ ὅς ἂν θέλῃ ἐν ὑμῖν εἶναι πρῶτος ἔσται πάντων δοῦλος· 45 καὶ γὰρ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου οὐκ ἦλθεν διακονηθῆναι ἀλλὰ διακονῆσαι καὶ δοῦναι τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ λύτρον ἀντὶ πολλῶν.	So Jesus called them and said to them, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.
Matthew 20	25 ὁ δὲ Ἰησοῦς προσκαλεσάμενος αὐτοὺς εἶπεν· οἴδατε ὅτι οἱ ἄρχοντες τῶν ἐθνῶν κατακυριεύουσιν αὐτῶν καὶ οἱ μεγάλοι κατεξουσιάζουσιν αὐτῶν. 26 οὐχ οὕτως ἔσται ἐν ὑμῖν, ἀλλ' ὅς ἐὰν θέλῃ ἐν ὑμῖν μέγας γενέσθαι ἔσται ὑμῶν διάκονος, 27 καὶ ὅς ἂν θέλῃ ἐν ὑμῖν εἶναι πρῶτος ἔσται ὑμῶν δοῦλος· 28 ὥσπερ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου οὐκ ἦλθεν διακονηθῆναι ἀλλὰ διακονῆσαι καὶ δοῦναι τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ λύτρον ἀντὶ πολλῶν.	But Jesus called them to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

There is much to say about the differences between the gospels. Especially when it comes to the imagery used in the second part of the parable, it stands out how Luke takes up the image of a meal, while Mark and Matthew choose the image of sacrifice and ransom.¹⁵⁹⁰ However, it is not my purpose to provide here an in-depth analysis of this passage. Instead, I will limit myself to a number of observations that are relevant for this section.

First of all, in contrast with the parable in Luke 12 and (most of) the rabbinic parables (see 7.3), this passage makes a clear connection between Jesus (God) serving as a slave/servant and the call to the disciples to act like slaves (*imitatio dei*). Jesus' self-humiliation serves here as exemplary behavior for his audience (compare Rabban Gamliel's serving of his guests in *Sifre Deuteronomy* 38; see below). As Dschulnigg notices, Jesus is in Mark 10:45 “[g]erade darin [...] maßgebendes Vorbild aller DienerInnen in der Gemeinde.”¹⁵⁹¹

Second, the terminology or the wording of the sayings differs per gospel. According to Elizabeth Dowling, the fact that Luke 22:26 avoids the terminology of slaves (*doulos*) “is particularly interesting when we consider that the Markan version of this saying does include slave wording (Mark 10:43-44). While Matthew follows the Markan text here fairly closely (Matthew 20:26-27), the Lukan version excludes the exhortation to be like a slave.”¹⁵⁹² According to Glancy's analysis, Luke wants to replace the difference between slave and free with the difference between benefactor and client. Why? “Luke's modification implies that the Markan formulation is potentially offensive to hearers.”¹⁵⁹³ Another, perhaps less challenging, explanation is that its

¹⁵⁹⁰ See, e.g., Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV*, 1411-1414.

¹⁵⁹¹ Peter Dschulnigg, *Das Markusevangelium*, 2nd ed., Theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 2007), 286.

¹⁵⁹² Elizabeth V. Dowling, “Slave Parables in the Gospel of Luke - Gospel ‘Texts of Terror’?,” *Australian Biblical Review* 56 (2008), 66.

¹⁵⁹³ Jennifer A. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 106.

different wording was caused by Luke's attempt to make a clearer connection between this saying and the parable of the Serving Master (see also below, on John 13), by introducing the language of serving at a table.

Thirdly, this passage is echoed in wording and meaning in a variety of verses, e.g., Mark 9:35 ("Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant [διδάκωνος] of all"), Luke 9:48 ("the least among all of you is the greatest"), Matthew 10:24 ("A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master"), and Matthew 23:11 ("The greatest among you will be your servant [διδάκωνος]").¹⁵⁹⁴ As the research of John O. York has shown, especially in Luke, the "repetitive form" of "bi-polar reverse [...] communicates a theme in the Lukan narrative."¹⁵⁹⁵ This theme is, in a nutshell, that in Jesus' kingdom "some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last" (Luke 13:30). From this passage it becomes clear that, as Adela Yarbro Collins puts it, Jesus' kingdom "rejects the actual relations of power in the early Roman imperial period as a model for the followers of Jesus."¹⁵⁹⁶ Leadership in the Jesus movement should be characterized by the same willingness to serve other members of that movement or community. However, as observed by Kaneen in his dissertation, while Jesus might rebuke his disciples for their pride and the way they envisage their leadership, he does not question hierarchical relations as such: "the focus of these sayings is not so much directed against the status of the leader, but rather against the style of leadership [...]."¹⁵⁹⁷ As Luke 22:26 puts it: "the leader [must become] like one who serves," and as Mark 10:43/Matthew 20:26 has it: "whoever wishes to become great [etc.]." So, these sayings of Jesus do not so much overthrow the different (societal) positions as they reinterpret these positions.

Many of the observations listed above also apply to the next passage I want to discuss, from John 13:1-16. The scene described in this passage ("an acted parable"¹⁵⁹⁸) is situated just before the Passover meal – so roughly at the same moment as the passage from Luke 22 – and contains sayings similar to Mark 10:42-45/Matthew 20:25-27/Luke 22:25-27. The text of the scene is as follows:

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. [...] And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. [...] After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord (Ὁ κύριος)—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, slaves are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them (οὐκ ἔστιν δοῦλος μείζων τοῦ κυρίου αὐτοῦ οὐδὲ ἀπόστολος μείζων τοῦ πέμψαντος αὐτόν). (NRSV with adaptations)

¹⁵⁹⁴ For a similar thought in the Hebrew Bible, see 1 Kings 12:7: "If you will be a slave (עֶבֶד) to this people today and serve them, and speak good words to them when you answer them, then they will be your slaves (עֶבְדִּים) forever."

¹⁵⁹⁵ John O. York, *The Last shall be First. The Rhetoric of Reversal in Luke*, Journal for the study of the New Testament Supplement Series (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 92. York's examples are numerous. He refers to the following parables, among others: The Rich Man and Lazarus (16:19-31; the rich man ends up in Hades, Lazarus joins Abraham); The Pharisee and the Publican (18:9-14; the publican will be justified, the Pharisee not); The Good Samaritan (10:25-37; the righteous one is the Samaritan, not the priests); and The Prodigal Son (15:11-32; the good son is left outside; the bad son is inside). From Jesus' sayings York mentions, e.g., 1:53 ("he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty"), 6:20-26 (blessings and woes, e.g. "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God"), 14:11/18:14 ("For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."), 9:24/17:33 ("For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it."), 13:30 ("Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.").

¹⁵⁹⁶ Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark. A Commentary*, Hermeneia – A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 499. Collins is correct in noticing that this not a new thought per se. See, e.g., Moshe Weinfield, who points out that already in 1 Kings 12:7 the idea is present that a king should serve his people ("The Kings as the Servant of the People. The Source of the Idea," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 33, no. 1/2 [1982], 188-194).

¹⁵⁹⁷ Kaneen, "Discipleship is Slavery," 246.

¹⁵⁹⁸ Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 811.

As Fitzmyer writes: “What John 13:3-16 presents in symbolic narrative and comment, Luke [22:26-27] states in a simple abstract contrast [...]”¹⁵⁹⁹ Moreover, Derrett has claimed: “Jn. 13 shows ample signs of being based on Lk. 12:35-38, or an analogous passage: for at John 13:4 Jesus actually girds his loins and serves his disciples by washing their feet (5) though their obedience to him was not complete (10-11).”¹⁶⁰⁰ Indeed, the Gospel of John seems to have taken up *both* the saying from Luke 22 and the parable from Luke 12 in order to create this remarkable and meaningful scene. In this scene, Jesus performs the archetypal slave task, washing the feet of the disciples.¹⁶⁰¹ After completing this task, he addresses his disciples, asking them to follow his example (now explicitly mentioned, v. 15: ὑπόδειγμα) in words reminiscent of the passage that we have discussed above. Notice, however, also verse 16, which seems a rebuke or an admonition of the apostles not to think too highly of themselves.¹⁶⁰² As slaves and messengers of God, they are not better or higher than him, the Gospel of John states.

Although this subsection could easily be expanded with other New Testament passages, also from the Pauline letters,¹⁶⁰³ I hope this short review suffices to see that the imagery of Luke 12:35-38 does not stand alone. Its concept of reversal can be found throughout the New Testament. Hence, I agree with Marshall that this concept is “firmly anchored in the teaching and activity of Jesus” and, thus, “there is no reason to suspect” its authenticity.¹⁶⁰⁴

Looking back at this section as a whole, we have learnt that the parable from Luke 12:35-38 sketches an image that may have reminded ancient audiences both of Saturnalia traditions and the Exodus story. Furthermore, the reversal of roles at the banquet from Luke 12:35-38 ties in with sayings and stories elsewhere in the New Testament. Although we have come across some indications that the story of the master serving his slaves might have been experienced as disturbing by the ancient audience, the parable (1) misses an explicit call to action with regard to human society; (2) is partly neutralized by the two parables it is paired with; and (3) is further domesticated by its antithesis in Luke, the parable of The Useless Slaves (17:7-10). However, implicitly, some form of *imitatio dei* might be assumed, a notion that is reinforced by comparable non-parabolic New Testament passages (Mark 10:42-45//Matthew 20:25-27//Luke 22:25-27 and John 13:13-16). This notion does have some “revolutionary” potential with regard to the power structures of ancient society. On the other hand, from a hidden transcript perspective, we have not observed any fundamental criticism to the societal roles it describes; in passages like John 13 it is clear that the hierarchy as such is not so much discussed as it is reinterpreted. We conclude that the message of the parable of The Serving Master mainly pertains to ideas about God and about a future world in which God does things differently than humans do now, while the parable of Luke 17 exactly describes the world as it is now and, thus, misses any provocation on the level of the parable proper (on the level of the application, a change of perspective and, as a consequence, a solidarity with the lowly may become visible). Also, the connection to the Exodus story probably serves to underscore the importance of readiness as theme.

In her commentary on the parable of The Serving Master, Beavis writes: “This reversal [of the parable] would be more acceptable to a Jewish audience, since many Jewish parables use the master-slave metaphor to describe the relation between God and Israel or God and humanity.”¹⁶⁰⁵ While it is true that many early rabbinic parables describe the relation between God and Israel as the relation between a slave-owner and his slave, it should not be concluded from this that reversal of roles is “more acceptable” in the rabbinic literature. As we will see below, reversal of roles in early rabbinic parables occurs but is rare, and its ramifications are limited.

¹⁵⁹⁹ Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV*, 1415.

¹⁶⁰⁰ Derrett, *New Resolutions of Old Conundrums*, 31.

¹⁶⁰¹ See for notes to relevant literature section 4.4.1, where we read that “Footwashing could be used as a synonym for slavery” (John C. Thomas, *Footwashing in John 13 and the Johannine Community* [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991], 46).

¹⁶⁰² Cf. Ernst Haenchen, *John 2. A Commentary on the Gospel of John Chapters 7-21*, Hermeneia, transl. Robert W. Funk (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 109.

¹⁶⁰³ E.g., Jesus’ arrival as a slave in Phil. 2:7, although that passage lacks a reference to a meal.

¹⁶⁰⁴ Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 537. See also Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 501.

¹⁶⁰⁵ Beavis, “Ancient Slavery as an Interpretive Context,” 42n35.

7.3. Reversal and Elevation in Early Rabbinic Parables

The meal as the ideal *mise-en-scène* for reversal and elevation is a *topos* that is not limited to early Christian texts. It is part of the symbolic universe of the ancient Mediterranean world, which included early rabbinic Judaism. In the rabbinic literature, this symbolic universe is sometimes intertwined with the imagery of an eschatological banquet. In this section, we start with a discussion of two parables from Sifre Deuteronomy. Since the combined image of slaves and meals in parables can only sporadically be found in rabbinic literature, I have decided to take a brief look beyond the tannaitic literature as well. So, in the second part of the section I discuss a parable from the Babylonian Talmud (Shabbat 153a), which is attributed to the tannaitic teacher Yochanan ben Zakkai. In the last part, I survey in an excursus three passages from the homiletical midrashim Numbers Rabbah and Tanchuma Buber.¹⁶⁰⁶ These parables are presented here because they are proof of a longer, persistent tradition with regard to the imagery of reversal and elevation in rabbinic literature, even if we only have a few transmitted examples of this tradition.

7.3.1. Sifre Deuteronomy 38

In the midrash Sifre Deuteronomy, we find in pisqa 38 a discussion on Deuteronomy 11:10. I quote here the biblical verse with a few lines of its context (vs. 8-12, NRSV):

Keep, then, this entire commandment that I am commanding you today, so that you may have strength to go in and occupy the land that you are crossing over to occupy, and so that you may live long in the land that the Lord swore to your ancestors to give them and to their descendants, a land flowing with milk and honey. *For the land that you are about to enter to occupy is not like the land of Egypt, from which you have come, where you sow your seed and irrigate by foot like a vegetable garden* (כִּי הָאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה בֹאֲשָׁמָה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ לֹא (כְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם הִוא אֲשֶׁר יְצַאֲתֶם מִשָּׁם אֲשֶׁר תִּזְרַע אֶת־זֶרְעֶךָ וְהִשְׁקִיתָ בְּרִגְלֶךָ כְּגַן הַיָּרְדֵּן: But the land that you are crossing over to occupy is a land of hills and valleys, watered by rain from the sky, a land that the Lord your God looks after (אֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ דֹרֵשׁ אֹתָהּ). The eyes of the Lord your God are always on it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year.

The contrast that is drawn here between Egypt (where one has to irrigate) and Israel (where God himself, by means of the rain, takes care of the irrigation) leads to a discussion in Sifre about the differences between Israel and Egypt. The conclusion of this discussion is that Egypt will not yield produce if one does not cultivate it, while in Israel such intensive work is not necessary. Then the parable follows:

Translation (MS)

a) A parable: it is like a king who, while walking on the road, saw a young man of noble family, and directly delivered him a slave to serve him.

And again he saw another young man of noble family, well dressed and cultivated, who was occupied with work – he knew him and his ancestors.¹⁶⁰⁸

He said, “I declare that I shall take it into my hands and feed him.”

b) So all lands were given servants to serve them – Egypt drinks from the Nile, Babylon from its rivers – but not the Land of Israel.

Text¹⁶⁰⁷

משל למלך שהיה מהלך בדרך וראה בן טובים אחד ומסר לו עבד אחד לשמשו

שוב ראה בן טובים אחר מעודן ומפונק ועסוק בפעולה ומכירו ואת אבותיו

אמר גזרה שאני עושה בידי ומאכילו

כך כל הארצות נתנו להן שמשים לשמשן מצרים שותה מן הנילוס בבל שותה מן הנהרות אבל ארץ ישראל אינה

¹⁶⁰⁶ For more rabbinic texts on reversal (not only parables), see Peter Kuhn, *Gottes Selbsterniedrigung in der Theologie der Rabbinen*, Studien zum alten und neuen Testament 17 (München: Kösel-Verlag, 1968), especially 23-32.

