

Jesus the Victimizer?

Jesus' antagonistic encounters with the Pharisees serve traditionally as a basis for the poor relationship between Christianity and Judaism. The conflict stories epitomized by Jesus' parables have been assessed as descriptions of how he either justifiably revealed his adversaries' falseness or falsely defamed them. These stories are used to justify later religious conflicts. I shall argue that the traditional anti-Pharisaic interpretations of Jesus' parables have an inadequate basis in the actual stories. Instead, they are due to two axiomatic perspectives that dominate the interpretation: ill-fitting allegorical explanations and/or the search for some historical context. Both approaches have resulted in manipulating the parables, either by curtailing them or by importing into them information of which their actual audience(s) were unaware.

JESUS' ANTAGONISTIC ENCOUNTERS with the Pharisees have served traditionally as the basis for the poor relationship between Christianity and Judaism. The *Streitgespräche*, or conflict stories, epitomized by Jesus' parables, have been assessed as descriptions of how he either justifiably revealed his adversaries' falseness or else (depending on the point of view of the interpreter) misleadingly defamed them (Albertz 1921). Scholars typically use military metaphors to describe the discussions between Jesus and his Jewish adversaries.¹ For example, The Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32) allegedly demonstrates the Pharisees' – and consequently the Jews' or Jewish-Christians' –

negative features,² and The Wicked Tenants (Luke 20:9–16) predicts that God will punish them and embrace other nations instead.³ The Early Fathers could make use of these stories against the Jews; moreover, the stories have served to justify later religious conflicts as well.

To be sure, there have been some attempts to render these stories politically correct, so that no anti-Jewish overtones can be detected, but the argumentation for these attempts is not very convincing.⁴

In this article, I shall argue that the traditional, anti-Pharisaic interpretations of Jesus' parables have an inadequate basis in the actual parables. Instead, these readings arise out of axiomatic perspectives that dominate interpretations of the parables in general: illfitting allegorical explanations and/or the search for some historical context at the cost of the immediate context. Both approaches have resulted in manipulations of the parables, either by curtailing them or by importing into them information of which their actual audience(s) were unaware.

1 Rudolf Bultmann (1921: 40, 51) uses the words 'Gegner', 'Angriff', and 'Kampf'. Correspondingly, Arland J. Hultgren (1979) speaks of 'attack' and 'necessary polarity'.

2 Bultmann 1921: 39–56; Hultgren 1979: 52–3; Harnisch 1985: 201–31; Wolter 2002: 25–56.

3 For example, John Nolland (1989–93: 953) argues that the reassignment of the vineyard refers to 'the Christian leadership of the renewed People of God'. See also Oldenhage 2007: 352–66, especially 352; Snodgrass 2008: 293–7.

4 Luise Schottroff (2005: 27–47) and Tania Oldenhage (2007: 352–66) show how modern scholars strive to arrive at an interpretation of the parable of The Wicked Tenants (Luke 20:9–16), which would better fit our contemporary values. Unfortunately, they all rely on external material unknown to the addressees. Moreover, they separate the parable from its immediate context.

An alternative way of reading these ‘conflict stories’ is to focus on the message of the protagonist in the document – that is to say, Jesus the Narrator. This Jesus actually exists, unlike any hypothetical ‘historical Jesus’ or the evangelist’s imagined community. Moreover, the goal of the author as it is implied in the text must be recognized. In other words, instead of seeking to characterize the relationship between the imaginary historical figures such as ‘Jesus’ or ‘the Pharisees’ I am interested in clarifying what message about them the text seeks to transmit.

In order to gain an accurate understanding of the ancient text, it should not be altered. Jesus’ parables are to be read as they appear in their actual literary context. Modern narratological perspectives (Booth, Chatman, Fludernik) and argumentation analysis (Toulmin) offer adequate tools for exposing their persuasive functions.⁵

This article will suggest new readings of some of Jesus’ most adversarial parables. Thereby, it seeks to open a tiny, yet not insignificant window onto a realistic view of religious conflict and co-existence in some of the earliest Christian documents. Since some of the most intriguing parables in this regard appear in Luke, I shall focus on his text.

The adversarial style in the New Testament

Knowledge of polemical conventions in other New Testament documents provides the necessary background information for a study of Jesus’ inimical expressions. Recent comparative studies of polemical rhetoric in Hellenistic culture in general, as well as that found in the New Testament writings specifically have challenged our traditional views of the adversaries in the Early Christian texts.⁶

These views are usually based on so-called *mirror reading*, which yields severely biased results. However, one cannot use a slandering text as the source for a neutral description; such a text cannot even serve as a guideline. It is especially important to recognize instances of the common rhetorical technique in ancient rhetoric called *vituperatio*, according to which the opponent is referred to by means of certain stereotypical pejorative expressions. The aim of the technique is not to describe them, but to simply mark them as opponents. This rhetorical device was enthusiastically used in the New Testament too, in, to

5 Booth 1983; Chatman 1978; Fludernik 2009.

6 See especially Barclay 1987; Vorster 1994; Johnson 1989; du Toit 1994; Thurén 2005 and 2007.

name but a few books, Galatians, 2. Peter, Jude, and 2. Cor, all of which neatly follow this convention.⁷

The Apostle Paul had his specific reasons for attacking opponents, even when they did not exist.⁸ More generally, using strong language to describe an interlocutor was normal in ancient Hellenistic discussions; early Judaism and Christianity were no exceptions. Modern readers ought to take into account this convention before drawing any historical or ideological conclusions based on these documents.

Understanding the ancient conventions of the usage of pejorative language could make it easier to interpret corresponding expressions in modern discussions and speeches as well. Taking stereotypical utterances at their face value, without proper knowledge of their communicative and persuasive functions, has compromised biblical scholarship in many ways, and the practice may yield undesirable results in the Middle East even today.

Jesus among enemies

In the gospels two types of stories especially describe Jesus’ encounter with his alleged adversaries. The short anecdotes, or *khreiai*, tell – according to the traditional interpretation – of his entrapment by malicious adversaries and how he manages to survive as a religiously or morally superior hero. Whereas in some cases, Jesus only needs to deliver one poignant sentence in order to do this (as in the question of paying taxes in Luke 20:20–6), other situations call for longer stories – the parables. In this article, I will focus on how they actually function in their immediate context, and ask what they reveal about Jesus’ attitude toward his adversaries. I will discuss the most important of these ‘antagonistic’ parables in Luke.

