

The Parables

What is a Parable?

The Parables

Class 1: What is a Parable?

Class 2: Why Parables?

Class 3-n: Jesus' Parables

What is a Parable?

▶ Literary form

Immediate historical/cultural context

Ancient/Old Testament context

What is a Parable?

Literary Form

a simple story used to illustrate a moral or spiritual lesson, as told by Jesus in the Gospels
(Oxford English Dictionary)

What is a Parable?

Literary Form

Every parable is a **story**; this story conveys a lesson, so that the parable has a **double meaning**, the story and the lesson; the parable's **purpose is to effect a change** in the hearer, to lead to decision or action; and the **lesson is always spiritual.**

What is a Parable?

Literary Form

There are then four points which define a parable:
It tells a story (**narrative**); it has two levels of
meaning (**tropical** (pronounced trope-ical)); its
purpose is to persuade, convince, convert
(**rhetorical**); and its lesson always has to do with
divine and human interrelations (**spiritual**)

What is a Parable?

Literary Form

Three proposed types/groupings of Jesus' parables:

Similitudes

Parables

Exemplary Stories

What is a Parable?

Literary Form: Similitudes

The similitude is the most concise type of parable. It briefly narrates a typical or recurrent event from real life.

Key Features: Similitude

Narrative: Typical, recurrent, familiar (often present tense)

Rhetoric: Persuasiveness achieved by recounting what is widely recognized to be true

Trope: Dissimilar comparison (metaphor/simile)

What is a Parable?

Literary Form: Similitudes

(Luke 15:8–10 ESV)

“Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

What is a Parable?

Literary Form: Similitudes

(Mark 4:26–29 ESV)

“And he said, “The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.””

What is a Parable?

Literary Form: Parables

Parables are often (though not always) longer and more detailed than similitudes, using a one-off fictitious event as their narrative

Key Features: Parable

Narrative: One-off event, fictitious (though not fanciful), “once upon a time”, often longer than similitude, past tense

Rhetoric: Persuasiveness achieved through simple, vivid, engaging story

Trope: Dissimilar comparison (metaphor/simile)

What is a Parable?

Literary Form: Parables

(Luke 18:1–8 ESV)

“And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Give me justice against my adversary.’ For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, ‘Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.’”

What is a Parable?

Literary Form: Parables

(Matthew 21:28–31 ESV)

““What do you think? A man had two sons. And he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ And he answered, ‘I will not,’ but afterward he changed his mind and went. And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, ‘I go, sir,’ but did not go. “Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you.”

What is a Parable?

Literary Form: Exemplary Story

The exemplary story, like the similitude and parable, presents an implied comparison between an event (either real or imagined that is similarly true-to-life) and a spiritual truth; using the event as a specific example of that spiritual truth.

Key Features: Exemplary Story

Narrative: One-off event, fictitious (though not fanciful), “once upon a time”, often longer like the parable, past tense

Rhetoric: Persuasiveness achieved through true-to-life application of a spiritual truth (i.e. I could do likewise..)

Trope: Similar comparison (synecdoche)

What is a Parable?

Literary Form: Exemplary Stories

(Luke 10:30–33 ESV)

“Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion.”

What is a Parable?

Literary Form: Exemplary Stories

(Luke 10:34-35 ESV)

“He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’”

What is a Parable?

Literary Form: Exemplary Stories

(Luke 10:36–37 ESV)

“Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” And Jesus said to him, “You go, and do likewise.””

What is a Parable?

Literary Form: Summary

A functional definition

(built from Jesus' parables)

Narrative
(story)

Tropical
(double-meaning)

Rhetorical
(persuasive/call-to-action)

Spiritual
(illustrate spiritual truths)