¹⁶⁰⁷ Text edition: Louis Finkelstein and Haim S. Horovitz, *Sifre on Deuteronomy* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1969), 74.

¹⁶⁰⁸ Literally: fathers. I think this element of the parable refers to the patriarchs of Israel: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. See also below.

Instead, they sleep on their beds and God sends down the rains for them.	כן אלא הם ישנים על מטותיהם והמקום מוריד להם גשמים
c) And we learn that the ways of [creatures of] flesh and blood are not the ways of God.	וללמדך שלא כדרכי בשר ודם דרכי מקום
d) One of flesh and blood buys slaves so that they feed and sustain him, but he who spoke, and the world came into being, buys slaves so that he himself may feed and sustain them.	בשר ודם קונה לו עבדים שהם זנים ומפרנסים אותו אבל מי שאמר והיה העולם קונה לו עבדים שיהא הוא זן ומפרנסם

For clarity sake, I divided the complete pisqa in the following building blocks. The passage above is located in section 2.

Section 1	“Plain” explanation of Deuteronomy 11:10 with as conclusion “But not so the Land of Israel – they (the Israelites) sleep on their beds while the Place sends down the rains for them.”
Section 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) A parable about king and two young noble men. b) Application of the parable with as conclusion “they sleep on their beds and the Place sends down the rains for them.” c) Statement (application of d) that functions as a bridge between the parables in a and d. d) A parable/parabolic saying.
Section 3	Story on Rabban Gamliel’s serving of his guests, which is compared with God setting the table for his people (text follows below).
Section 4-5	Exposition and rabbinical discussion on the question what the contrast between Egypt and Israel comprises of and whether that contrast is caused by the blessing that has left Egypt, when the people of Israel departed from the country. Connected to this is a discussion on the blessings that were earned by the righteous.

As the overview shows, there is a difference in theme and imagery between the first three sections and the second half of the chapter (section 4-5). Reuven Hammer has studied the various sources of Sifre Deuteronomy 38 carefully in a 1979 publication on the matter.¹⁶⁰⁹ According to his analysis, two major rabbinic themes come to the fore in chapter 38 – which are, to a certain extent, each other’s opposite – namely, “praise of the land of Israel” (my sections 1-3) and “praise of the people of Israel” (4-5). Connected to the latter is a third rabbinic theme, the “merits of the righteous.”¹⁶¹⁰ Instead of Hammer’s twofold scheme one could also propose the difference between God as actor in section 1-3 and Israel as actor in 4-5.

On the basis of these different themes and the different literary forms, Hammer divides the section into three sources: a source A that enumerates the differences between Israel and Egypt (section 1-3), a source B on the significance of the contrast between Egypt and Israel (section 4), and source C on the righteous (section 5). Furthermore, Hammer distinguishes three smaller sources: source a (section 3), the story about the sages in A, which also, in almost the exact same wording, appears in b. Qiddushin 32b. There are also sources b and c (discussion of Jacob’s blessing and a legend about the Canaanites) that are both part of C.¹⁶¹¹

Let us continue with a closer analysis of the different sections. As observed by Hammer, section 1 consists of an enumeration of differences between Egypt and Israel that can be summarized as follows: Egypt is watered from below (the rivers) and has to work its land, but Israel is watered from above (rain), while its inhabitants sleep.

We continue with the parable(s). Parable 2a has a rather striking plot. A king is walking and comes across two young men of noble birth. The first he gives a slave (עבד) to serve him; the second, who is well

¹⁶⁰⁹ See his “Section 38 of Sifre Deuteronomy: An Example of the Use of Independent Source to Create a Literary Unit,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 50 (1979), 165-178.

¹⁶¹⁰ Hammer, “Section 38 of Sifre Deuteronomy,” 174-175.

¹⁶¹¹ For the complete discussion, see Hammer, “Section 38 of Sifre Deuteronomy,” 171-175.

dressed and cultivated,¹⁶¹² and is occupied with work (ועסוק בפעולה). This young man, who was known to the king (as was the man's ancestors), is offered the personal service of the king (ומאכילו שאני עושה בידי). From the parallel with the first part of the parable (where the king orders a *slave* to serve the first young man) and from the emphasis on the fact that with the second young man the king will take things in his *own hands*, i.e. do so himself (בידי),¹⁶¹³ it is clear the Sifre portrays the king here as one who takes the role of the slave. This is in the application compared to the lands of Egypt, Babylon, and Israel. Egypt and Babylon received servants in the form of the Nile, the Euphrates, and the Tigris ("its rivers"), but the Israelites are directly served by God who lets it rain from above during their sleep. Notice the difference in wording: from slave (עבד) in the parable to servants (שמשים) in the application. Do theological sensitivities prevent Sifre from implying here that God is equated to a slave? Given our discussion in chapter six, we might assume it is.

As we have observed more often, an exact equation of elements from the parable and elements from the application might confront us with some problems. For example, the second young man occupied with work is probably a reference to Israel's slavery in Egypt (it is striking that the slavery is transformed into a different form of labor here, but this might be prompted by necessities of the plot).¹⁶¹⁴ However, in the parable this would mean that the second young man (Israel) worked for the first young man (Egypt) – a conclusion that does not make sense. Even more interesting are the references to the parents (אבותיו) and the upbringing of the second man (ומפנוק). Since God cannot be referred to as parent here, I think it was meant to designate the patriarchs; hence my translation with "fathers," or "ancestors." With it, the parable probably refers to the notion that Israel deserves God's personal care not because of its own merits, but because of the merits of the patriarchs (זכות אבות).¹⁶¹⁵

Parable	Application
King	God
Young man of noble family (1)	Egypt (Babylon); "the countries"
Slave	Nile (Tigris/Euphrates)
Young man of noble family (2)	Israel
- Well dressed	- ?
- Cultivated	- Educated
- Occupied with work	- Slavery in Egypt?
- The king knew him and his parents	- Israel and the patriarchs
Personal service by the king to see to his needs and feed him	Rain, while they sleep on their beds

Finally, we should devote some space to the slavery imagery that is at work here. With the parable, God is compared to a king who does the work of a slave, serving a young nobleman. What is interesting in this regard is that the pivotal slave-task here is feeding the nobleman. The feeding of Israel is represented by sending down rains while the Israelites sleep in their beds. While from context and word choice it is clear that the focus is on

¹⁶¹² Which may suggest that he does not deserve to work manually.

¹⁶¹³ This a recurring theme in Sifre. See Sifre Deuteronomy 325: "To me there is revenge and compensation – I, by myself, will call them to account, not by means of an angel and not by means of a messenger [...] (לי נקם ושלם - אני) (נפרע מהם בעצמי לא על ידי מלאך ולא על ידי שליח)." (Translation: MS. Hebrew text: Finkelstein and Horovitz, *Sifre on Deuteronomy*, 376.) Compare Judah Goldin, "Not by Means of an Angel and not by Means of a Messenger," in *Religions in Antiquity. Essays in Memory of Erwin Ramsdell Goodenough*, ed. Jacob Neusner, Studies in the History of Religions 14 (Leiden: Brill, 1970), 412-424, on the issue that rain is given by "God's personal and unmediated action" in Sifre Deuteronomy 42 (412). However, while בידי seems to be the preferred reading, Midrash ha-Gadol reads בידים and Yalqut Shimoni even בידך (§857).

¹⁶¹⁴ Kenneth Seeskin has argued that, according to rabbinic tradition, God's liberation of Israel from slavery, his feeding of Israel in the desert, and the defeat of their enemies obliged Israel to obey the covenant. He sees Sifre Deuteronomy 38 as proof for that tradition. Kenneth Seeskin, *Autonomy in Jewish Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 41-42.

¹⁶¹⁵ For this concept, see Solomon Schechter, *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), 170-198; and Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages. The World and Wisdom of the Rabbis of the Talmud* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 496-508.

the fact that the Israelites do not have to work for their water,¹⁶¹⁶ the application could also be read as a reference to the emblematic literary and pictorial pose of a slave leaning over his master's couch – a scene that is connected to rain from above in other parables as well (m. Sukkah 2:9, see section 6.3.2). Also notice that this sentence more closely relates the parable to the previous section (section 1) in which the same words are used.

After a general statement on the basis of the first parable, a second, short contrast parable follows (that is not followed but preceded by its application). The plot of the parable is that while humans buy slaves to be served, God buys slaves to serve them himself. This parable takes up the message of the first parable and strengthens it. In the first parable, the young man (Israel) was “free” and from a noble family. The king (i.e., God) serves him and takes the role of a slave. That the king decided to serve him might be humiliating for the king but does not per se affect the status of the young man. In the second parable, the relation between masters and slaves is turned upside down: God takes the role of the slaves, and the slaves take the role of the masters. This is a significant difference: the world order is completely reversed here.

How is this concept taken up by the third section of the pisqa? The text continues with a story about Rabban Gamliel, a story that is also told in the Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael on Exodus 18:12 and in the Babylonian Talmud (b. Qiddushin 32b¹⁶¹⁷). I provide here the text of the story in Sifre in my own translation:

And it happened once [that] Rabbi Eliezer and rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Tzadok were reclining at the wedding for the son of Rabban Gamliel. Rabban Gamliel mixed a cup [of wine] for Rabbi Eliezer, and he did not wish to receive it. Rabbi Yehoshua took it. Rabbi Eliezer said to him: “What is this, Yehoshua? Is it right for us to decline and Rabban Gamliel stands and serves us (בדין שאנו מסיבים וגמליאל עומד ומשמשנו)?” Rabbi Yehoshua said to him: “Let him serve. Abraham, a great one of the earth served the ministering angels and he thought that they were Arab idolaters, as it is said: *He looked up and saw three men standing near him.* (Genesis 18:2). Is this not a *qal wa-homer* (i.e., a fortiori) argument? If Abraham, one of the great of the world served the ministering angels and he thought that they were Arab idolaters, should not Gamliel, son of Rabbi, serve us?” Rabbi Tzadok said to him: “You have forgotten the honor of God, and you occupy yourselves with the honor of flesh and blood. If He who spoke and the world came into being, causes winds to blow, and clouds to rise, and the rains to come down, and the plants to grow, and a table to be set for each and every man, should Gamliel, son of Rabbi, not serve use (ומוריד גשמים, ומגדל צמחים ועורך שולחן לכל אחד ואחד וגמליאל ברבי לא ישמשנו)?¹⁶¹⁸”

What this passage shows is threefold. First, it proves again the symbolic value of the serving of guests during a meal. After Rabban Gamliel serves them, the rabbinic guests end up in a heated discussion on the question of whether they should accept their superior serving them (reminiscent of Peter's objections against Jesus' washing his feet in John 13¹⁶¹⁹). The second thing that the anecdote shows is that Gamliel's behavior is explained and legitimated by comparing his serving to that of Abraham and even God.¹⁶²⁰ Finally, what we learn from the

¹⁶¹⁶ Compare the introduction of pisqa 38 in which we read that the inhabitants of Israel sleep in their beds while God makes it rain for them. With respect to terminology: while the Hebrew for beds is the same for beds to sleep in and beds to eat on, in meal contexts usually the verb “to recline” (e.g. סבב, רבץ) is used, while the parable speaks about “sleeping” (ישן) here.

¹⁶¹⁷ In tractate Kiddushin, the bigger frame in which the story is placed is the question of whether leaders (respectively a Rabbi, a *nasi* [literally “prince”; chief Rabbi], and a king) can renounce their honor. The section starts with the premise that a *nasi* cannot renounce his honor. However, Rabban Gamliel, one of the six rabbinic princes, acts like a slave, serving drinks. Apparently, according to the rabbis, this qualifies as renouncing his honor, since in the conclusion it is accepted that a *nasi* renounces his honor but, as Rabbi Ashi emphasizes, a king cannot renounce his honor.

¹⁶¹⁸ Translation: MS. Hebrew text: Finkelstein and Horovitz, *Sifre on Deuteronomy*, 74-75.

¹⁶¹⁹ John 13:6-9: “He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, ‘Lord, are you going to wash my feet?’ Jesus answered, ‘You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.’ Peter said to him, ‘You will never wash my feet.’ Jesus answered, ‘Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.’ Simon Peter said to him, ‘Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!’”

¹⁶²⁰ We find the same argument in a story about Tavi from Midrash Proverbs 9:2 (see above, 7.1.1): “R. Ishmael said: We find a greater person [than Tabi who had served inferior people, namely] Abraham. For Abraham, one of the greatest men in the world, had served the Canaanite traders” (translation: Visotzky, *The Midrash on Proverbs*, 40).

comparison with Abraham and God is that an essentially servile task could gain weight and possibly even honor if fulfilled voluntarily by a high-ranking and free member of society.¹⁶²¹

If we position the story in the discourse of *pisqa* 38, we see two things happen: first, the message is repeated and reinforced that God takes care of his people like a slave, by bringing down rain, enabling crops to grow, “thus setting a table for everyone” (quite a universal message in comparison to the first parable). In addition, we learn that serving one’s guests oneself is, in principle, not an honorable thing to do. Second, I would argue that the story also promotes (or at least legitimizes) a certain ethical attitude. More than the former section (section 2 of *Sifre Deuteronomy* 38) that takes the situation that God acts different from humans as a given (hence a “contrast parable”), this story uses the image of God serving mankind as a role model that, through mediation by Abraham, also applies to the here and now, as becomes visible in the figure of Rabban Gamliel. Although it is not made explicit here, one might assume that stories like this could be used, and possibly were used, to promote “serving leadership.” As such, the story may remind us of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples in John 13.

The idea that God serves his people by feeding them is one we can find, in one way or another, also in another parable from *Sifre Deuteronomy* (*pisqa* 40), which we have discussed in the previous chapter (section 6.4.1). Thus, I only commemorate it briefly:

Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai said: “A parable. It is like a king of flesh and blood who had many sons and slaves. And they were nourished and supported from his hand, and the doors [‘keys’] of his storehouse were in his hands. When they did his will he opened the storehouse and they ate and they were sated. But when they did not do his will, he closed the storehouse and they died from starvation. So it is with Israel. When they do the will of the Place, *The Lord will open for you his rich storehouse, the heavens* (Deuteronomy 28:12, NRSV). And when they do not do his will, what will he say? *For then the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you and he will shut up the heavens, so that there will be no rain*” (Deuteronomy 11:17, NRSV). (Translation MS)

What we see here is how God is compared to a king who takes care of his children and slaves. The storehouses and the feeding are compared to the heavens and the rain from heaven (cf., the complete quotation from Deuteronomy 11:17a: “for then the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you and he will shut up the heavens, so that there will be no rain and the land will yield no fruit”). In this regard, there is, to a large extent, continuity with the images from *Sifre Deuteronomy* 38 where the king feeding his slaves is equated with God sending rain. However, here (*pisqa* 40), the element of reversal is not thematized and the behavior of God is not contrasted with that of humans either.

