# Sower, the Soil, and the Sponge:
# The Interpretation of the Parable of the Sower in the Context of Rabbinic Literature

Presented to the Everyday Theology Conference
Liberty University Baptist Theological Seminary

Micheal S. Pardue, Ed.D.

March 20, 2015

# The Sower, the Soil, and the Sponge: The Interpretation of the Parable of the Sower in the Context of Rabbinic Literature

Abstract:

Before the 18th century little was done to understand the Jesus of history outside of understanding the Jesus of faith. The Enlightenment has changed this way of thinking. A concerted effort began to discover the Jesus of history, but in doing so, much of the biblical record was ultimately dismissed as myth. However, other work has been done to better understand the biblical record by exploring the context in which Jesus ministered and taught. This was born out of a desire to understand the Scriptures with in a proper historical context.

One such example of an attempt to better understand Jesus' teaching ministry has been the connection of the format of the parable of the sower, found in the Synoptic Gospels, with the rabbinic teaching concerning students (disciples) and sages found in the *Pirke Avos*. This research examines how this connection has been treated since the beginning of the twentieth century. The project also examines how the rabbinic connection has influenced the interpretation of both the parable itself and Jesus' own interpretation given after the parable.

This research concludes with the implications on the interpretation of the parable of the sower when understood as finding its form in the rabbinical writings.

## Introduction

Much has been written over the last three centuries in a quest to discover the historical Jesus. Some who have undertaken this quest have come to the conclusion that almost nothing can be known about the historical Jesus of Nazareth. Others have come away from their journey believing that almost everything that is necessary to be known is available to the twenty-first century thinker.[1] Each of these quests provided new insight into the historical world in which Jesus lived. However, many of the scholars who undertook this work ended up remaking Jesus into the image of their theological dispositions.[2]

Most recently, there have been two distinct quests for the historical Jesus. The first arose from the students of Rudolph Bultmann and was shorted lived in the 1950s.[3] The third, and most recent quest, found its rise in the 1980s. This has commonly become known as the third quest.[4] Blomberg writes that this quest is marked by three primary characteristics:

> (a) a rigorous examination and application of historical criteria to determine the authenticity of the various Gospel data; (b) a reclamation of Jesus the Jew, interpreting him clearly against the backdrop of the religious ideas and institutions of his day; and (c) a far more nuanced and detailed understand of the diversity of early first-century Judaism.[5]

It is with these distinctives in mind that this paper seeks to compile the work that has been done in one small area of New Testament studies: understanding Jesus' parables in their pedagogical

---

[1] Craig Blombery, *Jesus and the Gospels* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2009), 205.

[2] Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications).

[3] Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels*, 209-10.

[4] Blomberg provides a thorough, though not exhaustive survey of the works that have been written about the "Third Quest." These include: B. Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove: IVP, 1997); D.B. Gowler, *What Are They Saying about the Historical Jesus?* (New York: Paulist, 2007); and M.J. McClymond, *Familiar Stranger: An Introduction to Jesus of Nazareth* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2004).

[5] Ibid., 210.

context in connection with the rabbinical teachings of first century Judaism. More specifically, this paper will examine the use by several parable commentators of the *Pirke Avos*[6] in their understanding of Jesus' parable of the Sower.

**The Sower**

The parables of Christ in the general and the Parable of the Sower in particular have been the source of much study and research since the earliest writings of church history.[7] There are myriads of resources that are available and countless conclusions that are drawn about the nature of the parables and the interpretation of the Parable of the Sower.

In part, the interpretive conclusions are derived from the particular conclusion that interpreter arrives at concerning the authenticity of the interpretation given by Jesus (Mt 13:18-23; Mk 4:13-20; Lk 8:11-15). Many contemporary scholars reject the interpretation given because it frames the parable allegorically.[8] There has, however, been a move by some to accept the biblical text as trustworthy, therefore changing the mindset of parabolic interpretation.[9] The

---

[6] Throughout the literature involving the *Pirkei Avos*, different numbering is used depending on which translation the author is referring to. The work itself is often referred to as the *Pirkei Avot*, the *Pirkei Avoth* or the *Pirkei Avos*. In English the work may appear as *Ethics of the Fathers* or *Chapters of the Fathers*. This paper will consistently use *Pirkei Avos* or simply *Avos.* The reader should be aware that the title and/or number may be different in other translations and in the sources referenced in the paper.