Groupings

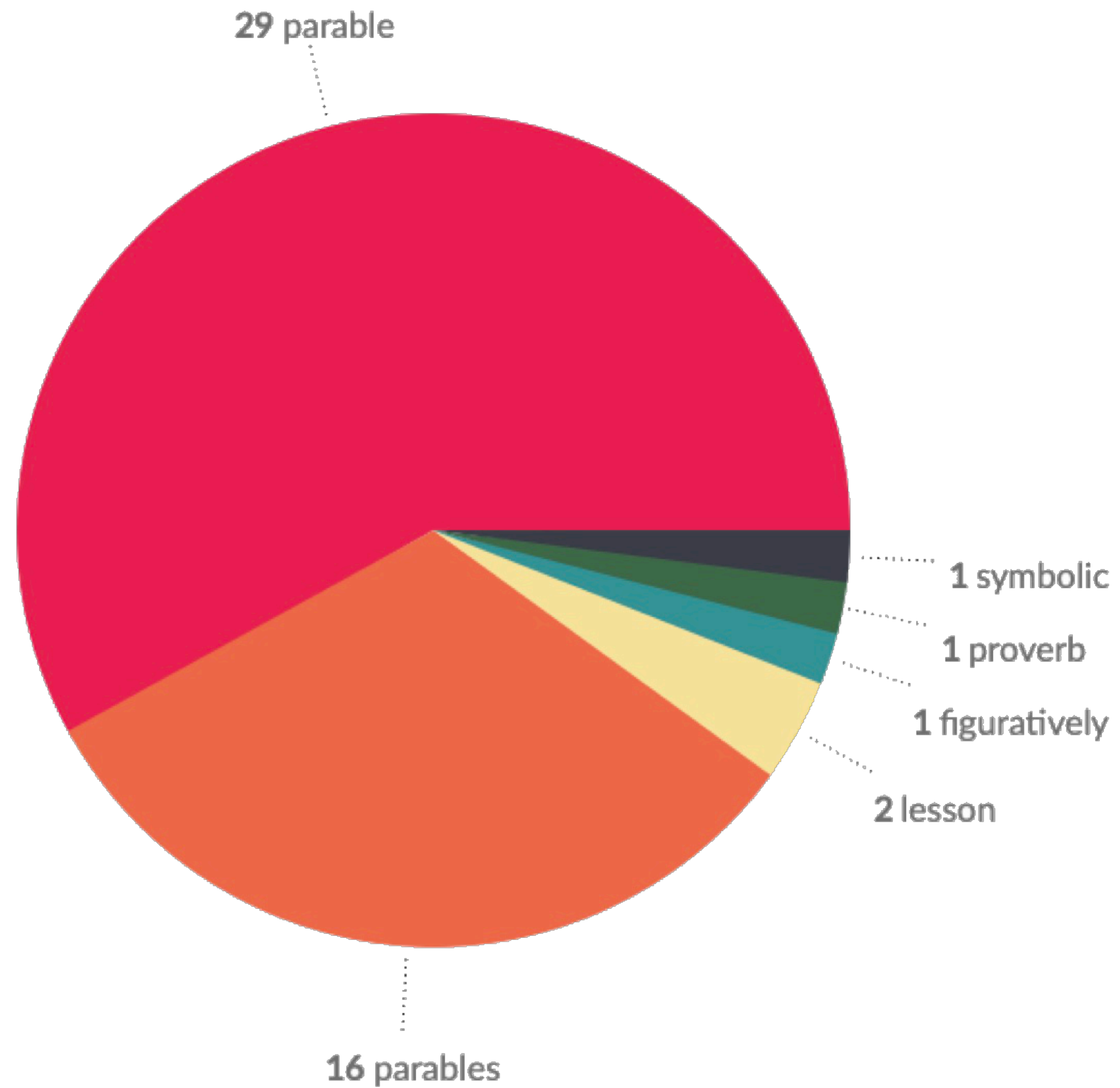
(built from Jesus' parables)

Similitudes

Parables

Exemplary Stories

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What is a Parable?

