

# Money and Torah in Early Christian and Early Rabbinic Parables

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Many parables in the New Testament and other early Jewish-Christian<sup>1</sup> or rabbinic Jewish sources are built along a similar pattern, containing the following elements:

1. A master (needs to travel);
2. The master entrusts property with (an) overseer(s);
3. The overseer(s) deal(s) with the property in a certain way;
4. The master (returns and) settles accounts;
5. The master rewards and/or punishes the overseer(s) according to his/their behaviour in 3.<sup>2</sup>

The pattern is remarkably stable, yet the way the details are filled in differs among the individual parables. The variations are situated on various levels: the pattern itself (e.g., reversal of two stages), the relation between the stages, and the identity of the protagonists (including the property). From the beginning, it will be clear that pattern/form and content are often hard to distinguish; the pattern is not only a frame, it is a frame filled with a specific, yet variable, content. Not intrinsically related to the pattern, yet possibly influencing the choice of protagonists and other aspects of the pattern, are the parable's application, message, and (literary) setting.

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1 For this very topical subject, see Peter J. Tomson, *The Image of the Judaeo-Christians in Ancient Jewish and Christian Literature*, ed. Doris Lambers-Petry, WUNT 158 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003); Annette Yoshiko Reed, *Jewish-Christianity and the History of Judaism*, TSAJ 171 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018).

2 Apart from Matt 25:14–30 (Talents), Luke 19:12–27 (Minas), and Sifre Deut. 48 (Denars), which are discussed in this article, see also Mark 13:34–37; Matt 21:33–41 (Bad Tenants); Luke 16:1–9 (Bad Manager); Mekh. R. Shim. Yoh. Sanya to Exod 4:13 (Unwilling Overseer); Mekh. R. Ishm. Bachodesh 5 to Exod 20:2 (Two Overseers); Sifre Deut. 11 (Father Appoints Overseer over Son); Shepherd of Hermas, *Sim.* 55 [5.2] (The Slave and the Vineyard); Sem. R. Hiya 3; Pesiq. Rab Kah. 14:5 (Pharaoh Compared to Overseer for King), and many other rabbinic parables. The recurrence of this pattern in rabbinic sources led Ulrich Luz to conclude that the parable of the Talents may originally go back to Jesus. Cf. Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 249–250.

Three key “protagonists” can be discerned in all *meshalim* with the above pattern: the master, the overseer, and the property. Variation in the identity of the protagonists is one way in which the individual parables become stories, and not mere patterns. The master is often a king, but he can also be a *pater familias* or a rich landlord. In many cases, the master is explicitly said to be travelling abroad, but this is not necessary for the plot of the story.<sup>3</sup>

The overseer is often a slave,<sup>4</sup> but he<sup>5</sup> can also be identified as a manager (who could likewise have slave status), a tenant farmer, or a son. The overarching term that I will use is “overseer,” corresponding to the Greek word ἐπίτροπος (*epitropos*), which often occurs in rabbinic *meshalim* in its Hebraized form: אפיטרופוס (or an alternative spelling).<sup>6</sup> Often there is more than one overseer, and if two or more are present, they typically (but not always) display different behaviour towards the property they need to guard or manage, in which case they are also treated differently—i.e., rewarded or punished—in the last phase of the plot. For the message of the parable, the specific identities of the masters (king, father, landlord) and the overseers (slaves, sons, or managers) do not appear to be very relevant. Often, they vary in different versions of the same parable.<sup>7</sup>

3 Even when such a journey is not explicitly mentioned, it may be implied because a landlord usually did not live on his estate in the countryside but rather in the city. See the discussion of the parable of the Bad Tenants in Willy Schottroff, “Das Gleichnis von den bösen Weingärtnern (Mk. 12:1–9 par.): Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Bodenpacht in Palästina,” *ZDPV* 112 (1996): 18–48, esp. 33. See also the contribution of Marcel Poorthuis in this volume.

4 See the contribution of Martijn Stoutjesdijk in this volume, as well as his PhD dissertation: Martijn Stoutjesdijk, “Not Like the Rest of the Slaves? Slavery Parables in Early Rabbinic and Early Christian Literature” (PhD diss., Tilburg University, 2021). Chapter five (“When the master is away”) is particularly relevant for this article. Of note here is the theme of the *absente ero*, discussed by Stoutjesdijk, as it is a wide-spread topos in Hellenistic and Roman literature, including ancient novels and comedies such as Plautus’s *Menaechmi*; see Wolfgang de Melo, ed., *Plautus: Casina. The Casket Comedy. Curculio. Epidicus. The Two Menaechmuses*, LCL 61 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 967–985.

5 I have encountered no antique parables where the overseer, or the master for that matter, is specifically identified as female.

6 See Ignaz Ziegler, *Die Königsgleichnisse des Midrasch beleuchtet durch die römische Kaiserzeit* (Breslau: Schottlaender, 1903), 154–428 passim; Samuel Krauss, *Griechische und lateinische Lehnwörter im Talmud, Midrasch und Targum* (Berlin: Calvary, 1898), 103–105. The term is also attested in the New Testament (Matt 20:8; Luke 8:3; Gal 4:2). In Gal 4:2 it is used for a guardian of children, which is a meaning we also find in rabbinic parables, e.g., in Sifre Deut. 11.

7 In Luke’s parable of the Minas, the “nobleman” even becomes king. In Matthew’s Talents, the protagonist is a main “man.” In various versions of rabbinic parables, we see often that a “man” in one version is a “king” in another, without implying any changes for the meaning

The property is another variable “protagonist,” as can be expected, and the relationship between the overseer and the property is similarly variable. What is important for the parable’s message is not only how the overseer(s) manages the property (3), but also how this behaviour is valued as “good” or “bad” (4), and how the overseer is eventually rewarded or punished for this behaviour (5).

Finally, there are variations in the application, which is closely related to the message of parables built along this pattern. Often, the parables feature an explicit application or *nimshal*, sometimes an *epimythium*.<sup>8</sup> Yet even when the application is not explicit, it is always there, as a parable’s function is to broadcast a message by means of a fictive story.<sup>9</sup> It is not always evident from the text in which the parable is found what its exact application is, even with the presence of a *nimshal* or an *epimythium*. Some parables have been transmitted with multiple applications, and in others it is evident that a redactor has applied an application different from the one originally intended. In rabbinic parables, this is often due to the application of the *meshal* to a different biblical text. With respect to the parables of Jesus that have come to us in the Gospels, I try to consider their meaning as they must have been understood by the living Jesus and his audience—that is, a Jewish audience that did not see Jesus as the risen Lord but as a gifted teacher, possibly with messianic claims, and with conflicting interpretations of certain rules of the Torah and their implementation.<sup>10</sup>

In this article, I will focus on parables built along the above pattern that deal with the overseeing of money. I will demonstrate that, at least to a certain extent or in a certain phase of their development, their application is related to

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of the parable. The tendency to make the protagonists in parables “kings” is seen as a factor of “stereotyping” by David Stern, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 21–23.

