

# Why didn't Jesus tell Bible Stories?

In the Conversation meeting after worship in the Craigville Tabernacle two Sundays ago, I asked a seminary professor of OT what his current scholarly project is. "I'm writing a book," he said, "on why Jesus didn't tell Bible stories." We were startled & laughed. His title is in the zone of Jesus, who typically startled his hearers (so they remembered, & so what startled them got into the Gospels).

1 So maybe that's a good place to begin answering this Thinksheet's question. Jesus didn't tell Bible stories because it wouldn't have **startled** his hearers, who knew those stories so could say "been there, done that."

2 That first observation leaves us with the possibility that he did tell Bible stories; but that behavior, expected of rabbis, was not memorable, did not stand out as different. The Evangelists (with capital "E," it always means Mt., M., L., & Jn.) had limited space (the longest papyrus scroll they could buy was only 16 feet), so they exercised severe concision ("verbose is gross, concise is nice"). What didn't end up on the cutting-room floor is what made Jesus stand out from his fellow-teachers, the authorities, & the crowds & what they judged essential to their particular purpose(s) in writing. To get a feel for this **compaction**, notice how often the subject changes in Mt.5-7 ("the Sermon on the Mount").

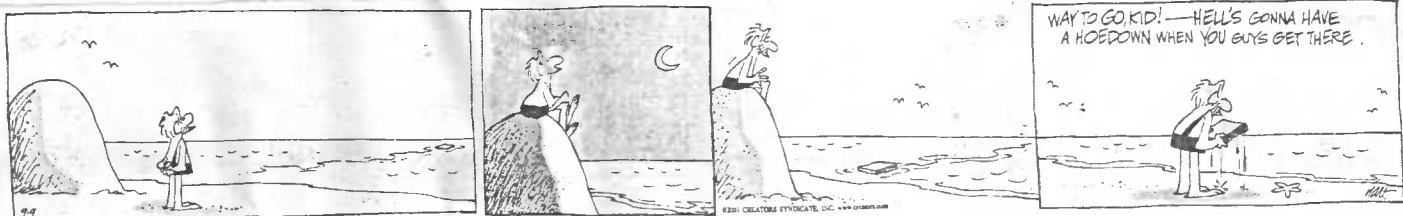
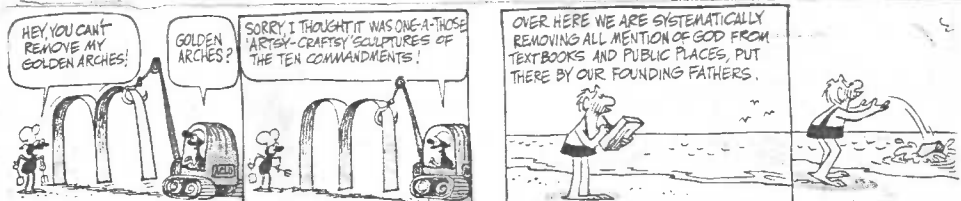
3 But careful! If Jesus actually did a lot of Bible-story telling, the Gospels would reflect it. Those stories carried the force of sacred writ, & rabbis extensively used them to hammer home (ie, positively sanction) their preaching/teaching. But the Sermon on the Mount ends with a contrast statement: "the crowds were **astounded** [yes, startled] at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority [on his own], and not as their [Bible-story-telling] scribes" (Mt.7.28-29 NRSV). Torah is the (animal-skin, parchment) authority for Jews; Jesus (in his own skin & resurrection "body") is the authority for Christians (who, however, are not to reject Torah but rather to see it "**fulfilled**" [Mt.3.15; 5.17]) in him--his life, death, resurrection, sending of the Spirit. (And another caution: While it's true that Jews are, more than are Christians, "people of the Book" [though Muhammad, who seems to have coined this phrase, included both], to Jews "Torah" means God's total & continuing teaching of his people [not just what can be read off the sacred page, though within the bounds of "it is written"].)

4 For Jesus, the "Bible" was "the law [Torah] & the prophets [Nevi'im]" (Mt.5.17; 7.12; 22.40--Ac.13.15 has the same phrase for a synagogue reading)--the writings [Kethuvim] being known but not used as liturgical lections, with the probable exception of the Psalms (the three-fold division of L.24.44). In the Jewish & Christian Bibles, Torah is the same 1st five books; & the next seven books are Nevi'im. In the Christian Bible, the next ten books (1Chron. - Song of Solomon) are (Jewish) Kethuvim; then Is. & Jer. are Nevi'im; Lam., Kethuvim; Eze., Nevi'im; Dan., Kethuvim; Hos. - Mal., Nevi'im.