[7] Young writes that I Clement had commented on the Parable of the Sower in speaking about the Resurrection (Brad H. Young, *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998). Irenaeus wrote concerning the interpretation of parables in *Against Heresies* (Alexander Roberts & W.H. Rambaut, *Translations of the Writings of the Fathers: Down to A.D. 325.ed.* Roberts, Alexander and James Donaldson (Edinburgh: T&T Clark) 1884.) Though not a commentary, the Parable of the Sower is largely preserved in the *Gospel of Thomas.* However, Young points out that Thomas' version "betrays clear evidence of editorial modification." (Young, *Parables*, 255).

[8] Snodgrass points out that, "Since Jülicher's work a good deal of NT scholarship has rejected the interpretation as early church allegorizing" (Snodgrass, *Parables*, 164). He goes on to examine the chief complaints against the interpretation provided in the Synoptics and concludes, "The interpretation fits the parable and has every claim to be in some form the explanation Jesus gave his disciples (166).

[9] Luz writes, "Along with others I assume that the fourfold parable of the seed was meant exactly as it was interpreted in Mark 4:13-20. From the beginning it was a 'parable about parables,' or a *meditation about the various hearers of Jesus' proclamation.* The interpretation fits the original character

ultimate hermeneutical results of studying the Sower have been varied and far reaching.[10] Those who would allegorize past the interpretation given in the Synoptics have endless access to defining each part of the parable to have meaning. However, if, as Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart write in *How to Read the Bible for All it Worth*, "the believing scholar insists that the biblical texts first of all *mean what they meant*,"[11] then seeking the original interpretation is the goal *par excellence*.

With the justifiable emphasis to understand Jesus and His teachings within their appropriate historical context, it seems reasonable to study Jesus' parable of the Sower within the context of other relevant teaching during the same period and geographical setting in which Jesus learned and taught. Below is an overview of how the Sower has compared to the rabbinical sayings in *Avos* 5 and how those comparisons have shaped the interpretations put forth by the scholars who explored this connection. First, however, there are a few key resources in understanding the Sower that do include rabbinical comparisons to different components of the parable but do not explore the connection to *Avos 5.* Those are explored in the next section below.

---

of the fourfold parable exactly" (Luz. *Matthew 8-20*. 244. italics his). See also: Philip B. Payne, "The Authenticity of the Parable of the Sower and Its Interpretation," in *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 1, ed. R.T. France and David Wenham (Sheffield: JSOT, 1980), 163-207.

[10] For an interesting treatment of the Mormon interpretation of the Sower, see Jared M. Halverson, "Of Soils and Souls: The Parable of the Sower," *The Religious Educator* 9, no. 3 (2008): 31-47, accessed March 19, 2015, https://ojs.lib.byu.edu/spc/index.php/RelEd/article/viewFile/2258/2133. Alyce M. McKenzie, who has written several books on the parables and wisdom literature advocates for rebranding the parable of the Sower: http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Rebranding-the-Parable-of-the-Sower-Alyce-McKenzie-07-04-2011.

[11] Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth (*Grand Rapids: Zonderzan, 2014), 14.

## Rabbinical Writing and the Parables

Clearly, if a student of the New Testament desires to have a firm understanding of Jesus' parables and is interested in properly interpreting those parables, he must explore the context in which Jesus lived and taught. Hebrew Scholar David Flusser makes it clear that, "Jewish thought is not—as is often claimed—merely a background for Jesus but is in reality the original context and natural framework of his message."[12] Interestingly, though many of the books written since the dawn of the twentieth century wrestle with the context in which Jesus is teaching the Parable of the Sower, many do not make the connecting point to the fifth chapter of the *Pirkei Avos* which, at least at first glance, may have relevance for understanding Jesus' words. Obviously, space does not allow to cover every book that has not said something, but the following is an abbreviated overview.

Rabbi Frank Stern's work on the parables[13] is cited throughout the recent literature on parable studies. His chapter on the Parable of the Sower is a treasure trove of background information and rabbinical teaching that has relevance to the parable. His footnotes are rich and informative. However, with all of the connections present in the chapter, he does not mention any connection to the rabbinical teachings of four types prominent in the *Avos.*

Robert Stein's[14] excellent and concise volume on the parables deals with the rabbinic and first-century Jewish culture thoroughly. His walks his readers through a history of parable interpretation, showing the changes that have taken place in the understanding of the parables for each major period in Church history. He provides his readers with a helpful interpretive method:

---

[12] Flusser, David in Young, *The Parables,* ix.

[13] Frank Stern, *A Rabbi Looks at Jesus' Parable* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

[14] Robert H. Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981).

