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## A parable in Greek-Roman, Old Testament and rabbinic literature

One of the aspects that biblical hermeneutics deals with is the question of literary genres present in the Holy Scriptures. A parable is certainly a distinctive genre of biblical literature. We find it most frequently in the Gospels because Jesus used this genre in his teaching very often. Why? Not without a reason was Jesus called the Teacher. He was the Teacher in the full meaning of the word and he was aware of that his listeners – often very simple people – on more than one occasion might have difficulty understanding remarkable secrets he preached to them. That is why he applied different methods in accordance with the principles of rhetoric in order to impact the widest audience. Due to parables – short stories that convey a comparison of some known life situations or pictures – he could certainly easier influence a significant number of listeners and impart them in a simple way sublime contents of the kingdom of God, God's love, mercy and salvation.

Countless publications of various types have been created about Jesus' parables, starting from authors who are pillars of this subject such as A. Jülicher<sup>1</sup>, Ch.H. Dodd<sup>2</sup> and J. Jeremias<sup>3</sup> to authors working in the 21st century, e.g., A.J. Hultgren<sup>4</sup> and A. Paciorek<sup>5</sup>. In this study only a small contribution to the context of a parable as a literary genre will be presented. It is worth to notice that parables were not 'an invention' of Jesus; this genre had already developed long before his birth. Therefore, the problem of genesis and shaping of the New Testament parable will be undertaken here.

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<sup>1</sup> A. JÜLICHER, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, part I–II, Tübingen 1886–1899.

<sup>2</sup> CH.H. DODD, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, London 1935.

<sup>3</sup> J. JEREMIAS, *Die Gleichnisse Jesu*, Göttingen 1947.

<sup>4</sup> A.J. HULTGREN, *The Parables of Jesus. A Commentary*, Grand Rapids 2000.

<sup>5</sup> A. PACIOREK, *Przypowieści Jezusa. Wprowadzenie i objaśnienie*, Częstochowa 2013.

## 1. A parable in Greek and Roman literature

The essence of a parable is a comparison of two elements. It is clearly showed by the Greek term *παραβολή* used in classical literature since the time of Aristotle, which literally means, i.a., ‘juxtaposition, comparison’ of these two elements. In Greek rhetoric the term was used to denote a developed comparison. A. Jankowski states that a parabola is an elaborate comparison based on the similarity that exists between various levels of reality: everyday life and spiritual truth<sup>6</sup>.

Before Aristotle the term *παραβολή* was used in literature by Isocrates in the sense of comparison. However, here it is not a literary form but performs an argumentative function. Whereas Plato used the term *παραβολή* only twice in his works (*Philebus* 33b and *Timaeus* 40c). He understood this term in a natural way as saying about relation, similarity, comparison; it did not constitute a separate literary form here, either. Socrates also willingly used a parabola – parable. Other authors, like Aristophanes, Xenophon and Demosthenes, used the term *εἰκόν* instead of *παραβολή*, which also indicates similarities to the Aristotelian approach to parables. The term *Παραβολή* had rather a usual denotation of two things juxtaposed next to each other. While the word *εἰκόν* was being used more frequently and referred exactly to a literary form. However, it had a sense of comparison and argumentative function. Aristotle distinguished two types of examples among ordinary means of the art of oratory: narration of facts and imaginary things. Of these two he identified a fable and a parable<sup>7</sup>. A fable is a type of unreal fiction while a parable is possible because most frequently it is told being based on observations and insights<sup>8</sup>. In Aristotle *παραβολή* is clearly distinguished from *εἰκόν*. From his times the understanding of the term *παραβολή* seemed to be easy. It was a developed comparison, a combination of two realities, one of which allows to stress some features of the other. For Aristotle a comparison was a special form of metaphor. Ancient rhetoric, however, rejected his definition and defined a metaphor as a condensed comparison<sup>9</sup>.

