

**The Old is Better:
Parables of Patched Garment and Wineskins as Elaboration
of a Chreia in Luke 5:33-39 about Feasting with Jesus.**

Anders Eriksson, Lund University

The unifying theme of the papers at this conference is the rhetorical analysis of ethos in biblical discourse. Such a theme invites studies of moral persuasion in specific biblical texts, but an analysis of ethos can also be a self-conscious reflection on the ethics of interpretation as suggested by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. An ethic of interpretation studies the "pervasive and often only partly conscious set of value-laden dispositions, inclinations, attitudes, and habits" and thereby often asks why a traditional interpretation has become dominant; whose interests it serves and what consequences the interpretation has had in history.¹ This paper will attempt to move in both areas by reading the parables about the patched garment and the wineskins as an example of moral persuasion in the ancient Mediterranean world and by asking why the traditional interpretation has become dominant.

The traditional interpretation of the parable about the wine and the wineskins, found in Luke 5:37-38, was introduced by Marcion at a time when the Gentiles had become the majority among the early Christians. In his attempt to separate Christianity from Judaism Marcion used the parable about the wineskins as a key passage to support his dualism. He interprets the old wineskins as "the hearts of the Pharisees and the scribes, who have grown old in their sins and have not received the proclamation of the Gospel."² The implication of his interpretation is that the new wineskins stand for Christianity and that these new wineskins should replace the old wineskins of Judaism. In the history of interpretation the majority of interpreters have followed Marcion's interpretation. When religious groups see themselves as the modern day examples of a new spiritual content that necessitates new organizational forms they appropriate the parable for themselves and "new wineskins for the new wine" becomes a rhetorical trope that can be used in diverse religious contexts. This popular interpretation is supported by the traditional interpretation of the parable in commentaries, where the new wine almost without exception is interpreted as a positive symbol for Jesus and his disciples and the old wine a negative symbol for the Pharisees and their disciples. So for example Fitzmyer interprets the contrast between the old and the new as an "emphasis on the difference between (Pharisaic) Judaism and Christianity"; Marshall claims that "containing the gospel within the bonds of Judaism will only destroy both," and Jeremias states that "the

¹ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship," *JBL* 107 (1988): 3-17; Quote from the Thirteen Theses of the Ethics of Interpretation in, *Rhetoric and Ethic : The Politics of Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 195.

² Epiphanius, *Panaraion haer.* 42.2.1-3.

old garment and the new wine tell us that the old is past, and the New Age has been ushered in." ³

Reading the parable in this way we are surprised to read the following verse, where Jesus does not urge his disciples to make sure to get new wineskins for the new wine he offers, but instead concludes: "no one after drinking old wine desires new wine, but says, 'The old is better.'" ⁴ How are we to understand this curious twist in the progression of thought? The usual suggestion is that the statement is an added ironic comment that reflects, not the views of Jesus, but pharisaic unbelief or the unenlightened views of the disciples before they had received the Spirit ⁵ Recent attempts to make sense of the passage either interpret the point of the parables as a call for repentance, ⁶ an emphasis on the gospel itself being old ⁷ or a critique of senseless innovations. ⁸ These interpretations have noted the positive evaluation of the "old" in these parables, but have not moved beyond the identification of Jesus' teaching as the new wine found in the traditional interpretation

The traditional interpretation is built on five presuppositions. It presupposes that the parables of Jesus reference the transcendent reality of the kingdom of God. Another presupposition is that the parables can be divorced from the context in which they now appear. Those interpreters who want to maintain a connection with the context usually presuppose this connection in the Pharisees' question to Jesus, not in the reply Jesus gives. A fourth common presupposition is that an opposition between a negative "old" and a positive "new" is the key to the text. The last of these presuppositions assumes that not just the point of the parables but also the component parts can be transferred allegorically to the question at issue. I would like to show that each of these presuppositions are both questionable and unnecessary if there is a way to make sense of the concluding remark "The old is better" as a saying of Jesus in the context of Luke. ⁹

Parable and Parabolhv

New Testament scholars are used to see parables as short narratives that reference a transcendent reality, usually the kingdom of God. ¹⁰ The definition as a literary form becomes problematic both at the upper end of the spectrum, where it is difficult to distinguish parables

³ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke*. Vol. 1 (2 ed.; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1981), 597; I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke : A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC 3; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 227; Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (3:rd rev. ed.; London: SCM, 1972), 118.

⁴ The positive adjective $\kappa\rho\iota\sigma\tau\acute{o}\varsigma$ here has the force of the comparative. See BDF §§ 60-62 on the breakdown of the degrees of adjectives in Hellenistic Greek.

