A farmer who knew he was about to die wanted to train his children in agriculture. He gathered them together and said, “Children, in one of my vineyards there is a buried treasure.” So after his death they took shovels and pickaxes and dug up all the arable land. They found no treasure, but the vineyard yielded abundant produce. Moral: Effort is a precious treasure for the people. (Aesop, fable 42 [ed. Hausrath])

An Unruly Book

The book on parables by David Flusser (1917–2000) is rather like like unruly farmland. The titles of the twelve chapters are often unclear and their arrangement is not intuitive, the chapters’ structures are sometimes disorganized, there are several repetitions, and cross-references in the footnotes are not always accurate. In other words, the book suffers from the lack of an editorial revision. Nevertheless, there are pearls buried in it—for those who are willing to make the effort and read the book with persistence.

Flusser dedicated his book to Clemens Thoma in Lucerne, where Flusser had taught for a year at Thoma’s invitation. The book’s shortcomings become somewhat understandable if we regard it as an elaboration of Flusser’s lectures. The book is written in lively and spirited German, the
language Flusser grew up speaking in Bohemia before emigrating to Palestine in 1939.

Flusser gives a clear summary of his approach in his final chapter:[2]

I am firmly convinced with fellow researchers that it is possible to get reasonably close to the original wording of Jesus’ teaching. But this is only the case when the otherwise usual method of literary criticism is applied to the text of the Synoptic Gospels, and when, moreover, one is willing and able to be guided by knowledge of Judaism. I certainly admit that the words of Jesus, including his parables, were edited by Greek redactors and subsequently by the evangelists. Nevertheless, I believe it is often possible to separate the “shell” from the “nut” by applying a better synoptic theory. ... As I have argued several times, the parables of Jesus belong to the genre of the rabbinic parables. Therefore, valid statements about Jesus’ parables, whether these regard their essence or their literary quality, can only be made when one has first dealt with the essence and literary form of the rabbinic parables.

From this statement it is clear that Flusser’s study of the parables was an important aspect of one of his main interests: the investigation of Jesus in his historical, Jewish context.[3]

**Predecessors**

In his book Flusser is in dialogue with two pioneers of modern parables research: Adolf Jülicher and Joachim Jeremias. Jülicher’s groundbreaking *Gleichnisreden Jesu* (1899) created the necessary critical distance between the surviving text of the parables in the Gospels and the original parables as Jesus may have told them.[4] Notably, Jülicher broke with the allegorical interpretation of parables that had been dominant since the Church Fathers. In fact, verbal analysis led Jülicher to conclude that the evangelists already understood παραβολαί (parabolai, “parables”) as “allegories.” Therefore, according to Jülicher, in order to properly understand a parable, it must be stripped of its editorial framework, including the explanations attached to the parables in the Gospels. Jülicher’s basic conclusion was that most of Jesus’ parables were nothing more than fables like Aesop’s: compact imaginary tales of animals or people that teach a lesson on a moral level. In this regard Jülicher refers to the work of Lessing and Herder.[5] On the other hand, Jülicher posited that the “perfect beauty” of Jesus’ parables is original and cannot be understood from “rabbinism,” as had been argued in the Netherlands by S. J. Moscoviter and Rabbi T. Tal, nor from Buddhism.[6]

Flusser’s book is especially a dialogue with “my friend Jeremias.”[7] Jeremias’ *Gleichnisse Jesu* (1952/1970) starts with the premise that the parables in the Synoptic Gospels are “a fragment of the original rock” of the Jesus tradition, in light their language (i.e., Semitisms) and numerous concrete details (e.g., a sower who sows before plowing, as was still the practice in Palestine).
Flusser shared this opinion, but disagreed with Jeremias regarding methodology. For Jeremias, the parables contain Jesus’ characteristic message. The parables were “something entirely new” to the teachings of the Pharisees and may even have contributed to the creation of the rabbinic parable genre as such.\[8\] However, the New Testament parables are difficult to understand in their current form.