Contrary to the New Testament epistles, Jesus’ way of his interlocutors does not utilize the conventional, denigratory devices typical of *vilificatio*. The parables, especially, are fictitious stories that in some way are thought to apply allegorically to the adversaries. Either the characters within the stories are to be identified with the Pharisees, scribes,⁹ or the like, or

7 The adversaries were always presented as infiltrators, lying hypocrites, filled with hubris, sorcery, gluttony, moral depravity etc., and they were seldom referred to by proper names. See Thurén 2005: esp. pp. 86–8.

8 In *Romans*, Paul had to create them. Apparently, the apostle needed antagonists in order to express his theological ideas clearly.

9 The allegorical interpretation was favoured by most Early Fathers and in a modified form it continues to



The traditional view of the Pharisees as the bad guys is based on a biased reading of the gospel stories. *The Pharisees and the Herodians Conspire Against Jesus* by James Tissot (1836–1902), between 1886 and 1894, opaque watercolour over graphite on gray wove paper. Online Collection of Brooklyn Museum.

the narrative structure, with its punchline, is aimed at these individuals.¹⁰ This mode of interpretation is even encouraged by the omniscient author, who lets us know that the teachers of the law and the chief priests understand that Jesus ‘had spoken this parable against them’ (Luke 20:19). Thus, as source material for antagonism in the New Testament, the parables constitute a more interesting case than the epistles.

Three methodological issues

A few words about methodology are necessary. In the manner of contemporary literary research, I will read the parables as they stand in their earliest literary form. While biblical scholars typically feel free to manipulate the material in numerous ways in order to reconstruct some ‘original’ version delivered by

have support among modern scholars as well. See, e.g., Snodgrass 2008: 15–17.

10 To identify a specific point at the end of the story has been popular among scholars ever since Jülicher 1910.

the historical Jesus, or otherwise to help the story to make more sense, I find such a procedure inappropriate – insofar as the goal is to understand the text.¹¹ Moreover, the common practice of adding to the parables real or suggested historical information is not only unnecessary for understanding their purpose; it is also misleading, since Luke’s readers were also not very familiar with life in first-century Palestine, and yet he trusts that they will get his message. As an analogy, little children understand fairy tales without any historical knowledge about fairies or Santa Claus.¹² In addition, synoptic comparisons are not appropriate when reading Luke, for a similar reason: his readers were hardly likely to be aware of many other versions of the gospel. For them, things

11 If, however, the goal is to reconstruct some historical reality before the text was written, methodological requirements may of course be different.

12 Actually, historical information about Nikolaos of Myra (270–343 CE) might be merely disturbing. For more about this methodological question see Thurén 2014: 26, 42.

History	Text	Framework story	Parable	Framework story	Text	History
Real author	Implied author	Narrator	Characters	Implied audience	Implied reader	Real reader
Unknown historical individual	Luke	Jesus	Master, slaves etc.	Pharisee, disciples etc.	Theophilus	Anybody reading the text

Table 1.

that Luke did not change when using Mark, Q, or any other sources are just as important and ‘Lukan’ as those he did.

Thus, I will study the Lukan text and its explicit and implicit messages, without adding to or extracting anything from it. After all, it was his message that the early Christian readers received, not that of his imaginary historical predecessors.

Following the classical Booth–Chatman model (Booth 1983; Chatman 1978), I will distinguish between the real author and the real readers – that is to say the author implied by the text (Luke) and the audience he implies (i.e., Hellenistic recipients with some knowledge of Judaism) and the narrator described in the text (Jesus) and his audience (Pharisees, scribes, disciples, the people etc.) (see Table 1 above).

indicates how the data is meaningful for the claim. Since this rule may not be completely accepted by the audience, it needs to be supported by some generally accepted information or examples; this factor is called the *backing* (B). Moreover, a *rebuttal* (R) indicates when the reasoning is not valid.

Usually not every factor is explicit. Yet by closely following Toulmin’s descriptions, they can be estimated. Although this model seems simple, it is not so easily applied to real texts. However, the results are easy to understand and assess.

A parable typically functions as a backing. When the author tells his audience a parable, he distances them from the actual situation. The parable illustrates some general principle, applied in another setting. This principle is then applied to the case at hand.¹⁴

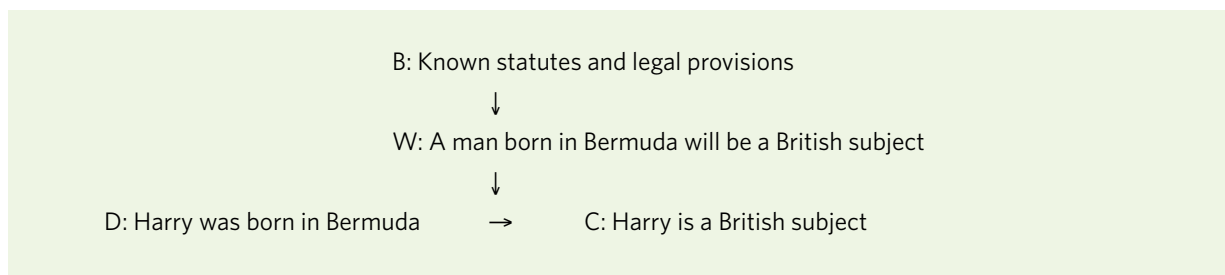


Figure 1.¹³

When establishing each parable’s function according to the narrator’s reasoning, I will apply a simplified version of the classical model for argumentation analysis, as developed by the British philosopher Stephen Toulmin (1958). According to him, every argumentation consists of clearly identifiable factors. The *claim* (C) expresses the opinion put forward. The *data* (D) presents the facts agreed upon by the audience, which support the claim. The *warrant* (W) is a general rule connecting the data and the claim; it

Parables in an antagonistic setting

In Luke, there are approximately 57 distinguishable parables.¹⁵ One fifth of them (actually 21 %) are

- 14 According to the alternative allegorical reading, Jesus’ parables are simply a case of names having been changed. However, such stories would have no persuasive force.
- 15 Most scholars have their own definitions, correspondingly resulting in various numbers of parables (for a discussion of this, see Thurén 2014: 183–94). One of the most comprehensive and well-thought out modern presentations by the German collective *Kompendium*, counts 54 parables in Luke. My estimation