8 Justin David Strong, “The Fables of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke: Their Form, Origins, and Implications” (PhD diss., University of Notre Dame, 2019), 395–458.

9 Cf. Lieve M. Teugels, “Talking Animals in Parables: A *Contradictio in Terminis*,” in *Parables in Changing Contexts: Essays on the Study of Parables in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism*, ed. Eric Ottenheijm and Marcel Poorthuis, JCP 35 (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 144; Lieve M. Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhilot. An Annotated Edition and Translation of the Parables in Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael and Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai*, TSAJ 176 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 11.

10 Two commentaries that I consulted when writing this article, Luz, *Matthew 21–28* and François Bovon, *Luke 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 9:51–19:27*, ed. Helmut Koester, trans. Donald S. Deer, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), distinguish between diachronic analysis and commentary. They understand commentary as synchronic, that is, based on the text as it is embedded in its present literary context. In the diachronic analysis, they reckon with a “source” and/or an oral transmission phase and/or the parable as told by Jesus.

the topic of Torah. Torah is taken here in a broad sense and not restricted to the rabbinic view of it. Torah here applies to all of its aspects, including studying, keeping, and doing the Torah and its commandments. An important factor, as we will see, are multiple and conflicting interpretations of the meaning of Torah in general, or of specific commandments.

By focussing on the variations in pattern, protagonists as well as their mutual relations, and application, I also hope to demonstrate how the real value of the parable genre is located in its capacity to broadcast specific messages by the modification of details. The best parabolist or *memasheh*<sup>11</sup> is the one who creatively uses fixed, often old, patterns and motifs to bring a new message.

## 1 Talents, Minas, Denars: Variations on a “Traveling Master” Theme

I will discuss two parables from the New Testament Gospels, one from an apocryphal gospel, and one from an early rabbinic source, all of which display, apart from the common pattern, a very similar theme: individuals entrusted with a specific amount of money by a “master,” each of them dealing with that money in a different way. While the parables from the gospels are versions of the same parable, the rabbinic text is not.<sup>12</sup> Apart from the similarities, we will also consider some major differences in this rabbinic *mashal*, with respect to the protagonists, the plot, and the application.

### 1.1 *The Talents: Matt 25:14–30*

The first text in this category is the parable of the Talents in the Gospel of Matthew. The relevant points of the pattern in this parable are:

1. A master goes on a journey;
2. He entrusts three slaves with property in an unequal way; they receive five, two, and one talents, respectively;
3. The slaves deal in different ways with the property entrusted to them: those who received five and two talents invest them, the one who received one talent hides it;
4. The master returns and settles accounts;

11 This term is used by Yonah Fraenkel, “Ha-mashal,” in *Darkhei ha-aggadah vehamidrash* (Givatayim: Yad Litalmud, 1991), 323–393 (Hebrew).

12 Apart from the three versions to be discussed in this paper (Matthew, Luke, and the Gospel of the Nazarenes), the parable of the Doorkeeper in Mark 13:34–37 is usually considered an elementary form of the same parable. A reference to Matt 25:26–27, 30 is found in Ps. Clementines, *Hom* 3.61. See François Bovon, *Luke 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 9:51–19:27*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 606.

5. He rewards those who invested their talents and let the money grow, and punishes the one who hid and saved his talent.

Some indications about the message of the parable can be found in the parable itself, such as the reaction of the master to those who in his opinion acted correctly: “Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much” (Matt 25:21, 23).<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, the slave who will eventually be punished is reproached as follows: “You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest” (Matt 25:26–27). The master’s negative self-characterization is remarkable, as is the harsh treatment of the slave who did not steal or lose the money but returned it to his master intact.<sup>14</sup> The *mashal* proper<sup>15</sup> comes to a conclusion in v. 28, where the master pronounces the slave’s punishment: “So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents.”

Thereafter, the text contains a so-called *epimythium* from which the reader can expect some clarification: “For to everyone who has, more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away” (Matt 25:29).<sup>16</sup> *Epimythia* such as these, containing wise lessons, are known from the Aesopian fables.<sup>17</sup> In certain parables in the New Testament, they have a function comparable to that of

13 For the English translation of the New Testament, I follow the ESV (2016).

14 The motifs of the severe master as well as the idea that multiplication of the entrusted property is what counts most is also found in the parable of the Inferior Field in Avot R. Nath. A 16 discussed by Marcel Poorthuis in this volume. Martijn Stoutjesdijk mentions this verse as an example of critique or protest against God in parables; see his contribution to this volume.

15 This is the terminology used in rabbinic studies, where a distinction is made between the “*mashal* proper” (the parable itself) and the “*nimshal*” (the application of the parable). As a rule, these two elements are not mixed up. The term “*nimshal*” has also found its way into the study of the parables in the Gospels; see, e.g., Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008). If the *mashal* continues after the *nimshal*, or if elements of the *mashal* are found in the *nimshal* or vice versa, this can be seen as a sign of a corruption in the transmission of the text or of redactional activity.

16 Mary Ann Beavis, “Parable and Fable,” *CBQ* 52 (1990): 23, also identifies this as an *epimythium*. The same saying is found in Matt 13:12, Mark 4:25, and Luke 8:18.

17 David Flusser, “Aesop’s Miser and the Parable of the Talents,” in *Parable and Story in Judaism and Christianity*, ed. Clemens Thoma and Michael Wyschogrod (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 15–16, compares this parable with Aesop’s fable “the Miser” (and with a rabbinic *mashal*; see note 31). He concludes that the “logion” in v. 29 fits this parable and that its use in other New Testament texts was borrowed from the context of this parable (cf. 23n15).

the rabbinic *nimshal*.<sup>18</sup> This also seems to be the case here. With its confusing message, the proverb makes for an excellent ending to the parable (in its broad sense, including the application), with its hard and shocking content. I believe this proverb to be a structural part of the parable in its present, redactional form in the gospels, the more so because exactly the same saying occurs in Luke's parable of the Minas (see below).<sup>19</sup>

After this, however, the *mashal* proper continues in v. 30, because the image of the slave is taken up again.<sup>20</sup> It is commonly accepted—unconvincingly, in my view—that v. 29 is part of the master's speech and thus part of the *mashal* proper.<sup>21</sup> I believe, as I will explain further, that v. 29 has a function similar to a *nimshal* and is thus not part of the *mashal* proper. Matthew 25:30 constitutes a second (or secondary) “ending” of the parable: “Throw out the worthless slave into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” This ending bears the redactional imprint of the Gospel of Matthew, who ends other parables in a similarly extravagant way, in contradistinction to the simpler versions in Luke and/or Mark.<sup>22</sup>