Building on Jülicher’s view, Jeremias’ introduction, entitled “The Problem,” states that the evangelists reinterpreted the parables allegorically according to the beliefs of the early church. This is especially evident in Mark’s parables chapter (Mark 4). Jeremias’ linguistic analysis convincingly demonstrates that the explanation of the Parable of the Sower (Mark 4:13-20) reflects the situation of the early church.\[9\] By contrast, Jeremias sees Mark 4:10-12 as ancient, which he calls the Verstockungstheorie (“hardening’ theory”).\[10\] It contains the Jubelruf (“cry of jubilation”; 4:11) in which the disciples, unlike “those outside,” are called partners in the “mystery” of the Kingdom. This statement is made not just about parables, but about Jesus’ preaching in general. Based on the consensus that Mark’s Gospel was the source for Luke and Matthew, Jeremias concludes that allegorization also predominates in these later Gospels. So a proper interpretation of the parables requires us to get back behind the evangelists. However, while Jülicher did “half the work” in making Jesus a humane preacher of progress, C. H. Dodd realized that we must reconstruct the original context of Jesus’ eschatological preaching.\[11\] Furthermore, Jeremias holds that the Gospel of Thomas contains instructive variants of synoptic parables, and that we should try to look behind the Greek of the Gospels to reconstruct Jesus’ Galilean Aramaic.\[12\]

**Summary of Flusser’s Book**

Given the nature of Flusser’s book, it will be helpful to summarize the chapters and touch upon important points of discussion with Jülicher and Jeremias.

The introductory **Chapter 1** is called “Problemstellungen und Beispiele” (“Problems and Examples”; compare Jeremias). Parables, like fables and European fairytales, form a separate, clearly recognizable literary genre. Flusser does not define what he means by “parables.” Apart from the definition given by Jülicher—a story with a moral on a second level—Flusser appears to consider two closely related forms to belong to the genre: the similitude, which does not contain a narrative, and the exemplum, a story that contains a moral. Parables are a Palestinian Jewish genre that does not appear in the Apocrypha or Pseudepigrapha, nor in the Qumran literature or Hellenistic Judaism, but exclusively in rabbinic literature and the New Testament—more precisely, only in Palestinian rabbinic traditions, not Babylonian, and only in the Synoptic Gospels, not in John or the rest of the New Testament. Furthermore, parables in rabbinic literature have always been formulated in Hebrew, even within later texts that are otherwise in Aramaic. This is an important point in Flusser’s argument with Jeremias about the original language of Jesus’ teachings (17f.).

**Chapter 2**, “Strukturen der Gleichnisse” (“Structures of the Parables”) deals with structural aspects of the parable. From the Russian structuralist Victor Shklovsky, Flusser learned that
parables, like the closely related fables, are “pseudo-realistic” and can, for example, have absurd or extremely cruel features. The parable narrates a pseudo-reality which, paradoxically, aims to teach the hearer something about his own lived reality. From the Swiss folklorist Max Lüthi, Flusser learned that the parable, as well as the third related ‘lower’ literary sub-genre, the European fairytale, contains stereotypical structural elements such as twos, threes or tens or the opposition of “good and bad,” or “wise and foolish.”

Chapter 3, “Ästhetik der Gleichnisse” (“Aesthetics of the Parables”) is not about the beautiful or the ugly, but about parables as a literary art form. In this chapter Flusser presents what he learned from Lessing about fables, here linking up with Jülicher. Like fables, parables are not autonomous stories; each has its point outside the narrative portion, whether or not it is expressed in a moral or application. By the way, following Shklovsky, Flusser refers to the narrative portion of a parable as the “subject,” while Jülicher speaks of the Bildhälfte (“imaginary portion”) and the Sachhälfte (“real portion”), and others of the mashal (“parable”) and the nimshal (“interpretation”), or the rhema and the thema.

