BETWEEN MASHAL AND PARABLE:  
"LIKENESS" AS A METONYMIC ENIGMA

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Generic Characteristics of Mashal

The elusive generic nature of the Hebrew מָשָׁל (mashal) has often been regarded as a problem that must be resolved. This is evident in the quest to secure its generic identity. While any genre ultimately resists definitive definition, the mashal remains particularly resistant to definition. The mashal refuses to be constrained by generic description.¹ It generates diverse generic expressions, such as allegory, simile, parable, proverb, riddle, taunt, irony, or aphorism, to name only some of the prominent expressions. Jeremias pointed out the "fruitless labour" of attempting to define the mashal, and provided the following "figurative forms of speech" that are encompassed by the mashal: parable, similitude, allegory, fable, proverb, apocalyptic revelation, riddle, symbol, pseudonym, fictitious person, example, theme, argument, apology, refutation, and jest.² The mashal is a "sovereign saying" or "word of power," derived from the Hebrew מָשָׁל (mashal) "to rule" (Schmidt, Eissfeldt). Some scholars (Godbey, Herbert) have also sug-

notations of “sympathetic magic.” The mashal approximates to “likeness, resemblance, and comparison,” yet is untranslatable into an English equivalent that conveys its full sense. Perdue noted variations of the mashal as sapiential motifs, encompassing aphorism and parable: the two most fundamental etymological qualities of mashal are “similitude” and “rule.” As similitude and rule, the mashal is a form of ‘Divine Wisdom’ in the tradition of Prov 8:22-31, and functions aesthetically to evoke a response. Mashal maintains its “root meaning” of “likeness, pattern, rule” through diverse kinds of utterance (“prophetic oracle,” “allegory,” “riddle,” “taunt,” “solemn declaration,” “didactic poem”), effecting a sense of enigma, even as it generates interpretation.

Whether the mashal is expressed as proverb, allegory, oracle, or lament, its meaning is fluid, being contingent, each time, on context. The comparison (mashal) is a constant feature of Old Testament literature, and provides an antecedent structure for the parables in the

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4George M. Landes, “Jonah: A Masal?” in Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays (ed. J. Gammie et al.; Missoula: Scholars Press, 1978), 139; also John G. Gammie, “Paraenetic Literature: Toward the Morphology of a Secondary Genre,” Semeia 50 (1990): 63. McKane also notes the use of meshalim to describe the entire content of the book of Proverbs. This is indicative of the broad generic characteristics that the mashal assumes. These characteristics all function to intensify linguistic images and evoke an emotive response. Yet these variations in the mashal’s character are not easy to define (McKane, Proverbs, 32).

5Leo G. Perdue, “The Wisdom Sayings of Jesus,” Forum 2/3 (1986): 5. From these two qualities, the mashal generates folk proverbs, literary proverbs, comparative proverbs, numerical sayings, riddles, questions, beatitudes, admonitions, instructions, disputations, wisdom psalms and poems, and aphorisms (pp. 6-31).


Synoptic Gospels. The mashal expressed in the structure of comparison or simile, is an intensification of images through parallelism. This type of comparison is not merely illustrative, even if the comparison has a degree of simplicity in its comparative structure. The comparison as simile evokes the familiar, only to show that the familiar is immersed in the rich diversity of life. Westermann sees a continuum between the comparison (mashal) and Synoptic Gospel parables with their intensification of the particularities of the simile.

Metonymic Equivocation

The density of the Hebrew mashal as simile is given to metonymic equivocation. The comparisons [meshalim] are sensually textured as well as sensibly suggestive, evocative but also theoretically indeterminate. The mashal's use of earthy, sensual subject matter for intensification, maintains a metonymic oscillation between new theological images and their opaque, material subject matter. The mashal's sensual particularities are not displaced by a "purely metaphorical image." This creates, rather than alleviates interpretive density. A constant feature of the mashal simile is an intensification of images. This intensification does not make the materiality of the mashal superfluous to rhetorical use. Instead, comparison in a mashal is metonymic. It maintains the integrity of qualities that construct the simile, even as the comparison sharpens them. Therefore, while the mashal simile intensifies

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8See Claus Westermann, The Parables of Jesus in the Light of the Old Testament (trans. F. W. Golka and A. H. B. Logan; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990). Finely honed, "literary," "literary parallelism" is the most specific generic characteristic that McKane is able to ascribe to the mashal (McKane, Proverbs, 32).