To conclude, I want to make some remarks from a hidden transcript perspective. If we take all the building blocks of *Sifre Deuteronomy* 38 together (the two parables and the story), an interesting variety of perspectives is offered. In the first parable (section 2a-b), God takes the role of a slave, feeding a free young man of noble birth himself. The second parable (2c-d) is a classical contrast parable about God buying slaves to feed them, while a human would buy slaves to feed himself. We might assume that this second parable reinforces the message of the first parable by emphasizing the fact that God is different from humans. Then, in section 3, Rabban Gamliel serving his guests is compared to Abraham serving his guests, who is, in turn, compared to God feeding the whole world. Is there a hidden transcript visible in these stories? I am inclined to think that there is not. The focus of these stories is on the fact that God is different from humans. There is no notion to be found that slaves are equal to (or even better than) their masters, or that societal roles should be changed; it is foremost the exceptionality of God that is underlined. However, in the story about Rabban Gamliel, there is a notion present that God’s behavior might also form a model for humans (*imitatio dei*), and that those who follow God should resist the way of humans (דרכי בשר ודם). Finally, we should notice that God’s special behavior *vis-à-vis*

This kind of argument is called a “Juridical Defense” by Alan J. Avery-Peck in his “Rhetorical Analysis Of Early Rabbinic Pronouncement Stories,” *Hebrew Annual Review* 13 (1991), 9.

¹⁶²¹ For Abraham as an example of hospitality see, e.g., Smith, “Food and Dining in Early Christianity,” 360; Gregg E. Gardner, *The Origins of Organized Charity in Rabbinic Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 102; Emmanouela Grypeou and Helen Spurling, “Abraham’s Angels: Jewish and Christian Exegesis of Genesis 18-19,” in *The Exegetical Encounter Between Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity*, ed. Emmanouela Grypeou and Helen Spurling, Jewish and Christian Perspectives 18 (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 181-204.

Israel is not without reason: God knows Israel and its fathers; hence, he has a special connection with the people of Israel. This special and direct connection will be addressed in section 7.3.3 as well. First, however, we take a look at a parable from the Babylonian Talmud, which relevance for early Christian and early rabbinic texts has been discussed extensively by, e.g., Reuven Kiperwasser.¹⁶²²

7.3.2. b. Shabbat 153a

The parable in b. Shabbat 153a is evoked by a discussion on vigilance, as is the parable of Luke 12:35-38. Rabbi Eliezer warned his disciples to repent before their death. His disciples responded, naturally, with the question of how one knows the day of one's death. Eliezer stated that, since one does not know the date of one's death, one has to spend one's whole life in repentance, quoting Solomon, "Let your garments always be white; do not let oil be lacking on your head" (Ecclesiastes 9:8). Then the parable follows, attributed to the important first century sage Yohanan ben Zakkai:

Translation

1) Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai said: "A parable. It is like to a king who invited his slaves to a banquet and he did not appoint a time for them.

The clever ones adorned themselves and sat at the door of the palace.

They said: 'Is anything missing in a palace?'

The fools went about their work, [and] they said, 'Can there be a banquet without preparations?'

Suddenly the king asked for his slaves.

The wise entered adorned, and the fools entered stained.

The king rejoiced regarding the clever ones and he was angry regarding the fools.

He said: 'Those who adorned themselves for the banquet, let them sit, eat and drink.

[But] those who did not adorn themselves for the banquet, let them stand and watch.'"

2) The son-in-law of Rabbi Meir said in the name of Rabbi Meir:

"They too would look as being in attendance.

But both sit, those (the former) eating and those (the latter) hungering, those (the former) drinking and those (the latter) thirsting,

because it is said, *Therefore thus says the Lord God:*

My slaves shall eat, but you shall be hungry;

my slaves shall drink, but you shall be thirsty;

[...]; my slaves shall sing for gladness of heart, but

you shall cry out for pain of heart [...]. (Isaiah

65:13-14, NRSV with adaptations)."

Text

אמר רבי יוחנן בן זכאי משל למלך שזימן את עבדיו לסעודה ולא קבע להם זמן

פיקחין שבהן קישטו את עצמן וישבו על פתח בית המלך

אמרו כלום חסר לבית המלך

טיפשין שבהן הלכו למלאכתן אמרו כלום יש סעודה בלא טורח

בפתאום ביקש המלך את עבדיו

פיקחין שבהן נכנסו לפניו כשהן מקושטין והטיפשים נכנסו לפניו כשהן מלוכלכין

שמח המלך לקראת פיקחים וכעס לקראת טיפשים

אמר הללו שקישטו את עצמן לסעודה ישבו ויאכלו וישתו

הללו שלא קישטו עצמן לסעודה יעמדו ויראו

חתנו של רבי מאיר משום רבי מאיר אמר

אף הן נראין כמשמשיין

אלא אלו ואלו יושבין הללו אוכלין והללו רעבין הללו שותין והללו צמאים

שנאמר כה אמר ה' הנה עבדי יאכלו ואתם תרעבו הנה עבדי ישתו ואתם תצמאו הנה עבדי ירונו משוב לב

ואתם תצעקו מכאב לב

This parable is notable in many respects, for example, its many similarities with the New Testament parable of The Banquet (Matthew 22:1-14/Luke 14:15-24),¹⁶²³ especially the last part (Matthew 22:11-13): "But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless. Then the king said to the

¹⁶²² Reuven Kiperwasser, "A Bizarre Invitation to the King's Banquet: The Metamorphosis of a Parable Tradition and the Transformation of an Eschatological Idea," *Prooftexts* 33, no. 2 (2014), 147-181. See also Menaham Kister, "Parables and Proverbs in the Jesus-Tradition and Rabbinic Literature," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 41, no. 1 (2018), 5-28.

¹⁶²³ See in particular Kiperwasser, "A Bizarre Invitation to the King's Banquet," 147-181.

attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’”¹⁶²⁴

Although the role of garments in these stories is significant, I want to focus on two other aspects. First, it is clear from the rabbinic parable that the image of a king summoning his slaves for a banquet is compared to God calling his subjects after their death. Secondly, in the eschatological banquet, a difference is being made between those who were prepared and are allowed to sit and eat, and those who were not prepared and have to stand and watch. As we have seen, those two roles coincide with the roles of the (free) guests and the slaves. To quote from Carly Daniel-Hughes: “in artistic images of Greek and Roman banquet scenes, we find the slave standing in attendance near the guests’ couches. The posture was telling, for those who reclined were able to enjoy all the services of the slaves and entertainers in attendance, being fed and plied with drink, regaled with bawdy or edifying discourses, serenaded, or sexually titillated.”¹⁶²⁵ However, in the second part of the parable, Rabbi Meir’s son-in-law comes up with another version of the parable in the name of his father-in-law. He states that the standing slaves would look like they were serving the meal (כמשמשין).¹⁶²⁶ Since this is not the case, he states that both groups (the prepared and the unprepared slaves) sit, but only the prepared slaves are allowed to eat. He then adds as proof text Isaiah 65, in which a judgment is spoken over the idolaters, “who forsake the Lord” (65:11), in contrast to God’s “chosen” (65:9), “descendants from Jacob” (idem). God’s subjects, his slaves, will eat, drink, and sing, while the idolaters will be thirsty, hungry, and shall wail. So, Rabbi Meir’s son-in-law has created a new category of banquet attendees (next to the two better known categories of the invitees who sit and eat and the slaves who stand and do not eat): those who sit, but do not eat. This invention of a third category in between standing slaves and sitting and eating guests is not unique for this rabbinic text. A somewhat similar situation is found in a fascinating section from Livy’s (59 BCE–17 CE) *Ab Urbe Condita*.¹⁶²⁷ From this passage, we learn that “complete” freedom is found in the combination of being free and being able to recline, but an intermediate stage exists in which one is free, is allowed to eat, but not able to recline. In the relevant section from *Ab Urbe Condita*, general Gracchus has gone to war with the help of volunteer slaves (a rare phenomenon), whom he had promised freedom for their contribution to the fight. However, some of the volunteer slaves had initially hesitated to join the fight. In the speech after the victory, Gracchus speaks the following words:

Before making you all equals by the right of freedom, I wished to stamp not one man of you with the mark of a brave or of a cowardly soldier. But now, the promise made in the name of the state being already fulfilled, to prevent the loss of every distinction between valour and cowardice, I shall order the names of those who, remembering their refusal to fight, left us a while ago to be reported to me; and summoning them one by one I shall make them swear that, excepting men who shall have illness as an excuse, *they will take food and drink standing only, so long as they shall be in the service*. This penalty you will bear with patience, if you will reflect that you could not have been marked with any slighter sign of cowardice.¹⁶²⁸

We read in this passage how the general wants to differentiate between the soldier-slaves and does so by making the cowardly slaves eat standing. This a little bit different from our parable in which the in-between category is allowed to sit, but not to eat. The question of which of these two possibilities is the most humiliating is open for discussion, but we might assume that to sit with the other guests but not be allowed to eat is the heaviest penalty.

¹⁶²⁴ For a comparison see, e.g., Kister, “Parables and Proverbs in the Jesus-Tradition and Rabbinic Literature,” esp. 9–15; see Kister’s note 15 for other references.

¹⁶²⁵ Daniel-Hughes, “The Sex Trade and Slavery at Meals,” 173.

¹⁶²⁶ Perhaps one might suspect that that the reference to standing and sitting is an addition to the (tannaitic) parable by the Stammaim. However, Kiperwasser argues that the Babylonian Talmud only has a shorter (“abbreviated”) version of this tradition in comparison to the version in the midrash. See Kiperwasser, “A Bizarre Invitation to the King’s Banquet,” 151.

¹⁶²⁷ I thank Jonathan Pater for this reference.

¹⁶²⁸ Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 24.16, 11–13 (italics MS). In the next lines, the soldiers are invited by the Beneventans to use a meal with them. We read about the slave volunteers: “Wearing caps or white woolen headbands the volunteers feasted, some reclining, and some standing served and ate at the same time. This seemed to deserve the order Gracchus gave on his return to Rome for a representation of that day of festivity to be painted in the Temple of Liberty [...]” (18–19; LCL 355, 225–227).

Lastly, we might wonder whether we find a reversal of roles or an elevation of slaves in this parable. I would argue that only an elevation of slaves is aimed at in this story. While in this image we might assume that it is God, as host, who provides food and drinks, it is clear that he does not serve his slaves. At the same time, it is important to notice that although the wicked have to stand during the meal (a position that was reserved for slaves), it is not mentioned that they have to serve the righteous, nor is it clear who will serve as slaves in the eschatological banquet. Nevertheless, hidden transcripts cannot be found in these parables. The focus is on the preparedness, i.e., the behavior, of the slaves, just like the Lukan parable of The Serving Master. It is their responsibility whether in the end they will be standing (or sitting) and watching while the others eat, or whether they will partake in the eschatological banquet themselves.

7.3.3. EXCURSUS: Contrast Parables in Homiletical Midrashim

In this excursus, I have brought together three parables from the so-called homiletical midrashim. They are called so because they do not contain verse-by-verse commentaries of the biblical text (like the halakhic midrashim), but are (probably) grown out of synagogue sermons in which particular verses, passages, or themes formed the focus.¹⁶²⁹ Often, they are of a much later date (early Middle Ages) than the halakhic midrashim we focus on in this study. It is because of their late dating that I have decided to bring these parables together in an excursus, as a way to set them apart from the much earlier parables that are found in tannaitic sources or are, at least, ascribed to tannaitic teachers. As said before, these parables are presented here because they are proof of a longer, persistent tradition with regard to the imagery of reversal and elevation in rabbinic literature, even if there are only a few examples of this tradition attested in the early rabbinic texts.

I open this section with a passage from the late midrash Numbers Rabbah 1:2 (probably before the ninth century¹⁶³⁰), in which reclining, slavery, freedom, Exodus, and Pesach are masterfully brought together in a contrast parable. Although the story is not classified as a *mashal*, we know from Thorion-Vardi's study on contrast parables that many contrast parables are not introduced with the "traditional" parable introduction formulas (e.g., "a parable, it is like"). This particular parable is introduced with what Thorion-Vardi has classified as a TA-Einleitung (introduction with a general statement),¹⁶³¹ which is often introduced with נוהג, מנהג, or דרך (this parable's formula שבעולם occurs often ["häufig"] according to Thorion-Vardi).¹⁶³² The contrast parable serves to explain that God "led the people about" (cf. Ex 13:18) in the wilderness (the parable depends on a play of words with the root סבב, meaning both "to lead around" and "cause to recline"):

Translation (MS)

In the way of the world, when a king of flesh and blood goes out into the desert, does he find there the peace that he finds in his palace, the food or the drink? But you were slaves in Egypt, and I brought you out of there and mad you recline on *sigmata*¹⁶³⁴ as it is said, *God led the people by the roundabout* (wayyasseb) *way of the wilderness* (Exodus 13:18, NRSV). What is wayyasseb?

Text¹⁶³³

בנהג שבעולם מלך בשר ודם שיצא למדבר שמא מוצא הוא שם שלווה כשם שהיה מוצא בפלסין או אכילה או שתיה ואתם הייתם עבדים למצרים והוצאתי אתכם משם והרבצתי אתכם בסיגמטין שנאמר ויסב אלהים את העם דרך המדבר מהו ויסב

¹⁶²⁹ Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 240.

¹⁶³⁰ Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 311.

¹⁶³¹ T: "Teil" (part), A: "Allgemeine" (general). The other part of the contrast parable is called TB (B: "besonderen Einzelfall," particular case). TA normally stands for the general human experience, while TB points to an exception to that rule, usually representing God (sometimes a minority of humans). See Talia Thorion-Vardi, *Das Kontrastgleichnis in der Rabbinischen Literatur*, Judentum und Umwelt 16 (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Peter Lang, 1986), 9.

¹⁶³² Thorion-Vardi, *Das Kontrastgleichnis in der Rabbinischen Literatur*, 29.

¹⁶³³ Aryeh Mirkin, *Midrash Rabbah. Bemidbar Rabbah*, Vol. 1 (Tel Aviv: Yavneh Publishing House, 1964), 10.

¹⁶³⁴ According to Jastrow "semicircular couches for reclining at meals," a loanword from the Greek *σάγματα*; see Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (Leipzig: W. Drugulin, 1903), s.v. סיגמטין, 975.

“He made them recline” in the ways of kings, reclining upon their couches.

שהרביצם כדרכי המלכים רבוצין על מטותיהם

In this beautiful piece of midrash, two reversals take place at the same time. In the *mashal proper*, it is recounted how a human king goes out into the desert where he does not find the same comfort and meals as in his palace. The king in the desert is compared to the Israelites (not to God!) who wandered through the desert. Not only do they recline in the desert “in the ways of kings” (the midrash makes a word play on *wayyasseb*), i.e., with comfort and being served, but they change in the process from slaves to kings, while it is God who takes the role of the host (possibly the slave?) and makes his people recline (הִרְבִּיצָתִי).

Mashal

A human king does not find the same comfort in the desert as he has in his palace.

Reversal 1

The Israelites do find the comfort of kings in the desert.

Reversal 2

The Israelites are no longer slaves (in Egypt), but kings in the desert, and God makes them recline.