Literary form

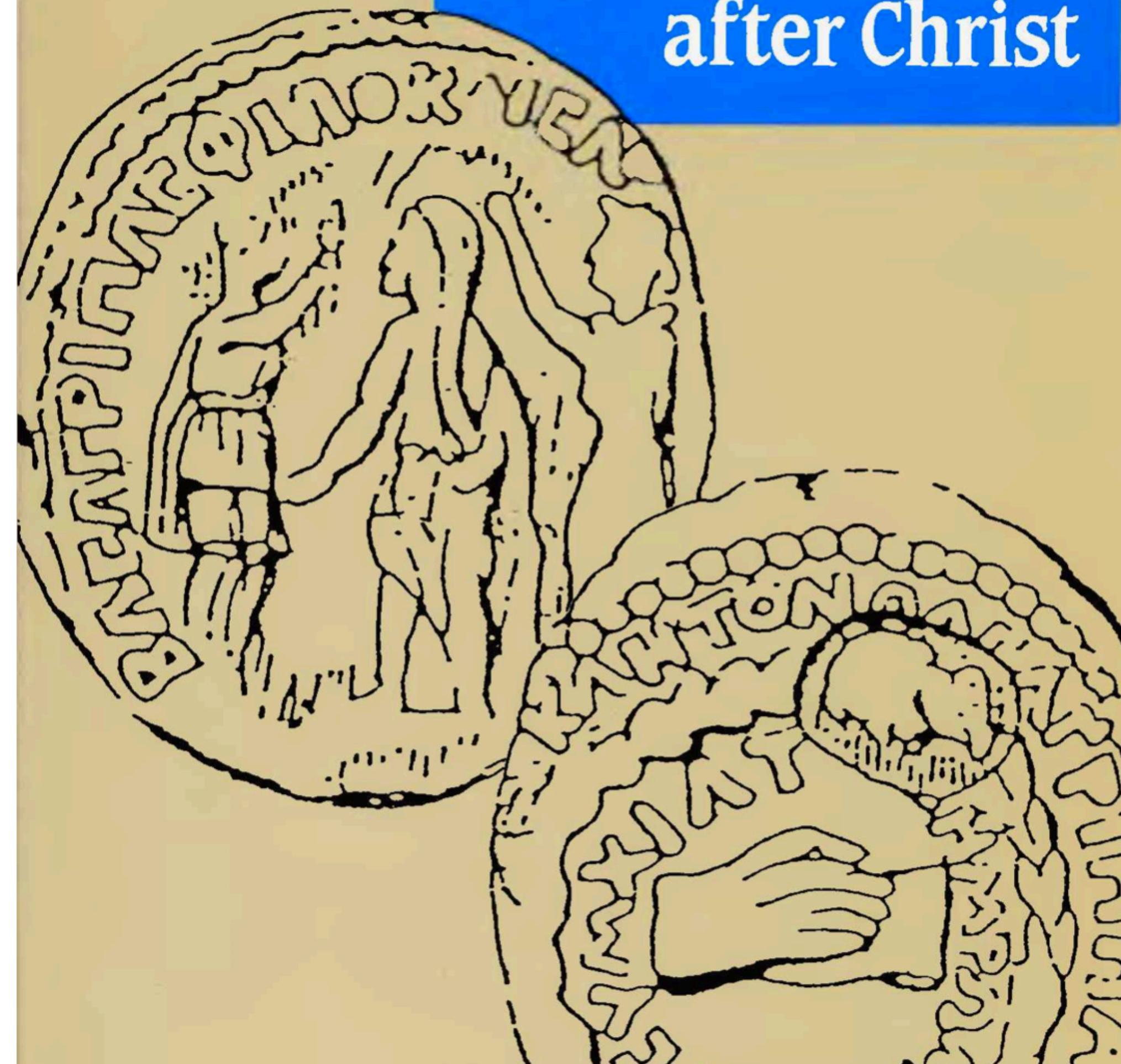
▶ Immediate historical/cultural context

Ancient/Old Testament context

MARTIN HENGEL

The
'Hellenization'
of Judaea in the
First Century
after Christ

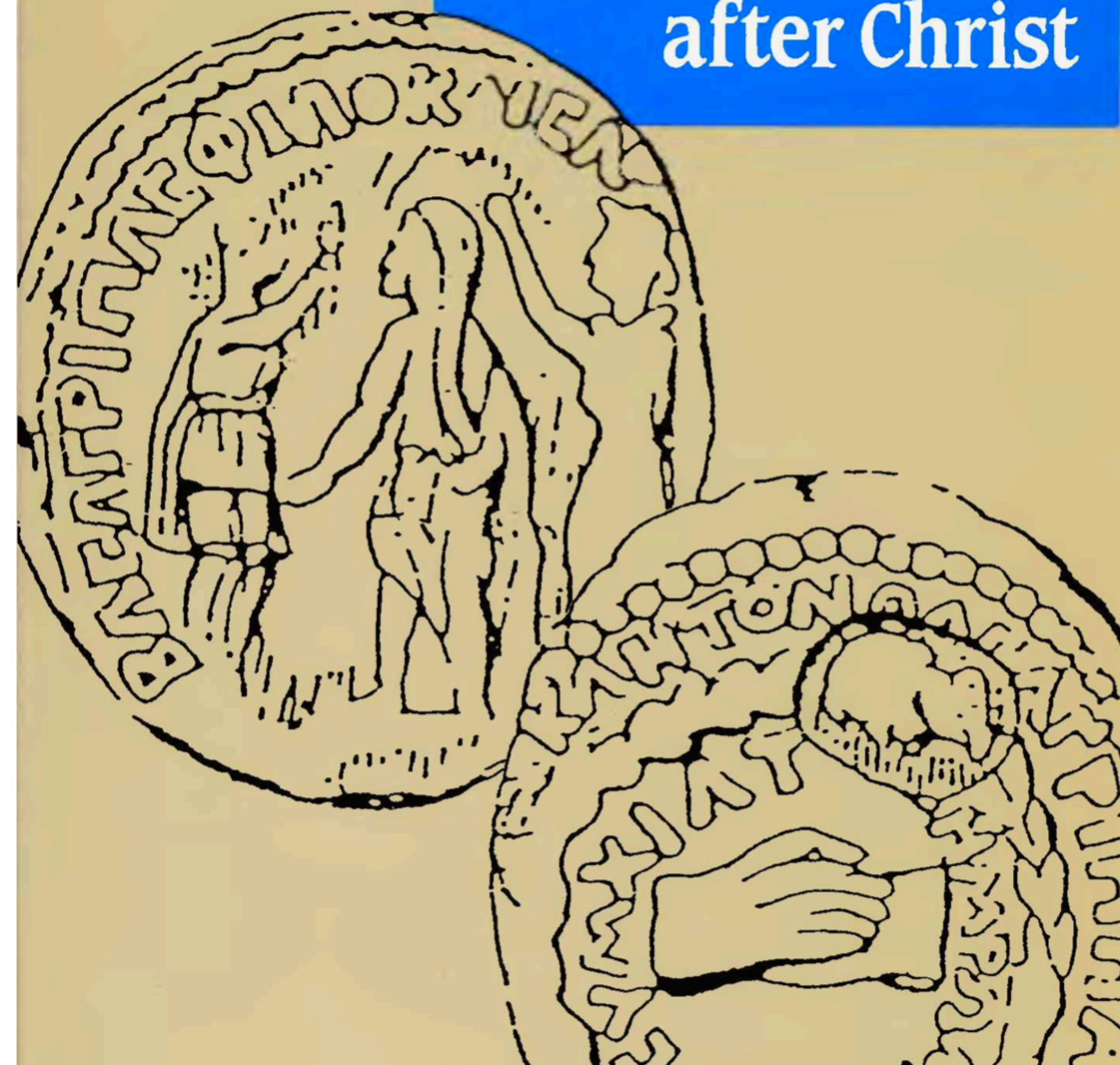
"It is too easily forgotten that in the time of Jesus Greek had already been established as a language for more than three hundred years and already had a long and varied history behind it ... **Judaea, Samaria and Galilee were bilingual (or better, trilingual) areas.** While Aramaic was the vernacular of ordinary people, and Hebrew the sacred language of religious worship and of scribal discussion, **Greek had largely become established as the linguistic medium for trade, commerce and administration.** The victorious Maccabaeen revolt and the national and religious renewal associated with it had hardly changed anything in this respect. Here is an elementary example of this. The Hasmonaean high priest and king Alexander Jannaeus (103-76 BCE), who enjoyed political success generally, already issued what were presumably the first Jewish bilingual coins (Aramaic & Greek)..."