Chapter 4, “Rahmen und Deutungen der Gleichnisse in den Evangelien” (“Framework and Interpretations of the Parables in the Gospels”), is based on the redaction-critical insight that Luke and Matthew each use the same parables in their own ways. The editorial “framework” (Rahmen) of the parable must, therefore, be viewed critically, taking into account the tendency of the evangelists to interpret the parables eschatologically (64, 66). This lengthy chapter meanders through ‘treasures’ such as the analyses of the Fig Tree Parable (80-85), the dinner conversations in Luke 14 (93-96), and the Parable of the House on the Rock (98-106).

Chapter 5, “Die wirkliche und vermeintliche Allegorese” (“The Real and the Supposed Allegory”) claims, unlike Jülicher and Jeremias, that not all parable interpretations in the Gospels are necessarily “secondary allegorization.” As mentioned, a parable has its point outside its narrative portion and, therefore, is likely to include a moral portion with some degree of “allegory,” as the rabbinic parables amply demonstrate. Flusser therefore doubts the value of the Gospel of Thomas in this regard (p. 128). Whereas Jeremias considered the absence of morals or applications in Thomas’s parables to be significant, since the author certainly meant the parables to be understood allegorically, Flusser explains the author’s reticence with regard to morals on the basis of Thomas’s Gnostic leanings, according to which the “light” must remain hidden from the non-initiates.

The important Chapter 6 is about “Ursprung und Vorgeschichte der jüdischen Gleichnisse” (“The Origin and Prehistory of Jewish Parables”). The earliest trace of Pharisaic-rabbinic parables is found in a saying of Antigonus of Socho, who lived during the Hellenistic period (m. Avot 1:3). The origin of the rabbinic and synoptic parables should therefore not be sought in the sporadic “fabulous” passages in the Old Testament, but rather in Hellenistic folk wisdom, in particular the Aesopic and Stoic traditions (Cleanthes, Epictetus). Flusser illustrates this with striking similarities between the parabolic sayings of Hippocrates (“Labor is long, life is short...”), Rabbi Tarfon (“The day is short, the work is great, the workers are slow...”), and Jesus (“The harvest is plentiful, the laborers are few...”). Like fables, parables are a form of
popular teaching. This is especially evident in the early type, the “classic parable” that Flusser finds especially with Jesus and that serves to illuminate human life before God. However, from the time of Rabbi Akiva, in the mid-second century C.E., the later rabbinic type emerged in which the parable serves to illuminate the text of the Torah.

Chapter 7, “Das Sujet der Gleichnisse und sein Zweck” (“The ‘Subject’ [in the Shklovskyan sense] of the Parables and Their Purpose”), deals with the relationship between the narrative and moral portion. Like fables and fairy tales, the narrative portion of parables has a conventional stylization based on a tacit agreement with the hearers: the narrator knows roughly what the audience expects. More than with fables, there is also an obligatory correlation between narrative and moral portions of parables. Nevertheless, not all elements of the narrative portion are “moralizable,” both because of the pseudo-realistic nature of the story and because of its relative autonomy.

Chapter 8 is about “Die zehn Jungfrauen” (“The Ten Maidens”), the example of a “well-made parable.” The pseudo-realistic narrative seems to have been taken from real life and effortlessly leads to a moral. The schematic narrative motifs of five wise and five foolish maidens and the absurd exclusion of the maidens without lamps have a direct effect on the moral level. Also, the falling asleep and awakening of all the maidens is part of the “subject,” as is the strange arrival of the bridegroom at midnight. In this, Flusser considers the possible influence of themes from the Song of Songs. The figure of the bridegroom must also point to Jesus himself, a relatively uncommon element in Jesus’ parables. However, even this parable does not have strictly eschatological intention (185f.).