In a way, this complex parable does not follow the expectations with respect to a contrast parable. In her study on contrast parables, Talia Thorion-Vardi classifies this kind of contrast parable as the category of “rhetorical questions.” Of course, the expected answer to the questions is “no,” and the comparison normally is made with God.¹⁶³⁵ With the last, unexpected turn of the parable – that it is God who serves his people – we meet a theme that is also prominent in the next parable from Numbers Rabbah, 16:27. Again, this is a clear contrast parable:¹⁶³⁶

Translation (MS)

A man buys a slave for himself so that he can bake bread for him, but I [God] do not act like this.
You are my slaves and I bake bread for you from the heavens.
As it is said: *Man ate of the bread of the mighty; [he sent them food in abundance]* (Psalm 78:25).

Text¹⁶³⁷

אדם קונה לו עבד שיהא אופה לו לחם, ואני לא עשיתי כן,
אתם עבדי ואני אופה לכם לחם מן השמים.
וכן הוא אומר (תהלים עח, כה): לחם אבירים אכל איש.

In this simple contrast parable, God compares his own acting to that of a man who buys a slave so that the slave can serve him by baking bread. God, instead, bakes bread for his slaves, mankind. This bread is “of the mighty” (probably referring to angels here¹⁶³⁸); from the context of the Psalm verse that the parable refers to, it becomes clear that manna is meant.¹⁶³⁹ The introduction to the parable is an example of what Thorion-Vardi calls a “Null-Einleitung.”¹⁶⁴⁰ Without any ado or any signal words (like *mashal* or even *le*) the midrash shifts to the parable.

Finally, a more elaborate series of parable-like sayings can be found in Tanchuma Buber, Beshallah 10. Tanchuma Buber is a late antique (first half of the ninth century) midrash on the whole Pentateuch, which was edited by and named after Salomon Buber at the end of the nineteenth century.¹⁶⁴¹ One of the interesting

¹⁶³⁵ Thorion-Vardi, *Das Kontrastgleichnis*, 80-81.

¹⁶³⁶ Cf. Thorion-Vardi, *Das Kontrastgleichnis*, 34.

¹⁶³⁷ Aryeh Mirkin, *Midrash Rabbah. Bemidbar Rabbah* (Tel Aviv: Yavneh Publishing House, 1965), 2:181.

¹⁶³⁸ See Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, transl. M.E.J. Richardson (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 1:6, s.v. אביר. The construction “bread of the mighty” is rather unique but compare Wisdom 16:20. In a passage from the Babylonian Talmud (b. Yoma 75b), it is discussed what “bread of the mighty” means. According to Rabbi Akiva, it refers to bread that the angels ate themselves. Other rabbis remark that angels do not eat and propose a different reading (*ebirim*, “body parts,” instead of *abbirum*, “mighty”).

¹⁶³⁹ Cf. the preceding verses 23-24: “Yet he commanded the skies above, and opened the doors of heaven; he rained down on them manna to eat, and gave them the grain of heaven.”

¹⁶⁴⁰ Thorion-Vardi, *Das Kontrastgleichnis*, 34.

¹⁶⁴¹ Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 303-306. Parts of Tanchuma might already have existed around 400 (305).

facets of the passage is that it reads as an enumeration of the most distinctive slave tasks. The feeding of slaves is, however, missing:

Translation (MS)

Another explanation: *And God did not lead them [by way of the land of the Philistines]* (Exodus 13:17). He did not lead them according to the way of the whole world. How [did he lead them]?

According to the way of the world, the slave carries his master. Would his lord carry him? The Holy One Blessed be He did not lead his people like this, but *in the desert where you saw how the Lord your God carried you etc.* (Deuteronomy 1:31) And it says: *I bore you on eagles' wings etc.* (Exodus 19:4)

According to the way of the world the slave washes his master, but in this case the Holy One Blessed be He is washing us, as it is said: *And I washed you with water* (Ezekiel 16:9).

According to the way of the world the slave dresses his lord, but in this case the Holy One Blessed be He dresses them, as it is said: *And I dressed you [with] embroidery* (Ezekiel 16:10).

According to the way of the world the slave puts shoes on his master, but in this case *and I put you shoes on with badgers' skin* (Ezekiel 16:10).

According to the way of the world the slave gives his master light, but in this case the Holy One Blessed be He gave light to Israel, as it is said: *And the Lord went in front of them etc. [to give them light]* (Exodus 13:21)¹⁶⁴³

So, God did not lead them in the way of the whole world, and why all this? *Because he was close* (Exodus 13:17), because they were near to the Holy One Blessed be He. As it is said: *He has raised up a horn for his people, praise for all his faithful, for the people of Israel who are close to him. Praise the Lord!* (Psalm 148:14).

Text¹⁶⁴²

ד"א ולא נחם אלהים לא נחם כדרך כל הארץ

כיצד דרך ארץ העבד טוען את רבו שמא אדונו טוענו הקב"ה לא נהג עמם כך אלא ובמדבר אשר ראית אשר נשאך ה' אלהיך וגו' ואומר ואשא אתכם על כנפי נשרים וגו'

דרך ארץ העבד מרחיץ את רבו אבל כאן הקב"ה היה מרחיץ אותנו שנאמר וארחצך במים

דרך ארץ העבד מלביש את אדונו אבל כאן הקב"ה מלביש אותם שנאמר ואלבישך רקמה

דרך ארץ העבד מנעיל את רבו אבל כאן ואנעלך תחש

דרך ארץ העבד מאיר לרבו אבל כאן הקב"ה מאיר לישראל שנאמר וה' הולך לפניהם וגו'

הוי ולא נחם אלהים כדרך כל הארץ וכל כך למה כי קרוב הוא שהם קרובין של הקב"ה שנאמר וירם קרן לעמו [תהלה לכל חסידיו] לבני ישראל עם קרובו

While the passage is, I would argue, a rather straightforward contrast parable (or series of contrast parables) in which God each times does the opposite of the way of the world, I would like to point to the application of the parable, since it is unique in providing an explanation for God's special behavior: because he was close to the

¹⁶⁴² Solomon Buber, *Midrasch Tanhuma. Ein agadischer Kommentar zum Pentateuch* (Vilna: Romm, 1885), 2:58.

¹⁶⁴³ Compare a passage from the Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai Beshallach (on Exodus 13:21): "Another interpretation: *The Lord went in front of them [in a pillar of cloud] by day* (Exodus 13:21): R. Yosi ha-Galili says: 'Were it not written in Scripture, it would be impossible to say. It is like a father carrying a torch before his son or like a master carrying a torch before his slave (וכרב שנוטל פונס לפני בנו וכרב שנוטל פונס לפני עבדו).'" Translation: MS. Hebrew text: W. David Nelson, *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2006), 86.

people of Israel. Hence, it is implied – and we have indeed seen this in the parable of Sifre Deuteronomy 38 – that God will not serve all peoples, but only Israel. That the relation between a master and a slave is a close one, is also attested in other sayings from rabbinic literature. A beautiful *mashal* from Sifre Deuteronomy 6 makes this clear in a rather surprising way.

As the common [“folk”¹⁶⁴⁴] saying (*mashal*) has it, “A king’s slave is a king,¹⁶⁴⁵ cling to a hot person,¹⁶⁴⁶ and you will become hot.”

משל ההדיוט עבד מלך מלך הדבק לשחין וישתחין לך¹⁶⁴⁷

In the second part of the saying the closeness between a slave and his master is visualized in a sensory image. The image is one of a person who is hot, probably because of his origin (the context of the saying is a discussion of different countries and ethnicities). If then, the saying states, you cling to such a person, you become warm yourself. The verb דבק indicates a very strong or close attachment; it can also be translated with “to glue,” and it suggests that we should imagine that the two bodies really touch each other. This saying shows, amongst other things, that in the close relationship between a master and his slave, the status of the master may “rub off” on the slave, even to the degree that people would consult the slaves (or the wife) of sages for answers to their questions when the sage himself was unavailable.¹⁶⁴⁸ These sayings do not only help us to understand how the status of the master influences the status of the slave (Dale Martin’s concept of “status-by-association,” as well as the concept of intersectionality), but it also explains why, according to the rabbis, God as master did not lead his people in the way of the whole world: “Because he was close” – so close that the bodies of him and his people touch.

If we take all the rabbinic parables that we have discussed in this section together, it becomes clear that the theme or motif of a slave-owner representing God, serving (feeding, giving drinks to) his subjects – his slaves – is a stable albeit seldom recurring element in rabbinic parable imagery. This image is sometimes connected to the theme of preparedness (b. Shabbat 153a) and a call for imitation, *imitatio dei* (Sifre Deuteronomy 38). What the contrast parables above stress is the fact that God is different from humans and that he takes the “Status einer gesellschaftlich niedrigeren Person.”¹⁶⁴⁹ Accordingly, the focus is on God’s behavior; in the parables from the homiletical midrashim, Israel only plays a very passive role. That God behaves differently from humans does not necessarily mean that the way humans behave is criticized.

7.4. Reflection and *Bildfeld*

In this chapter, I have brought together a collection of parables and stories that feature reversal of roles and elevation. I acknowledge the variety in form and content that is present in these parables. In this final section, I have reduced this variety to three issues:

1. *Reversal, elevation, and “normalcy”*: this chapter has tried to answer the question *to what extent* the slavery parables contradict the expected normalcy, an issue that John Crossan has put firmly on the agenda of New Testament studies some fifty years ago. As we have seen, deviation from the horizon of expected normalcy (i.e., slaves serving their masters) could take two forms: elevation of the slaves and a reversal of roles, with the second form topping the first in breaking with the prevailing ancient societal norms and roles (as our study of the Saturnalia and the Pesach meal has shown). There is, however, also a borderline area, situated between the elevation of the slaves and the “normal situation.” This is the area of parables in which the assumed background

¹⁶⁴⁴ From the Greek ἰδιώτης.

¹⁶⁴⁵ Manuscript Berlin: “like a king (כמלך).”

¹⁶⁴⁶ Manuscript London: “cling to a black person (לשחור).”

¹⁶⁴⁷ Translation: MS. Hebrew text: Finkelstein and Horovitz, *Sifre on Deuteronomy*, 15.

¹⁶⁴⁸ A saying similar to this one from Sifre Deuteronomy can be found in the Talmud: “The slave of a friend, behold he is like a friend (עבדו של חבר הרי הוא כחבר)” (b. Avodah Zarah 39a; translation MS). See Catherine Hezser, “The Slave of a Scholar. Stories About Rabbis and Their Slaves in the Babylonian Talmud,” in *Creation and Composition: The Contribution of the Bavli Redactors (Stammam) to the Aggadah*, ed. Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 114 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 185. Similarly, we read in the Babylonian Talmud (b. Baba Metzia 96a; translation MS): “the hand of a slave is like the hand of his master (יד עבד כיד רבו דמיה).” See also y. Betzah 1:9, 60d.

¹⁶⁴⁹ Thorion-Vardi, *Das Kontrastgleichnis*, 58.

is that of a master who sustains his slaves, as is his duty as *pater familias*. We have discussed these kinds of parables more extensively in the previous chapter. An example of this might be the parable from Sifre Deuteronomy 40 (the king who opens his storehouses for his sons and slaves). In this case, elevation or reversal is not thematized in the surrounding midrash context; rather, the theme is obedience. Hence, I deem these cases not as examples of contradiction with the expected normalcy (see the figure below).

Then, there are those parables in which the master/king invites his slaves for a banquet, but it is not explicated that he serves them himself – this relates, in particular, to the parable in b. Shabbat 153a. While an element of reversal certainly is present, I would not go so far as to call the fact that a host organizes a meal means that he serves his guests. He does, of course, in an indirect way, but this would require the service of many slaves, through which the host adds to his honor. So, this might be an example of elevation of the slave, but not of reversal.

Most of the parables (as well as the stories) in this chapter fall in the fourth category, reversal of roles.¹⁶⁵⁰ While these parables clearly portray behavior that challenged the horizon of expected normalcy, it is important to note that their images were not innovative per se. These parables and stories could rely on imagery known from ancient festivals like, but not limited to, the Saturnalia. To problematize our division between “normal” and “abnormal” labor divisions in the context of meals, we might wonder whether the reversal parables – by tapping into well-known ancient images and concepts – did not lose much of their impact, since from these ancient texts and practices it becomes clear that reversal was limited to specific times, places, and contexts.

<i>Horizon of expected normalcy</i>		<i>Elevation</i>	<i>Reversal</i>
Slaves serve their master at the meal.	Masters feed their slaves.	Slaves are invited to recline.	Masters serve their slaves at the meal.

2. *Reversal at What Time*: the second and third issues pertain to the applications of the parables. In the applications we see that the imagined reversal or elevation is actualized at different points in time. In the Lukan parable, but also in the parable from the Talmud (b. Shabbat 153a, Being Prepared for the Meal), these changes are thought to happen in the future – when the Son of Man will return (Luke) or in the “new heavens and earth” (Isaiah 65, to which Rabbi Meir’s son-in-law’s refers). However, in the other parables, reversal is imagined in the here and now, or even in the past. God feeds Israel now through the rains and the fertile ground of Israel (Sifre Deuteronomy 38, The King who Serves a Slave from High Birth), God took care of his people in the desert (Numbers Rabbah 1:2, A King Does not Find Comfort in the Desert; Numbers Rabbah 16:27, Baking Bread for your Slaves; Tanchuma Buber Beshallah 10, Fulfilling the Tasks of a Slave.). This also relates to the last issue:

3. *Different Applications*: the context in which the parables operate differs from case to case. The parables in Sifre Deuteronomy operate in the context of the Exodus and the arrival in the land of Israel. The parables from the homiletical midrashim apply to the time in the desert during the Exodus, but do not pertain to the land of Israel. Finally, the parables in Luke and in the Talmud operate from an eschatological perspective (and because of that, both call for readiness).

While we may wonder how issues of diachrony, geography and genre, play a role in the three issues described above, our specific collection of parables of elevation and reversal is perhaps not sufficiently broad to come to valid conclusions. Instead of looking for explanations for the variety in our reversal and elevation parables, I would like to ponder over the question of what our collection of parables entails with respect to the utopian ideal of the equality between all people – which was, according to Karin Neutel, a universal ideal in antiquity. Do our parables express this utopian ideal as well? Interestingly, the parables barely refer to a *human* reversal of roles. Instead, all applications refer to the *divine* domain and make it clear that the reversal or elevation that is thematized should be situated in the relationship between God and humanity. However, there is also a number of traditions (the story following the parable in Sifre Deuteronomy 38 and in Mark 10:42-45//Matthew 20:25-27//Luke 22:25-27 and John 13:13-16) that do seem to expect *imitatio dei* to the benefit of one’s fellow humans. Hence, while we have to conclude that even the reversal parables do not aim for an *Umwertung aller*

¹⁶⁵⁰ Luke 12:35-38, The Serving Master; Luke 22:26-27//Mark 10:43-45//Matthew 20:26-27 and John 13:13-16; Sifre Deuteronomy 38; Numbers Rabbah 1:2, A King Does not Find Comfort in the Desert; Numbers Rabbah 16:27, Baking Bread for your Slaves; and, although not pertaining to meals, Tanchuma Buber Beshallah 10, Fulfilling the Tasks of a Slave.