## 1.2 *The Minas: Luke 19:12–27*

A similar parable is included in the Gospel of Luke with an introduction indicating what the parable, according to the gospel author, was about: “because he was near Jerusalem, and they supposed that the kingdom of God was going

18 See Strong, “The Fables of Jesus”; cf. note 8. In some cases, the rabbinic parables also end with a lesson that resembles an *epimythium* more than a standard *nimshal*. This is, for example, the case in a *mashal* in Mekh. R. Ishm. Pischa 16, which concludes with the saying “So also do later troubles cause the former ones to be forgotten.” See Lieve M. Teugels, “From the Lion to the Snake, from the Wolf to the Bear: Rescue and Punishment in Classical Fables and Rabbinic Meshalim,” in *Overcoming Dichotomies: Parables, Fables, and Similes in the Graeco-Roman World*, ed. Albertina Oegema, Jonathan Pater, and Martijn Stoutjesdijk, WUNT 483 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022), 217–236.

19 The text of the parable in Q as reconstructed by Christian Münch, “Gewinnen und Verlieren,” in *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu*, ed. Ruben Zimmermann et al. (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2007), 244–256, includes this saying and ends with it. Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, like “most exegetes,” considers the logion “probably” to be a secondary addition because it is transmitted as an independent logion in several other cases: Luke 8:18; Matt 13:12; Mark 4:25; Gos. Thom. 41 (249). It is entirely possible, as we will see, that Jesus did not originally connect this message to this parable, since its message in a way actually contradicts the parable's message.

20 See note 15. Strong notes that *epimythia*, in the Gospels as in classical fables, “occasionally become entangled in the conclusion of a fable body,” which is also what appears to be the case here. See Strong, “The Fables of Jesus,” 395–399.

21 Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, typifies this parable and the parable of the Minas in Luke 19 as an “indirect narrative parable without a *nimshal*” (519).

22 Cf. Matt 8:12, 22:13. See also Matt 13:42 and 13:50.

to appear immediately” (Luke 19:11).<sup>23</sup> Overall, the parable of the Minas follows the same pattern as the parable of the Talents in Matthew:

1. A master goes on a journey to a distant country;
2. He entrusts ten slaves with property in an equal way; they all receive one mina;
3. Three slaves deal in different ways with the property entrusted to them: two invest the mina, and one hides it;
4. The master returns and settles accounts;
5. He rewards the two who invested their mina and let the money grow, and punishes the one who hid and saved it.

There are considerable differences between the parables in Matthew and Luke.<sup>24</sup> First, the text in Luke is more complex in that it contains a second storyline, about a king who goes out to acquire a kingdom (19:12c, 19:13b, 19:27).<sup>25</sup> A second difference is that the parables differ as to the monetary unit used: whereas Matthew uses the term *τάλαντα* (talents), Luke has *μνᾶς* (minas).<sup>26</sup> Third, Luke begins with ten slaves, whereas Matthew only has three. Fourth, in Luke the same amount is entrusted to all of the slaves (i.e., one mina), while each slave in Matthew receives a different amount. An additional complication is that, even though ten slaves are said to receive a mina in Luke 19:13, only three are mentioned when the king comes to settle accounts (19:16, 19:18, 19:20). Fifth, the slaves in Luke receive the explicit order “to do business” with their mina (19:13), while no such order can be found in Matthew. Sixth, whereas the slave who is punished in Matthew hid his talent in the ground, the slave in

23 In Matthew, this introduction is not found before the parable of the Talents, but a similar context can be assumed from the introduction of the preceding parable in Matt 25:1 as well as the content of Matt 24.

24 Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 225–231, discusses various possible relations between the two parables but also states that “[s]erious consideration must be given to the fact that these are two similar but independent parables.” (225). The question of the relationship is related to the question whether this is a Q text. Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 247–248, with reference to other scholars, doubts that this is the case. He does, however, consider them variants of a common “oral tradition.” See also the next note.

25 Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 248. Luz calls the motif “secondary” in Luke. Some reckon with a second source, even a second parable (Zerwick, Weinert). See Bovon, *Luke 2*, 607–612.

26 For the value of the amounts, see Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 528; Münch, “Gewinnen und Verlieren,” 248. Even one talent would have been an enormous amount, equalling the wages for twenty years of service for a day-labourer. A mina is a more realistic amount, but would still equal one hundred days’ wages for a common labourer. Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, assumes that the change from minas to talents was made by Matthew, who “loves such large sums of money” (248). So also Bovon, *Luke 2*, 608. The difference is not relevant, as coined gold and silver were used as currency.

Luke kept it in a cloth (19:20).<sup>27</sup> Due to the master's explicit command in Luke to do business with the entrusted mina, the third slave in this version disobeys his master's commandment.<sup>28</sup>

In the Lukan version, the master self-identifies as a "severe man" (Luke 19:22). He likewise reproaches the slave who simply hid his capital that he should have "put my money in the bank, and at my coming I might have collected it with interest." As in the (first) ending of the parable of the Talents in Matthew, the punishment levied upon the last slave is for his mina to be taken from him and given to the one who made ten minas (Luke 19:26). The parable closes with what I believe to be, as in Matthew, an *epimythium* and not a part of the master's speech: "I tell you that to everyone who has, more shall be given, but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away" (Luke 19:26).<sup>29</sup>

In both synoptic versions, profit is obviously valued most highly. It is also clear that such high profits cannot be made by depositing the money with a bank.<sup>30</sup> While both slaves who made a profit are praised in the same way, the one who made the greatest profit receives an extra reward, as the talent/mina of the third slave is given to him. Nevertheless, the third slave is not told that he should have done business with the money entrusted to him: rather, the master says he should have saved it in the bank where it could have earned him interest. This unevenness in the text may be an indication of an underlying parable model, of which the rabbinic *mashal* to be discussed next may be an exponent.

### 1.3 *The Denars: Sifre Deut. 48*

In the Tannaitic Midrash *Sifre to Deuteronomy*, we find a similarly structured parable that does not feature a traveling master and slaves, but rather two

27 Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, trans. Samuel H. Hooke, 2nd rev. ed. (London: SCM Press, 1972), 61n81, notes that burying money was regarded as a safe way to protect against theft, and refers to the rabbinic tradition in b. B. Mets. 42a. Conversely, wrapping money in a cloth was seen as irresponsible (see m. B. Mets. 3:10). Jeremias observes that both Matthew and Luke presuppose "Palestinian conditions." Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 248–249, sees this as a feature of the disobedience of the slave. He compares it with the insolent behaviour of the third slave in the Gospel of the Nazarenes (see further).