Seek the one main point of the parable, seek to understand the *Sitz im Leben* in which the parable was uttered, seek to understand how the evangelist interpreted the parable, and seek what God is saying to us today through the parable.[15]

David Wenham places his interpretation of the Sower in the context of the coming revolution of the Kingdom.[16] He understands the interpretation given in the Synoptics as fully reflective of Jesus experience in ministry. He gives background information to support this interpretation within the first-century Palestinian context.

Craig Evans writes at length about the parables of early Judaism.[17] He systematically walks the reader though the various types of biblical and postbiblical parables and their features. Also in the same volume, three chapters deal with the Sower, each using historical information gleaned from other ancient writings to provide background for the sower.[18]

Kenneth Baily explores the culture of Jesus time period in two separate works on the parables of Luke that have since been combined into a single edition. He writes that

> To understand the theology of the parables, therefore, we must recapture the culture that informs the text. The culture of the synoptic parables is that of first-century Palestine. Palestinian Christians saw their own culture reflected in the parables and could thereby understand the teller/author's intent directly. But when the cultural base of the Church ceased to be Palestinian the parables inevitably became stories about foreigners.[19]

---

[15] Ibid., 72-81

[16] David Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1989), 41-48.

[17] Craig Evans, "Parables in Early Judaism," in *The Challenges of Jesus' Parables*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 51-78.

[18] To show the varied opinions on the understanding of the interpretation provided in the Synoptics, Hooker considers the interpretation a later addition (93); Hagner sees the interpretation as authentic to Jesus, writing that the parable, "makes quite good sense in the mouth of Jesus…It is simply unjustifiable prejudice to conclude that Jesus never allegorized a parable" (105); and Longenecker does not state a position explicitly.

[19] Kenneth E. Baily, *Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), 27.

This problem of the separation between Palestinian Christianity and contemporary Christianity can only be solved by bridging the gap of understanding between the two. Baily uses the bulk of his work in an effort to bridge that gap.

There have also been a number of works that looks specifically at Jesus and His teachings within the rabbinical and cultural context.[20] Though many of these works do not directly address the Sower, they are nonetheless helpful in understanding the culture of the Savior's teachings.

**The Case for the Sponge**

The advocates for the connection between Jesus' Parable of the Sower and *Avos* build their argument on Jesus' use for four types of soils along with the context of discipleship. Though there six examples given in *Avos* 5,[21] the sixth is most often[22] cited as connecting to Jesus' parable:

> There are four types among students who sit before the sages: A sponge, a funnel, a strainer, and a sieve: a sponge, which absorbs everything; a funnel, which lets in from one end and lets out from the other; a strainer, which lets the wine flow through and retains the sediment; and a sieve, which allows the flower dust to pass through and retains the fine flour. [23]

Recently there have been several advocates for understanding this parable within the context of this specific rabbinical writing.

---

[20] A multitude of other works explore Jesus' teachings in the context of rabbinical teachings and Jesus' historical context. cf. David Flusser, *The Sage of Galilee: Rediscovering Jesus' Genius* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007).; Brad H. Young, *Meet the Rabbis: Rabbinic Thought and the Teachings of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).; Brad H. Young, *Jesus the Jewish Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1995).; Bruce Chilton, *Rabbi Jesus An Intimate Biography: The Jewish Life and Teachings that Inspired Christianity* (New York: Doubleday, 2000).; David Zaslow, *Jesus: First Century Rabbi* (Brewster: Paraclete Press, 2014).

[21] *Pirkei Avos* 5.13-18.

[22] Young gives a thorough overview of the four types theme that is present throughout the rabbinical writings. He, more than most, digs deeply into this prevalent theme, assisting his readers in seeing how "the four types weigh against each other like the different sides of a balance scale" (265). (Young, *The Parables,* 265-68*).*

[23] *Prikei Avos* 5.18.

In the nineteenth century, Anglican archbishop Richard Chenevix Trench connected the Sower parable to *Avos* 5:18 in his work *Notes on the Parables of Our Lord*. The connection is found in a footnote to his writing on the Sower parable: He writes:

> As our Saviour here, so the Jewish doctors divide the hearers of the words of wisdom into four classes. The best they liken to a sponge which drinking in all that it received, again expresses it for others; the worst to a strainer which, letting all the good wine pass through, retains only the ruthless dress; or to a sieve that, passing the fine flour, keeps only the bran.[24]

Interestingly, Trench understands the sponge to be "the best" although this is not the standard understanding presented in the literature.[25] He does not cite specifically those who he has read and referred to as "Jewish doctors." It is unclear if this conclusion has come from the rabbinic texts themselves or from a more recent publication. This would have been most helpful in understanding where his conclusions arise.[26]

Peter Rhea Jones, preaching and New Testament professor at McAfee School of Theology sees a connection between *Avos* 5 and the Sower in *Studying the Parables of Jesus.*[27]

---

[24] Richard Chenevix Trench, *Notes on the Parables of Our Lord* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1878), 84.

