

The World of the Parables

Meeting the People Who First Heard Jesus

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Preface

*T*he parables are stories told by a Galilean to Galileans and feature activities they did every day: sowing and reaping; catching fish and searching for lost sheep; grinding grain, mixing leaven, and sweeping floors. The speaker, the audience, the characters and their actions, and the settings in which the parables were first spoken all relate directly to first-century Galilee.

The past several decades have witnessed a veritable explosion of information about Galilee from archaeologists unearthing material remains of the culture and historians uncovering relevant sociological data. Most parables feature the ordinary people of Galilee's towns and villages, people who seldom make it into the history books. The following pages provide a rich, textured understanding of the historical context around Jesus's parables, plus commentary on the parables with the hope that readers will be able to hear them with some of the resonances that would have been clear to the crowds who heard Jesus in Galilee.

With the hope of making this book as stimulating as possible for both individual and group study, I have included a list of the most relevant parables at the beginning of each chapter and a list of questions "for reflection and discussion" at the end of each chapter. The map of Galilee contains every location mentioned in the book, and a key to the locations follows the map. The indexes will also facilitate finding discussions of specific parables, Scripture passages, and subjects.

For more detail and documentation, which has deliberately been kept to a minimum in this volume, see *The People of*

the Parables: Galilee in the Time of Jesus (Westminster John Knox, 2024).

Books, and certainly this one, require networks of support and friends who guide and encourage the author. The conference on the parables at Baylor in March 2024 and the invitation to give the annual New Testament Lectures at Asbury Seminary in April 2024 provided me with opportunities to test and refine my work on first-century Galilee with professors and students. Mikeal Parsons's undergraduate class on the parables at Baylor, in the fall of 2024, provided astute questions to reflect on. Opportunities to teach at St. Andrews Episcopal Church in Hartwell, GA; Emmanuel Episcopal Church in Athens, GA; and Smoke Rise Baptist Church in Stone Mountain, GA, confirmed the presence of a lively curiosity among many church members today and an eager readiness to learn more about life in first-century Galilee.

Dan Braden and his fellow editors at Westminster John Knox guided my work on *The People of the Parables: Galilee in the Time of Jesus*. Dan then suggested that I write this abridged version for a general audience. Without their prompting and guidance, this book would not have been written. Nor could I have written it without the resources and support of the staff at the Pitts Theological Library at Emory University, Atlanta. The map of Galilee on page xii was created using Bible Mapper 5, available at biblemapper.com; I am grateful to its creator, David Barrett, for permission to publish the map. Friends—especially Nancy Grizzle, Ann Parsons, and Sara Powell—generously served as my first readers, helping me write more clearly where my first efforts were lacking. Adequate appreciation can hardly be expressed for Amy-Jill Levine's careful reading, suggestions, and comments. Any problematic statements or views that remain are entirely my own. My wife, Jacquelyn, has given me her loving support and encouragement daily throughout our nearly sixty years of sharing life together, a treasure beyond description.

Alan Culpepper
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Map of Galilee

Key to the Map of Galilee

Acco (also Ptolemais and Acre). On the eastern shore of the Mediterranean, an important port city (Judges 1:31; Acts 21:7; often in 1 and 2 Maccabees), later a Crusader fortress.

Beit Netofa (Netophah) Valley. A fertile area with large estates.

Bethsaida. Home of Peter, Andrew, and Philip (John 1:44; 12:21), where Jesus withdrew from the crowds (Mark 6:45; Luke 9:10) and healed a blind man (Mark 8:22).

Caesarea. A port city on the Mediterranean, built by Herod the Great.

Caesarea Philippi. North of Lake Huleh, where Peter confessed that Jesus was the Christ (Matthew 16:13–20; Mark 8:27–30).

Cana. Where Jesus turned water to wine (John 2:1–11; 4:46), home of Nathanael (John 21:2).

Capernaum. Apparently Jesus's home after he left Nazareth (Matthew 4:13; Mark 2:1), where he taught in the synagogue (Mark 1:21; Luke 4:31; John 6:59), healed Peter's mother-in-law, a paralyzed man, and others (Mark 1:29–34; 2:1–12), and encountered a centurion with great faith (Matthew 8:5–10; Luke 7:1–10).

Chorazin (Korazin). One of the cities in which Jesus did "deeds of power" but was not received (Luke 10:13).

Gadara. One of the cities of the Decapolis, mentioned in Mark 5 as the home of "the Gadarene demoniac."