28 Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 248, concludes from this that the slave's remark that he was afraid sounds ironic.

29 See note 19. Strong, "The Fables of Jesus," 399, lists this verse as *epimythium*. He discusses the use of the formula "I tell you," which is found here and not in Matthew's Talents. He demonstrates that this formula was common in fables before the first century (405–412).

30 See Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 252.



brothers who inherit from their father.<sup>31</sup> The difference between inheriting, in which case the property becomes one's own, and guarding, in which case the property remains the master's, should be taken into account, although it is not absolute, since the first and second slaves in the synoptic parables are also "given" the profit they made.<sup>32</sup>

I quote the *mashal* with some of its surrounding context, namely the beginning of the midrash, in which the base verse (Deut 11:22) is quoted and, typically, contrasted with a preceding, nearly identical verse (Deut 11:13).

*For if you are careful to keep (שמר) all this commandment (Deut 11:22): Why was this said? Because of If you listen obediently to my commandments (Deut 11:13). I might assume that even if one has heard the words of Torah, he may remain idle and not study them again. Therefore Scripture says here, if you are careful to keep, indicating that just as one must be careful not to lose his money, so must he be careful not to lose his learning. ...*

R. Simeon ben Yohai says by way of a parable: "Two brothers inherit money from their father. One converts it into a denar and spends it, while the other converts it into a denar and puts it aside. He who has converted his denar and spent it now has nothing, whereas he who has converted

כי אם שמור תשמרון את כל המצוה הזאת למה נאמר לפי שנאמר והיה אם שמוע תשמעו אל מצותי. שומע אני כיון ששמע אדם דברי תורה ישב לו ולא ישנה. תלמוד לומר כי אם שמור תשמרון. מגיד שכשם שאדם צריך להזהר בסלעו שלא תאבד כך צריך להזהר בתלמודו שלא יאבד

...

רבי שמעון בן יוחי אומר משל לשני אחים שהיו מסגלים אחר אביהם. אחד מצרף דינר ואוכלו ואחד מצרף דינר ומניחו. זה שהיה מצרף דינר ואוכלו נמצא אין בידו כלום וזה שמצרף דינר ומניחו נמצא מעשיר לאחר זמן. כך תלמידי חכמים למד שנים שלשה דברים ביום שנים שלשה פרקים בשבת שנים שלש פרשיות בחדש נמצא מעשיר לאחר זמן ועליו הוא אומר וקובץ על יד ירבה [משלי יג א].

31 Flusser, "Aesop's Miser," 12, and note 9, gives a different rabbinic parallel, namely the *mashal* in S. Eli. Zut. 171, 1:19–28. On the basis of this parallel, Flusser concludes that "behind the tripartite structure of the Parable of the Talents there is a basic contrast between only two opposites." The parable of the Denars is a closer (and earlier) parallel, on the basis of which the same conclusion could be drawn. Sifre Deut. 48 is also not mentioned by Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 522; Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 250 (notes); Bovon, *Luke 2*, 610 (notes).

32 See Matt 25:28–29; Luke 19:24–26. Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 251, suggests that in the synoptic parables we have to do with a *peculium* entrusted to the slaves.

his denar and has put it aside eventually grows wealthy. Even so is it with the disciples of the wise: one who studies two or three things a day, two or three chapters in a week, two or three Scriptural lessons in a month, eventually becomes rich (in Torah), and of him it is said, *But he who gathers little by little increases*" (Prov 13:11). He who says, "Today I will study (only what I need now), tomorrow I will study (what I shall need then); today I will review (only what I need now), tomorrow I will review (what I shall need then), will have nothing, and of him it is said, *He who gathers in summer is a prudent son, but he who sleeps in harvest is a son who brings shame* (Prov 10:5).

Sifre Deut. 48<sup>33</sup>

וזה שאומר היום אני למד למחר אני למד היום אני שונה למחר אני שונה נמצא אין בידו כלום ועליו הוא אומר איגר בקיץ בן משכיל נרדם בקציר בן מביש [משלייה].<sup>34</sup>

The question on which the midrash draws concerns the difference between the two verses from Deut 11: why did the message have to be stated twice? The answer is that if one "hears" (Deut 11:13) a commandment, this does not necessarily imply that one will "keep" (Deut 11:22) it. This is why the latter verse needed to be added. An additional point echoing in the *mashal*, as we will see, is the double meaning of שמר, which can mean both "to save" and "to keep" (or "observe").

The recurring pattern is developed in this *mashal* in the following way:

1. A father dies;
2. Two brothers receive money in an equal way; one denar each;
3. The brothers deal in different ways with the property entrusted to them; one spends, and one saves;
4. Accounts are settled;
5. The one who has saved is rewarded with wealth, the one who has spent has nothing.

33 Translation Reuven Hammer, *Sifre: A Tannaitic Commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy*, xjs 24 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 101, with adapted translation of the biblical verses.

34 Hebrew text from Louis Finkelstein, ed., *Sifre ad Deuteronomium*, repr. 1969 (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1939), 108–109.

In this *mashal*, we encounter yet a third monetary unit: denars.<sup>35</sup> As in the parable of the Minas in Luke, the “trustees” receive an equal amount and they treat what has been entrusted to them differently: one puts it “aside,” which implies, as we can read in the next sentence, bringing it to the bank where it can grow, and the other spends it. The father obviously cannot return to settle accounts. However, the parable plainly states that the one who “kept” it in the bank rather than spending it is the one who is eventually better off.

Central to this *mashal* is a play on the various meanings of the verb שמר. Whereas the midrash deals with “not losing” (his learning), the *mashal* is about “putting aside” (a denar), and the *nimshal* about “accumulating” (Torah). The eventual message, displayed in the *nimshal*, is that one should multiply one’s Torah. The *mashal* already makes explicit that “putting aside” money means letting it grow, not “hiding” it in the ground or elsewhere. From this we can infer that what is meant here, as in the advice to the third slave in the New Testament parables, is depositing money with a bank or investing it.

The *nimshal* does not conclude by repeating the base verse, as one would expect, but by offering a series of prooftexts from Proverbs, the first being: “Wealth may dwindle to less than nothing, but he who gathers little by little increases it” (Prov 13:11).<sup>36</sup> The reason I quote the complete verse is that the midrash often renders only a selection of relevant words, while actually alluding to the context of the entire verse. Applied to the behaviour of the brothers in the *mashal*, this proverb implies that a person may even lose all his money if he does not multiply it steadily, by letting it grow slowly in the bank. In terms of the *nimshal*, it implies that one may lose or forget one’s Torah if one does not study and practise it regularly. The second prooftext contains the same contrast. Some more prooftexts follow but are not quoted here.