In Chapter 9, “Die synoptische Frage und die Gleichnisse Jesu” (“The Synoptic Problem and the Parables of Jesus”) Flusser discusses what he calls a “better synoptic theory” in his above-mentioned summary. This theory is based on the conclusion that the extant text of Mark has been edited in such a way that it cannot have been the basis for Luke and Matthew. Perhaps the Lukan and Matthean evangelists used an earlier version of Mark. Flusser follows Robert L. Lindsey’s hypothesis of Luke’s priority over Mark and Matthew. Luke probably only knew the primal Mark, and the later editor(s) of Mark must have been influenced by the Gospel of Luke rather than the other way around. On the other hand, Matthew knew both forms of Mark and is thus, unlike Luke, also influenced by the current Mark. Flusser tests this theory against the Parable of the Mustard Seed (198-204), the genre of twin parables (204-209), Jesus’ teaching ‘with authority’ (209-215), and the twin parables of the new patch on the old fabric and the new wine in the old wineskins (215-225).

Chapter 10, “Die Gleichnisse Jesu, ein Mittel zur Verstockung?” (“The Parables of Jesus, a Means of Hardening?”) discusses what Jeremias called the “Verstockungstheorie” (“hardening’ theory”; Mar. 4:10-12). Here Flusser applies his “better” synoptic theory. The most original version, Flusser argues, can be found in Luke 8:9f.: Jesus’ parables, like those of the rabbis, were used to teach the people. In the “ecclesiastical” explanation of the extant Mark (here Flusser follows Jeremias) it was implied that “those on the outside” are told everything in “parables,” that is, riddles, “so that they may not understand.” This modified version, which is
contrary to the purpose of Jewish parables, is further redacted in Matt. 13:10-15. Flusser then addresses the question of what may have been the original function of the quotation from Isa. 6:9f., which is also quoted in Acts 28:19 and John 12:37-43, and in those contexts is used by the early Christians to mark a clear boundary against Judaism. To Flusser it seems “absurd” to assume that Jesus would have had an esoteric conception of the Kingdom of God, so that only the initiates would understand the “mystery” while “those on the outside” would have to make do with parables.

Chapter 11, “Jubelruf und selige Augenzeugen” (“Cry of Jubilation and Blessed Eyewitnesses”), contains a complex explanation of the Jubelruf (Jeremias!) in Mark 4:11 and parallels, in conjunction with two other passages: Jesus’ Qumran-like “Thanksgiving Hymn” (Matt. 11:25-27 || Luke 10:21f.) and the beatitude of the ‘eyewitnesses’ (Luke 10:23f. || Matt. 13:16f.). Flusser thinks that the three passages belonged together in the original ‘sayings source’ and concludes that Jesus’ message thus had an esoteric aspect after all: each of the passages aims at the ‘simple’ or disciples who share in the ‘mysteries’ of the Kingdom.

Chapter 12, “Der epische Stil der Gleichnisse Jesu” (“The Epic Style of Jesus’ Parables”), continues the “aesthetics” of Chapter 3. The parables of Jesus and the rabbis are both poetic and unadorned. With artistic austerity, only details that are important to the main theme or that naturally belong to the narrative appear. This simplicity is reminiscent of Aesop’s fables and of European fairy tales. In contrast, the exempla of Jesus (e.g., the Good Samaritan, the Rich Fool, the Rich Man and Lazarus) do not move on two levels but have a richer epic style (295-297). Furthermore, parables, such as that of the Fig Tree, can end with a conversation (299-301), triplets and pairs are stereotypical ingredients (303-306), and digression, as in Rabbi Akiva’s parable about the king and his debtors, is a “decelerating” stylistic device (306-309).

Impact

Flusser’s “unruly” book formulates important principles that many scholars have adopted. There are also points of contention. I summarize both and cite recent literature in the footnotes.

1. Fundamental is the insight that the parables in the Synoptic Gospels and rabbinic literature form one continuum, a “genre” of its own; however, the term should not be interpreted too rigidly and internal developments within the genre should be taken into account.[18] For the sake of completeness, it should be added that this insight had already been propagated much earlier by Paul Fiebig, but at the time received no significant response.[19]

2. Equally fundamental is the insight that, given its relationship with the fable, the Jewish parable has its origins in Hellenistic popular teaching.[20] This point can be seen as complementary to the previous one, from which it follows that we need a nuanced conception of “Hellenistic influence.” Apparently people in the circles of the synoptic and rabbinic traditions were receptive to this form of Hellenistic folklore and created a genre of their own.