Greek rhetoric, thereby, distinguished and thoroughly defined different forms of visual speech such as *εἰκόν* – picture (Lat. *imago*), *ὁμοίωσις* – comparison (Lat. *comparatio*), *παραβολή* – parable (Lat. *similitudo*), *μεταφορά* – metaphor (Lat.

<sup>6</sup> A. JANKOWSKI, *Królestwo Boże w przypowieściach*, Poznań – Warszawa 1981, p. 10; J. CZERSKI, *Przypowieści Chrystusa jako gatunek literacki*, CS 25(1994), p. 209; see also: A.S. JASIŃSKI, *Przypowieść o dobrym Samarytaninie (Łk 10,30-37)*, in: B. POŁOK (Ed.), *Żywe jest słowo Boże* (Sympozja 10), Opole 1995, pp. 97–98.

<sup>7</sup> J. TRELA, *Przypowieści Jezusa a starotestamentalne i rabinackie meszolim*, Lublin 1997, pp. 90–92; A.J. HULTGREN, *Le parabole di Gesù* (Introduzione allo studio della Bibbia. Supplementi 18), trans. A. Piana, Brescia 2004, pp. 28–29.

<sup>8</sup> M. ROSIK, *Jezus i Jego misja. W kręgu orędzia Ewangelii synoptycznych* (SB 5), Kielce 2003, p. 92.

<sup>9</sup> J. TRELA, *Przypowieści Jezusa a starotestamentalne i rabinackie meszolim*, pp. 91–92.

*translatio*) and ἀλληγορία – allegory (Lat. *inversio*). It is worth to take a look at them a little closer<sup>10</sup>.

Εἰκὼν – derives from a verb εἴκω – ‘to be similar to’. A picture as a literary form in a short sentence, usually by means of a comparative particle ὥς – ‘how’, presents an abstract concept. As previously mentioned εἰκὼν for Aristotle is a comparison, and it is in turn – a special form of metaphor.

Ὁμοίωσις – a comparison, is a short semantic structure connected through expression καθ’ ὁμοίωσις which meant ‘in the likeness’. This term was rarely used in Greek literature, most often grammarians applied it.

Παραβολή – a parable, is a developed comparison in which, as it was earlier indicated, two events or two things from different fields are juxtaposed. They were linked by a common feature or similarity what resulted in an explanation of an unknown phenomenon by a known one. These parables were taking their contents from everyday life. As far as their genre is concerned they were not identical to the parables of the New Testament. Aristotle classified them as a category of example – παραδείγμα.

Μεταφορά – provided a specific function in Greek and Roman rhetoric. It illustrated an abstract concept without using the comparative particle ὥς, i.e., it equated image with the abstract reality.

Ἀλληγορία – is a combination of several metaphors or one developed metaphor. This term first appeared in Cicero and Plutarch works. Rhetoricians described an allegory as λόγος – a word that on the basis of similarity was to express something different than it meant. In antiquity several types of allegory were distinguished. An example of pure allegory is Horace’s ode *O navis referent in mare te novi fluctus*. In a simple way it depicted the ship at sea during the storm. Basically, nothing in this picture suggested that it might be a metaphor. In fact, however, this work presented the fate of the state threatened by a civil war. Generally known metaphors were used in this work: the ship as the state, and the storm as the war. A mixed allegory combined elements of allegory with a word picture, e.g., in Virgil’s *Georgics* where the description has a literal meaning, the exception is the shepherd – a metaphor of the poet. When an allegory is too difficult it becomes a riddle.

Despite all the theoretical distinctions among forms of visual speech ancient Greek literature often used the following terms interchangeably: παραβολή, ἀλληγορία, μεταφορά<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> Discussed by: J. CZERSKI, *Jezus Chrystus w świetle Ewangelii synoptycznych* (OBT 42), Opole 2001, pp. 128–130; IDEM, *Przypowieści Chrystusa jako gatunek literacki*, pp. 209–210.

<sup>11</sup> J. CZERSKI, *Jezus Chrystus w świetle Ewangelii synoptycznych*, p. 130.