Gamla. Site of a synagogue built in the first century BC and an olive-oil production center.

Gennesaret. A town near Capernaum that Jesus probably visited; a stone harbor; site of the kibbutz at which the "Galilee Boat" is on display.

Gergasa. A variant of Gerasa in Mark 5:1.

Gischala. Home of Josephus's adversary, John of Gischala.

Hippus. A Hellenistic city, one of the cities of the Decapolis, in the Golan Heights, 2 km from the Sea of Galilee.

Jezreel Valley. A fertile plain, the site of many battles in the history of Israel, with an ancient trade route.

Jotapata (Yodfat). City destroyed by Vespasian in AD 67.

Lake Huleh. A bowl between the mountains of Lebanon and the Golan Heights, a marshy area until it was drained in the 1950s, after the founding of the modern State of Israel in 1948.

Magdala (Migdal). On the Sea of Galilee's western shore, a center of the fishing industry and the home of Mary Magdalene; destroyed by Vespasian in AD 67.

Meiron. An olive-oil processing center in Upper Galilee where human bones have been discovered.

Mount Tabor. A mountain near Nazareth and beside the Jezreel Valley; the traditional site of Jesus's transfiguration (Matthew 17:1–8//Mark 9:2–8//Luke 9:28–36).

Nain. Where Jesus raised a widow's dead son to life again (Luke 7:11–17).

Nazareth. Jesus's hometown (Luke 4:16), with a population of 200–400.

Pella. One of the cities of the Decapolis in the Transjordan, where early Christians took refuge during the Jewish Revolt (66–70) according to Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.5.3).

Ptolemais. A major Phoenician port (Acco), conquered and renamed by Alexander the Great; later named Acre, site of a Crusader castle.

Scythopolis. "City of the Scythians" (see Colossians 3:11), rebuilt and so named by Pompey in 63 BC; also known as Beit Shean, the capital of the Decapolis.

Sepphoris. Chosen by Herod Antipas as his capital city in AD 1, under construction throughout Jesus's life.

Shikhin. A center of pottery production.

Tel Rekhes. Site of a small Jewish village, a farmstead, and a first-century synagogue.

Tiberias. The city on the west shore of the Sea of Galilee to which Herod Antipas moved his capital in AD 19.

Tyre. A northern coastal city, mentioned in the Gospels as the place to which Jesus withdrew for a period during his Galilean ministry (Mark 7:24).

Chapter 1

Meeting the Galileans

Children in the Marketplace	Matthew 11:16–19; Luke 7:31–32
Great Banquet	Matthew 22:2–13; Luke 14:15–24
Friend at Night	Luke 11:5–8
Choice Places at the Table	Luke 14:7–11
Rich Man and Lazarus	Luke 16:19–31

When he came to Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him, since they had seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the festival, for they, too, had gone to the festival.

(John 4:45)

*L*ife was hard in antiquity. Work had to be done by hand or with the help of a donkey or an ox. Imagine living before the development of modern medicine, with only folk remedies and herbs, before we understood infections, diseases, and the importance of sanitation. The emerging field of osteoarchaeology (the study of bones recovered by archaeologists) is shedding new light on the physical characteristics, effects of hard labor, life expectancy, diseases, and causes of death in ancient Galilee. Bone samples from about 1,600 individuals allow us to calculate the average height of Galileans in the New Testament period from the length of the femur (the longest bone in the body). The average for men was 5 feet, 5 inches; and the average for women was 4 feet, 11 inches. Men probably weighed about 140 pounds. These averages, give or take an inch or two, were probably true for Jesus and the disciples, Mary, Mary Magdalene, and others around Jesus.

Illnesses and Mortality

Life was especially hard on children. Up to 30 percent of newborns died in birth and another 30 percent before reaching the age

of five. Because of the high rate of infant mortality, life expectancy at birth was only 20 years. For those who lived to be 20, men could expect to live to be 38, women only 33, which reflects the dangers of childbirth. A first-century BC inscription from Egypt describes a situation that was tragically common elsewhere also.

This is the grave of Arsinoe, wayfarer. Stand by and weep for her, unfortunate in all things, whose lot was hard and terrible. For I was bereaved of my mother when I was a little girl [perhaps in her bearing another child?], and when the flower of my youth made me ready for a bridegroom, my father married me to Phabeis, and fate brought me to the end of my life in bearing my firstborn child. I had a small span of years, but great grace flowered in the beauty of my spirit. This grave hides in its bosom my chaste body, but my soul has flown to the holy ones. Lament for Arsinoe.¹

Frequent pregnancies, death in childbirth, “middle-age” widows, and orphans were common. With such short life expectancies, most children lost at least one parent by the time they were teenagers. Still, about a fourth of the total population was forty or older, with a few surviving into their sixties and beyond.