[25] The Talmud gives an expanded explanation of the four types of character among students: "One resembles a sponge: as a sponge absorbs all liquids, so does that kind of student absorb all that he studies: Scripture, Mishnah, Midrash, Halakhoth, and Agadoth. One is like a sieve: as a sieve passes through the fine flour and retains the coarse particles, so an intelligent student retains what is good in the study and leaves out what is not. One is like a funnel: as it lets in the liquid through one opening and lets it out through the other, so is it with the unintelligent student--what enters his one ear goes out through the other, until all is gone. The fourth student is like a wine-strainer which lets the wine pass through and absorbs the dregs: so also the wicked student forgets the good teachings and retains the bad ones" (Rodkinson, Michael L., trans. The Babylonian Talmud. Vols. 1-10. 1918.). This presents a judgement on three of the four types of students (sieve—intelligent; funnel—unintelligent; and wine-strainer—wicked) while not giving a judgement on the student who is like the sponge.

[26] Trench's order does follow that of the *Avos* and the interpretation given in the Talmud by putting the sponge first. However, the Talmud's interpretation is positive toward the sieve and then negative toward the funnel and wine-strainer.

[27] Peter Rhea Jones. *Studying the Parables of Jesus* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 1999) is a major revision of his work *Teaching the Parables of Jesus* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1982). The original did not contain a discussion of *Avos* 5 and the relationship with the Sower.

Jones writes that while, "the differences in the story are apparent"[28] because of a different setting, the connection is still interesting. For Jones, the connection is significant because "three or the responses are inadequate, and one is exceptional."[29] Jones, like others, only address *Avos* 5.18.

Brad Young is professor of biblical studies in the Graduate School of Theology at Oral Roberts University. A prolific author, he concentrates much of his time to Jewish-Christian interfaith dialogue. Having studied at the Hebrew University, he is intimately familiar with rabbinical studies.

Young explores the rabbinical writing of *Avos* 5.18 in his book, *The Parables*.[30] His chapter on the Parable of the Sower is entitled Four Types of Hears, a reference to the *Avos* which exclaims at the beginning of each of five of the six sayings, "there are four types of …"[31] Young makes it clear that the parable is not primarily about the sower, as the traditional title would imply, but about those who hear. For Young, to understand the Parable of the Sower, "it must be studied in light of Jewish culture."[32] He believes that understanding the Jewish parallels to this parable make it possible to interpret it properly. He asks:

> Would the people who first heard it have understood the meaning of the parable? A study of Jewish parallels that also use numerous analogies with four types shows that the answer to the question by be affirmative. In a context of Jewish learning and Torah study, four different types of soil conditions would be viewed as various types of disciples absorbing the words taught by their master.[33]

---

[28] Jones, *Studying the Parables*, 68.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Young, *The Parables.*

[31] *Pirkei Avos* 5.14-18.

[32] Young, *The Parables,* 253.

[33] Ibid., 251.

Young then uses this explanation to affirm the interpretation of the parable found in the Synoptic Gospels because it is in line with the explanation given for similar parables in Jewish teachings.[34] Young goes on to demonstrate the parallelism of the parable and demonstrating its relationship to Semitic parallelism. While his argument is convincing, it is not surprising as the Parable of the Sower is being told by a Semitic teacher.

He then turns his attention to *Avos* 5 where he examines three of the six wisdom teachings. He writes:

> Each of the four types of disciple is weighed in the balance in order to determine his positive qualities compared with less desirable characteristics…The strong characteristics are weighed against the weaker qualities in four parts. In the world of Jewish learning and Torah scholarship, each person can evaluate his or her strength and weakness…The form and structure of the rabbinic saying is very similar to the four types of soil in the parable of the Sower.[35]

This leads Young then to reject the "ever popular allegorical method"[36] of interpretation. He concludes that:

> [The] method that seeks to discover secret symbolic meanings in the parables actually only conceals the original purpose of Jesus. The parable of the Sower becomes clouded in mystery. People cannot hear its message because the interpreter is forcing his own meaning on each detail of the parable, like *1 Clement*, which imposed a teaching about the future resurrection on the parable. One must listen to Jesus as he tells the parable and see the story in light of rabbinic literature and the rich heritage of the first-century Jesus people. The focus therefore is on Torah learning and discipleship.[37]

---

[34] Ibid., 252.