13 Toulmin 1958: 105.

Verses	Name	Words	Image	Audience
4:23	Healer 1	3	Healer	Opponents
4:24	Prophet	8	Prophet	All
5:31	Healer 2	10	Healer	Opponents
5:34-5	Groom	31	Domestic	Opponents
5:36	Garment	29	Tailor	Opponents
3:37-9	Wine 1 and 2	45	Winemaker	Opponents
11:17	Kingdom	11	Politics	Some
11:21-2	Protecting House	33	Domestic	All
15:4-7	Lost Sheep	81	Sheep Owner	Opponents
15:8-10	Lost Coin	53	Domestic	Opponents
15:11-32	Prodigal Son	389	Master	Opponents
20:9-16	Wicked Tenants	120	Master	Opponents

One additional parable especially is usually seen as being adversarial:

14:16-24	Great Dinner	159	Master	Someone
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Table 2.

clearly defensive. In these cases, Jesus tells these stories in a setting which, according to Luke, is at least somewhat adversarial.

Most of these parables are very short (3–45 Greek words; 21 words on the average); and in them Jesus simply justifies his own behaviour or a proclamation he has made. They are not usually assessed as portraying his adversaries. They occur in the first part of the text. They are easy to accept, since they refer to what is typical or normal in some occupation, be it that of a healer, prophet, tailor, farmer, sheep owner, or a householder.

For our question, the five longest parables are most interesting, since they include individuals commonly interpreted as representing Jesus' adversaries. The last three parables are far longer than the others: on average, all five have 160 words, while the last three stories have 223 words and the eight opening parables only have 21 words. They are also more difficult to accept: instead of referring to what is typical for some occupation, they present unique stories about a sovereign, often high-handed, master. The people's reaction to the master's violent behaviour

comes close to this; the main difference is that some twofold parables are counted twice. See Zimmermann 2007: 518–21.

in Luke 20:16 is telling: *μη γένοιτο*, 'No way!' In the what follows, I will focus on these three parables and see what they tell us about Jesus' attitude towards his adversaries.

Eating with the Pharisees: *The Great Dinner* (Luke 14:16–24)

The first of the extensive adversarial parables¹⁶ in Luke is a story about a man giving a great feast. He had invited many respectable people, but they all made various excuses. The master gets angry (*ὀργισθεὶς ὁ οἰκοδεσπότης*), and this emotion is expressed in two ways: he assembles various outcasts to the occasion instead, and swears that none of those who rejected his initial invitation shall partake of the feast.

According to the usual interpretation of this story, the message is clear. It is an eschatological parable i.e., one which deals with the end of the world. The 'man' or 'master'

is God; the 'respectable' people are the Pharisees or Jews in general, and the outcasts represent the Gentiles. They will replace the Jews in the Kingdom of God, since the Jews have rejected Jesus. God is so angry with the Jews that they will not join his heavenly feast.¹⁷

Modern commentaries often express these ideas in a more cautious and covert way, but the line of thought nevertheless remains the same.¹⁸ Klyne R. Snodgrass's interpretation represents a typical contemporary allegorical one. He also sees the parable as an eschatological story, speaking 'specifically about Israel' or 'about Israel's response to Jesus'. However, he does not dare to take this to its logical conclusion, which would suggest that every Jew should be rejected, since those invited later are not identified as Gentiles (Snodgrass 2008: 314–16).

16 The parable is the fifth longest in Luke (159 Greek words).

17 For typical interpretations, see Beare 1951: 1–14 and Snodgrass 2008: 308–9.

18 According to Nolland (1989–93: 755–9), the 'total block-response of all the initially invited guests contributes to the drama of the story, but has no clear analogue in the experience of Jesus or of the early church' (p. 758), but the parable 'extends the gospel message to the Gentiles' (p. 759).

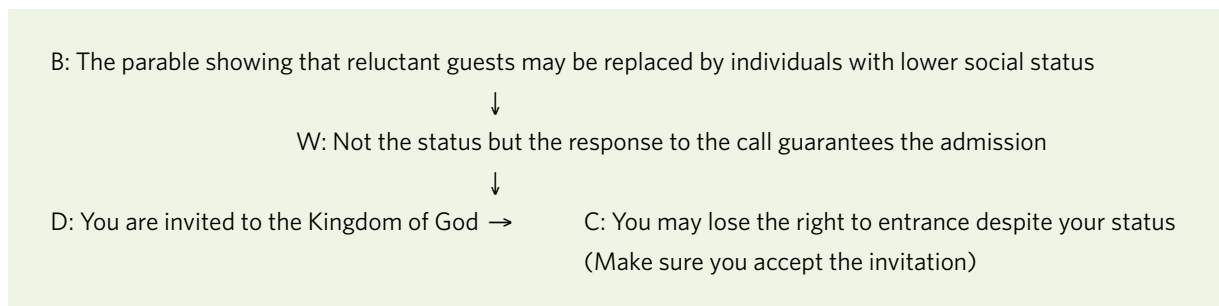


Figure 2.

Is the classical anti-Israel message the most natural interpretation from the point of view of Jesus' audience within the framework story? Moreover, is this the way Luke most plausibly wanted his readers to understand the parable?

To begin with, unlike most of the other 'adversarial' parables, the setting of this parable is not inimical. Jesus has been invited to a feast, and after a somewhat uncomfortable introductory scene,¹⁹ he gives the host some friendly advice. The parable is then a response to an enthusiastic exclamation by one of his fellows at table: 'Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!' (Luke 14:15). Thus, the context does not allow the readers expect harsh words against Jesus' hearers. They are at a feast, and Jesus in some way compares the situation with the feast in the kingdom of God – a solemn topic indeed.

The traditional allegorical explanations do not sit well with the original situation. Since Jesus speaks to his table-fellows, the parable should primarily be interpreted according to their perspective. The Gentile mission is not mentioned, but neither do Jesus or Luke say anything about Israel. Instead, a great variety of provenance among those who are rejected and those who accept the invitation is explicitly emphasized. The comment from the table-fellow which triggers the parable tells of an individual who will 'eat bread in the kingdom of God', and the parable presents several different individuals or groups – a wider range than is mentioned in any other of Luke's parables.²⁰ To elide this outstanding feature, and speak of the various groups as either 'Israeli' or 'Gentile' seems artificial. What is more likely is that each of the listeners – and readers – is encouraged to respond

to the story and its message on a personal rather than collective level.