⁵ According to Jaques Dupont, "Vin vieux, Vin nouveau (Luc 5,39)," *CBQ* 25 (1963): 287-292, these views have been the most common in the history of interpretation. The former is the most widely held.

⁶ Alistair Kee, "The Old Coat and the New Wine: A Parable of Repentance," *Novum Testamentum* 12 (1970): 13-21.

⁷ R-S Good, "Jesus, protagonist of the old, in Lk 5:33-39," *Novum-Testamentum* 25 (1983): 19-36.

⁸ David Flusser, "Do you Prefer New Wine?," *Immanuel* 9 (1979): 26-31.

⁹ Other attempts to make sense of the saying

¹⁰ Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable : A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 8.

from example stories, and at the lower end where they lose their narrativity in short aphoristic and illustrative images. It is also problematic to read all parables as symbolic accounts of a transcendent reality, whether it be the coming eschatological kingdom,¹¹ insight into our own existential situation¹² or the role of the church in salvation history.¹³

The problem is that in the synoptic tradition the term *parabolē* is not primarily used for a genre, but for a wide range of images, sayings and stories that have some kind of comparative function.¹⁴ This usage is more in line with the rhetorical understanding of parables as "illustrative comparison" or "analogy",¹⁵ and the word itself is derived from the verb *paraballein* in the sense juxtapose, set beside or parallel with for the purpose of comparison. In the *progymnasmata* a *parabolē* is an inductive argument from analogy often used in an elaboration of a *chreia*. The teachers of rhetoric seldom define a *parabolē* but Sardonios, the Byzantine commentator on Aphthonius *progymnasmata*, states that a *parabolē* is "a comparison between a reasoning in the mind [*nohōtōv*] and something perceived by the senses [*aiśqhtōv*]." ¹⁶

Luke in 5:36, 12:16, 13:6, 14:7, 15:3, 18:9 introduces analogies with the words *e[egen/ ei]pen parabolēn*. This formula in Luke functions to introduce analogies to a point already made in the text. This usage is similar to the rhetorical understanding of *parabolē* as an argument from analogy.

Parables as elaboration of chreiai

As previously mentioned a second presupposition for the traditional interpretation is the form critical consensus that the parables about the patched garment and the wineskins can be divorced from the context in which they now appear.¹⁷ These parables are then interpreted as free floating traditions that have no connection to the *mashal* about the bridegroom that precedes them both in Lk 5:33-39, Mk 2:18-22 and Mt 9:14-17. The form critical presupposition still is held by many, but a reaction has set in and Gerhardsson in his presidential address to the SNTS pleaded that it is not in line with sound exegesis to cut the parables of Jesus out of their frames to treat them as wild texts with indeterminable messages.¹⁸

¹¹ Jeremias, *Parables*; Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel according to St. Mark* (London: Macmillan, 1952).

¹² Dan O Via, *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967).

¹³ Rudolf Bultmann, *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1931); Adolf Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* (2 ed.; Tübingen: Mohr- Siebeck, 1910).

¹⁴ Burton L. Mack, "Teaching in Parables: Elaboration in Mark 4:1-34," in *Patterns of Persuasion in the Gospels*. (ed. Burton L. Mack and Vernon K. Robbins; Sonoma: Polebridge, 1989), 145-46.

¹⁵ See the thorough philological investigation by Marsh Mc. Call, H. Jr, *Ancient Rhetorical Theories of Simile and Comparison* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1969).

¹⁶ Sardonios, *Commentarium in Aphthonii Progymnasmata* 47.1 (ed. Rabe). I would like to thank Ron Hock for pointing out the importance of this definition for the interpretation of the parables in the New Testament.

¹⁷ F Hahn, "Die Bildworte vom neuen Flicker und jungen Wein," *EvT* 31 (1971): 357-375.

¹⁸ Birger Gerhardsson, "If We do not Cut the Parables out of their Frames," *NTS* 37 (1991): 321-335.