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**The
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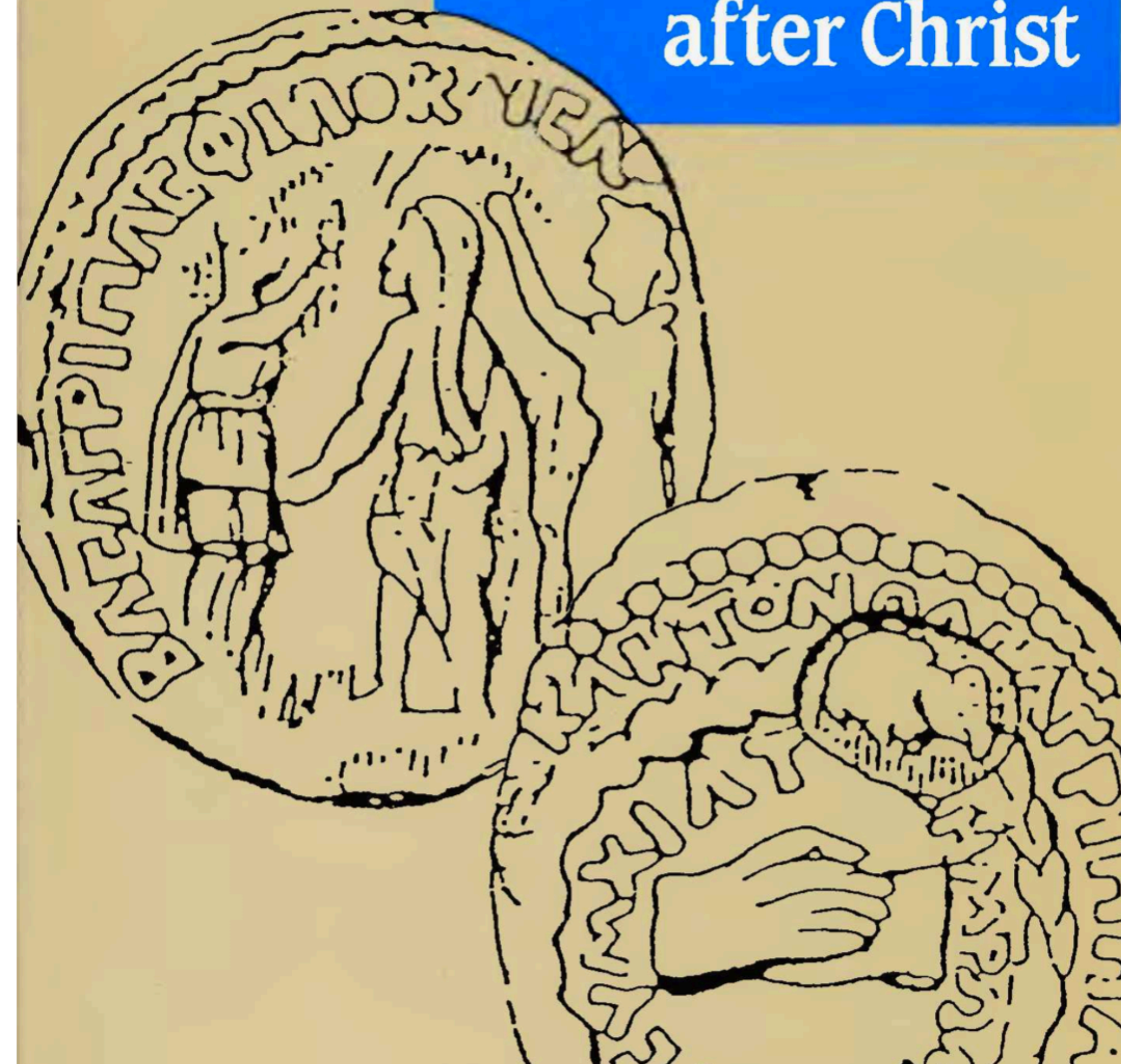
“The most important centre of the Greek language in Jewish Palestine was of course the capital, Jerusalem. We again have a good deal of epigraphical evidence to support this. Thus we have a number of public inscriptions in Greek from the period of the Second Temple, above all the two famous warning inscriptions which prohibit Gentiles from entering the inner precincts of the Temple..”