In Toulmin's analysis, the parable serves as an example (backing, B) supporting a general rule (warrant, W). The presumably generally accepted point of departure (data, D) and the opinion put forward (claim, C) are more difficult to establish. Jesus and his table-fellows are discussing the right to join God's feast. In the story, everybody is invited; probably every hearer is presumed to have received the invitation. This is their common point of departure (=D). Moreover, since the hearers are invited by the Pharisee, they may find themselves among those 'respectable' people who were invited first. The negative tone at the end sounds like a warning: 'You may lose your right to join' (=C). This could also be interpreted as an encouragement to accept the invitation. (See figure 2 above)

This story seems to be less persuasive than the shorter parables. It does not refer to an example of conventional behaviour, but to the master's highly unusual response to rejection. It is not evident how the parable is designed to ensure the approval of the warrant, so that the hearers will endorse the claim. Yet the narrator obviously expects to convince the audience: a corresponding rule will apply concerning admission to the Kingdom of God. Apparently, the parable appeals more to the emotions than to social conventions or logic. Its length, the number of interesting characters it contains, and the exciting storyline all probably aim at diverting attention from the problems inherent in the master's strange behaviour.

The parable emphasizes the master's emotional response (ὀργισθεὶς ὁ οἰκοδεσπότης) to the secondary explanations of the reluctant guests. He becomes so angry that he decides to replace them with just anybody. This emotion, more than anything else, is assumed to be experienced as genuine and designed to gain sympathy; the audience should understand and even identify with the infuriated

19 Jesus heals a man suffering from dropsy in 14:1–6 on the Sabbath.

20 There are nine different characters or groups, which is far more than in any other parable in Luke.

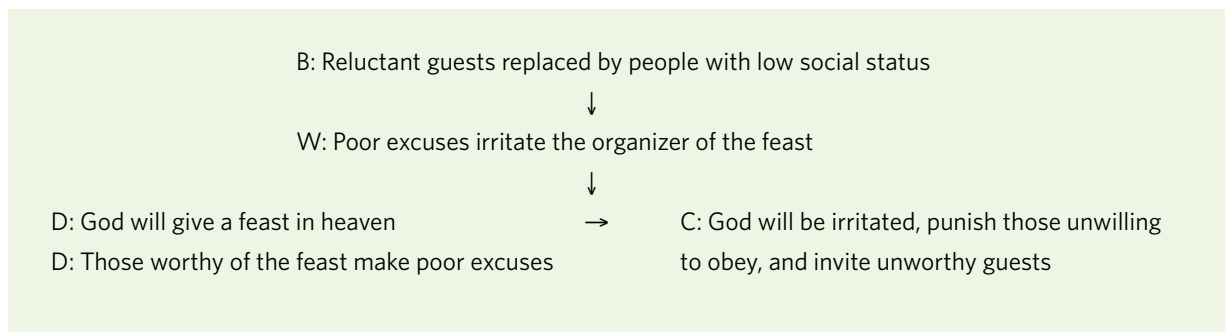


Figure 3.

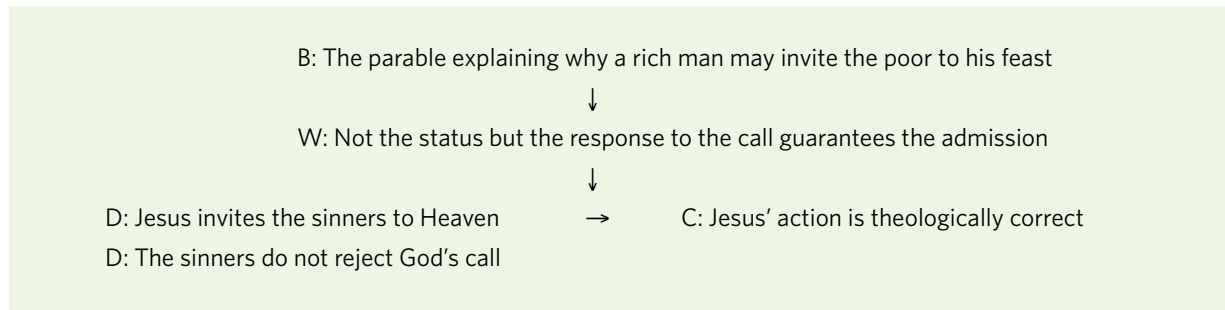


Figure 4.

man let down by his friends. However the master's emotion is negative. His goodness toward the unworthy is presented as resulting from his irritation with the respectable people. (See figure 3 above)

The situation of Luke's audience is different; they do not eat bread with Jesus (unless the Eucharist is meant). Nevertheless, the parable does not need any traditional allegorical explanations. More likely, a Jewish *qal wahomer* style of reasoning can be detected: if an earthly master can be so severe and so generous, how much more so can God? Thus the parable fits the Lukan context, where Jesus invites the unworthy to the Kingdom by healing the sick and proclaiming the gospel to the poor (14:18–21). The parable seeks to justify his programme, to invite the audience's participation, and to warn against rejecting his call. (See figure 4 above)

However, the parable may also encourage Lukan readers to contemplate more abstract theological interpretations. For a modern reader, its theme recalls Paul's theological discussion about Israel and the Gentiles in Rom. 9–11 – but Luke's readers are hardly likely to have been aware of this text. However, nor can the master's categorical exclusion of those who had been initially invited (Luke 14:24) be allied with Paul's thinking, since for him, 'The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable' (Rom. 11:29).

To sum up: the classical, polemical and anti-

Jewish interpretation of the parable doesn't fit well into the immediate context presented by Luke, or with the parable's emphasis on a wide variety of individuals and groups. Rather than incorporating any adversarial language, the primary function of the parable is to invite Jesus' Pharisaic hearers to accept his message – his specific invitation to the kingdom of God. Its warning tone should not be denied, but the aim is not to condemn its hearers, quite the opposite.

Eating with the sinners and tax collectors: *The Lost Sheep, The Coin, and The Prodigal Son* (Luke 15)

The next 'adversarial' parable, found in Luke 15, is actually a threefold story, concerned with recovering what is lost. Jesus' association with known sinners is criticized by the Pharisees and Scribes. He responds by telling three parables. 'One of you' finds his lost sheep (vv. 4–7); a woman finds a coin she has lost (vv. 8–10); and a father regains his lost son (vv. 11–24). They all are filled with joy – although the last of these protagonists also receives some criticism (vv. 25–32).