Heart attacks, cancers, and diabetes were not leading causes of death. Early deaths were more often the result of famines, malnutrition, diseases such as dysentery, and sometimes violence. The diseases that plagued people of that time were internal parasites, tuberculosis, malaria, and leprosy. The low-lying near-tropical areas around the Sea of Galilee—precisely the sites of Jesus’s itinerant ministry (Bethsaida, Chorazin, Capernaum, and Magdala; see Luke 10:13–15)—were especially susceptible to malaria. Josephus describes the atmosphere in this area as “pestilential.”² Mark says Peter’s mother-in-law was “in bed with a fever” (Mark 1:30). The royal official’s son, also in Capernaum, likewise had a fever and was at the point of death (John 4:52). They did not understand that fever was only a symptom, not the illness. Both probably had malaria. Almost half of the 200 skulls found in the tombs at Meiron in Upper Galilee were of children or teenagers, and most of the children’s skulls had lesions that could have been caused by malaria. In addition, roundworms, tapeworms,

and whipworms were common, sapping nutrients from the body and causing fatigue and susceptibility to other diseases. Not many people, therefore, knew the luxury of getting up in the morning with energy, ready to face the day's work.

Whether leprosy (Hansen's disease) was known in Galilee has been debated. What the Gospels refer to as leprosy may have been other skin diseases that caused chronic, scaly conditions. Aretaeus of Cappadocia (2nd c. AD), the first known writer to describe *lepromatous* leprosy, grimly comments, "When in such a state, who would not flee;—who would not turn from them, even a father, a son, or a brother? There is danger, also, from the communication of the ailment."³ Those who had skin diseases had to keep their distance from others (Leviticus 13:46; Luke 17:12).

Diet

What did Galileans eat, and what customs characterized their meals? Galilean Jews ate two meals a day. Breakfast was a simple meal, usually bread with dried fruit, olives, cheese, or eggs. The evening meal, the main meal of the day, could begin mid-afternoon or closer to sundown. The basic elements of the daily diet were bread, wine, and olive oil, "the Mediterranean triad" (Deuteronomy 28:51), but these were commonly supplemented with peas, beans, and lentils ("the poor man's meat"), but also fruit (especially dried figs), nuts, and fish. Deuteronomy 8:8–9 describes the land of Israel, perhaps with some hyperbole, as "a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity." Bee honey and syrup from fruits were used for sweetening. Milk came from sheep and goats. Barley, which required less water to grow than wheat, was regarded as inferior and used for animal feed; but the poor also made bread from it. The boy whose lunch fed 5,000 had five loaves (buns or pita bread) of barley and two fish, probably dried (John 6:9, 13).

Wheat was more common in Galilee. The "daily bread" was dipped in olive oil or served with olives, peas, or beans, but the

earliest reference to hummus comes from a thirteenth-century cookbook in Syria.⁴ Salads were made with fresh leafy vegetables (cabbage and kale). Salt was important both for seasoning and as a preservative. Fig trees were so prevalent that peace and prosperity could be characterized as a time when “every one of you will eat from your own vine and your own fig tree and drink water from your own cistern” (2 Kings 18:31). Carob pods were used as animal fodder but could be eaten in times of famine (see Luke 15:16). Wine, usually mixed two parts of water to one part of wine, was a staple: “Eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed” (Proverbs 9:5); “Wine mixed with water is sweet and delicious and enhances one’s enjoyment” (2 Maccabees 15:39 NRSV). So good was the wine that in the third century BC, the Macedonians in Egypt judged that wine from a vineyard in Galilee was indistinguishable from the wine of the Aegean.

Meat was not a staple. Only the elites ate meat regularly; most of the population ate meat only on special occasions. Arable land was so limited that it was not economical to raise livestock, and oxen were work animals. When the host in Jesus’s parable says, “My oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered” (Matthew 22:4), it means his feast will be a lavish occasion. Many families kept a few sheep and goats, because they supplied wool (or hair), cheese, and skins. Where pig bones have been found, they suggest a gentile community, or possibly that Jews raised pigs to sell to gentiles. The absence of pig bones in most Galilean communities, when coupled with other markers of Jewish identity and concern for purity, points to a Jewish population concerned to maintain its distinctiveness.