Werte, a complete reconfiguration of society, nor do these parables clearly envision the utopian ideal of universal equality that Neutel and others have found in ancient Greco-Roman texts, they might promote a more modest *Umwertung* in a circle or community of believers.¹⁶⁵¹ Nevertheless, I would argue that these parables primarily illustrate how God operates differently from human leaders, since he is willing to subjugate to even the humblest humans. While acknowledging that this way of looking to God was only one of the possible perspectives to perceive the divine, we might wonder what these parables of reversal and elevation teach us about the image of God in early rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity. It may come as a surprise that in most reversal parables it is not explicated *why* God takes the inferior role. Is it because he behaves like a caring father, or because he is not bound to human notions of honor and decorum? Or is God's behavior an example of self-humiliation and – to use a Christian theological term – *kenosis*? Although it might be tempting to ascribe these kinds of motivations to God or Christ, the parables themselves are rather silent about the reason(s) for the reversal of roles. Only in Numbers Rabbah 16:27 can a clear explanation be found in the *nimshal*. According to this passage, God's surprising behavior should be explained from the close relationship between him and the people of Israel. A comparable notion can be found in Sifre Deuteronomy 38, where it is said in the parable that the king "knew him [the young man of noble family] and his ancestors." However, in the parable of The Serving Master (Luke 12:35-38), the master's motivation does not lie in his intimate relationship with the slaves, but in their loyal service to his orders. So, we are faced again with the limits of the texts that are rather scanty when it comes to the characterization and motivation of God. What clearly was of the utmost importance for the tellers of these reversal parables is *that* God is different from humans, not so much *how* and *why* he is different from humans.

When we look at social reality, we might wonder what kind of message these parables of reversal brought to actual slaves in antiquity. Anders Martinsen is skeptical about the impact that the parable of Luke 12 would have had on slaves. He writes: "I propose that it [i.e., the parable of Luke 12:35-38] defuses the tension between the ideal of servility and humility and the ideal of authority and power. The trick is that it abandons neither one entirely, but merges them into the ideal service to God. The universalising of slavery – by mimicking the household of God after the current social conditions – is enabled through the servile imagery and narratives of servility."¹⁶⁵² With respect to the rabbinic parables, Kaneen has asserted: "masters remain masters in the parables."¹⁶⁵³ Regrettably, I cannot but agree with their assessments. While the ancient feast of Saturnalia perhaps allowed slaves and other subordinates to think of another world in which they were free and held an honorable position – and at the same time confirmed their and their master's position, so our reversal parables primarily seem to provide a theological message about a different world and a different God – without making a significant impact on the position of slaves in the here and now. Although *imitatio dei* may be assumed to a certain extent, following God's example probably would have been rare – just like Saturn's call for reversal was neglected by most slave-owners.

Finally, I present below a rather modest *Bildfeld*. In this *Bildfeld*, I have tried to distinguish between the normal state of affairs (slaves serving their masters), elevation, and reversal. Instead of a web of connections, this *Bildfeld* presents parallel, linear structures. As one can see, the structure of elevation is essentially the same as reversal but, in it, it is unclear who serves. Also, the scheme makes clear how that what is served – the food – has a different meaning in the different structures. In the normal state of affairs (e.g., Luke 17:7-10, The Useless Slaves, but also parables we have discussed in the other chapters¹⁶⁵⁴), the food served simply represents, implicitly or explicitly (see Luke 17:10), the following of orders. In the parables of reversal and elevation, however, the food represents the care God takes of his people in the form of rain or manna.

Bildfeld 4: Slaves and Meals

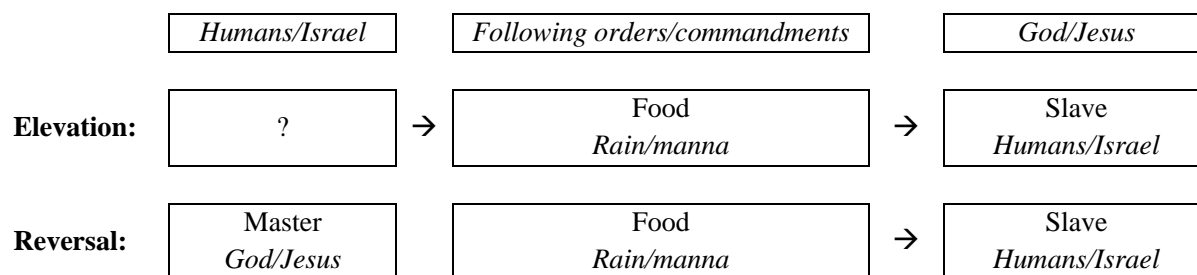


¹⁶⁵¹ As indicated by Mark 10:43 and parallels: "But it is not so among you," which – according to Collins "rejects the actual relations of power in the surrounding societies as a model for followers of Jesus" (*Mark. A Commentary*, 499).

¹⁶⁵² Anders Martinsen, "Men and Unmen in the Parables of Luke: Reception, Slavery, Masculinity" (PhD diss., University of Oslo, 2015), 348.

¹⁶⁵³ Kaneen, "Discipleship is Slavery," 276.

¹⁶⁵⁴ E.g., Luke 15:23; Tosefta Berakhot 6:18; Mishnah Sukkah 2:9; Tosefta Sotah 11:3.



7.5. Summary

In this chapter, we have studied the imagery of slaves and meals in the early Christian and early rabbinic parables. As we learnt from an exploration of ancient sources, in social reality the “normal” role of slaves at a banquet was to serve their masters. However, in a number of contexts (cultic meals, meals during festivals), slaves were sometimes allowed to recline *with* their masters (elevation) or were even served *by* their masters (reversal of roles). In the parables, we see the same tripartite division, with the master standardly representing God or Jesus, and the slave representing humankind/Israel/the early Christian community. In the parables that break with the “horizon of expect normalcy,” reversal happens more often than elevation. These parables (sometimes explicitly framed as “contrast parables”) mainly seem to communicate the message that God does things differently than humans, like a master who serves his slaves. In the parables of both reversal and elevation, the master and the slave remain in their positions, although their roles – especially that of the master – might become reinterpreted. As such, the society-challenging appeal of these parables is fairly limited. While some of the reversal texts stimulate the audience to take up the example of the master, representing God (*imitatio dei*), in most parables, there is no call to do so, nor is there a hidden transcript of protest traceable against “the way of the world.”

VIII. Conclusion: Working out a Way of Living with the Heavenly Master

*They seemed to think that the greatness of their masters was transferable to themselves. It was considered as being bad enough to be a slave; but to be a poor man's slave was deemed a disgrace indeed!*¹⁶⁵⁵

At the end of my second, historiographical, chapter, I noticed that while most scholars of early Christian slavery easily find their way to Greek and Latin texts, rabbinic texts are surprisingly missing in their analyses. To some extent the same could be said for scholars of early rabbinic slavery and Greco-Roman slavery: they have often overlooked the sources and findings from adjacent academic fields as well. In this study, I have tried to make up for that shortfall by bringing together all three worlds: early Christianity, early rabbinic Judaism, and Greco-Roman antiquity. Moreover, by discussing Jewish and Christian texts on an equal footing and as part of a continuum, I have tried to overcome polarity in the study of both religions. By doing so, this volume has offered what I hope to be a truly comparative study of the slavery metaphor in early rabbinic and early Christian parables.

In this conclusion, I will first summarize what we have learnt from the comparison of early rabbinic and early Christian slavery parables in this study (8.1). Then I will formulate some concise answers to the questions that I have posed in my introductory chapter (8.2), reflect on the methods we have used (8.3), and offer some suggestions for new and further avenues of investigation (8.4). Over the course of this conclusion, I refer in the footnotes to a number of slavery parables that illustrate the points I make in the main text. An overview of all early rabbinic and early Christian slavery parables discussed in this study can be found in Appendix II.

8.1. Slavery Parables: An Overview

After the first three theoretical chapters, we devoted four chapters (4-7) to different moments and themes in the slavery parables. In chapter four, we looked at the beginning of a slave's life, focusing on the buying and selling of slaves. In chapter five, we explored how slaves in the parables listened (or did not listen) to the orders of their masters, especially when their masters were away (*absente ero*). Chapter six offered us a plethora of punishments that parabolic slaves could be subjected to, but also showed the rewards that slaves were eligible to receive. Finally, in chapter seven, the reversal of roles and elevation in a number of slavery parables was addressed. In this section, we will take the conclusions of all chapters together in five statements.

8.1.1. The Master-Slave Relation Elucidates the Relation between God and Humans

As Catherine Hezser writes with regard to the rabbinic slavery parables: “[t]he various aspects of a slave's relationship with his master are used to elucidate human beings' relationship with God.”¹⁶⁵⁶ I find that this is true for both the rabbinic and Christian slavery parables we have studied in this volume. As I have shown, by choosing the metaphor of God as a slave-owner, the rabbinic and Christian parables build on “slave of God”-traditions in the Hebrew Bible but combine these traditions with Greco-Roman realia and literary motifs. As in the Hebrew Bible, the metaphor has two sides: not only is God a good master who cares for his slaves, is close to them, and who clearly and transparently regulates their lives by means of the Torah, but he also expects unconditional obedience and is prepared to punish those who are not obedient (for example, those who do not follow his example). The right of God to act like a slave-owner, selling and buying slaves, is rarely put to the test. As a parable from Sifre Deuteronomy 323 (Same Day Delivery of a Slave) shows, it is not so much his right to sell a slave, as it is the way he sells the slave, that is thematized.

¹⁶⁵⁵ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave. Written by Himself*, reprint of the original 1845 text (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2009), 32.

¹⁶⁵⁶ Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 348.

When it comes to the applications (*nimshalim*) of the slavery parables, it is clear that in the parables the slaveowner is almost always compared to God.¹⁶⁵⁷ When, in a rather early source (m. Sukkah 2:9, Spilling Drink on the Master's Face), God is compared to a slave, this bold comparison is "corrected" in later texts (see section 6.3.2). Slaves, in contrast, are always compared to humans (often the people of Israel) in the applications. Humans are represented by a variety of slaves in the parables, from a simple dinner attendant to slaves with considerable fortunes. From the *absente ero* parables, it becomes clear that many slaves in the parables have positions of responsibility.¹⁶⁵⁸ Hence, it should not come as a surprise that the slaves in the parables are often compared to notable men in the applications, like the disciples,¹⁶⁵⁹ Moses, David, Jonah or the patriarchs.¹⁶⁶⁰ In a few instances, the slaves in the parables are compared to other entities, like the sea (Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael Beshallah on Exodus 14:21, The Garden within the Garden) or Egypt (Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael Beshallah on Exodus 14:5, The Slave who Buys a Rotten Fish), but these are exceptions. Also, it should be mentioned that there are a few instances in which the slaves have dropped out of the application.¹⁶⁶¹ However, in general, the equations God=slave-owner, human (individual believer/God's people, often Israel)=slave form the foundation of a solid and rather constant *Bildfeld* in both early Christianity and early rabbinic Judaism.

Furthermore, our analysis of the parables shows that when rabbinic or Christian texts want to emphasize obedience they tend to opt for the *Bildfeld* of the "master-slave" relation, while they are inclined to choose the "father-son" relation when they want to emphasize the love of God for his people (cf. specifically section 4.4.1). Both metaphors are not contradictory per se; they are complementary: an element of love and care might be present in the slave-master parables just as an element of obedience and power is present in father-son parables.¹⁶⁶² Similarly, some slavery parables thematize the question of whether one should obey the (divine) master out of fear or out of love.¹⁶⁶³

8.1.2 There are Good and Bad Slaves

When it comes to the evaluation of being a slave, it is important to see that slaves model values;¹⁶⁶⁴ following Greco-Roman standard conventions, there are good and bad slaves. We have many parables in which good behavior is contrasted with bad behavior or good slaves with bad slaves.¹⁶⁶⁵ In order to judge the behavior of slaves, an important story motif is *absente ero*, or the absent master (cf. chapter 5). Bad behavior is expected from slaves when the master is away. When slaves do behave well, this is conclusive proof of their virtuous attitude. Regardless of their behavior, a moment of reckoning for slaves occurs upon the return of the master, in which either punishments or rewards are announced. Good behavior is not always rewarded but is often taken for granted, as it is the behavior that is expected from slaves. From a theological perspective, it is important to mention that the *absente ero* motif abounded in antiquity. Whereas Alfons Weiser already noticed that Jesus

¹⁶⁵⁷ An exception is an early parable in Tosefta Sotah 11:3 (Mixing Wine with Water), in which the slave-owner is compared to Israel (but the slave, I allege, is not compared to God).

¹⁶⁵⁸ E.g., Matthew 18:23-35 (The Unforgiving Slave), Luke 16:1-8 (The Unjust Slave Manager); Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai Sanya on Exodus 4:13 (The Chosen Slave Manager Retracts).

¹⁶⁵⁹ E.g., Luke 17:7-10 (The Useless Slaves), Matthew 24:45-51/Luke 12:42-46 (The Good and the Bad Slave Manager).

¹⁶⁶⁰ Moses: e.g., Sifre Deuteronomy 28 (A King, Wine and Two Slaves), Sifre Zuta 10:35 (A Slave who wakes the King), Sifre Deuteronomy 8 (The King who gave his Slave a Field). David: Sifre Deuteronomy 26 (The Sale of a Debtor's Children as Slaves). Jonah: Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael Pischa on Exodus 12:1 (The Slave of a Priest Flees to the Graveyard). Patriarchs: Sifre Deuteronomy 8 (The King who gave his Slave a Field).

¹⁶⁶¹ Tosefta Sukkah 2:6 (The Removed Lamp), Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael Bachodesh on Exodus 20:3 (The Patient King), Sifre Numbers 161 (The King who is Always with his Son).

¹⁶⁶² A third relevant *Bildfeld*, which has presented itself once in this study, is that of the freed person and his/her master (see chapter 4).

¹⁶⁶³ E.g., Avot de Rabbi Nathan B 10 (Acting out of Fear), Seder Eliyahu Rabbah 26 (Loving and Fearing Slaves).

¹⁶⁶⁴ "In particular, the metaphorical slaves of Jewish sources model the ideological concerns of the master which, when the master is God, explains their usefulness as a means of conveying religious ideas" (Edward Noble Kaneen, "Discipleship is Slavery: Investigating the Slavery Metaphor in the Gospel of Mark," PhD diss., Durham University, 2017, 178).

¹⁶⁶⁵ E.g., Sifra Nedavah 2:6 (Bringing Wheat, or Only Wheat), Matthew 24:45-51/Luke 12:42-46 (The Good and the Bad Slave Manager).

used an image that was widely used in ancient Judaism, our study has shown that the motif is firmly rooted in Greco-Roman socio-historical and literary contexts as well. Hence, we wholeheartedly support Weiser's position (cf. section 3.3.2.2) that the slavery parables have only been connected to expectations of the return of Christ (the *parousia*) in a later stage of nascent Christianity; before that, they formed general calls to take up one's responsibilities on earth without the (direct) supervision of God – and in view of one's imminent judgment. So, different from early rabbinic Judaism, where the moment of reckoning in most cases is situated in the afterlife, in early Christianity the *absente ero* theme is connected to eschatological expectations (Weiser speaks of eschatological slavery parables). In order to emphasize the seriousness of what will come very soon, the Christian parables use more violent images than their rabbinic counterparts. This is in line with the prophets from the Hebrew Bible, who often used strong, violent language to exhort the people of Israel to be obedient (see section 6.3.6).