9Westermann, The Parables of Jesus, 10-12, 150-151.


11For example, Westermann cites comparisons from the Song of Songs, tribal sayings, proverbs, historical narratives, prophecy, and psalms (ibid., 5-151).


13Ibid.
some aspects of life, it also produces opacity with its diverse possible associations in the world of material, sensual textures and human experience. For example the Ezek 18:2 mashal maintains this tension, in which exemplary motifs of Hebrew meshalim, such as comparison, fiction, metonymy, opacity, theology, and interpretation, are present.\footnote{Timothy Polk, “Paradigms, Parables, and Mēšālîm,” CBQ 45 (1983): 568-570. This mashal is a resistant reading to the theological belief in determinism—the ancestors’ sins causing retribution for their descendants. The mashal caricatures and exposes this doctrine to ridicule, with a deliberately confused image of eating and taste—one eats, another tastes (p. 575).}

Meshalim are resistant to transparent interpretation. They reflect the moral and social incongruities of life from which they are created as similes, yet resist clear analogical resolution as “mere similes.” Hence, the mashal simile is more metonymic than metaphorical, although the former contains the latter. This does not exclude metaphorical functions, but it does modulate binary claims made for the metaphoricity of Gospel sayings and parables with ‘metaphorical language’ distinguished from ‘ordinary language.’\footnote{For example, Sallie McFague, Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 43-80; idem, Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 14-66; John Dominic Crossan, In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 10-15.}

As earthy sketches of life, the parables, like their precursor meshalim,\footnote{Gerhardsson refers to sayings and parables from the Synoptic tradition as “aphoristic meshalim” and “narrative meshalim” (“If We Do Not Cut The Parables Out Of Their Frames,” 323). For correlations between the mashal and the Synoptic Gospel parable, see also: idem, “The Narrative Meshalim in the Synoptic Gospels,” NTS 34 (1988): 339-363.} function metonymically, at once literal and non-literal, oscillating between clarity and equivocation. Indeed, this is a recognized linguistic feature of the aphoristic sayings of Synoptic Gospel tradition. Further, too, Luke’s “realistic” narrative parables\footnote{The parables of the two debtors (7:41-42), the good Samaritan (10:30-35), the persistent neighbour (11:5-8), the rich fool (12:16b-20), places of honor (14:8-10), the tower builder (14:28-30), a king going to war (14:31-32), the lost coin (15:8-9), the prodigal son (15:11-32), the cunning steward (16:1-8a), the rich man and Lazarus (16:19-26), the slave’s duties (17:7-9), the unjust judge (18:2-5), and the publican and Pharisee (18:10-13).} appear to have greater continuity with the metonymy of the
mashal, than with binary constructions of metaphor. Luke appears to use these stories as stable, illustrative similes. Unframed, these ambivalent parables do not necessarily create theological meaning. They are dense with the diverse vicissitudes of human life, which can disseminate meaning in several directions. Their impressionable characters—debtors, compatriot and enemy, neighbors, entrepreneur, builder, soldier, father and son, steward, rich and poor, judge and widow—could be found in any story, and attributed with diverse figurative significance. Such characters are the stuff of human stories, whatever the kerygmatic, moral, or philosophical impetus attributed to them. The economical language of Luke’s parables is dense with both literal and figurative reference, yet this figurative capacity need not be theological. It is the Gospel’s kerygmatic framing that gives these metonymic parables their particular theological clarity and impetus.¹⁸

The mashal creates both clarity and density, evoking the familiar, while allowing the complexity of the familiar to generate paradox in a metonymic oscillation between specific reference (clarity) and endless reference (dissemination of specific reference). This equivocation reflects the social and moral contradictions of life from which the sensual particularities of the comparison mashal are drawn. The mashal is metonymic with its particularities being intensified to create a striking image. However, these particularities do not become superfluous to this image.¹⁹ They retain the very paradoxes of which life consists, because of their endless possible associations in the material, sensual textures of life and human experience. The mashal does not dissolve its literal components into a binary metaphorical entity. Intense imagery and dense metonymy remain. The parable, like the mashal with its sensual textures, functions metonymically, confusing binary constructions of literal and non-literal language in images that have a

¹⁸Unlike other Synoptic Gospel parables, there is an absence of direct correlation between Luke’s unique parables and the symbol “kingdom of God.” The only exception is Luke’s aphoristic parable about the backward looking ploughman (9:61-62).

surplus of nomination, fluctuating between specific reference and endless possible reference.