## 2. A parable in The Old Testament

During centuries of work on editing the Old Testament there were numerous political, religious, sociological and also literary changes. The latter were of special importance in relation to literary genres: old ones yielded to new ones that were just created<sup>12</sup>, others survived in their original forms, though in different traditions and different themes. This is one of reasons why the research on shaping of some literary forms through centuries is so important. An image was a primal and the most frequently used form of biblical conveyance. It evolved itself simultaneously with the evolution of the revelation<sup>13</sup>.

The aim of following considerations will be to reveal the genre מִשְׁל in the Old Testament and rabbinic literature as the next step of shaping the New Testament parable.

### 2.1. מִשְׁל in The Old Testament

#### a) The meaning and etymology of the term מִשְׁל

The Hebrew term מִשְׁל, which the Hebrew Bible uses 39 times, is usually translated as a parable. This is a very general and unprofessional translation as in the Hebrew language this term has a wide conceptual range and cannot be treated in such an unambiguous way. מִשְׁל derives from the verb מִשַׁל and Aramaic equivalent מְתִלָּה which has two meanings. The basic meaning is ‘to be alike; to express a similarity or comparison; utter a parable, sententia, proverb’<sup>14</sup>. The second meaning is ‘to reign, to rule’. However, this aspect is not present in the noun מִשְׁל<sup>15</sup>. S. Łach says that the term מִשְׁל derives from a verb not present in the biblical Hebrew but is a common source for verbs: ‘to rule and be alike’. This verb would have a meaning: ‘to stand over something, to represent’, therefore the concept מִשְׁל would mean a literary work illustrating various analogous cases of life<sup>16</sup>. In contrast, J. Trela believes that it is difficult to find a common source because these two meanings of the root מִשַׁל refer to something completely different. Not acceptable are also concepts whose authors (J. Coccejus, J. Gousset, A. Schultens) tried to derive them from a single source.

<sup>12</sup> A. LÄPPLÉ, *Od egzegezy do katechezy. Stary Testament*, trans. B. Białecki, Warszawa 1986, p. 23.

<sup>13</sup> A. STRUS, *Funkcja obrazu w przekazie biblijnym: obraz winnicy w Iz 5,1-7 i w Ewangelii*, STV 15(1977) no. 2, p. 25.

<sup>14</sup> J. TRELA, *Przypowieści Jezusa a starotestamentalne i rabinackie meszalim*, p. 24; R. MEYNET, *Język przypowieści biblijnych (Myśl Teologiczna 51)*, trans. A. Wałęcki, Kraków 2005, pp. 8–9.

<sup>15</sup> J. CZERSKI, *Jezus Chrystus w świetle Ewangelii synoptycznych*, p. 131.

<sup>16</sup> S. ŁACH, *Maszal – dydaktyczny rodzaj literacki w księgach Starego Testamentu*, RTK 3(1956), p. 290.

Trela also relies on contemporary studies that do not confirm the relation between the two meanings of the root מִשַׁל<sup>17</sup>.

#### b) Genres of מִשַׁל

מִשַׁל as a literary concept occurs in various contexts. On this basis it is possible to distinguish several genres:

##### A proverb

It is probably the oldest historical form of מִשַׁל that belonged to a folk language and determined expressions based on a comparison or analogy. These proverbs most often expressed some truth, like for example: ‘Therefore it became a proverb (מִשַׁל): Is Saul also among the prophets?’ (1Sam 10.12)<sup>18</sup>.

##### A satire

After some time the concept מִשַׁל obtained an ironic sense and became a satire. An example is a ridiculing satire on the king of Babylon: ‘You will take up this satire (מִשַׁל) against the King of Babylon and say: (...). O Day Star, son of Dawn, you have fallen from heaven! In the past you conquered nations, but now you have been thrown to the ground’ (Is 14.4,12). מִשַׁל means here also a proverb connected to the curse, e.g., Jer 24.9 where the prophet foretells the fate of the king of Judah, Zedekiah<sup>19</sup>.