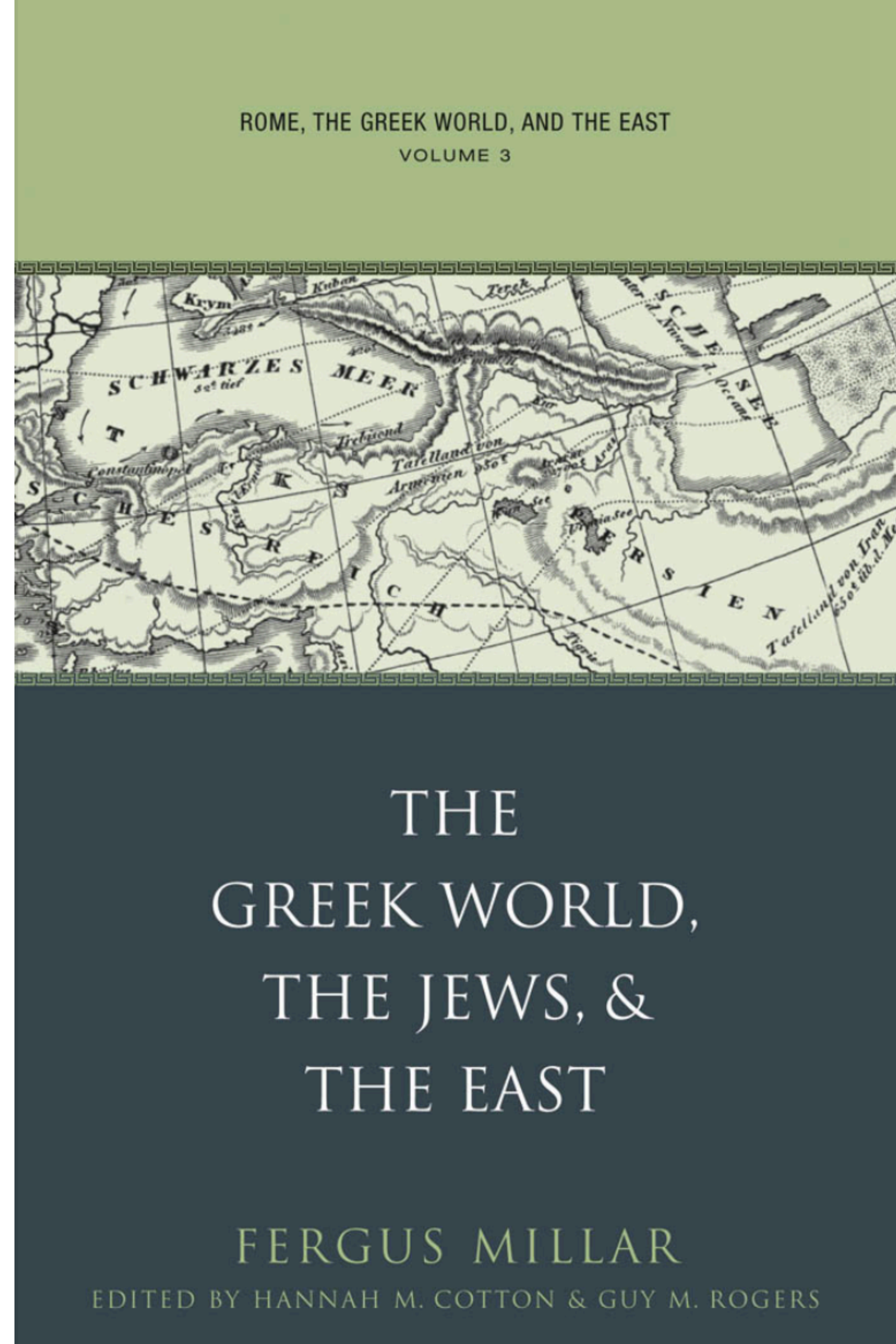
MARTIN HENGEL

**The
'Hellenization'
of Judaea in the
First Century
after Christ**

“The building of a gymnasium at the foot of the temple mount and the attempt to transform Jerusalem into a Greek polis with the right of Antiochene citizenship, both of which were prompted by the high priest Jason in 175 BCE, show how far the 'Hellenization' of the upper class through Greek paideia had already developed by that time ... We must expect that already at that time, at the beginning of the second century BCE, there will have been a very effective Greek elementary school in Jerusalem, since Greek 'basic education' was the necessary precondition for a gymnasium and the training of ephebes in accordance with 'Greek custom'.”



“One of the most successful achievements of Graeco-Roman civilization was the removal of the memories and identities of the people whom it absorbed. Alone of all the peoples under Roman rule, the Jews not only had a long recorded history but kept it, re-interpreted it and acted on it.”



“I have also taken a great deal of pains to obtain the learning of the Greeks, and understand the elements of the Greek language, although I have so long accustomed myself to speak our own tongue, that I cannot pronounce Greek with sufficient exactness; **for our nation does not encourage those that learn the languages of many nations, and so adorn their discourses with the smoothness of their periods; because they look upon this sort of accomplishment as common,** not only to all sorts of free-men, but to as many of the servants as please to learn them.”

The
ANTIQUITIES
of the
JEWES

Flavius Josephus



Translated by William Whiston

“The mention of Greek fables usually conjures up visions of stories with talking animals that illustrate a simple moral. Yet, in antiquity, the term fable denoted several kinds of brief narratives: Aelius Theon [an Alexandrian Greek, writing around the 1st Century] defined the fable (simply) as **"a fictitious story picturing a truth."**”

The Contexts of Jesus' Parables

BY DAVID B. GOWLER

Jesus' parables were created and preserved in conversation with both Jewish and Greco-Roman cultural environments. As we become aware of these diverse webs of meaning, we can respond more fully to the message of our Lord who spoke these parables with one ear already listening for our responses.

Jesus' parables were created and preserved in conversation with both Jewish and Greco-Roman cultural environments, and they partake, vigorously at times, in those cultural dialogues. To continue our own dialogues with the parables, we must become more aware of the diverse webs of meaning in these narratives. In that way we can respond more fully to the message of the one who spoke these parables with one ear already listening for our responses.

Jesus of Nazareth taught primarily, if not exclusively, in Aramaic (though he likely knew some Greek and Hebrew). The Gospels, however, are written in Greek, which is clear evidence that the Jesus portrayed in them speaks and acts in roles that combine Jewish and Greco-Roman modes of words and deeds.¹

Even as we recognize the importance of Greco-Roman contexts, however, we should not neglect the critical nature of Jesus' Jewish heritage. Since Hellenistic culture influenced all first-century Judaism to a certain extent, Jesus' Jewishness does not preclude the existence of Greco-Roman elements in his teachings and actions.

Therefore, I will examine briefly two Jewish and two Greco-Roman contexts that can help illumine the parables of Jesus.

“ ... [F]ive basic similarities between fables and the parables of Jesus [have been shown]. Fables and parables are brief, invented narratives that shed light on aspects of human experience and behavior. Fables usually involve ordinary human characters and situations - like quarreling siblings who are corrected by a loving father ... Some fables illustrate religious and ethical themes, such as the relations between humans and the gods, and most do not have miraculous interventions. Likewise only two of Jesus' parables have direct super-natural interventions (Luke 12:13-21; 16:19-31). Some fables have a surprising or ironic element of reversal that is reminiscent of Jesus' parables (Mat 20:16). Many fables have morals, attached to their beginning or end, which often appear to be secondary. Similarly, both Matthew and Luke tend to add such moralizing features either to the beginning of a parable (e.g. Luke 18:1) or the end (e.g. Matthew 18:35, 20:16).”