[35] Ibid., 265-66.

[36] Ibid., 268. He argues that the interpretation given by Jesus is in fact not allegorical. He writes, "The parables of Jesus, like their counterparts in rabbinic literature are unique. Some teaching forms, such as fables or allegories, are somewhat similar to Gospel and rabbinic parables, but not the classic form of story parables, such as those in the Gospels and rabbinic literature, is a distinct type of teaching technique that has no parallel (271)."

[37] Ibid.

Young ties his interpretation directly to the rabbinic literature and his interpretation will be explored at length below under Interpretive Implications.

Coming only slightly after Young's major work on the subject, Klyne Snodgrass, New Testament scholar at North Park Theological Seminary spends extensive time in his significant work *Stories with Intent*[38] on the influence of Jewish thought and writings on the parables of Jesus. Specifically looking at the *Avos*, he find seven texts that he states are "similar to the similitudes of Jesus."[39] Within this list, he includes *Avos* 5.18. Snodgrass clearly sees this, along with numerous other rabbinical teachings, to be comparable to Jesus parable, however he does not discuss directly why this is so or the effect it has on the Sower's interpretation.

**Interpretive and Pastoral Implications**

The sower has been interpreted in many different ways throughout the history of the Church.[40] For the purposes of this paper only the interpretive consequences of the relationship of the Sower and *Avos* 5 will be examined below. If a connection is present between one or all of the six sayings in *Avos* 5, does this change how the New Testament student and scholar understands this popular story told by Jesus?

Young gives an extended treatment of the interpretation, rejecting the allegorical interpretation in favor of an interpretation rooted in a rabbinical context. He writes:

> The one message is clear: be like the disciple who receives the word of Jesus' teaching with a good heart. The word sown will produce an abundant return. The word-picture communicates the force of Jesus' teaching in the form of a graphic

---

[38] Snodgrass, Klyne. *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus (*Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

[39] Ibid., 56.

[40] The number of interpretations is too numerous to exhaustively discuss here. However, because, "the Sower is a parable for all parables, a parable about parables and a parabling" (John Dominic Crossan, *The Power of Parable: How Fiction by Jesus Became Fiction about Jesus*. New York: HarperOne, 2012, 20) it is vital to considering the broader implications of the interpretive method utilized.

> illustration…[P]arables should be placed in a separate and distinct category. The allegorical approach to the parables pursues the intuitive effort to solve the cryptogram by arbitrarily ascribing meaning to the word-picture. Parables, however, must be studied to hear the message of the storyteller in the context of the situation. Only meaning ascribed by the storyteller by be accepted as showing a correspondence between the picture (mashal) and the reality (*nimshal*). In fact, allegory often misrepresents the original intention of Jesus. If an interpretation is called for, Jesus the master teller of parables gives additional clarity to his example. [41]

Young's interpretation is simple. Jesus is simply telling those who are around him to respond. This is normative part of Jesus ministry.[42] Jesus "calls upon each person to make a life-changing decision. No one should seek special symbolic meaning for each detail of a parable and allegorize it to suit his or her own purposes."[43]

If Young is to be accepted, the primary emphasis for the parable is the good soil. The question that is left largely unanswered is how he understands the other three types of soil. Based on his interpretation, this question is largely irrelevant because of his primary emphasis.[44]

However, from a homiletical/pastoral standpoint it is difficult to leave the other soils unattended. Young does exemplary work in his treatment of the good soil, even further connecting that them to other rabbinical literature.[45] Others, to the contrary, have went so far as to change the very words that are presented, ignore the context of the message, and jettison the

---

[41] Young, *The Parables,* 271.

[42] Mt. 4:19-22, 9:9; Mk 1:16-20

[43] Young, *The Parables*, 275.

[44] cf. Snodgrass, *Stories,* 169. He argues that, "any valid interpretation must do justice—not merely to the harvest—but to the emphasis given the threefold failure, failure that occurs at increasingly later stages in the growth process…To determine what Jesus' original hearers would have understood is impossible because we do not know what other comments were made or information was given in connection with the parable" (169).