These proverbs recall the *epimythium* appended to the parables of the Talents and the Minas: “For to everyone who has, more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away” (Matt 25:29). The message of the proverbs from Proverbs, in spite of their similar two-ply structure, is the polar opposite of the proverb in Matthew. In comparison with the bewildering message of the synoptic parables, the *mashal* of the Denars, supported by the biblical proverbs, seems much more acceptable to the average, uninitiated audience.

The similar pattern and common motif of dealing with entrusted money, combined with the presence of similarly structured proverbs with opposing

35 This monetary unit is also found in Matt 18:28; 20:2–13; 22:19; Mark 6:37, 14:5; Luke 7:41, 10:35, and 20:24.

36 More prooftexts follow in the original text.

messages, warrants a further, comparative look at the parables in both sources. For now, however, I will first discuss another relevant text.

#### 1.4 *Another Version of the “Talents”: The Gospel of the Nazarenes*

The lost Jewish-Christian gospel mentioned by Eusebius in his *Theophany* may serve as a missing link between the rabbinic *mashal* of the Denars and the two New Testament parables.<sup>37</sup> This lost gospel, which, according to Eusebius, was transmitted in Hebrew script, is sometimes called “Gospel of the Hebrews,” but according to the latest insights can rather be identified with the Aramaic “Gospel of the Nazarenes.”<sup>38</sup> According to Eusebius, this gospel contained a parable about three slaves who each receive one talent: one hid the talent, one multiplied it, and one squandered it. This is Eusebius’s record:

But since the Gospel [written] in Hebrew characters which has come into our hands enters the threat not against the man who has hid [the talent], but against him who had lived dissolutely—for he [the master] had three slaves, one who squandered his master’s substance with harlots and flute-girls, one who multiplied the gain, and one who hid the talent; and accordingly one was accepted (with joy), another merely rebuked, but the other cast into prison—I wonder whether in Matthew the threat which is uttered after the word against the

Ἐπεὶ δὲ τὸ εἰς ἡμᾶς ἦκον Ἑβραϊκοῖς χαρακτηρῶσιν εὐαγγέλιον τὴν ἀπειλὴν οὐ κατὰ τοῦ ἀποκρύψαντος ἐπήγεν, ἀλλὰ κατὰ τοῦ ἀσώτως ἐζηκότος—τρῆς γὰρ δούλους περιεῖχε, τὸν μὲν καταφαρόντα τὴν ὑπαρξίν τοῦ δεσπότου μετὰ πορνῶν καὶ αὐλητρίδων, τὸν δὲ πολλαπλασιάσαντα τὴν ἐργασίαν, τὸν δὲ κατακρύψαντα τὸ τάλαντον. εἶτα τὸν μὲν ἀποδεχθῆναι, τὸν δὲ μεμφθῆναι μόνον, τὸν δὲ συγκλεισθῆναι δεσμοτηρίῳ—ἐφίστημι, μήποτε κατὰ τὸν Μαθαῖον μετὰ τὴν συμπλήρωσιν τοῦ λόγου τοῦ κατὰ τοῦ μηδὲν ἐργασαμένου ἢ ἐξῆς ἐπιλεγομένη ἀπειλή οὐ περιὰυτοῦ, ἀλλὰ περὶ τοῦ προτέρου

37 No chronological claims are made here.

38 See Christoph Marksches, *Antike christliche Apokryphen in deutscher Übersetzung / Bd. 1, Evangelien und Verwandtes* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 578; Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 248–49. It needs to be mentioned that Eusebius’s authorship of the Greek fragment in which this text is found is disputed. Hugo Gressmann, *Eusebius Werke*, vol. 3.2, *Die Theophanie*, GCS 11.2 (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1904) omits the passage entirely from his edition. Klostermann (see note 40), having read Gressmann, adds two question marks after the reference: “EUSEB. THEOPH. ??”

man who did nothing may refer not to him, but by epanalepsis to the first who had feasted and drunk with the drunken.<sup>39</sup> κατ' ἐπανάληψιν λέλεκται, τοῦ ἐσθίου-  
ντος καὶ πίνοντος μετὰ τῶν μεθύοντων.<sup>40</sup>

EUSEBIUS, *Theoph.* 4.22

Eusebius considers this a variant on Matthew's Talents, but it seems closer to Luke's Minas, where each slave receives the same amount.<sup>41</sup> Yet there are considerable differences separating it from both canonical versions. In the version related by Eusebius, what counts is not the amount which the slaves manage to gain but what they do with the talent entrusted to them. They are judged against ethical rather than economical standards. One squanders it "with harlots and flute girls"—an obviously ethical disapproval, recalling the behaviour of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:13, and especially the judgement of the older son in Luke 15:30). In view of the condemnation of the one who thus squanders his talent, it is not evident how the one who "multiplies" it is judged. Since ethical standards are being used here, is multiplying good or bad behaviour? Does it refer to gambling or taking loans on interest, which is potentially immoral behaviour and even a contravention of biblical law and the prevailing halakhah?<sup>42</sup> Or should it rather be conceived as investing, which is potentially praiseworthy behaviour? This is not clear from the quote from Eusebius, since in the "accounting phase" of the parable he does not specify who is praised and who is rebuked, the text merely stating that "one" was rebuked, "one" praised, and "one" thrown into prison. Eusebius himself suggests that the accounting may not follow the order in which the behaviour of the three slaves is mentioned, such that the one cast into prison is the one who "squandered" the

39 Translation: Wilhelm Schneemelcher and Robert McLachlan Wilson, *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 1, *Gospels and Related Writings*, rev. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 161–162.

40 Greek text from Erich Klostermann, ed., *Apocrypha II. Evangelien*. Kleine Texte für Vorlesungen und Übungen 8. 3rd ed. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1929), 9 (no. 15) (p. 6 [no. 14] in the first edition from 1904). There is some confusion about the numbering of the fragment. Klostermann numbers it 14 and 15; Angelo Mai, ed., *Novae patrum bibliothecae tomus quartus* (Rome: Typis Sacri consilii propagando christiano nomini, 1847), 155, calls it fragment 22. I adopt the reference of the translators (see next note). I wish to express my thanks to my PThU colleague Jan Krans for advising me in regard to this text.