The traditional explanation of the stories is two-fold. First, Jesus proclaims God's extraordinary love towards sinners and outcasts and invites the hearers to share his joy. Second, he shows how the attitudes of his adversaries are perverse, since they do not join the joyous feast. Moreover, he parallels these'



Christ Accused by the Pharisees by Duccio (1260–1318), between 1308 and 1311, tempera on wood. Museo dell'Opera metropolitana del Duomo.

attitudes with the unpleasant character of the elder son. In this way he is deemed to prevail. The image of the Pharisees and scribes which emerges from the stories is not very attractive, despite some positive hints at the end.

According to a modern version presented by Wolfgang Harnisch and Michael Wolter, the whole chapter is characterized as a 'conflict narrative' (*Streitgespräch*), reflecting a typical dispute between Jesus and his Jewish adversaries.²¹ In such stories, Jesus is first criticized by them; then he responds with an objection. The parable's immediate goal is to demean the Pharisees and the scribes in the eyes of the audience as Jesus (and Luke) seek to dissociate the audience from them characterizing them as villains.

Reading Luke 15 as a description of a conflict has resulted in various historical and doctrinal interpretations, depending on whether the Pharisees here are seen to denote contemporary Pharisees, later Pharisees, Jews in general, Jewish Christians, or

21 Harnisch 1985: 201–31. *The idea is developed further by Wolter 2002: 25–56.*

some form of corrupted theology.²² Since such anti-Jewish messages are not currently deemed to be politically correct, many scholars attempt to soften, but cannot completely expunge them.²³

How best then to gain a satisfactory understanding of these parables? In the first place, no additions should be made; secondly, all allegorical explanations should be avoided. For example, contrary to the generally accepted reading, there is no shepherd in the parable of the lost sheep (vv. 3–7); thus, neither God or Jesus can be represented by the 'Good Shepherd'. The man who owns 100 sheep is, according to Jesus, actually a Pharisee or a scribe. His rhetorical

question reads: 'What would you do in such a situation?' They, not the sinners and tax collectors, are the primary targets of these parables. These are the people Jesus seeks to persuade by means of his stories.

Moreover, the tone of the narratives is difficult to reconcile with an antagonistic encounter. The initial stories are full of joy, and even in the third, the criticism by the elder brother is met by a kindly invitation. All this indicates that the chapter aims at something other than victory or condemnation.²⁴

If read in its actual context, Luke 15 argues that Jesus the narrator has here a positively optimistic perception of his critics. He tries to make the Pharisees and the scribes understand his own position, or even change their points of view and behaviour. Toulmin's

22 For discussion, see Rau 1998: 5–29, 19–28; Nolland 1989–93: 788–9.

23 E.g. Snodgrass 2008: 93–143. Mary Ann Beavis (2001: 3–30) too criticizes the antagonistic interpretations of the parables of Jesus and seeks alternative functions.

24 Nolland 1989–93: 788–9. Correspondingly, Heikki Räisänen (1992: 1622–7) observes the mild tone, but simply states that this 'causes difficulties' concerning Luke's view of the Pharisees and the scribes.

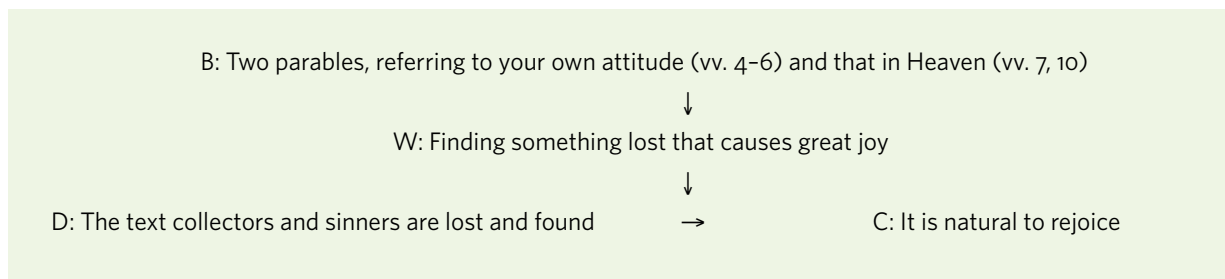


Figure 5.

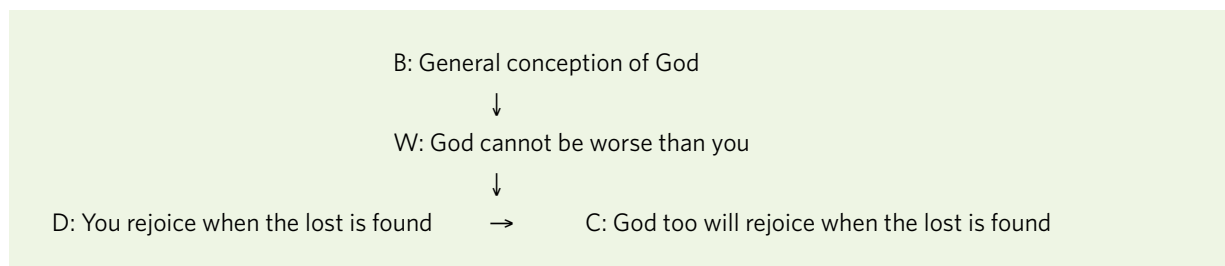


Figure 6.

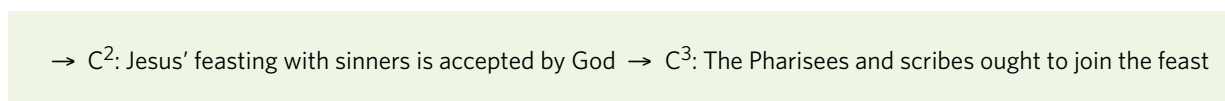


Figure 7.

analysis reveals the persuasive aims of the two minor parables in vv. 4–10. (See figure 5)

According to verses 7 and 10, there is a similar joy in Heaven or among the angels, both typically Jewish circumlocutions of God. Thereby, an additional theological structure of reasoning can be found. (See figures 6 and 7)

Claim¹ and claim² are connected with an implicit warrant which could be formulated as ‘joy implies acceptance’ and ‘what suits God, must suit the Pharisees and scribes’.