Until now, we have spoken about the bad and good slave in “ethical” terms, as defined by the slave's obedience to the master. However, there is also an ontological way to look at this issue, namely, whether being a slave in itself can be a good thing or is always bad. What several parables in this study show is that being a slave can be a relatively “positive” thing when one serves under a good and/or high ranking master¹⁶⁶⁶ – and the best master is, of course, God. On the other hand, being a slave can also be a negative thing under a bad master. Here, it is important to refer to the above-mentioned concept of status-by-association from Dale Martin. In a number of parables, it is clear that the slave functions as a mouthpiece and representative for the master, and to be a representative of God forms a rather high status. Also, the concept of intersectionality might be helpful in order to understand the sometimes complex hierarchies of ancient society in which some slaves (high function, important master, male) were seen as superior to other slaves (low standing master, low position, female) and, sometimes, these low and high positions overlap or intersect (a female slave of an important master, a learned slave of a low standing master).¹⁶⁶⁷ It is good to notice here that, in spite of intentions to be inclusive, this dissertation has mainly focused on male slaves since – with a few exceptions – only male slaves occur in our corpus. In two New Testament parables¹⁶⁶⁸ female slaves did occur, but in both cases not as main characters. In these two parables the female slaves are made more or less invisible by strongly associating them with male slaves. I have argued that this is caused by the fact that two oppressed and invisible positions overlap in the slave woman – that of the slave, and that of the woman.

8.1.3. Freedom is No Option

When one conceptualizes the relation between God and humans as the relation between a slave-owner and his slaves, it is rather complex, perhaps even impossible, to escape one's servile position. Slavery is presented in the parables as a closed system, without a point of entry or escape. This is very different from the historical understanding of Roman slavery as a dynamic system in which both the fear and actual risk of enslavement as well as the possibilities for manumission and even obtaining citizenship, are important aspects. In the parables, slaves are seldom killed for their bad behavior, nor are they sold;¹⁶⁶⁹ they try to flee, but are caught again (Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael Pischa on Exodus 12:1, The Slave of a Priest Flees to the Graveyard). They are

¹⁶⁶⁶ E.g., Sifre Deuteronomy 6 (A King's Slave is a King), Sifre Numbers 115 (The King who bought the Son of a Friend).

¹⁶⁶⁷ Slaves with important positions (e.g., Matthew 25:14-30/Luke 19:11-27, The Talents/Pounds; Matthew 24:45-51/Luke 12:42-46, The Good and the Bad Slave Manager; Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai Sanya on Exodus 4:13, The Chosen Slave Manager Retracts); slaves of an important master (e.g., Sifre Deuteronomy 6, A King's Slave is a King); slaves with a distinguished background (e.g., Sifre Deuteronomy 38, The King who serves a Slave from High Birth). On the other hand, handicapped slaves with limited responsibility might stand at the lower end of the hierarchy (e.g., Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael Shirata on Exodus 15:1, Blind and Lame Guards).

¹⁶⁶⁸ Matthew 24:45-51/Luke 12:42-46 (The Good and the Bad Slave Manager) and Matthew 18:23-35 (The Unforgiving Slave). The parable of The Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) should also be mentioned, which includes a reference to prostitutes (possible slaves).

¹⁶⁶⁹ Exceptions with regard to the killing of slaves are the third slave in the parable of The Talents (Matthew 25:30) and the bad slave manager in Matthew 24:51/Luke 12:46 (see also the threat to kill a slave in Sifre Deuteronomy 48, The Slave and the Bird for the King's Son). An exception with regard to the selling of slaves is Sifre Deuteronomy 323 (Same Day Delivery of a Slave). In two other parables, the families of slaves are (threatened to be) sold (see section 4.3: Sifre Deuteronomy 26 and Matthew 18:23-35).

neither manumitted, nor do they receive the opportunity to buy their own freedom.¹⁶⁷⁰ To a certain extent, this can be explained by the focus of the slavery parables, which is generally on the relation between God and Israel and, thus, requires such a relation (see below on the covenant). It also matches the *absente ero*-themed Greco-Roman literary sources that focus on the relation between masters and slaves. However, both in *Vita Aesopi* and in several of the Plautine comedies, slaves are threatened to be killed or sold on the one hand, or are freed on the other hand. This leads us to think that there are also philosophical or theological reasons why freedom from slavery in the Christian and rabbinic doulological universe is not an option. According to this discourse – that connects to ancient Stoic thinking – one is always the slave of something or someone, be it God, sin, or lust. Theologically, we should also be aware that in a number of slavery parables (e.g., Sifre Numbers 115, The King who bought the Son of a Friend), the covenant between God and Israel is equated with Israel's service to God. Within the framework of the covenant, one can be promoted or punished, but one does not easily drop out of this covenant. This can also explain the fact that manumission rarely occurs in the parables – since the intrinsically hierarchical, unequal relation between God and humans cannot be evened by any human actions. In this sense, it is not surprising that the only manumission that we know of in the parables (in the Shepherd of Hermas) directly leads to the inclusion of the free slave in another hierarchical relation, that of a son versus his father (a *Bildfeld* that, as we have stated above, is adjacent to that of the slave and the master). I find that the concept of covenantal nomism by Ed Sanders is particularly helpful to explain these peculiarities. Sanders describes his concept as follows:

The “pattern” or “structure” of covenantal nomism is this: (1) God has chosen Israel and (2) given the law. The law implies both (3) God's promise to maintain the election and (4) the requirement to obey. (5) God rewards obedience and punishes transgression. (6) The law provides for means of atonement, and atonement results in (7) maintenance or re-establishment of the covenantal relationship. (8) All those who are maintained in the covenant by obedience, atonement and God's mercy belong to the group which will be saved. An important interpretation of the first and last points is that election and ultimately salvation are considered to be by God's mercy rather than human achievement.¹⁶⁷¹

While perhaps not fitting the slavery parables in all respects, many features of this covenantal nomism match our observations in the present study: God is in a contractual relationship, so to say (compare the bill of sale, i.e., the law, in Sifre Numbers 115), with a people he has specifically chosen (e.g., Sifre Deuteronomy 38, The King who serves a Slave from High Birth). In the relationship with his people, both obedience and punishments have their legitimate place. In turn, for their obedience, God is expected to take care of his people and to provide mercy after atonement (i.e., after his subjects have undergone their penalties). We should also notice that Israel/the followers of Jesus hold a special position because they are part of God's covenant (see e.g., Tanchuma Buber Beshallah 10, Fulfilling the Tasks of a Slave). This also may shed light on the meaning of their status as slaves. According to Byron, “[a]s the slaves of God Jews were to act as intermediaries between God and the rest of the world.”¹⁶⁷² Understood from this perspective, being slaves of God signifies that they hold a special station in comparison to the rest of humanity. They are set apart as doorkeepers and managers between God and the world. This responsibility might sometimes be a burden to them, but God's radiance also makes them shine.

8.1.4. Following Orders Rarely Leads to Rewards, Failure Leads to Punishments

Although we already referred to some punishments and rewards previously, I also want to look at them separately here, since they form an important theme in the parables. We already discussed that good work by slaves never leads to freedom (the notion that service to God *is* freedom is not present in the parables¹⁶⁷³). Instead of manumitting them, “good” slaves receive more responsibilities from their masters. However, the parables seem

¹⁶⁷⁰ An exception is the parable in Shepherd of Hermas 55, which features the manumission of a slave.

¹⁶⁷¹ Ed P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (London/Philadelphia: SCM Press/Fortress, 1977), 42.

¹⁶⁷² Byron, *Slavery Metaphors*, 115.

¹⁶⁷³ This notion is, however, present elsewhere in the New Testament. See 1 Peter 2:16a: “As slaves of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil” (NRSV with adaptations). As Richard Bauckham has formulated it succinctly: “If the Old Testament emphasis is on God's people as *freed* slaves, the New Testament emphasis is on God's people as *free* slaves.” In *The Bible in Politics. How to Read the Bible Politically* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 111.

to favor punishments over rewards. Rewards only occur rarely, and if they occur, they form, at the same time, a punishment for another slave (Luke 19:12-27, the Parable of the Pounds), or they are not a true reward but consist of simply the food portion (the *paras*) that is necessary for a slave to survive (e.g., Sifre Deuteronomy 40, The King and his Storehouses). When we look at punishments, we see that most punishments in rabbinic and Christian parables fall into the category of the “change of position.” Slaves are demoted, stripped of their responsibilities, or sold (or see their children sold). Only in a minority of cases are physical punishments imposed, and the death penalty is mostly a threat, although it is executed in two New Testament parables (see the previous section). Even if physical *punishments* are rare, slaves in the parables regularly experience grave suffering: they are threatened, whipped, beaten, and even killed (stoned and crucified).¹⁶⁷⁴ As we have analyzed above, these violent images were probably used to scare the listeners into more moral behavior.

While following orders often defines the slave, it makes the slave invisible at the same time. In parables in which slaves “just” follow orders, they often disappear from the application; they have no personality but are tools of the master. A failure in fulfilling orders might sometimes refer to hidden contestations of the masters’ powers (see the next section). Turning down orders is normally not an option (cf. Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai Sanya on Exodus 4:13, The Chosen Slave Manager Retracts) and negligence of orders stems from fear in a number of cases. Finally, it turns out that it is difficult for slaves to do “more,” especially in the rabbinic parables studied in this volume; often, it is better to do exactly what one is told.¹⁶⁷⁵

8.1.5. Reversal of Roles and Critique of God Can be Found in the Parables

It was John Dominic Crossan who put the question on the agenda of whether the slavery parables of Jesus reflect normalcy or oppose it. If the latter, then a further question arises: do all slavery parables subvert normalcy and, if not, which ones do and how do we recognize them? Of course, the same question can be asked with regard to the rabbinic parables, as I have done in the present study.

First of all, let us establish that there are slavery parables that demonstrate reversal. Having said that, the number of reversal parables is rather modest, as we have seen in the previous chapter. In the early Christian writings, I find only one, the parable in Luke 12:35-38 about the master who serves his slaves; in the early rabbinic writings, there are a couple of parables in which a master serves his slaves like God serves his people. These parables emphasize that God’s ways are not the same as “the ways of the world”: while normally humans have slaves to feed them, God instead buys slaves to feed them himself. It is important to notice that these parables are primarily intended to clarify something about the different nature of God. They generally lack a call to change power relations in the here and now (“masters remain masters in the parables”¹⁶⁷⁶). However, in some of the texts on the reversal of roles, there is a call to *imitatio dei* – to follow the example of God and serve one’s fellow humans as God served his subjects (e.g., Sifre Deuteronomy 38; Mark 10:42-45//Matthew 20:25-27//Luke 22:25-27 and John 13:13-16). In sum, while reversal appears in the parables and might have consequences for social relations (at least in one’s own community), it is rare and not representative for the complete corpus of slavery parables.

Aside from reversal, there is the issue of whether the parables can contain critique. As I have argued in this study, I do think that in general parables are excellent sites for critique of, or protests against, God, since they open up a space in which God can be criticized in an indirect way. This is even more true when those parables focus on the most hierarchical relation on earth one could think of: that of a king or a master versus his/her slave. However, the number of parables in which criticisms can be found is more limited than I had expected beforehand. In my view, this indicates how God’s position *vis-à-vis* Israel is, ultimately, incontestable. According to the early rabbinic and early Christian slavery parables, God has the right to punish or to reward; he may give orders, and he may expect them to be followed; he holds the people of Israel/the followers of Jesus in his service and does not allow them to escape. These are his natural rights, as the creator and owner of Israel and the world, while this status also carries with it certain duties, as the slave-owner ideally fulfilled a number

¹⁶⁷⁴ E.g., Mark 12:2-5//Matthew 21:34-36//Luke 20:10-12//Thomas 65 (The Tenants); Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai on Exodus 15:17-18 (Defeated Robbers).

¹⁶⁷⁵ For the rabbinic parables, see e.g., Sifre Deuteronomy 28 (A King, Wine and Two Slaves), Sifra Nedavah 2:6, (Bringing Wheat, or Only Wheat).

¹⁶⁷⁶ Kaneen, “Discipleship is Slavery,” 276. However, as we have seen above, Kaneen is wrong in stating that slave stories in rabbinic literature do not demonstrate reversal (idem, 179).

of duties and responsibilities towards his slaves. These duties are to take care of his people, to feed them, and to protect them. It is exactly this reciprocity in the relationship between God and Israel – as part of the covenant I discussed above – that explains, I think, why critique towards God is so rare. However, although it is rare, critique of God can be found in the parables. We have seen how slave-owners are characterized as harsh, as giving unclear orders, as making disproportional threats, how their claim to ownership is debated, and how slaves try to escape their custody – to mention only some of the hidden transcripts we came across.¹⁶⁷⁷ This signifies, in my opinion, the difficulties the people of Israel/early Christians experienced when they were confronted with existential questions and crises – even when they tried to follow the orders of, and were protected by, their heavenly master. As mentioned in our theoretical chapter (3.4.4), Dov Weiss has dubbed the term “pious irreverence” for this phenomenon, namely, that parables open up the possibility to voice criticism (“irreverence”) *without* being disobedient (i.e., staying “pious”).

8.2. A Book about Comparison

In the first chapter of this study, I stated that “this book is all about comparison.” In the next seven chapters I have conducted a comparative study of early rabbinic and early Christian slavery parables in their Greco-Roman context, which aimed to answer my main research questions: *how do early rabbinic and early Christian parables respectively construe slavery and slave-master relations, and to what are slavery and slave-master relations compared in the applications of these parables?* To answer these questions I have addressed four methodological issues which all have a comparative element as well: 1. The extent to which ancient Jewish and Christian slaves are like slaves in the surrounding Greco-Roman context; 2. The extent to which slaves in the early Christian and rabbinic slavery parables are like slaves in Greco-Roman literature; 3. The extent to which the slaves in the parables are like actual Jewish and Christian slaves in ancient social reality; 4. The extent to which the slaves in the early rabbinic slavery parables are like the slaves in the early Christian slavery parables.

In my *status quaestionis* chapter, I have shown that Jewish and Christian slavery in antiquity did not essentially differ from Greco-Roman slavery in general. Comparable rules and institutions can be found in both systems. The special bipartite division between Hebrew and foreign slaves from the Torah was not applied in the first centuries (if it ever was), and the idea that Jewish and/or Christian slaveholders were more benign than Greco-Roman masters turned out not to be tenable.

With respect to Greco-Roman literature, it became clear that many motifs and stereotypes (lazy slave, stupid slave, *servus callidus*) from Greco-Roman popular literature can also be found in the slavery parables, most notably in the motif of *absente ero*. However, we also found some differences. The very popular Greco-Roman story motif of the free person who is enslaved and regains his/her freedom is not something we find in the parables, nor are (true) slaves manumitted in the parables as they are in some of the Plautine comedies (with, of course, the exception of the parable of the Shepherd of Hermas). Moreover, we observed how the concept of freedom plays a minor (or at least, different) role in Christian and rabbinic literature, perhaps under influence of the concept of the covenant.