##### A wisdom sententia

Then מִשַׁל was transferred to the language of wisdom. The Book of Proverbs contains the largest collection of various types of מִשַׁל in the form of sententias, proverbs, instructions, guides (see e.g., Prov 10.1-22; 16; 25.1-29; 27). There are also numerous sententias in the Book of Sirach, and the Book of Psalms determines the term מִשַׁל as a developed saying or instruction based on historical events<sup>20</sup>.

##### An allegory

We find מִשַׁל in a form of allegories especially in the prophet Ezekiel. Their subject matter was taken from everyday life and nature. The most famous are allegories: of the eagles (Ezek 17.1-10), which is also a riddle, and the story of the corroded cooking pot, foreshadowing the fate of Jerusalem (Ezek 24.3-5,10-14)<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> J. TRELA, *Przypowieści Jezusa a starotestamentalne i rabinackie meszolim*, pp. 25–26.

<sup>18</sup> J. CZERSKI, *Jezus Chrystus w świetle Ewangelii synoptycznych*, p. 131.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 131–132.

<sup>20</sup> J. CZERSKI, *Przypowieści Chrystusa jako gatunek literacki*, p. 212; H. LANGKAMMER, *Jezus naucza w przypowieściach. Mk 4,1-34*, in: S. ŁACH, M. FILIPIAK (Eds.), *Materiały pomocnicze do wykładów z biblistyki*, Lublin 1975, p. 223.

<sup>21</sup> J. CZERSKI, *Jezus Chrystus w świetle Ewangelii synoptycznych*, pp. 132–133.

### An oracle

In the Book of Numbers we find another kind of מִשְׁלָּה – an oracle (a prophecy, mysterious utterance). Here, the term refers to Balaam's prophecy (Num 23.7,18; 24.3,15,20-23) about unusual exaltation of Israel. A similar meaning has מִשְׁלָּה in Ps 49.5 (Ps 49.4 – in the English Bible): 'I will incline my ear to a proverb (מִשְׁלָּה); I will solve my riddle to the music of the lyre'<sup>22</sup>.

### A didactic work

The term מִשְׁלָּה referred also to longer works. Such an example is the Book of Job the contents of which was fully described as מִשְׁלָּה. Here it means a difficult problem that the author tries to solve. In this case the problem is the uncaused suffering. Likewise, the term מִשְׁלָּה was used in Ps 78.

In the books of the Old Testament appear also stories and developed metaphors which are not defined by the term מִשְׁלָּה but their form is similar to the New Testament parables. The best known is the prophet Nathan's parable of the rich man who took the poor man his only lamb (2Sam 12,1-4). The aim of this parable was to picture David consequences of his sin with Uriah's wife. We find following metaphors in the text: the poor man – Uriah, the lamb – Bathsheba, the rich man – David; the remaining elements serve the purpose of ornamentation. The same regards Isaiah's song of the vineyard (Is 5.1-7) which is not defined as מִשְׁלָּה but can be classified as a type of allegory<sup>23</sup>.

Trying to find a common feature linking all genres of מִשְׁלָּה S. Łach concluded that the link was the life situation which aroused interest and gave certain didactic guides. Thus this typical reality becomes a generic feature<sup>24</sup>.

### c) Translation of מִשְׁלָּה in the Septuagint

In most cases (28 of 39) the Hebrew term מִשְׁלָּה was translated as παραβολή in the Septuagint<sup>25</sup>. In other cases translators used different terms: παροιμία – proverb (Prov 1.1; 25.1), ἀφανισμός – destruction, dispersion (1Kgs 9.7; Ezek 14.8), προοίμιον – poem, hymn (Job 27.1; 29.1), θρήνος – song of mourning, lamentation, threnody (Is 14.4). Three times the term מִשְׁלָּה was not translated into Greek (Job 13.12; Prov 10.1; 26.9). Using the term παραβολή, besides מִשְׁלָּה, translated also words: הוֹלָלוֹת – madness (Ecc 1.17) and הִדְּהָ – riddle (Sir 47.17). Generally, however, the Septuagint omits

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 133; J. CZERSKI, *Przypowieści Chrystusa jako gatunek literacki*, pp. 214–215; S. ŁACH, *Maszal – dydaktyczny rodzaj literacki w księgach Starego Testamentu*, p. 293.