Fish bones became more abundant in the Roman era, when fish were shipped to Sepphoris and other inland markets (see chapter 8). The increase in consumption of fish in this period may be due to various economic and social factors, one of which may have been the prominence of fish in Greek and Roman diets.

Meals

Meals, especially on special occasions, were about much more than just eating. Banquets, communal meals, and festive meals

created community while defining boundaries between Jews and non-Jews as well as among Jews. In Mediterranean culture, where honor and shame drove many social patterns, who gave a banquet, who was invited, who was present, what was served, and where one sat or reclined all defined one's status. Perhaps for this reason, Luke moves Jesus's teaching on greatness to the Last Supper (see Mark 10:41–45; Luke 22:24–27), where “a dispute also arose among them [the disciples] as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest” (Luke 22:24). Among the Essenes at Qumran, where many of the Dead Sea Scrolls were written, one's rank in the community determined one's place at meals.

Meals Defined Status

“The meal was a construction site for identity in the Hellenistic Mediterranean.”

—Hal Taussig⁵

Although elite women could be present at meals with their husbands, when Jesus dines in the homes of his followers, women typically serve the meal. In Mark, for example, Peter's mother-in-law serves (1:30–31). In Luke, Martha prepares a meal for Jesus while her sister, Mary, sits at his feet, listening to his teachings (10:38–42). In

John, in the home of Lazarus, Martha again serves, while Mary anoints Jesus's feet (12:1–8).

The wealthy hosted banquets in their own homes: Zacchaeus (Luke 19:6–7), a leader of the Pharisees (Luke 14:1), Levi (Mark 2:14–15), Simon (Mark 14:3), and Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38–40). The semiprivate character of these meals allowed others to watch what occurred in the homes of the elite. A “woman in the city who was a sinner” could therefore enter the host's home, let down her hair, and anoint Jesus's feet, much to the embarrassment of the host, who was a Pharisee (Luke 7:36–37). Banquets were also held in rented locations, like the upper room (Mark 14:12–16). Birthdays, weddings, and gatherings with friends and clients were marked by festive meals. Galileans of modest means ate with relatives and neighbors on such occasions, as well as on the Sabbath, usually in their courtyards or outdoors. Communal meals were also held in the side rooms around synagogues.

One scholar quipped that in Luke, “Jesus is either going to a meal, at a meal, or coming from a meal.”⁶ Given the role of meals in defining identities and boundaries, it is no surprise that Jesus defines the kingdom of God and its coming by his inclusive table fellowship, eating with “tax collectors and others” (Luke 5:29), and consequently evokes controversy.

Definition of a Parable

“At its simplest the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.”

—C. H. Dodd⁷

Invitations were sent out in advance, in writing for lavish gatherings, orally for most meals. Jesus’s parable of the great banquet presumes a double invitation and guests who live in the vicinity.

In an age of the sundial and sand clock (hourglasses), times would have been only approximate. The practice of double invitations also allowed the invited guests to

confirm that other guests of status would be attending also—and make excuses (as in Jesus’s parable; Luke 14:15–24) if that were not the case.

Jesus’s response to his host, Simon the Pharisee, refers to the acts of hospitality a guest might expect:

I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. (Luke 7:44–46)

Removing sandals and washing a traveler’s dusty feet, following Abraham’s example (Genesis 18:4), were common acts of hospitality, normally performed by slaves, children, wives, or pupils. Yet, John the Baptist declares that he was not worthy to unloose the sandal of the one coming after him (John 1:27). When Jesus washes the feet of his disciples, Peter, shocked, protests, “You will

never wash my feet” (John 13:8). Showing hospitality and washing the feet of “the saints” attested to a widow’s virtue, according to 1 Timothy 5:10.

Anointing one’s head or a guest’s head with oil was associated with consecration and hospitality. In an incredibly extravagant act, the woman who anointed Jesus broke a flask of pure nard. This costly ointment was prepared from the roots and stems of an aromatic Indian herb. Breaking the flask meant that none of the ointment could be held back for a later occasion.

In ancient Israel diners sat up, but reclining was the common practice in the Greek world. References to guests reclining at meals in the Gospels suggest that reclining had become common by the first century. Common people reclined on the floor or outdoors, perhaps on mats. Only the elite reclined on couches.