Four decades ago William Farmer showed what such a frame would look like when he argued that in the synoptic material peculiar to Luke several parables should be understood as elaborating a chreia that was already stated in the preceding context. Farmer mentions how the point made in the chreia of 12:15, that a man must guard himself against all forms of covetousness, is aptly illustrated in the parable of the rich fool. In Luke 16:15 the meaning of the chreia that "what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God," is elaborated in the parable about the rich man and Lazarus. The same pattern is found in Luke 13, where the chreia about the need for repentance is elaborated with a parable about a gardener and his fig tree. It is also found in Luke 15, where the thesis for the chreia is not a saying but the fact that Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them. Jesus defends his action by the three parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son and his brother. Luke uses the term *parabolē* to designate the parables in 12:16, 13:6 and 15:3. Farmer concludes that this literary form, where parables elaborate and illustrate the point of the chreia, was present already in the source used by Luke.¹⁹

Thirteen years earlier R. O. P Taylor noted the importance of the chreia as a literary form. He was maybe not the first modern gospel scholar to note that parables were considered arguments in rhetoric, but he was probably the first to point out that parables were used to work out the meaning of a chreia through the pattern of elaboration.²⁰ The findings of Farmer and Taylor was taken up by Mack and Robbins in *Patterns of Persuasion* which revived the interest in Hellenistic rhetoric, progymnasmata and the elaboration of the chreia among New Testament scholars.²¹ Subsequently Willi Braun has examined the chreia pattern in Luke 14, where the meaning of the action in 14:4, healing a man with dropsy, is elaborated through a parable in 14:7-10, a judgment and contrary in 14:11, and another analogy in 14:12-14.²² Similarly David Gowler has shown the elaboration pattern in Luke 11:37-54.²³ The parables of the patched garment and the wineskins should be interpreted as belonging to the preceding chreia, just like the instances noted above. Luke introduces the parables with the formula, "and he told them a parable", and the theme of joyous festivity in the presence of Jesus is a theme running through Luke's gospel.

Burton Mack in a programmatic essay shows how the elaboration pattern of a chreia contains the three components: setting, challenge and response.²⁴ These components are also found in Luk 5:33-39 and the pattern of elaboration can be displayed as follows:

¹⁹ William R. Farmer, "Notes on a Literary and Form-Critical Analysis of some of the Synoptic Material Peculiar to Luke," *NTS* 8 (1962): 315-316.

²⁰ R. O. P. Taylor, *The Groundwork of the Gospels* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1946), 80, n. 1.

²¹ Burton L Mack and Vernon K Robbins, *Patterns of Persuasion in the Gospels* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1989).

²² Willi Braun, *Feasting and Social Rhetoric in Luke 14* (SNTSMS 85; Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 1995), 145-175.

²³ David B. Gowler, "Hospitality and Characterization in Luke 11:37-54: A Socio-Narratological Approach," in *The Rhetoric of Pronouncement* (ed. Vernon K. Robbins; *Semeia* 64; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 213-251.

²⁴ Burton L. Mack, "The Anointing of Jesus: Elaboration within a Chreia," in *Patterns of Persuasion*, 89-104.

Chreia component: Setting

Rhetorical function: *Narratio*

Luke 5:29–32 Jesus eats with tax collectors in the house of Levi.

Chreia component: Challenge, Question

Rhetorical function: *Quaestio*

Luke 5:33 Jesus is challenged since his disciples do not fast but feast.

Chreia component: Response

Rhetorical function: *Argumentatio*

Luke 5:34 Enigmatic *mashal*: The friends of the bridegroom cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them.

Luke 5:35 Clarification of *mashal*. They will fast when the bridegroom is taken away from them.

Three arguments from analogy in parables showing incompatibility.

Luke 5:36 Parable about patched garment. Contrary mode, absurd action.

Luke 5:37 Parable about old wineskin. Contrary mode, absurd action.

Luke 5:38 Clarification of wineskin parable in plain mode.

Luke 5:39 Analogy of wine drinker. Contrary mode, absurd action.

The setting for the Chreia: Eating with sinners in Levi's house

Those interpreters who want to maintain a connection with the context usually find this connection in the Pharisees' question about fasting and not in the reply Jesus gives.²⁵ This presupposition is questionable when one considers the pattern of challenge and ripost typical of honor exchanges in the ancient Mediterranean world. This pattern is part of a constant social tug of war in which the contestants compete for honor.²⁶ The challenge to Jesus in 5:33 should be seen within this ancient Mediterranean pattern of social exchange in which different parties strive for honor against one another in the eyes of the audience. The narrated form of the response to the challenge takes the rhetorical form of a chreia. The teachers of rhetoric knew various types of *chreiai*. The one answering a question posed to the main character Theon classifies a *chreia apokritikon*.

The challenge to Jesus is the third scene in a section of five controversy stories in Lk 5:17- 6:11.²⁷ The chiasmic pattern highlights 5:33-39 as the hinge of the section. Each of the

²⁵ Bo Reicke, "Die Fastenfrage nach Luk. 5,33-39," *Theologische Zeitschrift* 30 (1974): 321-328.