<sup>23</sup> J. CZERSKI, *Przypowieści Chrystusa jako gatunek literacki*, p. 212; IDEM, *Jeżus Chrystus w świetle Ewangelii synoptycznych*, p. 134.

<sup>24</sup> S. ŁACH, *Maszal – dydaktyczny rodzaj literacki w księgach Starego Testamentu*, p. 294; see also: A. JANKOWSKI, *Dopowiedzenia chrystologii biblijnej*, Poznań 1987, p. 12.

<sup>25</sup> According to L. STEFANIAK the term מִשְׁלָּה was translated as παραβολή about 47 times in the Septuagint, see: L. STEFANIAK, *Przypowieści o modlitwie w Ewangelii św. Łukasza*, RBL 8(1955) no. 2, p. 85.

various meanings of **לִּשְׁמֵהּ** present in Hebrew text translating this term as παραβολή. Both in classical Greek and the Septuagint παραβολή meant: parable, metaphor. Later Greek literature broadened the meaning range of this term<sup>26</sup>.

#### d) A terminological summary

J. Trela by presenting some other scholars' opinions shows that the latest research in contradistinction to previous ones avoid consider **לִּשְׁמֵהּ** as possible to define using the method of history of literary genres. It is likely to assume that **לִּשְׁמֵהּ** is not a straightforward term. For instance, G. M. Landes presents five categories of this term: a folk proverb, satirical ridiculing song, type of prophetic oracle, didactic poem and allegoring parable. He defines **לִּשְׁמֵהּ** as 'model' or 'paradigm'. D. Suter, however, thinks this qualification is too narrow because **לִּשְׁמֵהּ** leads to certain relations which become a model only after applying different comparisons and contrasts. T. Polk after observing research on the parables of the New Testament states that **לִּשְׁמֵהּ** has the same nature as the parables because it influences behaviour and engages a reader. Present research on the Old Testament **לִּשְׁמֵהּ** demonstrated agreement among researchers that it is not a literary form as such but a general idea. It is realized in a broad field of literary forms<sup>27</sup>.

#### e) Contents and nature of the Old Testament **לִּשְׁמֵהּ**

A metaphor in the Old Testament (and a parable in the New Testament) appears mostly in dialogues. Almost all regard earthly, human and natural order, although we can also find orientation towards God, e.g., Job's speech (Job 27.1; 29.1), Balaam's oracle (Num 23.7,18; 24.3,15,20-23) and Ps 78.2. These texts, though present everyday life pictures, contain rich and profound theological contents. Behind a more accessible for people metaphor there is a reference to God's reality<sup>28</sup>.

A distinctive feature of **לִּשְׁמֵהּ** (especially as an oracle) is its prophetic character. All texts of an oracle manifest God, his words and will. These are: Num 21; 27.23-24; Deut 28.37; Is 14.4; Jer 24.9; Mic 2.4; Hab 2.6. The judgment of behaviour of Israel towards people constitutes the context. In these cases we can talk about a theological meaning of **לִּשְׁמֵהּ**<sup>29</sup>. Another distinguishing feature of the genre **לִּשְׁמֵהּ** is its didactic character. It has classical didactic means such as: imagery, incomprehensibility – something hidden that will be revealed only by reflection, numerous paronomasias<sup>30</sup>

<sup>26</sup> J. TRELA, *Przypowieści Jezusa a starotestamentalne i rabinackie meszolim*, pp. 34–37; see also: R. MEYNET, *Język przypowieści biblijnych*, pp. 8–9; 12–13.

<sup>27</sup> J. TRELA, *Przypowieści Jezusa a starotestamentalne i rabinackie meszolim*, pp. 37–41.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 43–45.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 45–46.

