

RABBINIC PARABLES by David Bivin

Many Christians associate the parable exclusively with Jesus, as if he were the only teacher that ever used this mode of expression. An examination of rabbinic literature, however, reveals that the parable was well established as an instructional tool among Israel's first-century rabbis. The fact that Jesus used parables is evidence that he was a characteristic rabbi functioning in a rabbinic world.

All of the 4,000 rabbinic parables preserved in the Jewish literature of the period were written in Hebrew, and they deal with a wide variety of themes. A full comparison between the parables of Jesus and those of the other rabbis of his day would fill a book. For this article we will look at just a few examples of typical rabbinic parables which treat a common theme: Practice What You Preach.

Many rabbis expressed this idea straightforwardly, such as Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa who said:

"He who has more deeds than knowledge, his knowledge endures; but he who has more knowledge than deeds, his knowledge does not endure."

Similarly, Shim'on ben Gamaliel said:

"The most important thing is not the understanding, but the doing."

This same idea is expressed more elaborately in the following parable:

"A person in whom there are good deeds and who has studied the Torah extensively, what is he like? A man who builds first [of] stones and then afterwards [of] mud bricks. Even if a large quantity of water were to collect beside the stones, it would not destroy them. But a person in whom there are no good deeds, though he has studied Torah, what is he like? A man who builds first [of] mud bricks and then afterwards [of] stones. Even if only a little water collects, it immediately undermines them."

In other words, one's life is like a building: if a solid foundation of good behaviour is laid it will survive forces of opposition; but if the foundation is made of weak materials, of knowledge but no real practice, the whole structure becomes vulnerable.

The simile of a cup is used in the next parable to convey the same theme:

"A person in whom there are good deeds and who has studied Torah extensively, what is he like? A cup that has a base. But a person in who there are not good deeds and who has studied Torah extensively, what is he like? A cup that has no base. When the cup is filled it falls on its side and all its contents are spilled."

Anyone who is familiar with Jesus' parables will quickly see how similar they are in structure and treatment of theme with those quoted above. Let us look at two more parables, one from rabbinic literature and one from the Gospels, to see how much they can have in common. First, a parable from a tractate of the Mishnah called Avot, or "Sayings of the Fathers":

"A person whose knowledge is greater than his deeds, what is he like? A tree whose branches are many but whose roots are few: the wind comes and uproots and overturns it. But a person whose deeds are greater than his knowledge, what is he like? A tree whose branches are few but whose roots are many: even if all the winds were to come and blow against it, they could not move it."

Jesus' parable in Matthew 7:24-27 presents this theme in exactly the same manner:

"A person who hears these words of mine and does them, what is he like? A wise man who builds his house on bedrock: the rain comes down, the rivers overflow, the winds blow and buffet that house, yet it does not collapse because it has its foundations on bedrock. But a person who hears these words of mine and does not do them, what is he like? A foolish man who builds his house on sand: the rain comes down, the rivers overflow, the winds blow and buffet that house, and it collapses in total ruin."

It is apparent from the parables quoted above that Jesus was not the only rabbi to use such a method of teaching. Nor was he the only rabbi to use the 'two kinds of foundations' format or the theme that good deeds are necessary along with knowledge. It was not the way he taught or even the general content of his teaching which made Jesus unique among that rabbis. What was unique about Jesus was who he claimed to be, and he rarely ever taught without claiming to be not only God's Messiah, but more startlingly Immanuel, 'God with us'.

It is just this claim that marks a difference between Jesus' parable of the house built on bedrock and all the other rabbinic parables which deal with the same theme. All the other rabbis spoke of knowing and doing the words of Torah, but Jesus introduced his parable with the words, "A person who hears these words of mine and does them..." No other rabbi is recorded as ever having spoken like that or having made the claims inherent in Jesus' words. He was clearly speaking as only God would speak, and none of his contemporaries could have missed or ignored that fact.

However, what was obvious to a first-century Jewish audience steeped in rabbinic thought is often missed or misunderstood by Christians today. The Christian Church generally seems to have forgotten that the movement Jesus established was wholly Jewish, a movement completely within the Judaism of his day. Jesus himself was a Jew and a rabbi who spoke Hebrew, used familiar rabbinic methods of teaching and drew upon Jewish Scriptures and oral rabbinic traditions. Many of the qualities of Jesus' life and teaching that seem unprecedented to Christians, actually are essential elements in a highly developed Jewish tradition of which Christians are largely ignorant.

Jesus' uniqueness was not cultural or theological: he did not establish a new civilization or a new religion. Jesus' uniqueness was simply who he was: the Messiah. But what we often forget is that he was the Jewish Messiah and that he loved and functioned in an almost completely Jewish world. The more we become acquainted with Jesus' Jewish heritage, the better we will be able to understand who he was and what he taught.

David Bivin

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David Bivin is editor of '*Jerusalem Perspective*' - a quarterly journal dedicated to exploring the Jewish background to the Life and Words of Jesus and also director of the Jerusalem School of Synoptic Research. He is co-author of two books dealing with Hebrew: "*Fluent Biblical and Modern Hebrew*", and "*Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus*". He has lived in Israel since 1963.