Eating from bowls and plates is confirmed in the book of Judith, where Judith orders her servant to pack her containers (10:5). Diners wiped their hands on bread, and dogs were often present to eat the bread and other scraps (Matthew 15:27). Sirach, also in the Apocrypha (see the glossary), instructs his students on good manners at a banquet:

Do not reach out your hand for everything you see, and do not crowd your neighbor at the dish. Judge your neighbor’s feelings by your own, and in every matter be thoughtful. Eat what is set before you like a well brought-up person, and do not chew greedily, or you will be despised. Be the first to stop, as befits good manners, and do not be insatiable, or you will give offense. If you are seated among many persons, do not help yourself before they do. (31:14–18)

The common pattern of Greco-Roman meals distinguished between the meal and the symposium that followed. After the meal, the tables were removed, the wine was mixed, a libation of wine was poured out or drunk, and the diners sang a hymn in preparation for the symposium. The entertainment that followed could be as raucous as Herod Antipas’s birthday feast (Mark 6:21–28), as cultured as philosophical discussions, or as devout as exposition and discussion of the Torah.

The Parable of the Great Banquet

What we have learned about ancient meal practices sheds light on Jesus's parable of the great banquet (Luke 14:15–24), which is a good example of how Jesus used parables to challenge his hearers to reexamine common practices and expectations. Although the parable occurs in both Matthew (22:2–13) and Luke, only Luke dramatically situates it in the context of a meal at which Jesus is a guest (Luke 14:1, 15). Jesus has already created an embarrassing scene by challenging the practice of inviting only family, friends, and neighbors:

He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers and sisters or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." (Luke 14:12–14)

Another person at the table, perhaps not knowing what to say but feeling the need to say something, adds, "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" Jesus doubles down on his challenge by responding with the parable of the great banquet. As was the practice, the host had sent out invitations well in advance. When the day of the banquet came and the banquet was ready, the host sent a slave to call the guests to come, but one by one those who had been invited declined to come, offering flimsy excuses. No one would buy land without inspecting it first or buy oxen sight unseen. In these cases, material possessions and worldly pursuits (see Luke 8:14 and 12:13–21) interfere with their coming to the banquet. The third invited guest protests that he has just been married (perhaps a euphemism for saying he is occupied with his bride!). Earlier, Jesus warned would-be disciples about letting commitment to their family interfere with their call to follow him (Luke 9:59–62). It is one of Jesus's hard sayings, as is his warning that households will be divided (Luke 12:51–53). We might assume that an invited

guest would know that the date of the banquet would conflict with his wedding celebration. The excuses don't work, so the hearers are challenged to understand the story on another level. Dramatically, even scandalously, Jesus insists that the banquet invitation must supersede everything else. The hearer begins to understand that this is no ordinary banquet. Jesus is talking about our response to the invitation to the kingdom of God and the great banquet that Isaiah wrote about: "On this mountain [Jerusalem] the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear" (25:6). Echoing Isaiah, Jesus then describes how the host sent out his slave again, to invite those who were not on the original guest list: the poor, the disabled, the blind, and those unable to walk (see Luke 4:18; 6:20; 7:22). Then he sent his slave out a third time, to the poorest of the poor: those who lived in makeshift shelters along the roads and paths outside the city. His house will be filled, but not one of those who refused his invitation will taste his dinner.

By challenging the customs that marked the host as a person of honor and status and employing the conventional practice of summoning guests when the banquet is ready, Jesus's parable served as a dramatic illustration of Luke's announcement that Jesus was sent to scatter the proud, bring down the powerful, lift up the lowly, and fill the hungry with good things (Luke 1:51–53). Like Jesus's healings of the lame and the blind, the parable of the great banquet points to the new order of the coming kingdom.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Why are living grandparents and grandchildren never mentioned in the Gospels?
2. How would your life be different if as a young person you knew you probably would not live much beyond your mid-thirties?
3. How does knowing more about the realities of life in first-century Galilee change your understanding of Jesus's disciples and the crowds that gathered around him?
4. Did Jesus share ancient understandings of diseases? If he knew the importance of handwashing and sanitation, why is there no

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record that he taught his disciples and the crowds to wash their hands often (Matthew 15:2; Mark 7:2–5; Luke 11:37–38)? By washing their hands, the Pharisees maintained a priestly level of purity.