The third parable then applies the principle emphasized by the preceding ones to the actual situation. It presents an individual, who, unlike the sheep and coin, is responsible for his fate – just as are the sinners and tax collectors. Nevertheless, he is accepted by his father. The father, who has lost contact with both of his sons, is explicitly dissociated from God.²⁵ More likely, just as did the preceding man

and woman, he serves as a possible role model for the Pharisees and scribes. In a corresponding situation, would not they do as the father did? This time, the answer is not self-evident; thus, Jesus has to rely on a more extensive story with a greater emotional range.

What about the elder brother, who is traditionally seen as a depiction of a Pharisee?²⁶ Like them, he complains of Jesus’ actions in feasting with the sinners. However, several scholars have noted that this figure is not very negative. The father views him as his equal, not as an adversary: ‘All that is mine is yours’ (v. 31). It has been argued that his attitude is far too mild to be attributed to the historical Pharisees, or to those featured by Luke.²⁷

reminder that we must let the parable have its own integrity as story and not to simply identify the father with God.’

25 By contrast, for example, Hultgren 2000: 86: ‘... the father clearly represents God’; Wolter 2002: 38–9: ‘... jeder Hörer sofort wusste, dass mit ihr von Gott die Rede ist’. But Nolland (1989–93: 784) correctly notices: ‘The presence of God on the story line is a

26 For example, Hultgren 2000: 82. Gerd Lüdemann (2001: 365) has a slight modification: ‘The elder brother represents a Jewish person who objects to God’s compassion.’

27 Wolter (2002: 50–53) recognizes the problems, but refers to ancient rhetorical categories in order to prove that the elder brother nevertheless stands for the Pharisees. However, the reference builds upon a typical

Moreover, to associate the elder brother with the Pharisees and the scribes of the framework would be a poor argument. If Jesus wants to appeal to them, simply blaming or mocking them hardly leads to the desired result. Why would they want to be like the elder brother, the villain of the piece? If he is directly connected to the given audience, this means Jesus no longer speaks to them but to the Lukan readers only, proclaiming their inferiority and his own superiority. Nevertheless, this suits later interpretations and allegories in which the story describes the unacceptable attitudes of the Jews or the Jewish Christians to Gentile Christians. However, such an allegory does not fit the text as it stands, where we have a text-internal audience, which must be preferred to any hypothetical, reconstructed one. Thus, it is crucial to understand, how the Pharisees and the scribes in the framework are thought to understand this character.

The elder brother is presented as a morally exemplary individual. He has not abandoned his father or squandered his fortune, and he has not pursued a morally or religiously unacceptable way of life. Thus, he too gains the Pharisees' and the scribes' sympathy to some extent, just as the father does. Structurally, the elder brother is reminiscent of the ninety-nine sheep and the nine coins. Those are not denigrated in the earlier stories, and they are paralleled in the interpretations (vv. 7, 10) with the righteous.

Instead, the elder brother represents a reasonable second opinion. Under one condition, the rule does not apply: that is to say in cases where the lost is personally responsible. In Toulmin's scheme, such a critical viewpoint is called a *rebuttal*:

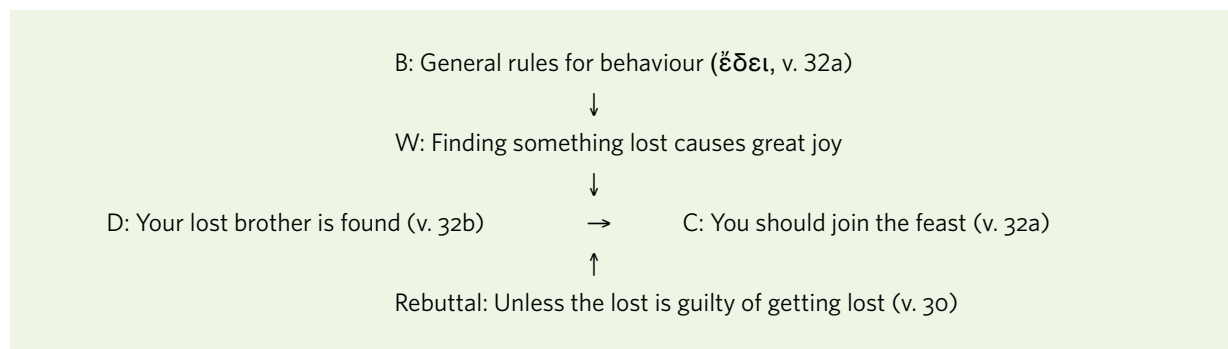


Figure 8.

misconception of all rhetoric as *judicial*, seeking to judge past events. For the correct use of rhetorical genera, see Kennedy 1984: 19. Räisänen (1992) tries to solve the problem by suggesting that the figure refers to later Jewish Christians. However, this explanation wrongly imparts external data to the storyline.

The audience is expected to sympathize with both the father and the elder brother. This dilemma finally reflects the actual situation in the framework.

However, the elder brother's credibility is challenged by his own behaviour. First, he refuses to share in the great joy of the father and the servants. The contrast is stark when the joy is compared with the previous calls to rejoice by the owner of the sheep and the woman. This attitude resembles that of the respectable people invited to the great feast in chapter 14. Refusal to attend a banquet is the stereotype of a gloomy destiny in a society where such festivities were of great importance. Such behaviour renders an individual an unlikely subject of identification. Yet, the elder brother may have had a just reason for his attitude: in a case where he has moral justification²⁸ could be seen as a martyr, who declines the invitation for honourable reasons.

Unfortunately, his hyperbolic language appears merely childish: 'So many years I have been slaving away [δουλεύω]²⁹ for you, I have never disobeyed your command, but never have you given me even a young goat.' The repetition of the word *never*, emphasizing both his merits and how little he has gained, all point in the same direction: this is not a mature adult. He assumes the role of a small child before his father and the servants, thereby losing face. The father's patient response simply highlights the son's pathetic character.