41 Cf. Alice Whealey, "The Greek Fragments Attributed to Eusebius of Caesarea's Theophania," *VC* 69 (2015): 22.

42 Cf. Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 253 and notes. See also note 41.

talent, and not the final figure, that is, the one who hid his talent. If “hiding”<sup>43</sup> was considered an acceptable way of keeping money by the author of this Hebrew Gospel, it is understandable that he would be offended by what in his eyes represents an unjust harsh punishment. But depending on the interpretation, there are still two options for the one who hid and the one who multiplied, since either one could be praised or rebuked.<sup>44</sup> If we assume that the one who hid the talent was rebuked, then the message is the same as it is in the Synoptic Gospels: he should have put it in the bank where it could multiply, which is also the message of the rabbinic parable, where the difference between “preserving/keeping” (שמר) and “multiplying” is in fact erased in that the one who “keeps” Torah and does not just “hear” it will “multiply” it.

### 1.5 *Talents, Minas, Denars: Same Pattern, Different Content and Application*

To recap, the four parables are constructed along the lines of the simple pattern outlined in the beginning. In all of them, the entrusted property has the form of money. What the overseers do with the money varies from hiding, to multiplying, to spending, or some forms thereof, such as investing or squandering. Furthermore, which behaviour is considered liable to reward or punishment seems to differ among the sources. In the following, I will focus on some important differences between the sources with respect to the pattern, the use of the motifs in the *mashal* proper, and the application (*nimshal*).

As to the pattern itself, there is a difference that is not visible in the above scheme. The rabbinic version is merely dual: there is “good” behaviour (saving/multiplying) which is rewarded, and “bad” behaviour (spending) which is subject to punishment or not rewarded. Both New Testament versions, as well as the Gospel of the Nazarenes, have a third category. In these three parables, the various behaviours and consequences can be placed on a scale running from “punished” through “punished a bit”<sup>45</sup> through “rewarded”<sup>46</sup> to “rewarded a lot.”

Second, on the level of the *mashal* proper, the use of the motifs “saving” or “hiding” and “spending,” and the way they correspond to the categories of

43 See above, note 27 (hiding is an accepted, good way of preserving) and note 31 (Flusser; originally two-ply structure).

44 Petri Luomanen, *Recovering Jewish-Christian Sects and Gospels*, VCSup 110 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 131, favours the first reading (the one who hides is praised) because it fits “Mediterranean anthropology” and biblical law against taking interest (Deut 23:19–20). Like Jeremias (see note 27 above), he refers to the rabbinic tradition in b. B. Mets. 42a, according to which burying money was seen as a valuable wise option.

45 So the Gospel of the Nazarenes.

46 So Matthew and Luke.

“reward” and “punishment,” differs among the various versions. From the perspective of the rabbinic parable, “saving” (שמר) is the same as “multiplying,” and opposed to “spending.” While hiding could be a way of saving, this path is not followed in the rabbinic parable.<sup>47</sup> In Matthew and Luke, hiding is opposed to multiplying. I already noted that, in the synoptic versions, the master does not reproach the third slave for failing to have done business with the money like his two companions, but rather charges that he should have brought it to the bank, which is the approved behaviour in the rabbinic parable. This may be an important clue in the comparison of the various versions.

The rabbinic *mashal* has the opposition “multiplying vs. spending,” whereas the New Testament Gospels use the opposition “multiplying vs. hiding.” In both sources, multiplying is the recommended behaviour. The Gospel of the Nazarenes contains three ways of dealing with the property, two of which overlap with either one of the other two sources: hiding, multiplying (cf. Talents and Minas), and multiplying and spending (cf. Denars)—with the nuance that the Gospel of the Nazarenes explicitly depicts spending as immoral behaviour. What is common in all three gospels, each of which features three slaves, is that one of the three is punished harshly by the master. In the synoptic versions, the punished slave is the one who hides, and in the Gospel of the Nazarenes, the one who squanders. In the rabbinic parable, which has only two categories, the son who spends his inherited denar is merely punished implicitly, in that he is left “with nothing.”

The third important level of difference concerns the application. In the Gospel of the Nazarenes, an application is not extant. Strictly speaking, only the rabbinic parable contains a *nimshal* (“Even so is it with the disciples of the wise ...”). Yet we have seen that both New Testament versions conclude with a saying whose function is similar to that of a *nimshal*. According to this saying, the one who has little will get even less, and the one who has more, shall receive even more. This ties in well with the *mashal* proper in Matthew, where the slave who received the smallest amount does not multiply but eventually even loses it, while the one who started out with most gains most. In Luke, where each slave receives the same amount, the application only fits the outcome, where the one who made the most profit gets even more, and the one

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47 See note 41 above. Pesiq. Rav Kah 14:5 (the second *mashal*, about Pharaoh), which is adduced as a parallel to the New Testament parables of the Talents and the Minas by Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 249n25, 250n30; Peter Dschulnigg, *Rabbinische Gleichnisse und das Neue Testament: Die Gleichnisse Der PesK im Vergleich mit den Gleichnissen Jesu und dem Neuen Testament*, JudChr 12 (Bern: Lang, 1988), 295–297, seems rather to focus on the importance of “saving” in the simple sense of preservation, without accumulation. I think, therefore, that the present parable of the Denars serves better for comparison with the Talents and the Minas.

who made no profit loses everything. The rabbinic parable similarly ends with a saying, taken from Prov 13:11. This proverb is suggestive of a message opposite to that in the New Testament Gospels, implying that the one who has a lot can lose it fast, but the one who has a little can/should slowly increase it. Despite the concluding saying in the Gospels, this message is in line with the master's rebuke of the third slave in the *mashal* proper, when he charges that he should have brought his money to the bank where it could (slowly) grow. Could this mean that in the end (or perhaps even originally), the message of the New Testament and the rabbinic parables is not so different after all?

## 2 The Torah-Money *Bildfeld*

Considering the great similarities in the scheme along which these parables are built as well as the topic of money, how can the different applications in the two New Testament versions, at least in their present form, be explained?<sup>48</sup> I believe that it is safe to say that the parable of the Denars is rather predictable from a rabbinic Jewish perspective, because its application is “Torah”: one who saves, studies, and invests in Torah does well, whereas one who neglects Torah may forget (lose) it the moment he stops learning. Rabbinic parables are rife with application to “Torah,” which is even a standard trope.<sup>49</sup> Torah is compared to almost everything in rabbinic *meshalim*, including treasures, money, silver, or gold.<sup>50</sup>

The combination of a special Torah focus and the use of financial metaphors for Torah is deserving of further attention. First, concern for Torah, both the study of Torah and observance of Torah commandments, can already be found in works from the Second Temple Period, such as Ben Sira, Jubilees, Proverbs,<sup>51</sup> Qoheleth,<sup>52</sup> some of the Dead Sea Scrolls,<sup>53</sup> and in several books of the New

48 The evaluation of the Gospel of the Nazarenes will follow later.

49 See Dschulnigg, *Rabbinische Gleichnisse*, 12–13. He sees a similar, unilateral focus in the New Testament parables in the *Basileia*, the kingdom of God. See also below.

