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JESUS AS A METAPHORICAL THEOLOGIAN AND THE RABBINIC WORLD

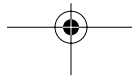
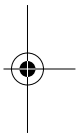
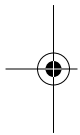
What is theology, and what does it mean to be a theologian? Is theological meaning created by linking ideas together with reason/logic, ideas that may or may not have illustrations attached to them for clarity? In such a world, the illustration is sometimes useful but, in reality, nonessential and can be discarded once the concept is clearly grasped. The illustration becomes a delivery system for an idea. The creator of meaning who uses this method probably will not add an illustration if the concept is clear to the reader/listener without one.¹ The idea matters. The illustration introduced to clarify or communicate that idea does not. This is a time-honored way to “do theology” and will continue to be important.

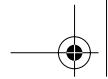
There is, however, another way to create and communicate meaning. It involves the use of word pictures, dramatic actions, metaphors and stories. This latter method of “doing theology” shines through the pages of Scripture. Dale Allison has written, “Meaning is like water: it is shaped by the container it fills.”²

The biblical writers and reciters make extensive use of metaphors, parables and dramatic actions. Jesus does not say, “God’s love is boundless.” Instead, he tells the story of the prodigal son. He does not say, “Your

¹Dietrich Bonhoeffer is capable of creating profound meaning relying strictly on concepts. He can pen entire essays or sermons without a single illustration. He doesn’t need them (cf. D. Bonhoeffer, *Meditations on the Cross*).

²Dale Allison, “Books and the Book,” installation address by Dr. Dale C. Allison Jr., 2001, p. 16.





benevolence must reach beyond your own kith and kin.” Rather, he tells the story of the good Samaritan. He does not say, “Try to influence the community around you for good.” But he does state,

You are the light of the world. A city set (by men) on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do they (i.e., the women) light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a lamp stand, and it gives light to all in the house. (Mt 5:14-16; author’s translation)

Thomas Aquinas created meaning with the masterful use of philosophical and theological language. Saint Francis affected the church and the world with powerful dramatic actions that have resonated for more than seven hundred years. It is easy to claim that Saint Thomas was a theologian while Saint Francis was a simple man who went about doing good. But such an equation is not adequate to the reality of the significance of these two theological giants. Both men created and communicated meaning, but in different ways, and each method is valid.

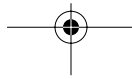
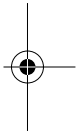
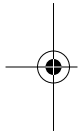
Jesus, as noted, was clearly a “metaphorical theologian” whose primary style of creating meaning was the skillful use of metaphor, parable and dramatic action.³ But is it accurate to refer to Jesus as a theologian at all? Theologians are known for changing their minds. They publish second editions of their works and describe themselves as “birds in flight.” Yet Jesus, reason some, was different. Being who he was, he understood the things of God instinctively and did not need to wrestle, like others, with how to understand or express divine truth. He was neither puzzled nor uncertain about the deep things of God.

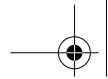
The christological convictions that prompt the above reservations are important, and I share those convictions. But do we have the right to confine Jesus to the category of “simple carpenter”? Would not the “divine word made flesh” be the first to reflect deeply on the significance and meaning of that word? Could Jesus’ indescribable impact on history have been possible were he not a profound thinker?

The answers to these questions are clear. Jesus was indeed a craftsman. In Mark 6:3 he is referred to as a *tektōn*.⁴ This word is usually translated “carpenter,” but it can also mean a carpenter/builder or artisan. Traditional village culture in the Middle East uses little furniture. The Gospels rarely mention home

³For a more complete discussion of this chapter’s topic, cf. K. E. Bailey, *Finding*, pp. 15-28.

⁴The only other use of this Greek word is in Matthew 13:55, which identifies Joseph as a *tektōn*.





furnishings.⁵ In short, a cabinetmaker would find little to do in a small village like Nazareth. But doors and roof beams are necessary in every house, and they require a woodworker's skills.⁶ Jesus tells a number of parables that refer to the building trade (Mt 5:14-15, noted above; Lk 6:46-49 and parallel Mt 7:24-27). While he was growing up in Nazareth, the provincial capital Sepphoris was being constructed by Herod Antipas.⁷ Joseph may well have moved to Nazareth because there was work for a carpenter/builder in Sepphoris four miles away. But, carpenter/builders are generally known to be practical, non-intellectual types. Is it possible to envision a carpenter/builder as a theologian?