Parable and Fable

MARY ANN BEAVIS

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Introduction

ALTHOUGH SUBSEQUENT GENERATIONS OF INTERPRETERS have questioned certain aspects of his work, the debt of modern parable interpretation to Adolf Jülicher is widely acknowledged by NT scholars.¹ Jülicher's most enduring contribution to the understanding of the parables of Jesus has, of course, been his rejection of the extravagant allegorical interpretations which had predominated up to his time.² Another widely influential, if not univer-

¹ Jülicher's classic study is, of course, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1976 [Tübingen: Paul Siebeck, 1919]).

² For acknowledgment of this debt to Jülicher, see, e.g., J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (2d rev. ed.; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972) 18-20; C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961) 2-3; E. Linnemann, *Parables of Jesus: Introduction and Exposition* (London: SPCK, 1966) 8; D. O. Via, Jr., *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967) 2; M. Boucher, *The Mysterious Parable: A Literary Study* (CBQMS 6; Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1977) 3; M. A. Tolbert, *Perspectives on the Parables: An Approach to Multiple Interpretations* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 27-28. Some reappraisals of the value of allegory in parable interpretation include those of R. E. Brown ("Parable and Allegory Reconsidered," *NovT* 5 [1962] 36-45); M. Black ("The Parables as Allegory," *BJRL* 42 [1959-60] 273-87); J. Drury ("The Sower, the Vineyard, and the Place of Allegory in the Interpretation of the Parables," *JTS* 24 [1973] 367-70); Boucher (*Mysterious Parable*); H.-J. Klauck (*Allegorie und Allegorese in synoptischen Gleichnistexten* [Münster: Aschendorf, 1978]).

“When Jesus preached so strikingly in parables, he did not create a new literary genre. Rather, he made brilliant use of a genre which was familiar to all throughout the Mediterranean world. No doubt Jesus' personal authority and speaking ability added "power, dynamic emotion, and excitement" to his use of parables. However, the recognition that many of the Synoptic parables are akin to a popular literary genre that was regarded by the ancients as a *gymnasma*, appealing mainly to children and the uneducated, suggests that excessively complex and sophisticated approaches to interpretation may misrepresent the impact of the parables on their first hearers.”

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What is a Parable?

Immediate historical/cultural context: Summary

Education in Greek language and thought would not have been systematic among the Jews of Judea in the early first century, but at the very least, Greek was the language of trade, commerce and administration, thus having a place in the common everyday speech of all social classes of the Jews.

Jesus spent much of his ministry in Galilee which, even in the post-exilic period, is referred to as "Galilee of the Gentiles" by the prophet Isaiah – Jews were a minority, and the region was bilingual (Aramaic & Greek) in Jesus' day.

What is a Parable?

Immediate historical/cultural context: Summary

Jesus' parables have their basis in the parables ("mashal") of the Hebrew scriptures/Old Testament, that is not in question.

However, Jesus' use of parables was culturally relevant not only in Judea, but throughout the Mediterranean world; though not as much due to widespread familiarity with the parables ("mashal") of the Old Testament, but likely moreso due to the Hellenistic influence of his time (Greco-Roman fables/parables (themselves finding their origins in "mashal", but reaching a far wider audience through the Greco-Roman/Hellenistic expansion)).

The Greco-Roman cultural context of parables in Jesus' day was that of the Greek "gymnasma" – meaning they were primarily used in teaching children/the uneducated.