I read through all the Gospels' sayings attributed to Jesus (an exercise that would do you good, in a red-letter edition, preferably NIV) & found this distribution: TORAH--Mt., 29 (ie, 29 times Jesus in Mt. quotes/refers to the Bible's 1st five books); M., 9; L., 7; Jn., 5

NEVI'IM--Mt., 11; M., 10; L., 16; Jn., 1  
KETHUVIM--Mt., 9; M., 6; L., 6; Jn., 6.

NOTE: In add-



ition to OT references in Gospels' sayings attributed to **Jesus**, the **Evangelists** make references to the OT: given this Thinksheet's subject, I have excluded the Evangelist's OT references. NOTE: "Jesus" means (to use a recent phrase from American politics, viz. "as we know it") not "the historical Jesus" (historical fiction, as in the various portraits derived from the iffy scholarship of the Jesus Seminar) but the Gospels' "Jesus as we know Him."

Jesus references TORAH 50 times, NEVI'IM 38 times, & KETHUVIM 27 times. This spread (descending from Torah to Kethuvim) correlates with Jewish then-&-now rating of the importance of the sections of their Scriptures. Three qualifications we keep in mind when reading the Gospels: the Evangelists give us (1) Jesus as he was remembered, (2) Jesus' sayings as they were remembered, & (3) the Person, deeds, & words filtered through each Evangelist's/redactor's purpose in publishing (of which we can catch glimpses by noting each Evangelist's frequency of quoting Jesus' sayings: Mt., 49; M., 25; L., 29; Jn., 6; also, by noting each Evangelist's frequency of using a particular title of Jesus--here, eg, is "Son of Man": Mt., 7; M., 6; L., 13; Jn., 9).

5 Jesus was not the only parable-speaking rabbi of his day, but it's a solid historical datum that this was his main teaching-mode (not "Bible stories," but *his own* (with his own twist/spin, though in all probability he did not originate all the story-lines: Funk/Scott/Butts' THE PARABLES OF JESUS: Red Letter Edition [Polebridge Press/88] attempts to identify parables that are wholly Jesus').

Of the 33 parables (pp26-27, 6 not in the Synoptics, & not including the Fourth Gospel's "signs"), here's the Synoptic distribution: Mt., 22; M., 7; L., 31. Given Luke's dominance, we're not surprised to find in that Gospel a passage illuminating this Thinksheet's title (16.1-17). "The Pharisees" "ridiculed" Jesus for his manner of teaching & here, for the parable whose moral is "You can't serve God and wealth." Jesus' response is to distinguish between their/his Scriptures (here only Torah & Nevi'im) & "the good news of the kingdom of God," to which his parables point. But immediately he affirms the permanence, & therefore the truth, of Torah.

6 Formal, official rabbis were duty-bound to tell Bible stories from what some wag has termed "the treasury of immoral stories" (in contrast to Wm. Bennett's THE BOOK OF VIRTUES, as I heard it). An informal, unofficial rabbi, Jesus did not have that obligation. Rather, his kingdom-of-God teaching combined the timeless wisdom-promise of grace with the timely threat of judgment. (Robt. Farrar Capon has neatly set out this distinction in his THE PARABLES OF GRACE [1988] & THE PARABLES OF JUDGMENT [the next year; both, Eerdmans].) What overarches both is the character of God as **holy**: grace without holiness would be only sentimental & amoral "love": judgment without holiness would close the door to forgiveness. Jesus prays to his/our "Holy Father" (Jn. 17.11) & teaches (though the words are in Hebrews 12.14 NRSV) "the holiness without which no one will see the Lord."

7 Two senses of "tell": while Jesus doesn't **narrate** Bible stories *in extenso*, he does **signal** them by words/phrases for events/places/persons. The stats on his sayings here are useful in roughly assessing his relative emphases. Here are the data (including number of occurrences; eg, "L3" means 3 references to Abraham in Luke).

EVENTS--creation, Mt1; wilderness wandering ("manna"), L1

PLACES--Sodom & Gomorrah, Mt1; Tyre & Sidon, Mt1, L1

PERSONS--God, very many references; Satan, Mt1, M1, L1; Noah, L1; Abraham, Mt1, M1, L3, Jn1; Isaac, Mt1, M1, L1; Isaac, Mt1, M1, L1; Moses, Mt5, M2, L2, Jn2; David, Mt2, M3, L2; Queen of Sheba, Mt1; Elijah, Mt1, M1, L1; Elisha, L1; Jonah, Mt1

Some sayings of Jesus refer to BIBLE SECTIONS: the Commandments, Mt6, M3, L3; Leviticus, Mt1, M1; "the law and the prophets" L1; "Moses and all the prophets," L1; Psalms, L1. But personal symbolism for Bible sections: eg, "Moses" sometimes means Torah, & "David" sometimes means the Psalter (Psalms).

8 Jesus uses the Bible for understanding, & teaching, God's nature & will. From the common life he parabolized, in timely fashion, to the timeless truths of who God is & what God wants for us: "Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth...."