In the world of the rabbis, a scholar was expected to earn his keep by engaging in a secular profession. The Mishnah tractate *Avot* reads:

Make them [the words of the Law] not a crown wherewith to magnify thyself or a spade wherewith to dig. And thus used Hillel to say: He that makes worldly use of the crown shall perish. Thus thou mayest learn that he that makes profit out of the words of the Law removes his life from the world.⁸

From this severe stricture it is easy to understand that rabbis in Jesus' day were expected to support themselves with secular professions. Engaging stories in the Talmud illuminate the strictly held principle of "no digging with the crown."

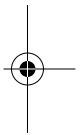
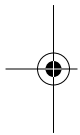
Johanen ben Zakkai, a contemporary of Jesus, once lectured to his students in the shade of the temple. The learned rabbi was then criticized for having received material benefit from religious things. That is, he was accused of "digging with the crown." Later rabbinic tradition excused him because what happened inside the temple was religious but the shade outside was not. The text reads:

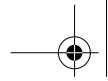
⁵There was a seat in the synagogue designated as "Moses' seat" (Mt 23:2), and in the temple those who sold pigeons had "seats" (Mk 11:15; Mt 21:12), but the word *kathedra* (chair/seat) does not occur again anywhere in the New Testament. Likewise, the word *trapeza* (table) appears as a table for money changers (Mt 21:12; Jn 2:1) and as a bank (Lk 11:23). Rich men have tables for meals (Mt 15:27; Lk 16:21), and the great banquet with the Messiah at the end of all things will be at a table (Lk 22:30). Only Luke 22:21 refers to a table in the upper room. The *krabattos* of the Gospels is a pallet that the sick man at the pool of Bethzatha could pick up (Jn 5:2-9). The other word for a bed in the Gospels, *klinē*, is also something a healed sick man could carry (Mk 9:2, 6; Lk 5:18).

⁶The occasional farm implement would also be shaped by the village carpenter/builder. The Greek words for *plow* (Lk 9:62), *winnowing fork* (Lk 3:17; parallel Mt 3:12) and *yoke* (Mt 11:29-30) each occur in only one account in the Gospels.

⁷R. A. Batey, *Jesus and the Forgotten City*, pp. 65-82.

⁸Mishnah, *Avot* 4:5, trans. Danby, p. 453.





It was related of R. Johanan b. Zakkai that he was sitting in the shadow of the Temple and teaching all day. Now here it was impossible [not to lecture], and he intended [to benefit from the shade], and is it permitted? But Raba said: The Temple was different, because it was made for its inside.⁹

The stipulation of “not digging with the crown” harmonized smoothly with the major task of the sages, which was to interpret and apply the Torah to *everyday life*. Thus, if they had one foot in the work-a-day world and the other in the world of the Torah and its law, it would be easier to make the connection between the two.¹⁰

Shemmai and Hillel, two of the greatest rabbis, lived one generation before Jesus. Shemmai was a stonemason, and Hillel probably earned his keep as a porter. Thus, Jesus (carpenter) and Paul (tentmaker) were not exceptions to the rule but were concrete examples of established practice. Unlike the contemporary Western world, the world of Jesus *expected* the scholar to be engaged in a trade such as carpentry. The question that naturally follows is: What sort of intellectual life would have been available to a young man growing up in an isolated village?

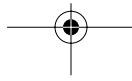
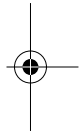
In Jesus' day, across the villages of Galilee and Judea, there were associations of serious-minded Jews who called themselves the *haberim* (the companions/friends).¹¹ The name was taken from Psalm 119:63, which reads, “I am a companion [*haber*] of all who fear thee, / of those who keep thy precepts.” These associations were composed of men who were employed in secular trades but who spent their spare time debating the Law and trying to apply it to their world. A young Jew in his early teens had the option of joining such a group. If he decided to do so, he was committed to becoming a “student of the rabbis” and participating in their discussions. Those Jews who wished to spend their spare time in activities other than scholarly debates were not a part of these associations. The rabbis called such types *am ha-arets*, “the people of the land.” This title was not a compliment, and considerable hostility developed between these two groups.¹² It seems natural to assume

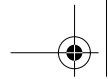
⁹Babylonian Talmud, *Pesabim* 26a.

¹⁰Rabban Gamaliel, the son of R. Judah the Patriarch, is reported to have said, “Excellent is the study of the Law together with worldly occupation, for toil in them both puts sin out of mind” (Mishnah, *Avot* 2:2, trans. Danby, p. 447).

¹¹Shemuel Safrai, “Religion in Everyday Life,” *The Jewish People in the First Century*, 2:793-833. Note especially pp. 802-5, 820-81, 824.

¹²Babylonian Talmud, *Pesabim* 49b.





that Jesus joined the *haberim*. The story about him in the temple at twelve years of age emphasizes his intelligence and his scholarly bent (Lk 2:41-51). With this pattern of culture in mind, it is easy to assume that Jesus went on to spend eighteen years in sustained discussion with the brightest and best thinkers in Nazareth and the surrounding villages. When, at the age of thirty, Jesus began his public ministry, he demonstrated time and again considerable skill in the rabbinic style of debating, and, therefore, it is not surprising that the community called him “rabbi.”