5. How does understanding the customs related to meals shed light on Jesus's conduct and parables involving meals?

Chapter 2

Families

Two Sons
Prodigal Son

Matthew 21:28–32
Luke 15:11b–32

*When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him. . . .
And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here
are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of
God is my brother and sister and mother.”*

(Mark 3:21, 34–35)

*F*amily units were the basic elements of ancient society and economy, in part because of the amount of work daily life required. In many respects, however, ancient families were quite different from modern families. Relationships between men and women were different, and so were courtships and weddings. Marriages were contracts between families. Marriage contracts and certificates of divorce protected the wife’s property. Families were patriarchal, and a few men had more than one wife. Yet husbands and wives collaborated, each taking the lead in certain tasks: the man typically led in most activities outside the home, but some women owned houses and orchards and other businesses. Life expectancies, short by modern standards, and high rates of death in childbirth altered family patterns. Eldest sons were especially favored; daughters were reared to become part of another man’s household. Most families worked where they lived or walked to nearby farms. A few were wealthy, but most lived at the margin of subsistence, struggling with debts. In these and other ways families in antiquity cannot be stereotyped and often challenge our modern preconceptions. In addition, political alliances and the relationship, obligations, and responsibilities between patrons and clients can be characterized as “fictive” kinship or “fictive families.” Marriages could seal alliances.

Children

Ancient writers expressed mixed views on children and parenting. Children were, of course, expected to obey their fathers. Sirach, a Jewish wisdom teacher early in the second century BC, took a generally dim view of children and said, “It is a disgrace to be the father of an undisciplined son, and the birth of a daughter is a loss” (22:3). Therefore, “he who loves his son will whip him often, so that he may rejoice at the way he turns out” (30:1). Yet Cicero

Fictive Kinship

The Seleucid ruler Alexander Balas addressed his defeated rival Demetrius I (150–145 BC): “Now therefore let us establish friendship with one another; give me now your daughter as my wife, and I will become your son-in-law and will make gifts to you and to her in keeping with your position.”

—1 Maccabees 10:54

and the philosopher Epictetus also taught that love of children is engendered by nature. Hellenistic sarcophagi (323–30 BC) depict children at play, with pet dogs and birds, with a hoop, driving a cart pulled by a small animal, playing ball, and rolling a nut down an incline to scatter a tower of nuts. Epictetus added, “Who is not tempted by attractive and wide-awake children to join their sports, and crawl on all fours with them, and talk baby talk with them?”¹ Yet, he also said children are fickle.² Ignorance is the defin-

ing character of a child, and in that regard a child is a model for all: “For what is a child? Ignorance. What is a child? Want of instruction.”³ The same theme appears in the New Testament:

Brothers and sisters, do not be children in your thinking; rather, be infants in evil, but in thinking be adults. (1 Corinthians 14:20)

We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. (Ephesians 4:14)

Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. (1 Peter 1:14)

Yet, loving Jewish parents brought their children to Jesus, and Jesus blessed children and laid his hands on them (Matthew 19:14–15). It is also the children, not the chief priests and scribes, who hail Jesus, “Hosanna to the Son of David” (Matthew 21:15).

Education

Both Greek and Jewish writers emphasize the importance of education, but whatever education children of rural and artisan families received was in the home, from their parents, and generally did not go beyond training in everyday tasks, the family’s work (agriculture, fishing, carpentry), and religious instruction (Proverbs 6:20; 31:1; Ephesians 6:4; 2 Timothy 1:5; 3:14–15). The book of Proverbs contains traditional exhortations for parents and children.

In the Apocrypha, the book of Tobit gives us a glimpse of what may have been typical parental instruction. An orphan, Tobit learned Torah from his grandmother Deborah. Before Tobit sends his son off to recover money he had left in trust in Media, he instructs his son to give him a proper burial when he dies, honor his mother, revere the Lord, live uprightly, give alms, beware of fornication, marry a woman descended from his ancestors (a Jewish woman), pay workers their wages at the end of the day, discipline himself, seek advice from every wise person, and bless the Lord God at all times (4:3–19).

A statement from the Talmud, although it dates to the fifth or sixth century, reflects the traditional duties of the father that surely characterized Jewish families in the first century also: “Our Rabbis taught: The father is bound in respect to his son to circumcise [him], redeem [him if the son is a firstborn], teach him Torah, take a wife for him; and teach him a craft. Some say, to teach him to

A Command for Children (and Adults Too)

“Hear, my child, your father’s instruction, and do not reject your mother’s teaching.”