The story does not allow the elder brother a more mature censure of the father's actions. Thus any criticism is condemned not only as leading to a socially undesirable result, but also as childish. By having

28 Cf. Ps. 1:1; Heb. 13:12–13.

29 Translation by Hultgren (2000: 70–1), who argues that this colloquial translation reflects an angry son's outburst to his father.

this unacceptable character represent the critical response to the father's behaviour, the narrator makes it difficult to think in the same way. If one assesses his behaviour in a negative light, his opinions must be rejected, too. From the point of view of persuasion, this is an unfair but effective move, recommended by classical rhetoricians.³⁰ Thus, the object of the story is that the Pharisees and scribes would not identify with the elder brother.³¹ Since he alone goes against the reasoning of the owner of the sheep, the woman, and the compassionate father, his opinions too are to be rejected.

The persuasive strategy in Luke 15 is more subtle than if the narrator merely sought to win over an enemy. The Lukan Jesus has not given up hope concerning the Pharisees; he is eager to convince them. As his critics, they are not humiliated, since they are not obliged to 'be' the elder brother, but invited to choose another role model. Either they can accept the role of the father, or they are led to believe that in a corresponding situation, they would not act as did the shameful elder brother.

To sum up: the traditional interpretation of Luke 15 as a conflict story, where Jesus prevails over his opponents in the front of the audience (the tax collectors, the sinners, and the disciples) is misleading. Instead, it displays his subtle plea to those who are criticizing him to accept his message after all.

Asking for authority:

The Wicked Tenants (Luke 20:9-16)

Jesus' last narrative parable in Luke tells the story of a rich landowner who rents out his vineyard and travels abroad. His tenants refuse to pay the rent and instead mutilate the landowner's servants one by one as they come to collect it. Finally, the man sends his son, but the tenants kill him. The landowner's response is fierce: he destroys the tenants and gives the vineyard to other people.

Jesus tells the story in Jerusalem, a few days before his death, to his adversaries; the high priests, scribes, and elders. On the basis of this situation and since

30 Heinrich Lausberg (1998: § 902.4) argues: '... conceptual irony is a *sermocinatio* ... from the thought-world of the opposing party... Ultimately, its technically appropriate place is in *refutatio*..., where it serves to represent the opponent's point of view.'

See also Thurén 2002: 90-2.

31 Harnisch (1985: 216-17) too wonders why anybody would identify with the elder brother.

traditional Old Testament images are used,³² the prevalent interpretation of this parable is allegorical: the landowner is God, the vineyard is Israel or Jerusalem, and the servants are prophets. The son, of course, is identified with Jesus, who was killed,³³ since he was the rejected cornerstone.³⁴

Moreover, the parable prophesies historical events such as the defeat of Herod Antipas's army in 36 CE (Schürer 1973: 350), the death of Nero in Rome in 68 CE after his alleged persecution of the Christians, and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE. The land and God's favour will be taken from the Jews and given to the Gentiles. Some modern scholars have attempted to tone down this message, but the alternative interpretations remain arbitrary. Thus, the parable plays a central role in forming the characterization of the relationship between the Jews and the Christians as inimical.

It is my opinion however that this classical and rather perilous reading is due to improper allegorical interpretations, based on overlaying the parable text with external information not available to Jesus' hearers, or even the Lukan recipients. Moreover, the parable's persuasive function in its immediate context is unduly overlooked.

Jesus' hearers were hardly expected to connect the details in the story with the Scriptures. Israel and God are not always meant when speaking of a vineyard and its owner. Unlike us, they did not know that this story would be later be considered to be as holy as any found in the Scriptures. The death of Jesus is not mentioned until Luke 23. Even if Luke's audience is not expected to be unaware of it, this does not automatically have an impact on their reception of the text.³⁵ Jesus' own hearers are even less cognizant of his future death. When he actually prophesies his own suffering and death (Luke 18:31-4), he accuses the Gentiles, not the Jewish leaders for what will happen.³⁶ Some scholars compare the owner in

32 Especially Isa. 5:1-7; Ps. 118:22-23; and Dan. 2:44-45

33 Luke 23:66-24:49 already supports this reading.

34 Luke lets Peter make this connection in Acts 4:11; the same idea is attributed to Peter in 1 Pet. 2:4-8.

35 In a corresponding way, it can be exciting to read a detective story for the second time, even though the result is already known – since a reader 'agrees' to stay within the world of the narrative in order to be able to enjoy it; no direct connection to the real world is needed (see Segal 1995: 70-1).

36 However, earlier in Luke 9:22, the religious leaders are prophesied to reject the Son of Man and make him suffer.

the parable with Rome, which destroyed Jerusalem (Newell and Newell 1972: 226–37), but this analogy is weak indeed: Rome did not found Jerusalem and rent it to the Jews.

In the context, a different theme is being topicalised. It is an integral part of the structure of the argument, beginning from 20:1. The religious leaders question Jesus' authority. He counters this with another question: where then did John the Baptist's authority come from? As the leaders do not dare to answer, Jesus continues by delivering the parable, so that it functions as a reply to this debate. Luke's readers are already accustomed to both themes – the adversaries questioning Jesus' authority to proclaim his gospel, and Jesus accusing them of killing the prophets. It is this background which guides their understanding of the text.

Toulmin's model reveals the structure of the reasoning. Once again, the parable serves as an example (backing) for a general rule (warrant). The basic idea illuminated by the story is that the messengers of a distant overlord should be obeyed.

What could be the particular data and the not-yet-accepted claim which are combined in the warrant? In the previous discussion, Jesus implies that both John's and his own authority come from God. A plain accusation such as 'John should have been taken seriously' does not tend towards any action. Another charge 'Those who rejected John will feel

the consequences' sounds more dynamic, as does the onlooking leaders' reaction in verse 19 'because they realized he had told this parable against (or with reference to, πρὸς αὐτοὺς εἶπεν) them'. However, as the discussion actually deals with the authority of Jesus, his claim to share his authority with John in verse 8 opens new possibilities for claim. If the data reads 'Jesus' authority comes from God', then the claim can look forward, instead of just blaming the adversaries: 'Jesus' proclamation should be accepted' or 'Jesus must not be mistreated'. Thus it attempts to change the audience's behaviour irrespective of whether they represent the people or the leaders. (See figure 9)

Moreover, the parable refers to God within *qal wahomer* structure: if a landowner will vindicate people offending his messengers, how much more will God? (See figure 10)