[45] Ibid., 274-75.

scriptural setting of Jesus' teachings.[46] This makes it imperative from a pastoral perspective to have personal clarity about the composition of the parable and the integrity of the synoptic interpretation. The question becomes, does one have to shake off the more common interpretation of the Sower to accept that there is within the parable a clear connection to the rabbinic teachings present in Jesus day?

## A Possible Bridge of Interpretation[47]

It seems as if it is possible to bridge the interpretive processes to allow for a strong connection between the Sower and rabbinical writings while also keeping the traditional homiletical emphasis that examines each of the soils as distinct response to hearing the word of God. This can be done by understanding each of the six sayings from *Avos* 5 as having essentially the same structure. There are two responses that have some merit but are not sufficient, one response that is completely wrong/wicked, and one that is praised in both the rabbinical literature and the Sower parable. This understanding leaves in place the overall theme presented by Young that Jesus calls for a response with a good heart.[48] At the same time, it still takes into account that a great deal of Jesus' parable is devoted to the failure of the sower to see growth along the path and among the rocks and thorns.

It is important to note that the *Avos* sayings do not appear in any particular context with the Mishnah to give the reader an understanding of when and why they were uttered. However,

---

[46] Donald H. Juel, "Encountering the Sower: Mark 4:1-20," *Interpretation* 56, no. 3 (July 2002): 273-283. has writing a wonderful article on the issues, both scholarly and pastoral with removing the parable from its scriptural context.

[47] cf. Tables 3 and 4 in particular to see the connection.

[48] Young, *The Parables*, 274-75.

this is not the case with the case with the Sower. In each of the Synoptics there is at least minimal contextualization given.[49]

In *Avos* 5, it is clear that there is nothing to be praised among those types that have insufficient or evil results.[50] Regardless of one's theological disposition, this is something that New Testament students from both Reformed and Arminian backgrounds can agree. Whether one believes that the rocky and thorny soil people lost their salvation or never had it to begin with, it is obvious that falling away is not an action that is praised by Jesus in His parable.

It seems, therefore, exegetically, historically, and experientially accurate to interpret the Sower parable as following the pattern that is present in *Avos* 5. That is not to claim that Jesus was somehow dependent on the rabbinic teachings that eventually found their way into the Mishnah or vice versa. However, Jesus was a first-century Jew who grew up in constant contact with the religious teachings of His day. Understanding this parable in light of the rabbinic teaching does not change its interpretation but rather it is strengthened.

## Conclusion

It can be accepted that there is a relationship between the rabbinical writings and Jesus' parable without ultimately changing the interpretation of the parable itself completely.[51] As has

---

[49] In Matthew: That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. 2 And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables (13:1-3a); in Mark: Again he began to teach beside the sea. And a very large crowd gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat in it on the sea, and the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. And he was teaching them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them (4:1-2); and in Luke: And when a great crowd was gathering and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable (8:4). Obviously there is an even larger context that each pericope is located.

[50] The sponge, which soaks up everything, may come closest, but the Talmud is silent at this point.

[51] Jones' point in presenting the *Avos* text is to show that one response is "exceptional" while the other three are "inadequate" (Jones, *Studying the Parables*, 68). He comes to the conclusion that the along-the-path people where those who had not yet believed and been saved. contra. Young, *Parables* above.

been demonstrated, an interpretation within the context of the rabbinical writings is compatible with an understanding of four responses in the Sower. As in the *Avos* sayings, two responses are inadequate, one is completely wrong, and one is praised. This should give confidence to those whose interpretive goal is to both understand Jesus in His historical/cultural context and properly exegete the text within its scriptural context.

## Appendix

Table 2. *The Sower and the six sayings from Avos 5 broken down by type*

| **Saying/Parable** | **First Type** | **Second Type** | **Third Type** | **Fourth Type** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sower (Mt 13:18-23; Mk 4:13-20; Lk 8:11-15) | Along path | Rocky ground | Among thorns | Good soil |
| Possessions (Avos 5.13) | Mine and Yours is Mine | Mine is yours and yours is mine | Mine is yours and yours is yours | Yours is mine and mine is mine |
| Temperament (Avos 5.14) | Angered easy; pacified easily | Hard to anger; hard to pacify | Hard to anger; easy to pacify | Easy to anger; hard to pacify |
| Student's Understanding (Avos 5.15) | Grasps quickly; forgets quickly | Grasp slowly; forgets slowly | Grasps quickly; forgets slowly | Grasps slowly; forgets quickly |
| Donors to Charity (Avos 5.16) | Wishes to give; wants other no to give | Wishes others to give; does not want to give | Wishes himself to give; wants others to give | Wishes not to give; wants others not to |
| Attendees of the House of Study (Avos 5.17) | Goes; does not study | Studies; does not go | Goes; studies | Does not go; does not study |
| Students before the Sages (Avos 5.18) | Sponge | Funnel | Strainer | Sieve |

Note: These appear in this table in the same order in which they appear in the text given under saying/parable.