—Proverbs 1:8

swim.”⁴ The last line of the statement, “Some say, to teach him to swim,” probably expresses a general admonition to teach sons what they need to survive. The sign of circumcision, performed on the eighth day, was rooted in the Abrahamic covenant (Genesis 17:10–14), but it received renewed emphasis as a sign of Jewish identity and faithfulness after some in Jerusalem embraced Greek culture in the second century BC. In commemoration of the exodus, the firstborn male was offered to the Lord, presented to a priest, and exchanged (“redeemed”) for five shekels (Exodus 13:11–16; Numbers 18:16). We do not have evidence of redeeming firstborn sons in first-century Galilee, but faithful observance of the Torah, marriage within the people of Israel, and procreation of children were all essential for the continuation of the people of the covenant. They were therefore duties expected of every Jewish father. According to Luke 2:21–24, Jesus was circumcised and presented in the temple. Joseph and Mary made a sacrifice for Mary’s purification (following Leviticus 12:8), but there is no reference to Jesus being redeemed.

Literacy

Unfortunately, not many ancient Jews had the opportunity to learn to read. It is estimated that in antiquity only about 10 percent of the population could read, and even less among Jews. There was also a correlation between illiteracy and dependence on agriculture. Literacy rates would have been higher in Jerusalem than in Galilee, higher in cities than in villages and rural areas, higher among elites and priests than among farmers and artisans, and much higher among men than women. Complicating the situation, four languages were used in first-century Judea and Galilee. Biblical texts were written in Hebrew. Aramaic was the common spoken language, while some also spoke Greek. Probably only those who interacted with Roman officials or soldiers spoke Latin.

Various levels of literacy are evident: illiteracy (inability to read or write); artisan or craft literacy (a low level of literacy, such as would be required to function in one’s work: reading or writing lists, weights, measurements, names); and scribal literacy

(ranging from village scribes with limited abilities to those who could read and write fluently). The goal of elementary education was the ability to write one's name (signature literacy). Therefore, persons who could not sign their name generally could not read either. A groundbreaking study of the signatories of early second-century documents found in Judea identifies four levels of ability based on the handwriting: (1) the alphabetic hand or slow writer, reflecting only a year or two of schooling; (2) the unpracticed hand; (3) the practiced hand or "literary literate," attesting years of study and practice; and (4) the professional scribe.⁵ Michael Wise, the author, concludes that about 16 percent of Judean adults were signature literate, but none of the women in Wise's sample population could sign her name. Illiteracy carried no social stigma, however, while literacy was a mark of status and wealth, since only 5 to 10 percent of Judean men were able to read books.⁶ Most of those who could read were elites, priests, and scribes. Synagogues emerged by the first century as places where the people could go to hear the Scriptures read and interpreted.

The origins of the Jewish elementary school are obscure and probably postdate Jesus's ministry. The Jerusalem Talmud attributes its origin to Simeon ben Shetah (ca. 100 BC),⁷ but this appears to be a case of pressing later rabbinic ideals back into an earlier period. The Babylonian Talmud records that Joshua ben Gamla (ca. AD 64) introduced a decree that teachers should be appointed in every district and town and that children should enter school from the age of six or seven, but it is doubtful that such a decree could have been widely instituted prior to the Jewish Revolt of 66–70.⁸ Neither of these traditions can be authenticated, and no contemporary source mentions schools for primary education in Galilee. When schools did begin to appear by the third century, they were private enterprises in which a teacher and his student or students met wherever they could, often in the student's home. The rabbis advised young men who wanted to study the law to find a teacher and a fellow student (Mishnah Avot 1:6, 16; see John 1:38–39).

In sum, children of agrarian and artisan families in Galilee received practical and religious education at home and in the synagogues. Only the children of the elite, landowners, priests,

scribes, and the Herodians might receive formal instruction in reading or writing, probably from private instructors. One who read the Scriptures or offered instruction would have been held in high regard. Whatever knowledge of the Law and the Prophets others might gain came through what they had learned from their parents as children and what they heard in public readings and discussions in the synagogue.

Parables about Fathers and Sons

Four sayings feature fathers and sons. A father would not give his son a stone or a snake when he asks for bread or fish (Matthew 7:9–11). If an earthly father would not treat his child in this way, “how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” When the neighbor comes at night, the father is in bed with his young children (Luke 11:5–8), probably all together in one room on floor mats; but if the neighbor is persistent, the father will still get up to help the neighbor. Be persistent in prayer. When the father sends the first son to work in the vineyard, his son refuses but then goes. The second son said he would go but did not. Which one did the will of his father? (Matthew 21:28–32). Whatever groups one identifies as the first son and the second son, the emphasis clearly falls on *doing* what the father commands. The first son uses no term of respect when he responds to his father. The second son addresses him as “sir,” but does not go to work in the vineyard (which likely reminded hearers of “the song of the vineyard” in Isaiah 5, where the owner of the vineyard is God and the vineyard is Israel). Remember, Jesus said, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 7:21). The prodigal son asks for his inheritance, which he squanders in a far country. But when he returns home, his father receives him joyfully (Luke 15:11–32). All four parables assume definite expectations about a father’s authority and a son’s obligations.