A precise generic description of the mashal, and the nature of its metaphoricity, is not possible. What a mashal is can only be determined by its use in a particular context. Such contexts are diverse and evocative. It is often assumed that literary genres are only affective, evoking emotive, existential responses that exclude the possibility of theological polemic, because they are thought to exclude the possibility of conceptual discourse. Hence, metaphors convey ‘truths’ that cannot be articulated in any other way than as metaphors. This argument cannot be supported by the use of Hebrew meshalim. The mashal is comparative, evocative, affective—a specific image that can also be transplanted into new interpretive contexts. Indeed, the indeterminacy of the mashal as a genre gives it a high degree of rhetorical value, because of its portability into new contexts, with a possibility of alternative rhetorical purposes. Each time it is used in this way, its generic features are also modified.

The generic indeterminacy of the mashal is not a problem that must be solved by appealing to an ever-receding horizon of original use. A clear path to the mashal’s generic roots is always deferred. The continual reconfiguration of a mashal in new and diverse contexts complicates the quest for generic classification. Furthermore, the metonymic character of the mashal in which language oscillates between specific reference and limitless reference, resists an interpretation of mashal as a “purely metaphorical” trope. The mashal is world-affirming, while having the capacity to destabilize perceptions of one’s world. It is

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21 The various contents and contexts of the mashal cause it to function diversely. This affects any proposal for a firm generic description. Indeed, chameleon like, the mashal is shaped by the contexts in which it is found, such as narrative, song, wisdom, or prophetic discourse. It is from the contextual uses of mashal that we identify its textures and functions as a literary genre. See Westermann, *The Parables of Jesus*, for evaluations of simile in a variety of contexts.
proverbial in its wisdom, while being elusively poetic in disseminating its reference. The scant particularity of the mashal causes it to generate multiple meanings. Sparsity generates, rather than limits possible reference. Hence, the biblical tradition continually reuses and reconfigures the mashal in new ways, while retaining a residue of previous uses. The mashal exemplifies the metonymic nature of language. It plays on the oscillating nature of language with its continuum between so-called literal and non-literal use. The mashal is resistant to generic definition as comparison, metaphor, aphorism, proverb, and instruction, yet it is all these. It refuses to be pinned down to an essential generic expression. The mashal is resistant to definitive description and function, even in its most common appearance as “likeness.”

Whatever generic character Gospel writers may have envisaged in their use of parables, whether as metaphor, aphorism, story, allegory, or analogy, their antecedent use as meshalim, cannot be defined precisely. On the one hand, this makes the parable, following the mashal tradition, a difficult genre to be used, even as a simile, with precision or assured meaning. On the other hand, all genres resist definitive use, with any singular use being in tension with an assumed generic identity. The relationship between mashal and παραβολή plays out this tension, with seemingly inevitable dissonance where the interpretive possibilities are circumscribed.

Translation and Genre: Between Mashal and Parable

The generic identity of the Synoptic tradition parable as simile has continuity and discontinuity with the mashal as “likeness.” The translation of השם provides one of the generic framings within which παραβολή is interpreted. Translation can never occur without slippage and displacement of meaning from text to translation, with complete

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Kenneth Dauber refers to the dynamic of “relationality” between biblical texts and genres (“The Bible as Literature: Reading Like the Rabbis,” Semeia 31 [1985]: 27-46).
translation being essentially impossible. Therefore, while the process of translation is necessary, it is always inadequate. Underlying the idea of parable as simile is the assumption that the Hebrew mashal (proverb, riddle, parable, cryptic saying) was adequately translated as παραβολή by the Septuagint. In secular Greek, παραβολή was pervasively understood as comparison or simile, and Aristotle "counts the παραβολή (Rhetoric 2.20) among the examples (παραδείγματα)," which are used for the purpose of "demonstration and illustration." According to Tucker, Aristotle's παραβολή is a comparison, example, or simile, as a subspecies of παράδειγμα. Gerhardsson argues that παραβολή was an unsuitable translation for the mashal because of its assumed generic function among Greek classicists. Evans makes a complementary observation:

That a parable should itself require elucidation is completely foreign to Greek usage, where parabolē denoted an illustration, or