The title *rabbi* emerged in first-century Judaism as a title of respect for a scholar. Students used it for a teacher, and the community at large used it for the scribes and sages. Eduard Lohse states, “When Jesus is called Rabbi by His disciples and others, this shows that He conducted Himself like the Jewish scribes.”¹³ David Flusser, the able Israeli scholar writes, “It is easy to observe that Jesus was far from uneducated. He was perfectly at home both in holy scripture and in oral tradition, and he knew how to apply this scholarly heritage.”¹⁴ Flusser goes on to note that carpenters in particular had a reputation for learning. With this in mind Flusser then rejects “the common, sweetly idyllic notion of Jesus as a naive and amiable, simple, manual workman.”¹⁵

In summary, Jesus was a master in the use of metaphor, parable and dramatic action. His audiences were often composed of scribes and Pharisees. The reader of the Gospels needs to be aware that when a scholarly audience is specifically mentioned, it can be assumed that a sophisticated scholarly exchange is underway.¹⁶ When this assumption is made, new perceptions of Jesus and his message emerge. The following text provides an example.

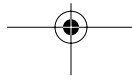
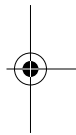
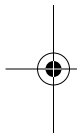
Jesus’ first sermon and the crowd reaction to it are recorded in Luke 4:16-30. In that famous scene Jesus reads from Isaiah 61:1-2. The text, however, is edited in four places. One phrase from the text before him is omitted. A line is borrowed from Isaiah 58:6 and added to the reading. One key word is changed from “say” to “proclaim,” and the final verse is cut in half. Who did the editing? The Mishnah stipulates that in any public reading of the Prophets, the reader is permitted some editing. The rules for the reading of the To-

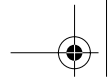
¹³E. Lohse, “Rabbi,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 6:961-65.

¹⁴David Flusser, *Jesus*, p. 30.

¹⁵David Flusser, *Jesus*, p. 33.

¹⁶For a fuller discussion of this topic, cf. K. E. Bailey, “Jesus as Metaphorical Theologian,” and “Jesus Within First Century Judaism,” in *Finding*, pp. 15-28.





rah of Moses were stricter.¹⁷ The editor of the text of Isaiah 61:1-2 that appears in Luke 4:18-19 (whoever he was) followed those rules, and thus, said editor is best understood to be a first-century Jew. Did Jesus do the editing? Or was it the apostles who remembered and later recorded, and edited, the scene and the text of Isaiah that Jesus read on that occasion? Or was it Luke who tried to summarize his understanding of what the ministry of Jesus was all about? If Jesus was no more than a simple carpenter, it is difficult to imagine that he was the editor. If he was a scholar with eighteen years of training in rabbinic thinking, then it is entirely reasonable to imagine him judiciously editing the text. The presuppositions we have about Jesus as a “simple man” or as a “serious theologian/scholar” determine the eyes with which we look at the text and how we understand it.

When the finely tuned nature of Jesus’ presentations to his contemporaries is examined within the world of first-century rabbinic scholarship, it is possible to see Jesus as the first mind of the New Testament and Paul as the second. From Jesus we have indescribably profound theological perceptions of the faith available to us.

As noted, the intent of this book is to examine how Jesus the theologian has created a new story, with himself at its center, which is linked again and again to the saga of Jacob. But such an inquiry is not possible unless we are confident that the Synoptic Gospels in general, and the Gospel of Luke in particular actually present an authentic account of what Jesus said and did! Strident voices on one side insist that Jesus left Spirit-inspired mental tape recordings of exactly what he said. Some scholars from the extreme on the other side insist that the Gospel records are imaginative creations by a second, third or even fourth generation of Christians who invented stories to meet their spiritual needs and that these stories have very little to do with the mysterious figure called Jesus who all but disappeared into the mists of time early in the first century. Yet others claim that the Gospels are a record (in story form) of the religious experience of the early Christians, not a record of what Jesus said and did. Is there any assurance of the *authenticity* of the Synoptic accounts as historical records of Jesus? To this question we now briefly turn.

¹⁷Mishnah, *Mo'ed* 4:4. Around A.D. 200 the Mishnah recorded the traditions of the past. It is not possible to prove that these regulations for synagogue reading were in force at the time of Jesus. What is striking is that they are followed in the Lucan text. The Talmud expands these same regulations into a set of six rules (Minor Tractates, *Soferim* chap. 11 [39a(2)-39b(2)]).