50 In Song Rab. 1:1, 8 Torah is compared to a gold coin, which a king loses, and a parable to a candle, which the king then uses to find it. See also Song Rab. 1:1, 9. Cf. the “lost coin” in Luke 15:8–9, where a woman uses a candle to find a coin.

51 See Evert Tuinstra, “Torah in Spreuken,” *ACEBT* 31 (2017): 21–30.

52 Qoh 12:13–14. See Stuart Weeks, “‘Fear God and Keep his Commandments’: Could Qohelet have said this?” in *Wisdom and Torah: The Reception of ‘Torah’ in the Wisdom Literature of the Second Temple Period*, ed. Bernd Schipper and David Andrew Teeter, JSJSup 163 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 101–117.

53 Elisa Uusimäki, *Turning Proverbs towards Torah: An Analysis of 4Q525*, STDJ 117 (Leiden: Brill, 2016), argues that the author of 4Q525 seeks to demonstrate that true wisdom is found in the concept of Torah.



Testament, including the Gospel of Matthew, the Epistle of James, Hebrews, and Revelation.<sup>54</sup> Yet in the biblical and extra-biblical wisdom literature, it is rather wisdom (Chokhmah, Sophia) that represents, even personifies, the keeping of the biblical commandments, as does the Logos in Hellenistic Jewish literature, mainly in Philo.<sup>55</sup>

Second, silver and gold, familiar metaphors for wisdom in pre-rabbinic Judaism,<sup>56</sup> were applied to the Torah by the rabbinic sages.<sup>57</sup> The use of financial metaphors for Torah can be considered a *Bildfeld* in rabbinic literature.<sup>58</sup> Only the self-evident way in which metaphors of riches and money are used to denote wisdom and Torah can explain the use of verbs such as acquiring, stealing, wasting, spending, multiplying, and saving for Torah and wisdom, which can only be understood in a metaphorical sense.<sup>59</sup>

It is, therefore, safe to assume that in the time of Jesus, and for Jesus himself, “saving” (שמר) the Torah in the sense of studying and keeping its commandments was a standard Jewish ideal,<sup>60</sup> and the use of the *Bildfeld* “wisdom-silver” or “Torah-coins” was familiar.<sup>61</sup>

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- 54 For the New Testament, see Michael Tait and Peter Oakes, *Torah in the New Testament: Papers Delivered at the Manchester-Lausanne Seminar of June 2008*, LNTS 401 (London: T&T Clark, 2009). For the Second Temple period in general, and most notably sources from Hellenistic Judaism, see Lawrence H. Schiffman, “Second Temple Period Rationales for the Torah’s Commandments,” *DI* 32 (2018): 55–76.
- 55 Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), esp. parts 2 and 3; Lieve M. Teugels, “Wijshheid als Tora in de Rabbijnse Interpretatie,” *ACEBT* 31 (2017): 31–39.
- 56 See, e.g., Prov. 2:4; 3:14–15; 1:9; 3:22; 4:9; 7:3; 8:10–11; 18–19, 21 (jewels); 14:24; Ben Sira 1:17, 25; 21:21; 51:28. For the Dead Sea Scrolls, see CT Levi ar, col.f: “the treasure of wisdom” (אוצר חוכמה) which can be “acquired” (קנה)—compare the chapter “*kinian torah*” in m. Avot 6); cf.; 4Q214a: “They cannot steal the treasure of wisdom” (cf. Martínez and Tigchelaar, *Dead Sea Scrolls*, 455); see also 4Q177: “The words of YHWH are pure words, silver ...” (Martínez and Tigchelaar, *Dead Sea Scrolls*, 365). Cf. Teugels, “Wijshheid als Tora”; Schipper and Teeter, *Wisdom and Torah*, 149.
- 57 Boyarin, *Border Lines*, 129: “transfer [of] all Logos and Sophia talk to the Torah alone.” See, e.g., Gen Rab. 2; Midr. Prov. 8.
- 58 Harald Weinrich, “Münze und Wort. Untersuchungen an einem Bildfeld,” in *Sprache in Texten*, ed. Harald Weinrich (Stuttgart: Klett, 1976), 276–290, takes the *Bildfeld* “Wortmünze” as an example. This comes very close to the *Bildfeld* “Torah-money” discussed here. The Hellenistic-Jewish *logos*-theory advanced by Philo, where the word “logos,” which means “word,” is often used instead of Torah, can be considered a bridge between the two *Bildfelds*.
- 59 See Teugels, “Wijshheid als Tora,” 31–39.
- 60 This has to be distinguished from developments in the early church after Jesus’s death, when certain strands of Christendom started to include non-Jews without requiring them to keep all the commandments of Torah.
- 61 Eric Ottenheim, “Finding Pearls: Matthew 13:45–46 and Rabbinic Literature,” in *Hebrew Texts in Jewish, Christian and Muslim Surroundings*, ed. Klaas Spronk and Eveline van

In the synoptic parables, the master's expectation with respect to the behaviour of the overseers shifts midway: he does not reproach the third slave that he should have multiplied the deposit ten- or fivefold, but tells him that he should have put it in the bank, where it could have grown slowly and steadily. This financial metaphor is exactly the same as the one used in the parable of the Denars, where it is explicitly applied to Torah: "He who gathers little by little increases" (Prov 13:11).

### 2.1 *Modifying and Repurposing the Bildfeld*

Could it be that the parables of the Talents and the Minas are also about Torah, albeit not in the same way as the rabbinic parable? That the opposition in the two synoptic parables is not between multiplying and spending, as in the rabbinic parable, but between multiplying and hiding, is a complexity indicating that the opposition between doing or studying Torah, and thus multiplying it, and neglecting and thus wasting it, is not the main focus here. The focus is rather on the fact that hiding is not the correct way.

Joachim Jeremias suggested that these parables may originally have referred to "Law,"<sup>62</sup> or "the Word of God," especially as it had been entrusted to the Pharisees and scribes as the contemporary authorities,<sup>63</sup> but received a secondary application in the respective Gospels where the Gospel editors placed them among the *parousia* parables.<sup>64</sup> It should be clear that I utterly disagree with Jeremias's conclusion that Jesus's audience would "have applied the figure to the Jewish people to whom so much had been entrusted but who had not made use of their trust."<sup>65</sup> Being Jews themselves, they could hardly have thought so.