²⁶ Bruce J Malina and Jerome H Neyrey, "Honor and Shame in Luke-Acts: Pivotal Values of the Mediterranean World," in *The Social World of Luke-Acts* (ed. Jerome H Neyrey; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991), 29-32; Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World : Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Rev. ed.; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993); 42-45; Pierre Bourdieu, "The Sentiment of Honour in Kabyle Society," in *Honour and Shame : The Values of Mediterranean Society* (ed. John George Peristiany; London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1966), 191-241.

²⁷ This section has synoptic parallels in Mk 2:1-3:6 and Mt 9:1-17, 12:1-14.

five scenes has a setting, a challenge and a response similar to the chreia pattern noted by Mack. Something happens which causes the scribes and the Pharisees to challenge Jesus and he responds either in word or deed. In the first scene, Luke 5:17-26, Jesus forgives the lame man his sins, the scribes and the Pharisees challenge his claim to be able to forgive sins, and Jesus responds by showing that he has the authority to forgive sins by healing the lame man.

In the second scene, Luke 5:27-32, Jesus calls the tax collector Levi to be his disciple, accepts the invitation to eat and drink during a great feast in his house together with a large company of tax collectors. This feasting causes the Pharisees and the scribes to challenge the behavior of Jesus and the disciples, and Jesus retorts that "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick."

In the fourth scene, Lk 6:1-5, some of Jesus' disciples are plucking grain on the Sabbath. Some of the Pharisees challenge Jesus by claiming that they are doing something unlawful. Jesus responds by retelling the story about how David and his men ate the bread of the Presence in the house of God when they were hungry. In the fifth scene, Lk 6:6-11, the scribes and the Pharisees are watching him as he enters a synagogue to see whether he is going to heal on the Sabbath. Jesus responds to their challenge by an oral defense of his right to do good on the Sabbath and then heals the man with the withered hand. The scribes and the Pharisees respond by discussing with one another about what they might do to get rid of Jesus.

The literary setting for the chreia in Lk 5:33-39 is thus a series of controversy stories in which the scribes and the Pharisees constantly challenge Jesus. The challenge to Jesus in 5:33 is a follow-up to the previous exchange in Levi's house. Jesus seemed to have won the verbal battle in 5:31. His witty remark that "it is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick" is an unquestionable truth shaped like a proverbial saying. The saying is a verbal chreia and like many other chreiai the meaning is not immediately evident. Chreiai are veiled utterances similar to some of the *meshalim* in the Hebrew Bible. Aphthonius gives the following example of an active chreia: "When Pythagoras was asked how long is the life of men, he hid himself after appearing briefly". He then clarifies the meaning of the enigmatic action: "making his appearance a measure of life."²⁸ Doxopater supplies another veiled utterance: "When Philip wrote many threatening letters to the Lacedaemonians, they wrote back to him. 'Lacedaemonians to Philip: Dionysius in Corinth: alphabeth'"²⁹ This taunting reply alludes to the fact that the tyrant of Syracuse, who had received Plato and other philosophers in his palace, had surrendered to the Spartans and now had to support himself in his Corinthian exile by teaching at the very lowest level. If Philip makes his threats come true he will face a similar situation. The point of such a chreia is usually left to the understanding of the hearers, much like the moral of a fable.

The chreia in 5:31 states that: "It is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick." This chreia is phrased in general terms and functions as a Rule in a

²⁸ Aphthonius 4.6-8 ed Rabe. Kennedy's translation.

²⁹ Doxopater 2.258,6-9. Chreia 44 in Ronald F. Hock and Edward N. O'Neil, eds., *The Chreia in Ancient Rhetoric: I, The Progymnasmata* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986) 326-328.

deductive enthymeme. The actual Case is only hinted at, but we are probably to understand Jesus to imply that the sinners and tax collectors in Levi's house are metaphorically sick and therefore in need of a spiritual physician. Read as an enthymeme the Result is that Jesus is the spiritual physician who has come to call, not the righteous but sinners to repentance. The meaning of the chreia is clarified through a gradual process in which the metaphor of the chreia, those who are well and those who are sick, is applied to the issue of Jesus' eating with sinners and tax collectors in the house of Levi. On the general level, *quaestio infinita*, the Rule states the need for medical treatment of sick people. In the analogous reasoning sin is compared to a disease and Jesus is compared to a doctor able to cure the spiritual disease. On the concrete level, *quaestio finita*, the chreia answers the challenge from the scribes and Pharisees: Jesus is justified to eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners. There is one more aspect of this enthymeme that deserves notice. The Rule builds on the contrast between those who are well and those who are sick. Throughout this argument the two groups, sick and healthy, sinners and righteous, are kept apart through contraries. On the concrete level the discourse separates those eating and drinking with Jesus in the house of Levi from those Pharisees and scribes who raise objections when they see the table fellowship.