3. To the above historical insights Flusser added a literary characterization of the parable as an
art form, building on Jülicher, Lessing, Shlovsky and Lüthi. The parable is twofold in character and its narrative portion is “non-autonomous”: the narrative portion is “pseudo-realistic,” and may include people and animals with bizarre or exaggerated characteristics, stereotyped twos, threes, or tens, and a contrast between “good and bad,” “wise and foolish.”

4. We may question Flusser’s view that the later rabbinic parable type represents a regression with respect to the “classical,” free-telling type as represented in the parables of Jesus. More accurately, the rabbinic exegetical, or “illustrative” parable should be regarded as a sub-genre with specific characteristics of its own.[21]

5. The “better synoptic theory” that Flusser shared with Lindsey remains unconvincing.[22] However, in my opinion there is something to be said for the “ecclesiastical” vocabulary of Mark 4:13-12, which, as Jeremias demonstrated, may be due to a secondary revision that deviated from the “primal Mark,” which Luke must have seen.[23] Instead of the difficult to defend “priority” of Luke, reference can be made to the non-polemical way in which this evangelist deals with transmitted material. It is not without reason that the reconstruction of “Q” is based on Luke.

6. There is also much to be said for the view that the three passages that Flusser discusses in chapters 10 and 11 (Luke 8: 9f., 10:21f., and 10:23f. [and parallels]) do, indeed, have to do with a mystical streak in Jesus’ message, especially in view of recent studies on ancient Jewish mysticism.[24] It is not unlikely that Jesus initiated his disciples into “the mystery of the kingdom” in which he himself played a central role, while he had to clarify this message to the people with parables “as they could understand” (Mark 4:11, 33; cf. 9:2-8).[25]

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Notes

[*] This review originally appeared in Dutch as Peter J. Tomson, “David Flusser, Die rabbinischen Gleichnisse und der Gleichniserzähler Jesus (1981),” NTT Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion 71.2 (2017): 200-209. Whole Stones thanks professor Tomson for his approval of this translation of this article.


[5] Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 1:98 (Parables and fables have a characteristic duality, in which the effect of a sentence or theme is supported by a story in another area with a clearly rounded effect).


[7] I heard this qualification from Flusser himself, but I no longer recall whether it was oral or written.


[10] Jeremias, *Die Gleichnisse Jesu*, 10 [*Parables*, 15], with, among other things, the argument that και ἀφεθήσεται αὐτοῖς for ἀφροῦ in Isa. 6:9f., which differs from the Septuagint, is found in the Targum and the Peshitta.


[14] Jeremias, *Die Gleichnisse Jesu*, 86f. [*Parables*, 87f.]. On page 20 [24] Jeremias lists the 11 “synoptische Gleichnisse in eigener Fassung” in *Gos. Thom. 9*, 20, 21b (+103), 57, 63, 64, 65, 76, 96, 107, 109. Flusser does not go into Jeremias’ argument that the Lukan Sondergut (“unique material”) also contains no allegorizing interpretations of the parable (which, incidentally, cannot be sustained, see Luke 16:9; 18:6-8). He could, in any case, object that this often concerns exempla that has no moral portions to start with: the Good Samaritan (Luke


Tradition (Göttingen, 1995), 409-452, particularly 429-433 (My thanks to Annette Merz for referring this piece to me and making it available).

[21] Goldberg, Thoma and Lauer, see above n. 18. See also Stern, Parables in Midrash, 11 n. 17; 294 n. 54.

[22] By the way, Flusser recognizes a “light form” of the sayings source “Q”: Flusser, Gleichnisse, 255f., 274-277.

[23] Also compare the secondary-looking section in Mark 8:17-21, which (Mark 8:18!) makes a clear connection with Mark 4:10-12.