The differences and similarities between (Jewish and Christian¹⁶⁷⁸) slaves in social reality and slaves in the Christian and rabbinic slavery parables are difficult to determine. In this study, I have regularly and fruitfully made use of socio-historical data to explain the plots of the parables. This proves that the parable operated from a background that was known and recognizable to most of the listeners. However, we occasionally come across parables that contain strange, illogical, or even absurd elements (for example, the size of a slave’s debt, or the cooperation of a blind and a lame guard, or a prohibition to drink wine). In these cases, we have to assume that it would have been immediately clear to the audience that these elements were surprising and, therefore, probably deserved attention. So, these extremities are part of the rhetorics of the parables (see also my methodological reflections in the next section).

¹⁶⁷⁷ E.g., harsh and giving unclear orders: Matthew 25:14-30/Luke 19:12-27 (The Talents/Pounds). Disproportional threats: Sifre Deuteronomy 48//Avot de Rabbi Nathan B 35 (The Slave and the Bird for the King’s Son), or Sifre Deuteronomy 40 (The King and his Storehouses). Claim to ownership debated: Sifre Numbers 115 (The King who bought the Son of a Friend). Escaping custody: Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael Beshallah on Exodus 14:21 (The Garden within the Garden), Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael Pischa on Exodus 12:1 (The Slave of a Priest Flees to the Graveyard).

¹⁶⁷⁸ As argued above, there is no relevant difference between Greco-Roman slaves and Christian/Jewish slaves.

Finally, we may wonder how the early rabbinic slavery parables compare to the early Christian slavery parables. As my research has shown, in early rabbinic and early Christian slavery parables the same motifs and themes occur, and settings and plots overlap. In both corpora, slaves serving their masters at a meal occur, as do slaves taking care of their masters' property in his absence. In nearly all slavery parables, Christian and rabbinic, God is identified with the slave-owner and mankind, specifically Israel, is identified with his slaves. Generally, God is not questioned for his role as a slave-owner. Although ideas of reversal are present, this is not the dominant line of reasoning in either corpora. While there are some differences between Christian and rabbinic parables (e.g., explicit violence occurs more often in the New Testament parables, obedience – Torah observance – might be more important in rabbinic parables), these differences are hard to prove conclusively given the modest number of slavery parables in both corpora. What we can notice with certainty is that the corpus of rabbinic slavery parables is significantly smaller (percentage wise) in comparison to the early Christian parables (compare section 3.3.4). While any explanation for this phenomenon must be tentative and reticent, I would like to propose a few possible perspectives:

1. First of all, in the rabbinic literature, the parable becomes more formalized and takes the king parable as its predominant mode.¹⁶⁷⁹ While a king can of course have slaves (many kings in the parables discussed in the previous chapters have slaves), the rabbinic king also often deals with his family, his ministers, his soldiers, and his subjects.
2. Second, the motif of the absent and returning master suits the New Testament's eschatology and messianism (*parousia*) very well. This is perhaps a reason why early Christian parables often preferred slavery parables over, for example, family parables or meal parables.¹⁶⁸⁰
3. Finally, the use of the slavery image might better suit the (target) audience of the New Testament parables. While rabbinic parables were, at least to a certain extent, part of academic endeavors, the parables of Jesus were probably, from the start, part of his oral teachings, which addressed all segments of society, including the poor and the oppressed. For such an audience, slavery parables may have been more recognizable than parables that were situated in a king's or emperor's court.

In conclusion of this section, I would like to reflect on the comparison conducted in this volume from a more theoretical point of view. As I have discussed in section 3.4.1 the comparison(s) conducted in this study depart from the assumption that the early rabbinic and the early Christian slavery parables represent two equivalent units (text corpora), and that a comparison of both units will single out regularities "that might provide explanatory generalizations."¹⁶⁸¹ Indeed, as we have enumerated earlier in this conclusion the comparative study of Christian and rabbinic slavery parables reveals, for example, how the identification of God with the slave owner in the parable is a fixed element of the *Bildfeld*. At the same time, the comparisons in this study produce two other results. The first result of the comparisons is that they de-exoticize the parables: As we have seen parables lend story elements, *topoi* and stock figures from the Greco-Roman world. Furthermore, the early rabbinic and early Christian slavery parables resemble each other to such great extent that slavery parables in either tradition can and should not be seen as a genre *sui generis*. Moreover, when it comes to social reality we have learnt from our *status quaestionis* chapter that both Jewish and Christian slavery in antiquity did not essentially differ from their Greco-Roman equivalent.

The second result of the comparison(s) is that we are able to see interpretative possibilities of the texts we otherwise would have overlooked, by disclosing the differences between the two (or more) corpora we study.¹⁶⁸² Indeed, the comparative study of early Christian and early rabbinic slavery parables has helped us to see, for example, the (even) greater relevance the *absente ero* theme plays in Christian parables, which invites us to reflect on the meaning and importance of the *parousia* in these parables and in early Christianity. Hence, we may conclude that the promises of comparison as heuristic device have been fulfilled in this study.

¹⁶⁷⁹ On the king parables, see Alan Appelbaum, *The Rabbis' King-parables: Midrash from the Third-century Roman Empire* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2010).

¹⁶⁸⁰ For separate studies of meal and family parables, I am happy to refer to the PhD theses of my colleagues, Jonathan Pater and Albertina Oegema. For the PhD thesis of the latter see Albertina Oegema, *Negotiating Paternal Authority and Filial Agency. Fathers and Sons in Early Rabbinic Parables*, *Quaestiones Inertiae* 130 (Utrecht, 2021).

¹⁶⁸¹ John S. Kloppenborg, "Disciplined Exaggeration: The Heuristics of Comparison in Biblical Studies," *Novum Testamentum* 59, no. 4 (2017), 395.

¹⁶⁸² Kloppenborg, "Disciplined Exaggeration," 414.

8.3. Methodological Reflections

For the analysis of the parables, I formulated (in section 3.4) four dimensions of analysis: socio-historical, rhetorical, hidden transcript, and *Bildfeld*/Conceptual Blending Theory. In this section, I briefly want to reflect on the results of those four forms of analysis.

Socio-historical: Our socio-historical analysis turned out to be very fruitful. By combining a variety of sources (literary, legal, archaeological) from early Christianity, early rabbinic Judaism, and Greco-Roman society, we have gained insight into many parables. However, there is a recurring issue that I have struggled with (like many parable scholars before me) and that is the relation between social reality and the element of surprise. If one looks hard and long enough, one can almost always find an ancient text that in some way mirrors the practices or problems described in our parables. Consequently, one might lose sight of the surprise element that some of these parables are supposed to present, for example, by means of grandiose exaggeration. On the other hand, very harsh punishments or very large responsibilities for slaves should not be qualified too quickly as extraordinary and surprising, as some scholars tend to do. As I have stated repeatedly, there are, unfortunately, many precedents of horrifying penalties for slaves – both in antiquity and in colonial times – as well as many examples of high ranking slaves with much power and fortunes to match. The latter phenomenon may strike us as odd, but this was part of the intricacies and complex intersectionalities of societies in which slavery was ubiquitous and undebated (societies that gave rise to phenomena such as slaves with their own slaves, or freed people who acquired enormous numbers of slaves themselves). Thus, as far as I am concerned, the issue of surprise and exaggeration is still an open question that has to be studied for each parable individually.

Rhetorical: With the rhetorical analysis, I have paid attention to the embedding of parables in their bigger rhetorical units. This analysis has been vital to discern the intertextual relations that are being made between the parable, its application, the midrash, and the text of the Bible. While I have always discussed the context and occasion of parables, due to my main questions and the already large scope of this dissertation, the focus of my discussions of the parables has been on the *mashal proper*. Perhaps a more detailed study of the embedding of the slavery parables and their intertextuality would add to our understanding of early Christian and early rabbinic theology and doulology, but this will be a task for future researchers.

Hidden transcript: Taking up suggestions by, for example, Applebaum and Horsley, we have applied a systematic hidden transcript reading to the early rabbinic and early Christian slavery parables. The output of this type of analysis forms a mixed image. On the one hand, the hidden transcript perspective was helpful in developing a sensitivity for sentiments of resistance, for glimpses of criticism that seeped through the cracks of these ancient texts, or, sometimes, even bold statements or gestures that clearly indicated Israel's/early Christianity's disappointment with God and his orders. On the other hand, in many cases, I simply could not find evidence that would support such a reading. The majority of slavery parables do not critique the societal and theological ideas they depart from.

Aside from the outcome of our hidden transcript analysis, it became also clear over the course of this study that the theory of hidden transcript misses practical tools to establish how hidden transcripts manifests themselves textually. In other words: how do we concretely recognize a hidden transcript? This is not the place to fully answer such a question but, on the basis of the preceding four chapters, we might be able to formulate some beginnings of an answer, which I hope will be helpful for further study. A hidden transcript might be identified by the following five steps:

1. Take the perspective of the subordinate, the lowliest character of the story: is s/he treated justly? Does s/he resist the master narrative? Such a perspective helps us to see, for example, that the third slave in the parable of the Talents does not receive a clear assignment but is punished when he “fails” anyway (Matthew 25:14-30); or helps to identify with the slave in The King who bought the Son of a Friend (Sifre Numbers 115), who struggles with his new, unfree role; or to sympathize with all those slaves in the parables who are ruled by fear.¹⁶⁸³
2. Connect the plot to (ancient) tropes and stock characters: would it be logical to sympathize with the inferior characters of the story, or is one expected to side with the master's/ruler's view? (Do the authors follow conventions or turn the conventions upside down?) Our study has shown that many parables play

¹⁶⁸³ E.g., Avot de Rabbi Nathan B 10 (Acting out of Fear); Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael Pischa on Exodus 12:1 (The Slave of a Priest Flees to the Graveyard); Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael Beshallah on Exodus 14:21 (The Garden within the Garden); Sifre Deuteronomy 48 (The Slave and the Bird for the King's Son).

with conventions from ancient Greco-Roman comedies and novels. For example, from *Vita Aesopi* we learn that it was not unusual in antiquity to side with the lowest and ugliest character of the story. Indeed, many parable scenes remind us of passages from the biography of the slave Aesop, for example, the (failed) buying and cooking of food.¹⁶⁸⁴

3. Imagine the first audience: what is their social position? Whose side would they have picked on the basis of their own status and experience? Would they be indignant? Is there an audience imagined in the text itself (a “chorus”)? How do they respond to what happens in the story? One could think, for example, about the chorus in *The Sale of a Debtor’s Children* (Sifre Deuteronomy 26), or the “fellow slaves” in the parable of *The Pounds* (Luke 19:25).
4. Position the author: what is his/her social position? How does s/he elsewhere write about issues of justice, freedom, and domination? For example, the fact that Hermas is (described as) a former slave might have influenced his composition of the slavery parable in the *Shepherd of Hermas*.
5. Establish inter“text”uality: how is the story connected to the life stories of the audience and/or different texts from their tradition? Could they or should they identify with character(s) from the story? For example, many slavery parables are intertextually connected to the Exodus story. In this way, a direct connection is made between the slave in the story and the people of Israel as slaves of God. So, the protest of the son’s friend against his new role as slave (Sifre Numbers 115) is *their* protest, since this parable pertains to Israel’s behavior *vis-à-vis* God after its liberation from Egypt.

Bildfeld/Conceptual Blending Theory: In my view, *Bildfeld* theory (enriched with insights from Conceptual Blending Theory) turned out to be really helpful in conceptualizing how, in the minds of the parable-tellers, different concepts from the input domain of slavery were connected with each other, as well as with the corresponding output domain of (in most cases) service to God. The added value of Conceptual Blending Theory becomes most visible when studying how metaphors can develop and expand in new, creative turns. For example, the parable of Sifre Numbers 115, *The King who bought the Son of a Friend*, adds the bill of sale (=the commandments in the application) as a new element to the slavery metaphor. Establishing *Bildfelder* also turned out to be helpful to identify those parts of the input domain that were not actualized in the output domain. This aided us in discerning the theological peculiarities or priorities of these images. Moreover, *Bildfeld* theory helped us to see that friction regularly existed in the comparison between input and output domains. Most of the time, these frictions can be explained by the requirements of the plot of the parable.¹⁶⁸⁵ Sometimes, these incongruencies might also be explained by the dynamics of the slavery metaphor, a metaphor that was so widely known and used that it would have elicited associations and responses on its own.¹⁶⁸⁶

Although perhaps another division of dimensions of analysis could have been made, the rich results of the four dimensions I have used in this volume show, in my opinion, the importance of a combined methodological approach when studying parables. By employing socio-historical, rhetorical, hidden transcript, and *Bildfeld* analyses, we had the opportunity to analyze the stories Jesus and the rabbis told in their full social and literary breadth, which is, I contend, a *conditio sine qua non* for parable research.

8.4. New Research Possibilities

While recently a lot of work has been done with regard to the study of the slavery metaphor in Judaism and (early) Christianity, slavery parables often have not received the attention they deserve, especially those in rabbinic literature. The present study aims to partly repair that gap but has also been bound to a number of limitations. That is why I would like to formulate some venues for further study, in addition to the new research possibilities mentioned above already.

¹⁶⁸⁴ E.g., Tosefta Berakhot 6:18 (*The Stupid Slave*); Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael Beshallah on Exodus 14:5 (*The Slave who Buys a Rotten Fish*).

¹⁶⁸⁵ E.g., the stereotypical number of three penalties, which does not square with the number of penalties in the application/the biblical text (Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael Beshallah on Exodus 14:5, *The Slave who Buys a Rotten Fish*); or the occurrence of a son in the parable that makes sense in the narrative, but is not necessary for the application (Sifre Deuteronomy 48, *The Slave and the Bird for the King’s Son*).

¹⁶⁸⁶ E.g., a slave who drops out of the application (Tosefta Sukkah 2:6, *The Removed Lamp*). For the point of the parable, the slave’s presence is not needed in any way; however, expectations with regard to social reality and the slavery metaphor dictate that a king does not light his own lamps.

My first suggestion would be the study of late antique/early medieval rabbinic parables. In particular, the sizable collection of slavery parables that can be found in Seder Eliyahu Rabbah deserves closer investigation. A second possible topic of study would be a systematic comparison of Palestinian and Babylonian slavery parables, a comparison that Catherine Hezser has called for previously.¹⁶⁸⁷ A third topic deserving of study are the similarities and differences between slavery parables and parables with other, (free) subordinates, for example, tenants, day workers (cf. Matthew 20:1-16, The Workers in the Vineyard), and pedagogues. A fourth topic pertains to the reception of the slavery parables. How, for example, were the slavery parables preached in the colonies?¹⁶⁸⁸ In addition, what consequences did the status quo that the slavery parables represented (or were thought to represent) have for the abolition of slavery in the nineteenth century? Related to this, my fifth and final suggestion would be a historical and theological reflection on the question of what the consequences of the use of the slavery metaphor in the parables are for the Christian and Jewish self-understanding, especially from the perspective of the transatlantic slave trade and European colonial history.¹⁶⁸⁹ To reformulate the question with a reference to the parabolic saying of Sifre Deuteronomy 6 (cf. 7.3.3), I would like to argue that it is our responsibility to contemplate the extent to which the language of slavery has “rubbed off” on our worldview: how has this language influenced us and what can we do to repair what has been damaged? And, perhaps, in addition, how is it possible that we have overlooked different, hidden transcript-like interpretations of the parables for all these centuries?