The challenge to Jesus

Once the setting has been identified the next chreia component is the challenge. The challenge in Lk 5:33 continues the pattern of challenge and response in Levi's house. The persons invoked by the ambiguous *oi* in Luke's gospel are the Pharisees and scribes who have been challenged by the reply Jesus gave in 5:31-32. Since Jesus had successfully defended himself against their initial challenge, their honor in the eyes of the audience is now threatened. They need to respond with a renewed challenge.

The challenge to Jesus in 5:33 has the implicit claim that the disciples of Jesus lack in spirituality since they do not fast and pray in the same way as the disciples of John and the Pharisees. The reasoning could be displayed in the form of an enthymeme:

Rule: [Jesus and his disciples ought to fast]

Case: The disciples of John and the Pharisees fast

Contrary case: but the disciples of Jesus eat and drink

Result: [The disciples of Jesus lack the spirituality shown by fasting].

The logic of the challenge contains an unstated rule, which says that Jesus and his disciples should fast and pray in accordance with the ethos of Jewish piety.³⁰ The text posits contrary cases that show fasting and lack of fasting, i.e. feasting. The implicit claim is that the disciples of Jesus break with Jewish piety when they eat and drink together with sinners and tax collectors.

³⁰ Thanks to Mark Nanos for pointing out that the issue is not legalism and rules for fasting, as the majority of commentators suggest, but the ethos of a spiritual life.

The response by Jesus in an enigmatic chreia

The third component of the chreia is the response. In Luke 5:34 Jesus responds to the challenge with a rhetorical question: "Can you make the friends of the bridegroom [i.e. the wedding guests] fast while the bridegroom is with them?" The question presupposes a negative answer. No, of course not! As long as the wedding festivities last, the guests do not fast; instead they eat and drink. This chreia states an obvious truth known from the experience of the hearers. However Jesus is not talking about the marriage customs of Palestine. The point of the chreia is found in the analogy between Jesus as the bridegroom and the disciples as the wedding guests. The disciples, together with the sinners and the tax collectors in Levi's house, feast because Jesus the bridegroom is with them.

Rule: As long as the wedding lasts the guests do not fast.

Case: [Jesus is the bridegroom and his disciples are the wedding guests.]

Result: [Therefore, the disciples do not have to fast when Jesus is with them.]

The response by Jesus in this enigmatic chreia makes a double point. First it continues to justify the dinner practices of Jesus and his disciples together with sinners and tax collectors against the criticism of the scribes and Pharisees. The disciples are justified not to fast when they are with the bridegroom Jesus. The second point is that the time of feasting is limited to the duration of the wedding. When the wedding is over the groom will be taken away from the disciples and then they will fast. This should probably be taken as a veiled reference to the death of Jesus and the accompanying sorrow.³¹ The second point is implicit in the enigmatic chreia of 5:34, but the distinction between the present joyous time of salvation and the future time of fasting receives a special stress in 5:35. The reasoning can be displayed as follows:

Rule: As long as the wedding lasts the guests do not fast.

Case: Days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from the wedding guests.

Result: In those days they will fast.

This enthymeme clarifies the second point through temporal contraries; the time when Jesus is with the disciples is set against the future time when he will be taken away from them. The chreia is similar to the veiled allusions in a *mashal*. It contains metaphorical elements but is not in itself a parable in the sense of an argument from analogy.

Elaboration through three arguments from analogy

Once the point of the chreia has been clarified by contraries, the elaboration in the *progymnasmata* continues by inductively proving the point through arguments from analogy, (parabolē), example (paradeigma) and ancient witness (marturiā twñ palaiwñ). Luke 5:36-39 elaborates the point of the chreia through three arguments from analogy. Luke introduces this section with the formula "And he told them a parable". The following section contains three comparisons. Each comparison is introduced by οὐδεὶς and an action that must have appeared foolish to listeners in first century Palestine. It is absurd to tear a piece from a

³¹ It is not unthinkable that the historical Jesus would have foreseen that he would be killed and that the disciples would be left without a leader, cf. Lk 6:11 and Mk 3:6.

new garment and put it upon an old garment. It is absurd to pour unfermented³² wine in old wineskins. It is absurd to desire unfermented wine once you have tasted old wine. All three comparisons should probably be seen as part of the argument from analogy Luke signals by the use of *parabolai* in 5:36.