When the parable is interpreted from the leaders' viewpoint, the most significant change is that they do not accept the data, *viz.*, John's (or Jesus') prophetic authority. This may result in a collapse of the whole project of persuasion. However, the idea of leaving some elements implicit in an argument is to obscure its weaknesses. If the recipients agree upon everything else, they may swallow the implicit factors as well. Typically, the warrants are such implicit elements, but this time it is the point of departure (the data) that may be functioning in this way. Jesus does not divulge the source of his ἐξουσία, but attempts

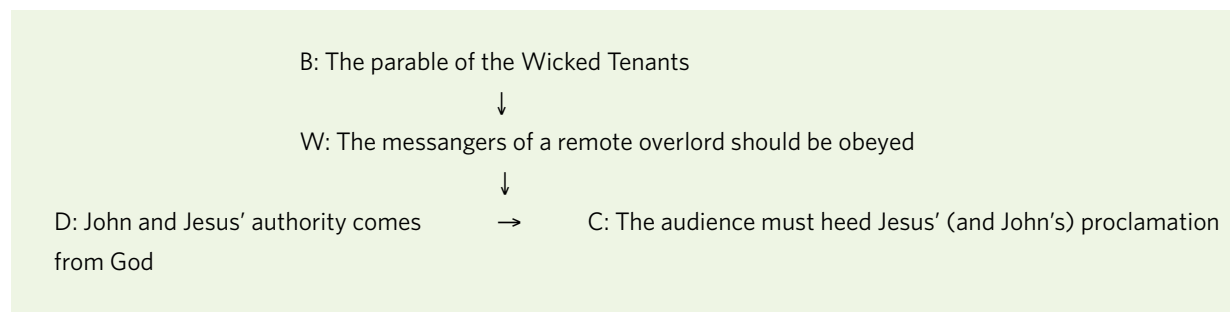


Figure 9.

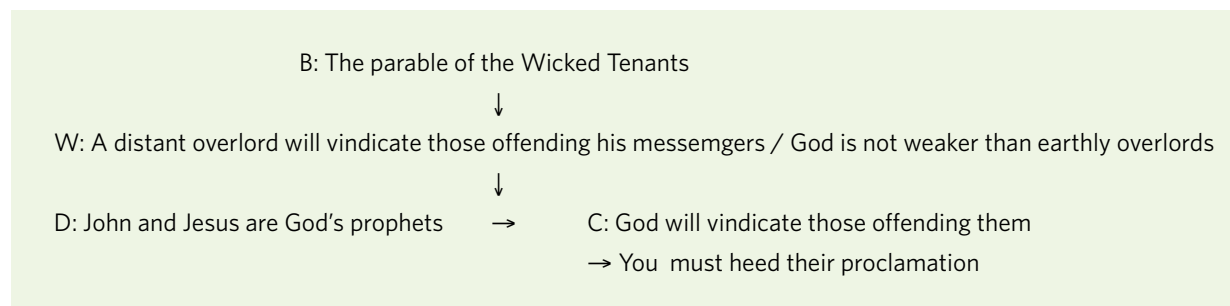


Figure 10.

to confirm his thesis about his divine authority, not only by connecting himself to John, but also by delivering the parable. Thereby, he directs his adversaries, at least hypothetically, to think about the possibility that John was, and he is, God's messenger. In that case, severe punishment threatens to overtake everybody who does not accept their authority or their message. The obvious conclusion is that the recipients ought to accept them and their message, and to act accordingly.

As a result, the parable is Jesus' final plea to make himself heard. The religious leaders ought to accept his message. To be sure, by means of this parable Jesus also warns them about the consequences of rejecting his message, or doing violence to him. Even then, his goal is not to condemn but to persuade them. Consequently, it is odd if later interpreters miss this plea. Rather than being an invitation to mock the Jews, the text more likely encourages its readers, as Jesus does his partners in discussion, to heed his message. In any case, he addresses the religious leaders, not the people.

Summing up, the parable's traditional interpretation as a prophecy against the Jews, who are identified as the villains of the story, is wide of the mark. It does not predict that God will abandon Israel and embrace the Gentiles instead. Instead, it has a clearly identifiable function within its context. The parable serves as Jesus' and Luke's severe, emotionally-loaded appeal to their recipients to accept Jesus' proclamation.

Conclusions

This analysis of the most important, allegedly adversarial, parables in Luke has demonstrated that the common interpretation of them as descriptions of Jesus' antagonistic attitude towards and inimical encounters with the Pharisees and other Jewish groups is misleading. This type of interpretation is made possible by the allegorical reading, which was to the Early Fathers a practical way of applying the parables to their own struggles with the Jews. Modern scholars have not been able accurately to perceive the parables' persuasive function either, since they have been too eager to import into the stories cultural and historical information not available to the parables' intended recipients. Thus, both the church and the academy have too often isolated the parables from their immediate context and used them to portray Jesus as being antagonistic toward his fellow Jews. Modern scholarly attempts to exonerate Jesus have not been convincing, since they too isolate the parables from their immediate contexts.

In Luke, the 'adversarial' parables most of all

demonstrate his protagonist's attempt to persuade his audience to accept his message about the gospel to the outcasts of society. Whereas the shorter parables appeal to reason and conventions, the longer stories refer to the hearers' emotions in order to challenge their values, beliefs, and behaviours.

Although the parables do not display Jesus' or Luke's unfriendliness towards the Pharisees or other Jewish groups, this does not mean that no tensions existed. Luke lets his readers understand that the people of Jerusalem were guilty of Jesus' death after all. Nonetheless, this is not used to blame some specific group; on the contrary. In his second book, the Acts, Luke lets Peter first accuse the people of Jerusalem of killing Jesus (Acts 2:23, 36), but then uses this in order to proclaim God's forgiveness of them (vv. 38–40).

To be sure, at the time of Luke, strong religious hostilities abounded within Judaism, as the famous *birkat haminim* prayer illustrates. Whether the prayer actually curses the Christians however is still a disputed topic.³⁷ Moreover, the attitudes of the other evangelists, especially Matthew and John, are commonly interpreted as being more hostile towards the Jews than Luke. Studying their parables with the method used here would be interesting indeed.

However, I hope this study has shown that some of the most allegedly antagonistic parables of Jesus in fact have a different function. They indicate that a more optimistic and persuasive attitude toward the Pharisees and other Jews also existed among the early Christians. Perhaps this observation has some bearing on the contemporary interreligious encounters in the Middle East as well. ■

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37 For a recent overview and analysis, see Langer 2012.

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