8.5. Final Remarks

Finally, I would like to return to the introduction of this study where we recounted how Rabban Gamliel mourned the death of his slave, Tavi, because he “was not like other slaves.” Over the course of the previous chapters, we have learned that slaves in early Christian and early rabbinic texts were in many ways comparable to each other, as well as to the slaves of ancient Greco-Roman literature and social reality. However, with their appearance in parables, they had an influence on early Christian and early rabbinic theology (doulology) that does not find its counterpart in Greco-Roman sources. The parables do not use the metaphor of slavery without reason. They use it because they express ideas and concepts that cannot be conveyed, at least not as powerfully, by other metaphors. Both the dependence of slaves on their masters’ justice and benevolence, and their absolute obedience to their masters’ will, cannot so easily be found in other relationships such as that of a child versus the father, a student versus the teacher, or a guest versus the host. Also, I have discussed whether the use of the image field of slavery enabled the parable-tellers to voice theological or social critique of God and ancient society. In the third chapter of this volume, I quoted Sarah Forsdyke who said that slavery stories are “cultural devices through which elites and non-elites worked out a way of living together.” In a similar vein, I think that slavery parables are theological devices through which Jews and Christians worked out a way of living with God. It is precisely at the most defining human moments that slavery parables offer explanatory models and show humans how to behave *vis-à-vis* the heavenly master. Those models are not easy to work with and they sometimes also allow for talking back to and critiquing God, but seldom do they allow for outright disobedience.

¹⁶⁸⁷ Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 362.

¹⁶⁸⁸ See, for example, Alexander Glennie, *Sermons Preached on Plantations to Congregations of Negroes* (Charleston: A.E. Miller, 1844), which contains several sermons on slavery parables. See also Mary Ann Beavis’ contribution “Fables, Parables and Slaves. Epictetus, Aesop and the Gospels in Conversation with North American Slave Narratives,” in *Overcoming Dichotomies. Parables, Fables, and Similes in the Graeco-Roman World*, ed. Albertina Oegema, Jonathan Pater, and Martijn Stoutjesdijk, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021 [forthcoming])

¹⁶⁸⁹ See also my “Een werktuig ‘om de negers in ondergeschiktheid en bedwang te houden’? De predikant in zijn rol als influencer in het slavernijdebat,” in *Heilzame verwerking slavernijverleden voor “wit” en “zwart”: Een bijdrage vanuit de kerken*, ed. Egbert Boeker, Rhoinde Doth, Urwin Vyent, Andreas Wöhle (Den Haag: Stichting Lutherse Uitgeverij & Boekhandel, 2020), 96-119.

Appendix I: Abstract

This work offers a comparative study of early Christian and early rabbinic slavery parables in their Greco-Roman context. While a number of studies on slavery parables in Christianity exist, a systematic study of and comparison with rabbinic slavery parables is still lacking. This work seeks to resolve that shortcoming. Not only does it study the rabbinic slavery parables in relation to the Christian parables (and vice versa), but it also tries to embed both corpora in the broader Greco-Roman world. By bringing together these three worlds (Christianity, Judaism, Greco-Roman culture), it seeks to develop a broad view on the ancient institution of slavery and the way slavery was represented in (popular) ancient literature. By using metaphor theory (*Bildfeld* theory, Conceptual Blending Theory), combined with James Scott's theory of the hidden transcript, this study aims to investigate the imagery of slaves and slavery and to discover how slavery parables, as literary constructions, convey certain theological and ideological (possibly subversive) messages. In order to do so, four underlying methodological issues have been addressed: 1. The extent to which ancient Jewish and Christian slaves are like slaves in the surrounding Greco-Roman context; 2. The extent to which slaves in the early Christian and rabbinic slavery parables are like slaves in Greco-Roman literature; 3. The extent to which the slaves in the parables are like actual Jewish and Christian slaves in ancient social reality; 4. The extent to which the slaves in the early rabbinic slavery parables are like the slaves in the early Christian slavery parables. On the basis of a review of existing scholarly literature, this study concludes that Jewish and Christian slavery in antiquity did not essentially differ from Greco-Roman slavery in general (ad 1). From the comparison with Greco-Roman literature (comedies, novellas, etc.) that this study offers, it becomes clear that many motifs and stereotypes (lazy slave, stupid slave, *servus callidus*) from Greco-Roman popular literature can also be found in the slavery parables, most notably the motif of *absente ero*, the absent master (ad 2). However, we also find some differences. The very popular Greco-Roman story motif of the free person who is enslaved and regains his or her freedom is not something we find in the parables, nor do we find manumission in general. Connected to that, we have observed how the concept of freedom plays a minor (or at least different) role in Christian and rabbinic literature, perhaps under the influence of the theological concept of the covenant. With respect to the difference between slaves in the parables and in reality (ad 3), we find that parables greatly rely on images and practices from social reality. At the same time, some parables contain strange, illogical, or even absurd elements, which were probably used to draw the attention of the listeners to a certain message or conclusion. Finally, we have studied how the early rabbinic slavery parables relate to the early Christian slavery parables (ad 4). Although some differences occur between both corpora (specifically, the greater use of violence in Christian slavery parables), the general conclusion is that in early rabbinic and early Christian slavery parables the same motifs and themes occur and the settings and plots overlap. The most striking observations with regard to the slavery parables from both religions are summarized in this study in five points: (a) that the relation between God and his people (Israel or the followers of Jesus) is compared to that of a slave and an (often absent) master; (b) that there are good and bad slaves and that the *de facto* status of slaves is determined by the complex intricacies of gender, occupation, and the slave-owner's position; (c) that, with one exception, slaves do not find freedom in the slavery parables but keep their station as slaves; and related to this, (d) that slaves might be punished and rewarded for their actions but (generally) are not killed, sold, or manumitted, which, again, points to the permanency of their position; and (e) that while reversal of roles can be found in both corpora, it is very rare. However, when role reversal does happen, humans might be called to imitate God and serve their subordinates (*imitatio dei*). Moreover, critique of God as the supreme master of humanity, usually represented by the slave-owner in the parables, is rather rare as well. In conclusion, this study proves a great degree of continuity in the use, themes, motifs, and plots of slavery parables in early Christianity and early rabbinic Judaism, as well as considerable similarity with stereotypes and type scenes, but also with the social reality, of the wider Greco-Roman world.

Appendix II: Index of Slavery Parables

Early Christian Parables

No.	Source	Title in the present study	Main discussion in section
1	Mark 12:1-12//Matthew 21:33-44//Luke 20:9-18//Thomas 65	The Tenants	6.3.6
2	Mark 13:33-37	The Doorkeeper	5.4.3.1, 7.2.3
3	Matthew 13:24-30	The Weeds	5.3.1
4	Matthew 18:23-35	The Unforgiving Slave	4.3.2
5	Matthew 22:1-14//Luke 14:15-24//Thomas 64	The Banquet	6.3.6 (7.3.2)
6	Matthew 24:45-51//Luke 12:42-46	The Good and the Bad Slave Manager	5.4.1.1, 6.3.6
7	Matthew 25:14-30//Luke 19:12-27//Gospel Of The Nazarenes	The Talents/Pounds	5.4.1.3 (6.5.1)
8	Luke 12:35-38	The Serving Master	5.4.3.1, 7.2.1
9	Luke 15:11-32	The Prodigal Son	5.3.1
10	Luke 16:1-8	The Unjust Slave Manager	5.4.1.2
11	Luke 17:7-10	The Useless Slaves	5.3.1, 7.2.3
12	Shepherd of Hermas 55	The Faithful Slave	5.4.2 (6.5.1)
13	Gospel of Philip 80-81	The Master Feeding his Household	6.4.3

Early Rabbinic Parables

No.	Source	Name	Main discussion in section
1	Mishnah Avot 1:3	Do not Obey for a Reward	6.5.2
2	Mishnah Sukkah 2:9	Spilling Drink on the Master's Face	6.3.2
3	Tosefta Berakhot 6:18	The Stupid Slave	5.3.2.2
4	Tosefta Sukkah 2:6	The Removed Lamp	5.3.1.1
5	Tosefta Sotah 11:3	Mixing Wine with Water	5.3.2.1
6	Avot de Rabbi Nathan B 10	Acting out of Fear	6.5.2
7	Mekhilta RS ¹⁶⁹⁰ Sanya on Exodus 4:13	The Chosen Slave Manager Retracts	6.3.4
8	Mekhilta RY Pischia on Exodus 12:1	The Slave of a Priest Flees to the Graveyard	6.6
9	Mekhilta RY Beshallah on Exodus 14:5/par. RS	The Slave who Buys a Rotten Fish	5.3.2.3, 6.3.3
10	Mekhilta RY Beshallah on Exodus 14:21/par. RS	The Garden within the Garden	5.4.3.2
11	Mekhilta RY Shirata on Exodus 15:1/par. RS	Blind and Lame Guards	5.4.3.3
12	Mekhilta RY Shirata on Exodus 15:17-18/par. RS	Defeated Robbers	6.3.6
13	Mekhilta RY Bachodesh on Exodus 20:3	The Patient King	5.3.1.3
14	Sifre Numbers 84	The Slave who Arranges an Inheritance	5.3.1.2
15	Sifre Numbers 94 (only in Vatican)	The King and his Stealing Sons and Slaves	6.4.1 (footnote)
16	Sifre Numbers 115	The King who Bought the Son of a Friend	4.4.1
17	Sifre Numbers 161	The King who is Always with his Son	5.3.1.1 (footnote)
18	Sifre Deuteronomy 6	A King's Slave is a King	7.3.3
19	Sifre Deuteronomy 8	The King who gave his Slave a Field	5.4.2.2
20	Sifre Deuteronomy 26	The Sale of a Debtor's Children as Slaves	4.3.1
21	Sifre Deuteronomy 28	A King, Wine and Two Slaves	5.5.1
22	Sifre Deuteronomy 38	The King who Serves a Slave from High Birth	7.3.1
23	Sifre Deuteronomy 38	Buying Slaves to Feed them	7.3.1
24	Sifre Deuteronomy 40	The King and his Storehouses	6.4.1
25	Sifre Deuteronomy 48/par. Avot de Rabbi Nathan B 35	The Slave and the Bird for the King's Son	6.3.5
26	Sifre Deuteronomy 323	Same Day Delivery of a Slave	4.2
27	Sifre Deuteronomy 357	The Depositor	6.3.6
28	Sifra Nedavah 2:6	Bringing Wheat, or Only Wheat	5.5.2
29	Sifra Bechukotai 4:4	On Account of Evil	6.3.1
30	Sifra Zuta 10:35	A Slave who Wakes the King	5.3.1.2
Non-tannaitic			
31	Genesis Rabbah 2:2	Two Slaves on One Bill	4.1.4
32	Genesis Rabbah 15:7	The Slave Girl and the Prince	4.1.2

¹⁶⁹⁰ RY: Rabbi Yishmael, RS: Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. I have taken up the reference system for the Mekhiltot that Lieve Teugels has developed in *The Meshalim in the Mekhiltot. An Annotated Edition and Translation of the Parables in Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael and Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai*, with the assistance of Esther van Eenennaam, Text and Studies in Ancient Judaism 176 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 73-74.

33	Leviticus Rabbah 8:1	A Matrona and her Slaves	4.1.2
34	b. Shabbat 153a	Being Prepared for the Meal	7.3.2
35	b. Ta'anit 25b	Giving your Slave his Ration	6.4.2
36	b. Hagigah 12b	The Early-Rising Slaves	7.2.1 (footnote)
37	b. Menachot 43b	Two Seals	5.5.1 (footnote)
38	Tanchuma Buber Beshallah 10	Fulfilling the Tasks of a Slave	7.3.3
39	Seder Eliyahu Rabbah 16	Loving and Fearing Sons and Slaves	5.6 (footnote)
40	Seder Eliyahu Rabbah 26	Loving and Fearing Slaves	5.6
41	Numbers Rabbah 1:2	A King does not Find Comfort in the Desert	7.3.3 (excursus)
42	Numbers Rabbah 16:27	Baking Bread for your Slaves	7.3.3 (excursus)

Appendix III: Chronology of Tannaitic Rabbis¹⁶⁹¹

Generation	Name (alternative/shorter name between brackets)	Mentioned in section
Earliest period (before 10 CE)	Antigonus of Soko	6.5.2
First Generation (10-90)	Gamliel I Shimon ben Gamliel I Shimon the Just Yochanan ben Zakkai Zadok	1, 7.3.1, 5.4.2.3., 6.1, 7.1.1, 7.2.3, 7.3.1 4.4.1-2 6.5.2 5.6, 7.3.2 7.3.1
Second Generation (90-130)	<i>Older group</i> Eliezer ben Arach Eliezer ben Hyracnus (Eliezer) Shmuel the Little Yose the Priest Yehoshua ben Haniah (Yehoshua) <i>Younger group (sometimes included in the Third Generation)</i> Akiva Eleazar ben Azariah Tarfon Yose the Galilean	6.3.4 1, 4.1.2, 6.3.2, 7.3.1-2 6.4.2 4.3.4 6.1, 6.3.2, 7.3.1 4.1.1, 4.3.4, 4.4.1, 5.4.3.2, 7.3.3 5.3.2.1, 7.1.1 4.1.1 7.3.3
Third Generation (130-160)	Eleazar ben Perata Hanina of Tib'in Meir Nehemiah Shimon ben/bar Yochai (Shimon) Yishmael ben Elisha (Yishmael) Yose ben Halafta (Yose)	6.4.2 4.2 4.1.1, 4.2, 4.4.1, 5.5.1 5.4.3.2 6.4.1, 7.3.1 5.4.3.2, 7.3.1 4.1.1, 4.1.2, 5.4.3.2, 7.1.3
Fourth Generation (160-200)	Eleazar Eleazar ben Simeon Yitzhak Yehoshua ben Karchah Yehudah bar Ilai (Yehudah) Yehudah the Prince (Yehudah ha Nasi) Yose ben Yehudah	4.4.1 5.4.2.2 4.1.1 5.4.2.2 5.3.2.2 5.1, 5.4.3.3 4.3.2
Fifth Generation (200-220)	Levi	6.3.2, 7.1.3
Later rabbis (Amoraim; 200-500)	Abbahu Ashi Nachman	4.1.4, 4.4.1 5.4.3.2, 7.3.1 7.1.3

¹⁶⁹¹ This chronology only includes rabbis mentioned in this study. For the division in five generations presented here, see Hermann L. Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, transl. and ed. Markus Bockmuehl, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 62-100. The spelling of the rabbis' names is uniformized here and differs sometimes from the way they are quoted in the chapters. Within each generation the rabbis are ordered alphabetically since the precise dating of many rabbis is still a matter of discussion.

	Oshaia	5.4.3.2
	Papa	4.1.2
	Rava	4.1.5
	Resh Lakish	5.4.3.2
	Shmuel	5.4.1.3
	Yehoshua ben Levi	4.4.2, 7.1.3
	Yehudah	4.1.1
	Yehuda bar Shimon (Yehudah ben Simeon ben Pazzi)	4.1.4

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