All three comparisons work in a contrary mode. They state actions that are contrary to the normal way of doing things. First century hearers would have laughed when they considered the folly of these parables. The contrary type of argument often states the negative results of a particular course of action. The first two comparisons are parallel in that they list the negative result of the foolish behavior. In both comparisons the negative consequences are introduced with: *eij devmhvge*. "but if he would do so". If someone would be so foolish as to tear a piece from a new garment and put it on an old garment, the negative result would be that both the new and the old garment would be destroyed. Luke has accentuated the folly compared to Matthew and Mark by having the foolish person not just ripping the old garment in his attempt to mend it with unshrunk cloth, but deliberately cutting a new garment apart. But since the cloth from the new garment would not have shrunk as much as the old, it would still tear up the old garment.

The folly of the second comparison is that pouring wine that is still fermenting into old wineskins would break the valuable airtight skin bags used for storing wine once the fermentation process was finished. No one in antiquity would do such a thing if he knew what he was doing.

The argumentative function of these comparisons is to establish a Rule of incompatibility.

Case 1: Tearing a piece from a new garment and putting it on an old.

Result 1: Both the new and the old garment would be destroyed.

Case 2: Pouring unfermented wine into old wineskins.

Result 2: The wine will spill and the wineskins will be destroyed.

[Rule: Both in manufacturing of clothes and in wine production certain things are incompatible].

The argument works from the experience of first century Palestinians, who know that unshrunk cloth does not go with an old garment and that unfermented wine does not go with old wineskins. Does the analogy from the areas of wine production and manufacturing of clothes have anything to do with Jesus' response to the Pharisees challenge? In the enigmatic *chreia* about the bridegroom he presented the two incompatible situations of feasting with the bridegroom and fasting when the bridegroom would be taken away from them. The two contrary cases become argument from analogies, i.e. *rhetorical parabolai*, when the thing perceived by the senses is compared to a reasoning in the mind. The rule of incompatibility inductively established in the parables of patched garment and wineskins also applies to the situation of Jesus and his disciples. The situations are incompatible in both cases. The parables are arguments from analogy that show incompatibility in other areas of life as well. Just like it would be folly to mend a garment with a piece torn from another garment and folly

³² *Neō* in 5:37 means "which is still fermenting", BAGD.

to pour unfermented wine in old wineskins, it is foolish not to distinguish between the festive time when Jesus is with his disciples and the sorrowful time when he is not with them.

Primitivism as a cultural topic in the ancient Mediterranean world

Instead of looking at the argumentative function of the parables in an original Palestinian situation, the traditional interpretation seeks a deeper spiritual meaning concerning the kingdom of God and the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. The traditional interpretation finds this meaning in an opposition between a negative "old" and a positive "new" and makes this opposition the key to the interpretation of the text. This is the fourth presupposition of the traditional interpretation.

The problem for interpretation is that "newness" is a powerful rhetorical trope in the western civilization. We live in a culture that values new findings, new ideas and new clothes and where that which is old tends to be regarded as obsolete. For us modernism or postmodernism is the prevailing cultural topic. For Christians the "new" as contrasted to the "old" is inscribed in the very texts we regard as sacred, the Old and the New Testament. In biblical texts the "new" and the "old" has different connotations, but commentators on our text regularly invoke Scriptural parallels where the new is qualitatively better and replaces something old an inferior. W. D. Davies for example appeals to Rom 7:6, Eph 4:22, Col 3:9-10 and Heb 8:13 in his exegesis of Mt. 9:17.³³ Luke uses the adjective *καῖνός* in a positive sense in the words of institution, Lk. 22:20, but in other cases he seems to hold a theology in which the old is good.³⁴ Whether the adjectives old and new should be interpreted as positive or negative in the reading of the parables of Lk 5: 36-38 should be determined by those passages themselves, and not by a cultural or theological pre-understanding.

If we read the statements about the various items in the two parables carefully we note that the old and the new in the contrasting pairs are not characterized as we would expect. The focus in the comparisons is on the old part of the pair and this part is generally described as superior to the new part. The *ἵματιον* was the outer garment worn over the tunic or *χιτώνα*. Such a garment was usually woven out of wool from camels or goats hair. The production was complicated and the finished product would have been worn for many years. For a Palestinian peasant such clothing was valuable and we read in Mk 15:24 that the soldiers threw lots to get the garment of Jesus and according to Lk 10:30 the thieves took the clothing of the man they robbed. A garment was so valuable that even a used garment could be sold for money that could be used for buying a sword, Lk 22:36. In the parable of Lk 5:36 the old garment is worth repairing and the folly is to destroy the valuable garment.