<sup>30</sup> Paronomasia – a play upon words which is based on combining words with similar sounds but different meanings.

which unfortunately decline while being translated into European languages, repetitions – anaphoras at the beginning of a line and epiphoras at the end<sup>31</sup>.

משל besides classical didactic means has also specific ones which distinguish it from other biblical books. משל does not address to people but to an individual; the subject of the lessons is good (broadly defined), not God's law; contains encouragements, advices and suggestions, not orders<sup>32</sup>. Nonetheless, the Old Testament משל are the source of knowledge about God acting for a human and nation.

### 3. A parable (משל) in rabbinic literature

More like the evangelical parable is rabbinic משל. Many such examples we can find in Rabbi Akiba, Yochanan ben Zakkai and Hillel. Rabbis used this genre usually explaining Law, and sometimes in eschatologic and apocalyptic lessons, e.g., The Fourth Book of Ezra, Ethiopian Henoah, Testament of Levi. משל is typical for Palestinian Judaism written in Hebrew (sometimes only short Aramaic formulations were logged). The Dispersion conveyed no such parables<sup>33</sup>. Some exegetes discern a specific structure of the parables<sup>34</sup>:

presenting part + introducing formula + narrative part (the proper parable) + application  
+ biblical quotation

A parable appears also in rabbinic biblical commentaries. Midrash is an interpretation, exegesis, explanation of biblical text practised also in biblical times. Where texts taken from Law are interpreted we deal with halachic midrash (or halacha), whereas interpreted are narrative texts – with haggadic midrash (haggada)<sup>35</sup>.

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Defining the genre of concerned biblical text is an essential step also in order to properly assess the text. The genre widely known as a parable had evaluated for a long time before it became a teaching method so frequently used by Jesus. But why should we deal with its origin and evolution while we can focus on the final work as Jesus' parables? Due to above analysis we find out, i.a., that a parable was known in classical ancient literature as well as in the Old Testament and inter-testamental

<sup>31</sup> S. ŁACH, *Maszal – dydaktyczny rodzaj literacki w księgach Starego Testamentu*, pp. 297–299.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 300–301.

<sup>33</sup> M. ROSIK, *Jezus i Jego misja*, pp. 94–95.

<sup>34</sup> J. TRELA, *Przypowieści Jezusa a starotestamentalne i rabinackie meszolim*, pp. 136–137.

<sup>35</sup> R. RUBINKIEWICZ, *Midrasz jako zjawisko egzegetyczne*, CT 63(1993) no. 3, p. 17.



literature. Thus Jesus was reaching to the multi-century-old tradition and applied it in his teaching. It seems, however, even on this stage the process of establishing had not been finished. Jesus' parables were evolving until they were finally edited by Evangelists. Nowadays, either its original form or circumstances of utterance is unknown. However, having those two poles of developing of a parable we can assume that Jesus' form of parables was almost identical to the one conveyed by Evangelists.

Let this study serve as a contribution to further and deeper analysis of the subject.

### Przypowieść w literaturze grecko-rzymskiej, starotestamentowej i rabinackiej

#### STRESZCZENIE

Jednym z aspektów, którymi zajmuje się hermeneutyka biblijna, jest kwestia gatunków literackich obecnych w Piśmie Świętym. Do charakterystycznych gatunków literatury biblijnej należy z całą pewnością przypowieść. Z przypowieścią najczęściej spotykamy się w Ewangeliach. Przypowieści nie były jednak „wynałazkiem” Jezusa. Gatunek ten rozwijał się już na długo przed Jego narodzeniem. Niniejsze opracowanie podejmuje właśnie problem genezy i kształtowania się przypowieści nowotestamentowej – od literatury greckiej i rzymskiej, przez literaturę starotestamentową po rabinacką.

**Keywords:** a parable, literary genres in Bible, biblical hermeneutics.

**Słowa kluczowe:** przypowieść, gatunki literackie w Biblii, hermeneutyka biblijna.