Table 3. *The results of each type from Avos 5.13-18*

| **Avos** | | **Type** | **Result** |
|---|---|---|---|
| 5.13 | 1 | Mine is mine, yours is yours | Average/could be Sodom |
| | 2 | Mine is yours, yours is mine | Ignoramus |
| | 3 | Mine is yours, yours is yours | Saint |
| | 4 | Mine is yours, yours is mine | Sinner |
| 5.14 | 1 | Easy to anger, easy to calm | Neutral |
| | 2 | Hard to anger, hard to calm | Neutral |
| | 3 | Hard to anger, easy to calm | Saint |
| | 4 | Easy to anger, hard to calm | Sinner |
| 5.15 | 1 | Learns quickly, forgets quickly | Neutral |
| | 2 | Learns slow, forgets slow | Neutral |
| | 3 | Leans quick, forgets slow | Good portion/scholar |
| | 4 | Learns slow, forgets quick | Bad portion |
| 5.16 | 1 | Gives, no one else should give | Begrudges others |
| | 2 | Others give, but not him | Begrudges himself |
| | 3 | Gives, others give | Saint |
| | 4 | Does not give, others do not give | Sinner |
| 5.17 | 1 | Goes but does not study | Reward only for going |
| | 2 | Studies, but does not go | Reward only for studying |
| | 3 | Goes and studies | Saint |
| | 4 | Does not go and does not study | Sinner |
| 5.18 | 1 | Sponge | Soaks up all |
| | 2 | Funnel | Pours out all |
| | 3 | Strainer | Keeps the bad |
| | 4 | Sieve | Keeps the good |

Note: In the first five, the type in position one and two are somehow incomplete. The type in position three is described in the best terms. Position four is a sinner or a bad portion.

Table 1. *The Sower parable with explanations of type from Luke 8*

| Type | Explanation[52] | Explanation of the Type[53] | Result |
|---|---|---|---|
| Along path | Seed is trampled underfoot, the birds devoured it. | The devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. | Do not grow |
| Rocky ground | As it grew up it withered away because it had no moisture. | They receive the word with joy. However, they have no root. They believe for a while but fall away during a time of testing. | Fall away |
| Among thorns | The thorns grow up and choke out the seed. | These are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of like and their fruit does not mature. | Do not mature |
| Good soil | Grows up and yields a hundredfold. | Hear the word and hot it fast in an honest and good heart. They bear fruit with patience. | Bear fruit |

Table 4. *The sixth Avos saying arranged in the order given in the Talmud with explanation*

| Type | Explanation | Explanation of the Type | Result |
|---|---|---|---|
| Sponge | Absorbs all | The student absorbs all that he studies | None given |
| Sieve | Passes through the fine flour are retains the coarse particles | An intelligent student retains what is good in the study and leaves out what is not | Intelligent |
| Funnel | Lets in the liquid through one opening and lets it out through the other | The unintelligent student. What enters his one ear goes out through the other, until all is gone. | Unintelligent |
| (Wine) Strainer | Lets the wine pass through and absorbs the dregs | The wicked student forgets the good teachings and retains the bad ones | Wicked |

Note: The explanations given in the Talmud bring the understanding of this sixth saying closer into the format of the previous five. Though the order still does not follow the same as the previous sayings, they are now grouped closer to the results presented in Table 3. With the given explanations it would be appropriate to number the results of this saying as: Sponge-1; Funnel-2; Sieve-3; and Strainer-4.

[52] Adapted from Luke 8:5-8.

[53] Adapted from Luke 8:12-15.

**Bibliography**

Bailey, Kenneth E. *Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke.* Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983.

Bieringer, Reimund, Florentino Gaarcía Martínez, Didier Pollefeyt, and Peter J. Tomson, . *The New Testament and Rabbinic Literature.* Leiden: Brill, 2010.

Blomberg, Craig L. *Interpreting the Parables.* Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2012.

—. *Preaching the Parables* . Grand Rapids: Baker Academic , 2004.