The parable of the wineskins has a similar focus on the old part in the comparison. *ἄσκοϋ*, skin or hide, usually refers to skins made into a bag, especially wineskins. In the

³³ W. D. Davies, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (ICC; Edinburgh: T.& T. Clark, 1988), 113.

³⁴ Greg W. Forbes, *The God of Old : The Role of the Lukan Parables in the Purpose of Luke's Gospel* (JSNTS 198; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

orient such leather bags were used for transportation by camel. While the wine was "new" it needed fresh supple wineskins so that the skins could expand during fermentation. When the fermentation was finished and the wine was ready to be stored it was important to protect the wine from the oxygen in the air so that the wine would not get ruined. Therefore the wine was poured into old airtight and hardened wineskins. Probably these wineskins had a sealing film on the inside, just like wine casks do today. Such hardened wineskins were treasured and the fear that is evoked in the parable is that the old wineskins would be destroyed when the unfermented wine was poured into them. Jeremias turns the folly completely around when he claims that the foolish actions consists in using valuable new material to mend a tattered garment and pouring fermenting new wine into worn-out damaged wineskins.³⁵

That the old was so highly esteemed is quite understandable given that ancient cultural context. Old garments were the finished products of a long process and old wineskins were prized for their ability to protect the wine from the air. For the original hearers of these parables the cultural topic was primitivism. Their cultural values were age, ancestry and lineage and these values were directly tied to the material conditions of limited goods. Since adherence to these values was so widespread in the ancient Mediterranean world an appeal to them could provide arguments in a wide variety of circumstances. Peter Pilhofer has studied this *Altersbeweis* in Jewish and Christian apologetical writings. He ends his extensive monograph by quoting Mk 2:21-22, but does not apply the insight to the interpretation of the passage.³⁶

The traditional interpretation of the Lukan passage also builds on the fifth presupposition that there is an allegorical purpose in the parables. Ambrosius claims that the old garment that needs to be mended refers to the fasting that should be replaced with new clothes when the Christian is renewed and purified through baptism.³⁷ Jülicher pinpoints the fanciful suggestions in the history of interpretation:

Bald sind die alten Schläuche und das alte Kleid die am Alten fasthangenden Pharisäer, bald die Anhänger des des alten Bundes überhaupt, bald die Johannesjünger, bald die Jünger Jesu, die noch(!) schwach und unfähig wie alten Schläuche waren, der neue Lappen und Wein bald die Fastenfreiheit, bald der neue Bund, bald die erst von den Pharisäern aufgebrachte Fastensitte, bald die strenge asketische Zucht, die später in der Kirche eingeführt worden, bald die Jünger Jesu als Boten des Evangeliums.³⁸

Jülicher is correct in criticizing the allegorizing trend in the later Christian exegesis that wants to appropriate the parables for their own time. The point of the parables is not primarily an opposition between old and new, that can be transferred to Judaism and Christianity, but the incompatibility between different things. The parables want to underscore the simple lesson

³⁵ Jeremias, *Parables* 117.

³⁶ Peter Pilhofer, *Presbyteron Kreitton. Der Altersbeweis der jüdischen und christlichen Apologeten und seine Vorgeschichte* (WUNT 2.39; Tübingen: J.C.B.Mohr, 1990), 303.

³⁷ Ambrosius 217.

³⁸ Jülicher, *Gleichnisreden*, Vol 2. 196.

that from the experience of the listeners as to manufacturing of clothes and wine production they know that certain things do not mix

The old is better

The last of the three comparisons is the concluding analogy in Lk. 5:39. This comparison is similar to the two previous comparisons in that it begins with οὐδέι" and states an absurd situation: "And no one after drinking old wine desires new." The incompatibility that was established in the previous comparisons is now presupposed. The function of the comparison is therefore not to establish the incompatibility between wine that is ready to drink and wine that is still fermenting as an analogy that can be applied to the situation of Jesus and his disciples. The point of the comparison is instead the evaluative comment "The old is better", which supplies the Rule for the positive evaluation of the old wine.

Case: A person is tasting old wine

Result: He does not want to have new wine

Rule: The old [wine] is better [than the new].

The Rule is placed last and receives special stress. The Rule is general and applies not just to the bracketed situation of wine drinking, but in its formulation it is open to be generalized and applied to other situations. The evaluative comment therefore implies that the point of the saying is not just the incompatibility between the situation when Jesus is with his disciples and the situation when he will be taken away from them. The point is that the one situation is better than the other. When this claim is transferred to the point of the chreia in 5:34 it is most naturally interpreted as saying that it is better that the disciples feast when Jesus is with them than that they mourn when he is not.