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Staalduine-Sulman, ssn 69 (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 231–251, discusses a similar *Bildfeld*, namely that of pearls. In his study, he does not find conclusive evidence that pearls stood for Torah and commandments as early as the first century CE, but he does find clear references for the Amoraic period. The *Bildfeld* coins/silver as a reference to Torah is similar to that of pearls, but not the same. Pearls are typically meant to be preserved and cannot be multiplied. Due to the use of the silver/gold-Torah comparison in wisdom literature, as noted above, I do believe that this *Bildfeld* was known and active beneath the New Testament parables under discussion here.

62 Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, 61.

63 Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, 61–62.

64 Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, 56–62. Luz refers to the "Matthean interpretation of the parable," thus distinguishing it from the "original" parable (i.e., the parable as told and intended by Jesus), which merely referred to the "final judgement" (*Matthew 21–28*, 255 and passim).

65 Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, 61.

Yet we cannot deny that certain conflicts between religious groups in the first century are apparent in the New Testament, as they are in other Jewish sources of the time (Josephus, Dead Sea Scrolls). The parables of the Talents and the Minas may reflect a critique, either by Jesus himself or by the gospel author, of a certain way of interpreting the Torah and its commandments. This is in line with the presentation of Jesus, especially by Matthew, as someone who highlighted certain commandments and practices as part of his conflict over authority with groups that are repeatedly named in the Gospels, such as the Pharisees and the “rabbis.” The Gospels abound with examples of differences in the interpretation of rules, such as healing on shabbat (Mark 3:5–6// Matt 12:13–14// Luke 6:10–11) or divorce (Mark 10:2–12; Matt 19:3–9), and certain practices, such as the large *tefillin* worn by the Pharisees (Matt 23:5). Eric Ottenheim has demonstrated that the similarities between Jesus (as presented by Matthew) and competing Jewish religious leaders are often closer than the differences, but that the exaggeration of the differences in practices and language, the latter being relevant for the modification of the *Bildfeld* and the specific formulation of the parables, formed part of a struggle over influence and authority.<sup>66</sup> Despite the differences, a shared focus on Torah and commandments remains, and would be, specifically due to certain differences in interpretation, a likely topic for a teacher to address in his parables.

On the other hand, the suggestion that the parable of the Talents and Minas was in fact already meant by Jesus as a reference to the more or less imminent arrival of the kingdom of God, should not be discarded. Indeed, it is the most obvious understanding of the parables in Matthew and Luke. In the literary contexts of the Gospels, “investing” means being alert and prepared for the coming of the kingdom. “Hiding,” on the other hand, means not being ready for or delaying the kingdom. This message is also advanced in other New Testament kingdom parables, such as the Hidden Lamp (Matt 5:14–16; Mark 4:21; Luke 11:33) and the Leaven Hidden in the Dough (Matt 13:33; Luke 13:20–21).

Finally, what can we say about the version in the Gospel of the Nazarenes? Because of its fragmentary character, without a literary context or application, we miss the necessary tools to evaluate its message. As it stands, it seems less shocking, because it is more predictable in that the slave who displays

66 Eric Ottenheim, “Matthew and Yavne: Religious Authority in the Making?,” in *Jews and Christians in the First and Second Centuries: The Interbellum 70–132 CE*, ed. Joshua J. Schwartz and Peter J. Tomson, CRINT 15 (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 378–400, esp. 380, describes the relationship of Matthew and other religious authorities as one of “social competition,” whereby the practices of other groups are defined as “contrary or even hostile to one’s own practices or language, even if actual differences may appear to be rather limited or even negligible.”

obviously unethical behaviour is punished. Maybe this parable teller wanted to mitigate the harsh effect of the New Testament versions, possibly because he did not understand the *parousia* application. But it is more plausible that he deliberately treated it as a parable about Torah, possibly with an ethical take on what “keeping the commandments” means. The fact that this version of the Talents adds the third category of “spending” to the categories of “hiding” and “multiplying” in the Synoptic Gospels is indicative of a more standard Jewish reading, as also witnessed in the (later) parable of the Denars, which opposes “saving = multiplying” to “spending.”

### 3 Shock Effect

The three “Christian” versions of the parable contain several unexpected, even shocking, elements that draw the attention of the audience. Even without the application of the figure of the landlord to God, the presentation of the landlord as a capitalist only interested in profit, whatever the means, remains bewildering. This is in keeping with Jesus’s style in other parables, such as the Smart Manager (Luke 16:1–8) and the Judge and the Widow (Luke 18:1–7).<sup>67</sup> Most shocking is the harsh punishment levied on the one who has committed a relatively minor offence, if any, such as hiding a coin.

Significantly, such shock effect is not reserved for the parables of Jesus alone, nor do all Jesus’s parables have an equally strong shock effect. One of the key stages in Yonah Fraenkel’s analysis of the rabbinic *mashal* is the recognition of the “breaking of the pattern of the mashal.”<sup>68</sup> Fraenkel explains how, wherever a strange, unexpected, or exaggerated element shows up, there the theological message shines through, even in *meshalim* that are mostly exegetical. Clemens Thoma and Simon Lauer mean something similar when they refer to the *chiddush* that is essential to every good *mashal*.<sup>69</sup> Here too the sole *memashel* of the New Testament Gospels resembled his later Jewish colleagues.

67 Cf. Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 250.

68 דגם פריצת דגם המשל See Fraenkel, *Darkhei ha-aggadah*, 330–337. The pattern itself he calls “basic pattern of the plot of the mashal” (דגם היסוד של עלילת המשל). In a similar way, Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, states that “such expressions break the boundaries of the story so that the intended reality shows through” (532).

69 See C. Thoma, S. Lauer, and H. Ernst, *Die Gleichnisse der Rabbinen. 1. Tl.: Pesiqtā deRav Kahanā (PesK): Einleitung, Übersetzung, Parallelen, Kommentar, Texte* (Bern: Lang, 1986), 22.

#### 4 Torah or *Parousia*?

Can we conclude that the parables of the Talents and the Minas are about Torah? My own conclusion is that they are *also* about Torah. They do have an eschatological message, but this message does not exclude Torah or obedience to the commandments. The “Torah” and the “Parousia” applications can be easily combined, for how else would one prepare for the coming of the kingdom than by living according to the Torah (as Jesus understood it).<sup>70</sup> On the contrary, a specific view on Torah, which may differ on certain points from the interpretations of the Torah given by the Pharisees and other contemporaries and possible opponents of Jesus, is part and parcel of the eschatological message.

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<sup>70</sup> Cf. Dschulnigg, *Rabbinische Gleichnisse*, 13–14: “Aber auch dieser tiefgreifende Differenz trennt die Gleichnisse der Rabbinen und Jesu nicht absolut, da sowohl Tora wie Reich Gottes die Totalität der Gotteserfahrung, Gottesbeziehung wie Verpflichtung gegenüber Gott zum Ausdruck bringen.”

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