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24Madeleine Boucher, The Mysterious Parable: A Literary Study (Washington: CBA, 1977), 11-13. Jeremias (The Parables of Jesus, 20) points out that παραβολή "has not only the meaning 'parable,' but also 'comparison' (Luke 5:36; Mark 3:23) and 'symbol' (Heb 9:9; 11:19; . . . in Luke 4:23 it should be rendered 'proverb' or 'commonplace,' in 6:39 'proverb'; in Mark 7:17 it means 'riddle' and in Luke 14:7 simply 'rule'). Similarly, the meaning of paroimia varies between 'parable' (John 10:6), 'proverb' (2 Pet 2:22), and 'riddle' (John 16:25, 29)." Brad Young points out that "[t]he LXX translators . . . rendered the Hebrew word mashal by . . . parabolē twenty two times" (Jesus and His Jewish Parables: Rediscovering the roots of Jesus' Teaching [Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1989], 5). Parabolē is constructed "from the preposition para, 'alongside of,' and ballein, 'cast, place, or throw.' Etymologically parable means that one thing is understood in juxtaposition or comparison with another" (Donahue, The Gospel in Parable, 5).


an example having probative force in an inductive proof (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 2.20) which would fail of its purpose if it were not crystal clear.²⁸

If then, παραβολή functions primarily as a lucid, illustrative comparison or analogy, this type of comparison does not have the density of the Hebrew mashal in its function as a comparison. The mashal as simile, therefore, does not equate with the παραβολή as simile, if the former embraces metonymic equivocation, while the latter is used predominantly for analogical clarity.

Jülicher’s classification of Synoptic Gospel parables as “similitudes, parables, and exemplary stories” is Aristotelian (“*Rhetoric II*”), according to Beavis, and continues to influence the generic classification, and therefore interpretation of parables. Beavis, however, argues for the “multiform Semitic mashal/mathla” as the appropriate precursor for classifying these parables.²⁹ Boucher points out that the Hebrew Bible contains every form of the παραβολή, arguing that one does not need to go beyond a Semitic context for antecedent expressions of the Synoptic Gospel παραβολή.³⁰ Early Christian use of παραβολή retained the “richly varied signification” of ἔση beyond its contemporary secular Greek use.³¹ Hence, while the parable as simile has been equated with the rhetorical illustration of Aristotle, the mashal, unlike the rhetorical simile, can be opaque as an enigmatic comparison, which metonymically oscillates between specific reference and endless possible reference.

The equation of mashal with παραβολή is based on the assumption that such translation is complete, with παραβολή saturating the generic possibilities of mashal. The Synoptic tradition parable was developed

²⁸C. F. Evans also notes several instances where mashal has a “sense of enigma” (Prov 1:6; Sir 39:2-3 Num 23:24; Deut 28:37; Pss 49:4; 78:2; Ezek 17:2; 20:49; Saint Luke [Philadelphia/London: TPI/SCM, 1990], 372).


³¹Hauck, "παραβολή," 749, 751.
out of the antecedent repertoire of Hebrew *meshalim*, and Mark demonstrates a residue of enigmatic qualities lurking in the apparently uncomplicated use of παραβολή as a rhetorical simile. Mark’s use of parable is as ἀποκάλυψις, a *mashal* that both reveals and conceals.\(^{32}\) Mark’s parables in particular maintain the character of *meshalim* as aphorisms.\(^{33}\) When the Septuagint translated *mashal* to παραβολή, the translation created a particular interpretive prism through which, for example, Luke’s narrative parables in particular, appear to be framed by the writer. Luke maintains a relatively tidy use of parables, which function as illustrative, rhetorical catalysts for the Gospel narrative. Luke does not seek to evoke the mysterious density of Mark’s rationale for parables for “the one having ears to hear,” but rather works toward clarity of communication.\(^{34}\) The writer softens and applies the rationale to only one parable (the Sower), not to all. The word is not a mystery or riddle, but is to be accessible and discernible to faith (Luke 8:18),\(^{35}\) following Aristotle’s rhetorical παραβολή which functions primarily as a comparison, an illustration or analogy. Unlike the Hebrew *mashal* comparison, this rhetorical use of παραβολή does not appear to have the same density or resistance to transparent interpretation as the *mashal*. While the *mashal* as simile encompasses metonymic opacity, the rhetorical use of παραβολή as simile seeks analogical clarity.