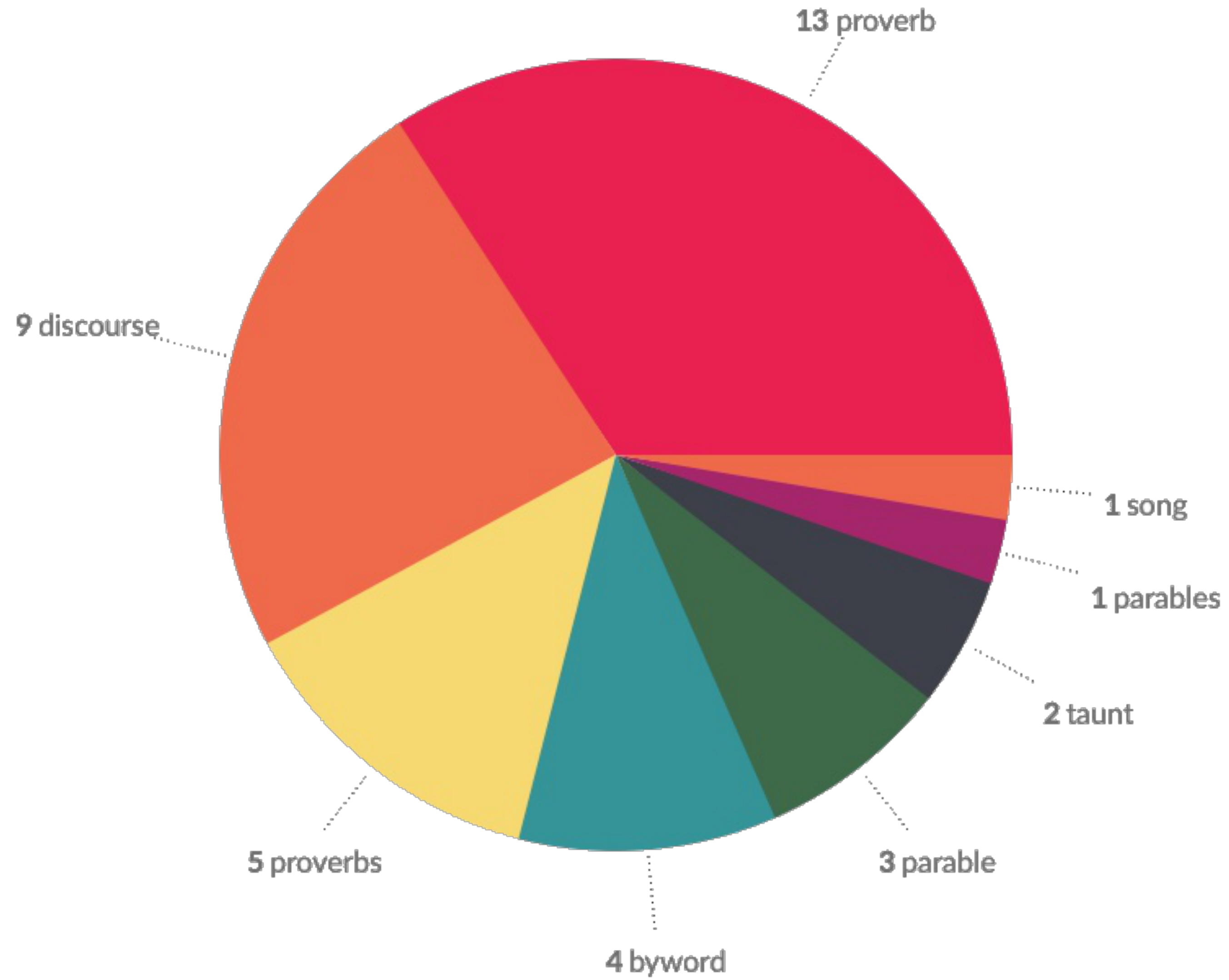
What is a Parable?

Literary form

Immediate historical/cultural context

▶ Ancient/Old Testament context

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What is a Parable?

Ancient/Old Testament context

(Matthew 13:34–35 ESV)

“All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed, he said nothing to them without a parable. This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet: “I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world.””

What is a Parable?

Ancient/Old Testament context

A functional definition

(built from Jesus' parables)

Narrative
(story)

Tropical
(double-meaning)

Rhetorical
(persuasive/call-to-action)

Spiritual
(illustrate spiritual truths)

Groupings

(built from Jesus' parables)

Similitudes

Parables

Exemplary Stories

What is a Parable?

Ancient/Old Testament context

- 2 Sam 12:1-4** (The poor man's ewe lamb)
- 2 Sam 14:5-13** (The widow's quarrelling sons)
- 1 Kgs 20:39-42** (The soldier's charge)
- Is 5:1-7** (God's vineyard)
- Is 28:23-29** (The plowman)
- Ezek 17:1-24** (The eagles and the vine)
- Ezek 19:1-14** (The lioness of Judah)
- Ezek 20:45-49** (The consuming wildfire)
- Ezek 24:3-14** (The boiling pot)

Non-fiction narratives: Jer 13:1-11 (The linen belt), Jer 18:1-10 (The potter), Hosea (Hosea's broken and redeemed family)

What is a Parable?

Ancient/Old Testament context

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What is a Parable?

Ancient/Old Testament context: Exemplary Story

(2 Samuel 12:1-4 ESV)

“And the LORD sent Nathan to David. He came to him and said to him, “There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds, but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. And he brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children. It used to eat of his morsel and drink from his cup and lie in his arms, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the guest who had come to him, but he took the poor man’s lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him.””

What is a Parable?

Ancient/Old Testament context: Parable

(Isaiah 5:1–7 ESV)

“Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and briers and thorns shall grow up; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting; and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry!”

What is a Parable?

Ancient/Old Testament context: Similitude

(Ezekiel 20:45–49 ESV)

“And the word of the LORD came to me: “Son of man, set your face toward the southland; preach against the south, and prophesy against the forest land in the Negeb. Say to the forest of the Negeb, Hear the word of the LORD: Thus says the Lord GOD, Behold, I will kindle a fire in you, and it shall devour every green tree in you and every dry tree. The blazing flame shall not be quenched, and all faces from south to north shall be scorched by it. All flesh shall see that I the LORD have kindled it; it shall not be quenched.” Then I said, “Ah, Lord GOD! They are saying of me, ‘Is he not a maker of parables?’””