Luke also recalls a moment when a man called for Jesus to settle a family dispute: “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me” (12:13). The prodigal son demands

his inheritance, which may not have been unusual (Luke 15:12), and the wicked tenants of the vineyard conspire to kill the owner's son, "the heir," thinking, wrongly, that they can then claim the vineyard (Matthew 21:38; Mark 12:7; Luke 20:14). The Jewish laws regarding inheritance, therefore, have implications for our understanding of these parables.

The father's role in passing on his property to his heirs was important in both Greco-Roman and Jewish contexts. For Jews, passing on inherited land had the added significance of covenantal duty, as it pertained to the land of Israel. Shares in one's inheritance were allotted following the law of Moses. According to Deuteronomy 21:17, the firstborn son typically received a double portion of the father's property, even if the father preferred another son or the firstborn of another wife. If a father had no son, his inheritance could pass to his daughter (Numbers 27:8), who was then required to marry into a family of her father's tribe (Numbers 36:6). If a father had no children, his estate would pass to his brothers or nearest relative (Numbers 27:9–11).

In light of these laws, we can better understand the dynamics of the family situation in the parable of the prodigal son. The younger brother may have assumed he would not inherit his father's land. The father had no obligation to grant his younger son's request but still agreed to it, and the elder brother may have been angered by his brother's departure from the family. Then, the prodigal added to his offense by squandering his inheritance in a "far country," where he was reduced to feeding pigs.

This parable is different from the other two parables in Luke 15, the recovery of the lost sheep and the lost coin. In contrast to the coin and the sheep, which take no action and have no role in their recovery, the lost son "came to his senses" (v. 17), or more literally, "came to himself" (KJV, NRSV). That is, he recognized the error of his ways, his wrong decisions, and was ready to confess the wrong he had done. He would go home, knowing that his father owed him nothing more, not even his mercy. But his father was waiting for him, looking for him, and when he saw his son coming home, he "was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him" (v. 20). This description underscores the father's joy at his son's return, the very point repeated

at the end of the two previous parables: “Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (15:7).

Here the context of the parable becomes important. The older brother’s complaint about his father’s joy and his mercy toward his younger brother resonates with the grumbling of the Pharisees and the scribes over Jesus’s welcoming sinners and eating with them (15:1–2). It also resonates with the protest of the laborers in the vineyard who had worked all day when they received only a denarius for their labor, the same as those who began working late in the day. There is no basis for antisemitism here, however. “The tax collectors and sinners” and “the Pharisees and the scribes” are all Jews. Tax collectors were often despised because they worked for the Herods, collecting taxes from their neighbors. The Pharisees and scribes, on the other hand, were esteemed as the most righteous and the most learned. What is held up to condemnation is the attitude of entitlement and the callousness of refusing to celebrate the return of a brother. The merciful father might have asked the same question as the vineyard owner challenging the workers who felt entitled to more than the denarius they had agreed to for their day’s work: “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?” (Matthew 20:15). Like the other parables, this one calls the hearers to reexamine their sense of what is right and what is good and to see in themselves the same attitudes that drove the Pharisees and scribes to challenge Jesus in Matthew and Luke.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What strikes you about how ancient Jewish families were different from families today?
2. The Gospels tell us very little about Jesus’s childhood (Luke 2:41–52). Based on what we know about children and families of the first century, describe what you think Jesus’s early life was like.
3. What do the Gospels tell us about Jesus’s relationship with his mother? See Mark 3:31–35. Compare Luke 8:19–21. See also John 2:1–5 and 19:26–27.

4. Given what we know about ancient families, what would it mean for Jesus to constitute his disciples as a “fictive family”—a close-knit group that functions as a replacement for one’s biological family (Mark 3:34–35)? In this regard, study Jesus’s hard sayings about the imperative of following him (Matthew 10:34–38; Luke 9:57–62).
5. How does understanding more about Jewish families in the first century shed light on the parable of the prodigal son? Why might the younger brother have wanted to leave home?