\(^{32}\) Jewish apocalyptic is “[t]he idea of a mystery, a secret once hidden and now revealed.” Apocalyptic motifs divide humanity into the “wise and foolish.” “Corresponding to the distinction between the wise and the foolish in wisdom and apocalyptic is the distinction between insiders and outsiders which we find associated with the parable theme in Mark 4:11-12,” the characteristics of riddle in the *mashal* being present in apocalyptic genres (John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991], 387-388, 393, 396).


The parable as *mashal* should also include aphoristic proverbs and enigmatic allegories.\(^{36}\) On this basis, many of the short sayings of the Synoptic Gospels can be classified as parables after the character of *mashal*.\(^{37}\) Parable is only one form of *mashal*.\(^{38}\) The Septuagint translation of *mashal* to παραβολή is an inevitable narrowing of the perceived character of parable.\(^{39}\) Yet, Jeremias felt that Mark’s use of παραβολή to designate the mystery or riddle of the kingdom of God (Mark 4:11) was problematic. Mark’s logion is couched in the language of ἀποκάλυψις:

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\text{ἵνα}
\text{βλέποντες βλέψωσιν καὶ μὴ ἴδωσιν,}
\text{kαὶ ἀκούοντες ἀκούσωσιν καὶ μὴ συνιῶσιν. (Mark 4:12)}
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Jeremias did not want to expound the *parables of Jesus* as riddles or apocalyptic mysteries. Therefore, he found it necessary to posit a misuse of παραβολή by Mark in the logion explaining the reason for Jesus speaking in parables.\(^{40}\) Two perceptions of parable are therefore

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\(^{36}\)Crossan, "Parables," 147. At the turn of the century, Christian Bugge critiqued Jülicher’s rejection of allegory in parable, citing the Hebrew *mashal* as the most appropriate trope to understand the nature of parables in the Synoptic Gospels. According to Bugge, Hebrew evaluations of *mashal* are diverse and indeterminate, with a continuum between parable and allegory in the *mashal* (Ezek 31:16, 17:22; Dan 4:12). Paul Fiebig extended Bugge’s exploration of parable as allegory by sifting through the use of *mashal* in Jewish Midrashic traditions, observing similarities with the Synoptic Gospel parables. Cf. Warren S. Kissinger, W.S. The Parables of Jesus: A History of Interpretation and Bibliography (Metcen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, 1979), 77-82.


\(^{38}\)Bernard Brandon Scott, Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 8.

\(^{39}\)Drury, The Parables in the Gospels, 8; also Boucher, The Mysterious Parable, 12. Jeremias, commenting on the use of παραβολή in Mark 4:11, asserts that παραβολή necessarily derives its meaning from the Hebrew *mashal* and has intrinsic qualities of riddle and mystery (The Parables of Jesus, 16).

\(^{40}\)Mark, misled by the catchword παραβολή, which he erroneously understood as ‘parable,’ inserted our logion into the parable-chapter” (ibid., 18).
present here. On the one hand, Jeremias recognized that Mark uses παραβολή as a riddle to provide similes of the mystery of the kingdom; the nature of παραβολή therefore being that of Hebrew mashal as simile, which is also riddle, mystery, or dark saying. On the other hand, the Septuagint use of παραβολή, according to Jeremias, is more appropriate in explaining the function of parable as simile, analogy or illustration in the teaching of Jesus. Jeremias assumed that the latter function, clarity not enigma, was the function of Jesus teaching in parables. Jeremias resisted Mark’s combination of παραβολή with riddle in the reason for speaking in parables. He wanted to sever Mark 4:11 from the parable logion. This indicates a reluctant recognition of Mark’s παραβολή use as mashal, riddle, or enigmatic dark saying.