Carlston, Charles E. *The Parables of the Triple Tradition.* Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975.

Caspi, Mishael, and John T. Greene. Parables and Fables As Distinctive Jewish Literary Genres: The Origins and Structure of Indirect Speech About God. Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 2011. eBook Collection (EBSCOhost), EBSCOhost (accessed March 16, 2015).

Chilton, Bruce. *Rabbi Jesus An Intimate Biography: The Jewish LIfe and Teachings that Inspired Christianity* . New York: Doubleday, 2000.

Chilton, Bruce, and Craig Evans, . *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the State of Current Research.* Boston: Brill, 1998.

Crossan, John Dominic. *The Power of Parable: How Fiction by Jesus Became Fiction about Jesus.* New York: HarperOne, 2012.

Drury, John. *The Parables in the Gospels* . New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1985.

Evans, Craig A. *Jesus and His Contemporaries: Comparative Studies.* Leiden: Brill, 1995.

Fee, Gordon D., and Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for all its Worth.* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014.

Flusser, David. *The Sage from Galilee: Rediscovering Jesus' Genius.* Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007 .

Halverson, Jared. M. “Of Soils and Souls: The Parable of the Sower,” *The Religious Educator* 9, no. 3 (2008): 31-47, accessed March 19, 2015, https://ojs.lib.byu.edu/spc/index.php/RelEd/article/viewFile/2258/2133.

Hendrick, Charles W. *Many Things in Parables: Jesus and HIs Modern Critics.* Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.

Huel, Donald H. "Encountering the Sower: Mark 4:1-20." *Interpretation* 56, no. 3 (July 2002): 273-283.

Hultgren, Arland J. *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary.* Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000.

Hunter, Archibald M. *Interpreting the Parables.* Philadelphia: 1960, 1960.

—. *The Parables then and Now.* Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971.

Jeremias, Joachim. *The Parables of Jesus* . New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972.

Jones, Peter Rhea. *Studying the Parables of Jesus.* Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 1999.

—. *The Teaching of the Parables.* Nashville: Broadman Press, 1982.

Jülicher, Adolf. *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu.* Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1888.

Kennedy, Gerald. *The Parables: Sermons on the Stories Jesus Told.* New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1960.

Kissinger, Warren S. *The Parables of Jesus: A History of Interpretation and Bibliography.* Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 1979.

Kistemaker, Simon J. *The Parables: Understanding the Stories Jesus Told.* Grand Rapids: Bakers Books, 1980 .

Lachs, Samuel Tobias. *A Rabbinic Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke.* Jersey City: KTAV Publishing, 1987.

Levison, N. *The Parables: Their Background and Local Setting.* Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1926.

Longenecker, Richard N., ed. *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables.* Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000.

Luz, Ulrich. *Matthew 8-20 Hermeneia Series.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001.

Oesterley, W. O. E. *The Gospel Parables in the Light of Their Jewish Background.* New York: The Macmillan Company , 1814.

Payne, Philip B. "The Authenticity of the Parable of the Sower and Its Interpretation," in *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 1, ed. R.T. France and David Wenham (Sheffield: JSOT, 1980), 163-207.

*Pirkei Avos: Ethics of the Fathers / A New Translation with a Commentary Anthologized from the Classical Rabbinic Sources.* Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 2009.

Rodkinson, Michael L., trans. *The Babylonian Talmud.* Vols. 1-10. 1918.

Schweitzer, Albert. *The Quest for the Historical Jesus.* Mineola: Dover, 2005.

—. *The Quest of the Historical Jesus.* Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2005.

Scott, Bernard Brandon. *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989.

Snodgrass, Klyne. *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus.* Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company , 2008.

Stein, Robert H. *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus.* Philadelphia : The Westminster Press, 1981.

Stern, David. *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic LIterature* . Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994.

Stern, Frank. *A Rabbi Looks at Jesus' Parables.* Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006.

Thoma, Clemens, and Michael Wyschogrod, . *Parable and Story in Judaism and Christianity.* Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1989.

Trench, Richard Chenevix. *Notes on the Parables of Our Lord.* New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1878.

Via, Jr., Dan Otto. *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension.* Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967.

Wenham, David. *The Parables of Jesus.* Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1989 .

Young, Brad H. *Jesus the Jewish Theologian.* Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1995.

—. *Meet the Rabbis: Rabbinic Thought and the Teachings of Jesus.* Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007.

—. *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation.* Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998.

Zaslow, David. *Jesus: First Century Rabbi.* Brewster: Paraclete Press, 2014.