If the concluding saying is interpreted Jesus' response to the challenge from the Pharisees regarding fasting, what effect is this response meant to have on them? Was it a rebuke or an invitation? That depends on the Pharisees' relationship to Jesus at the time of the event. They were with Jesus in the house of Levi and saw him and his disciples eating and drinking with sinners and tax collectors. It is not clear how they came to be present at the dinner. Were they themselves participating in the festivities? Read as a rebuke the saying silences their criticism by appealing to the well known fact that old wine is preferred to unfermented wine as an analogy to why feasting with Jesus should be preferred to fasting. The imagery of wine evokes the festive atmosphere of a dinner. They should know better than to advocate fasting during a wedding. In this reading the purpose of the response is to rebuke the Pharisees. It shows Jesus to have the ethos of a sagacious teacher who uses witty remarks and clever turning of words to silence his critics.

If the emphasis instead is placed on the present participle πίνων and the wine drinker's choice between the different types of wine, the saying could be interpreted as an invitation to the Pharisees to place themselves in the situation of the wine drinker and to choose the good wine of the fellowship with Jesus that they already share to a certain degree. They would be invited to move from their criticizing position to active fellowship with Jesus, the disciples, sinners and the host Levi, a tax collector. Since the present participle implies knowledge

based on experience, Jesus could be implying that if they would only be willing to trust and learn from him, they would also find that the old wine is good.

The comment could thus be interpreted either as a rebuke and an invitation. The choice depends on Luke's characterization of the Pharisees in his Gospel.³⁹ The dinner in Levi's house is the first of a number of scenes where Jesus eats in a Pharisee's house. In Lk 7:36-50 Jesus forgives the sins of a sinful woman who has anointed his feet with ointment. The host Simon, a Pharisee, has doubts about Jesus as a prophet, is mistaken in his assumption and is characterized as analogous to the two debtors. His actions show that there is no qualitative difference between him and the sinful woman. In the next dinner scene with a Pharisee, Lk 11:37-54, the tensions have escalated. Jesus denounces the Pharisees in three woes, and they in turn are portrayed as lying in wait for him. In Lk 14:1-24 the Pharisees continue to be critical of Jesus and he criticizes them for choosing the places of honor. This characterization of the Pharisees in the Lukan narrative serves as a "legitimation device *via negativa* for Jesus."⁴⁰ Initially the Pharisees have a more neutral relationship to Jesus. Their attitude to him gradually changes though becoming polarized against him. Eventually they are driven to seek his death. During the course of the Lukan narrative they move from round to flat characters. The comment in 5:39 belongs to the first dinner scene in the narrative and the Pharisees are still open to consider Jesus. We should therefore not exclude the interpretation that the concluding comment was meant to be an invitation to them to join in the fellowship with Jesus.

An ethical reflection on the interpretation

The traditional interpretation extends the analogy from just stating a difference between different situations into a difference between religions. When the strife between the Jewish-Christian and the Gentile-Christian fractions developed into strife between Christianity and Judaism the parables were interpreted within a framework of replacement theology. The new qualitatively better wine of Christianity replaced the old wineskins, i.e. organizational forms of Judaism. Standing on the winning side of a struggle of interpretation Gentile Christians can say that they are better than the Jewish Christians and the Jews. Throughout history the rhetorical trope has been used by various Christian groups as a justification for the ideological view that they are better than an older organizational form from which they want to break away. The legacy of this interpretation has had strong historical consequences, which we all too well know.

The ethic of interpretation points out that this traditional interpretation has served the interests of groups wanting to break away from other groups. It has served as a justification for the winning side in an ideological battle between Judaism and Christianity. It once served the interests of Gentile Christians, who like Marcion, wanted to break away from Judaism. An

³⁹ David B Gowler, *Host, Guest, Enemy, and Friend : Portraits of the Pharisees in Luke and Acts* (ESEC 2; New York: P. Lang, 1991), 177-296.

⁴⁰ Gowler, *Hospitality and Characterization*, 224.

ethic of interpretation can recover those suppressed voices of individuals who contested this theological agenda and wanted to maintain the connection with Judaism. Tertullian writes in response to Marcion: "In fact how can he tell us that a new patch is not sewn on to an old garment, nor new wine entrusted to old wineskins, if he is himself patched on to, and dressed up in, names that are old?"⁴¹ The reading here advanced sees the point of the parables as a distinction between the joyous time of feasting with Jesus and the sad time of fasting when the bridegroom is taken away, as well as an invitation for sinners and Pharisees alike to join in the fellowship with Jesus.⁴²

⁴¹ Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem*, 3.15.

⁴² Thanks to Vernon Robbins for stimulating this discovery and to my students at Lund University for sharing it.