While Mark retains the enigmatic dimension of mashal in the use of παραβολή, Jeremias, against the prevailing evidence that he nevertheless concedes, resists the idea that parables should be enigmatic. Therefore, we might summarize the tension in the following way: in Jesus’ use of παραβολή according to Mark, Mark’s παραβολή equates with the Hebrew mashal as riddle, mystery, or dark saying; and, in Jesus’ use of παραβολή according to Jeremias, Mark’s παραβολή should equate with the prevailing rhetorical use of παραβολή as illustration, analogy, or comparison. However, no such dichotomy need be established between apocalypse and simile, if the mashal as “likeness” is already enigmatic in its metonymic capacity for disseminating reference. Drury points out that Jeremias overlooked the pervasive Jewish apocalyptic background, including Pauline use of parables, as a context for Mark’s use of parables. Indeed, the Isa 6:6-9 citation indicates a paradoxical disclosure and concealment for parables, which is typical of a Jewish apocalypse.41 The mashal tradition is paradoxical with its capacity for riddle, taunt, cryptic saying, proverb, and metaphor.42

41Drury, The Parables in the Gospels, 40-43. Crossan notes that the parables in the Synoptic Gospels can take the form of aphorism, comparison, or narrative after the antecedent Hebrew mashal (Crossan, “Parable,” 147-148).

42Scott, Hear Then The Parable, 9-13. The mashal and riddle (hidā) are closely associated in biblical literature, riddles being “[e]nigmatic sayings which challenge the hearer to determine the referent” (Gammie, “Paraenetic Literature,” 64, 71).
"Mashal is the paradigm of hidden or allusive truth that demands the skill of the wise to interpret. . . . A riddle plays upon language's ambiguity."\(^{43}\) It is resistant to quick assimilation,\(^{44}\) even as "likeness."

"Likeness" is not easily comprehended as riddle, yet the mashal has polysemic qualities that invite interpretive response from the auditors of a mashal.\(^ {45}\) It directly engages interpretive activity, because of its "indirection and suggestion."\(^ {46}\) As "likeness," the mashal evokes the familiar, only for the familiar to be immersed in complexity. The same might be said of Gospel parables, especially Luke's unique parables, many of which at first appear to be framed by the writer as illustrations, but on closer examination, retain in their similes, the same metonymic density as the mashal. This ambiguity is retained in Mark's use of παραβολή.

Conclusion

The mashal is a precursor to the parables and sayings of the Synoptic Gospels, however, "likeness" does not adequately translate into παραβολή as simile following Aristotle's rhetorical tradition. The mashal, even if approximated to "likeness" in its closest generic classification, creates a sense of enigma or riddle. Certainly, the mashal is equated with opacity not clarity. Παραβολή understood as a simile,

\(^{43}\) Scott, *Hear Then The Parable*, 10. "All the various items that are referred to as mashal involve connotative language. Inference and interpretation are of the essence of mashal. In semiotic terms, mashal is the expression for a suppressed content" (p. 13).

\(^{44}\) The character of mystery in the Old Testament does not "banish clarity," so much as intensify our quest for clarity (Levinas, "Revelation in Jewish Tradition," 194).


\(^{46}\) Scott, *Hear Then The Parable*, 10-11. Scott (pp. 12-13) notes an accentuation of the interpretive skill necessary for understanding an allegory, in the introductory phrases "riddle a riddle" and "mashal a mashal," referred to by Ezekiel (17:2).
need not diminish its capacity to be enigmatic, metonymically generating endless possible reference, while also providing an apparently simple comparison. The simile, as likeness, is also strangely enigmatic in its possibilities for multiple references. Hence, the simile as comparison is not as generically determined as it is easily assumed. The language of Synoptic Gospel parables, as with the language of Hebrew meshalim, is subject to metonymic fluctuation in its reference. Parables are metonymically dense, with the particulars of a parable being sufficiently sparse for the story to be interpreted in a number of ways. The particulars of the story function metonymically with the possibility of "literal" (specific) and endless possible references. The plot might be simple, yet it is as dense as life itself.

The effect of translation, in which the metonymic mashal as "likeness" becomes illustrative παραβολή as simile, may have made the Synoptic tradition parable easier to frame for rhetorical and theological purposes. However, the parable simile, within the context of Gospel ἀποκάλυψις, also retains textures of the mashal. The metonymic density of this genre, with its surplus of meaning, cannot be completely controlled by rhetorical assumptions with which it is framed and therefore interpreted. Similarly, the metonymic possibilities of parables cannot be closed by its generic designation as an illustrative παραβολή, without simile or likeness also having latent possibilities of apocalypse and enigma. A generic designation of a parable largely determines the direction of its interpretation, and the designation of parable as "simile" is often resisted in its classification as a metaphorical trope. However, with its antecedent tradition in the mashal "likeness," the resistance of the Synoptic parable to definitive generic identity is loaded with potential resistance to a circumscribed understanding of simile and, therefore, legitimate interpretation of parables as similes.