

The Parables of Jesus as Media of Collective Memory

Making Sense of the Shaping of New Genres in Early Christianity, with Special Focus on the Parable of the Wicked Tenants (Mark 12:1-12)

RUBEN ZIMMERMANN

The death of Jesus did not make sense at all. He told his disciples about the kingdom of God, which is not merely a future kingdom, but one which is “in fact, among you” (Luke 17:21). He spoke about himself as the “Son of Man” from heaven, who appears as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other (Q/Luke 17:24). He was celebrated as the expected Messiah, who would, as a descendant of King David, rescue the Jews from the oppression of the Romans. Thus, the death of Jesus must have been shocking, especially because of the fact that he was crucified. Crucifixion was not only the death penalty for subversive criminals. According to the Jewish Scriptures “[e]veryone is cursed who hangs on a tree” (Deut 21:22f.) and in the first century the cross was understood to be such a tree (see Gal 3:13). Jesus’ death on a cross simply did not make sense.

However, one of the most impressive processes of “making sense” began at the nadir of this story, a process which has not only influenced most of Western history, but which has also endured up to the present day. The cross of Jesus can be seen as the starting point or, in other words, as the birth of Christian theology. That is to say, the cross marks the birth of the Christian way of interpreting history and reality. Thus, early Christianity may indeed be an appropriate environment for gaining insight into the process of “creating sense”.

In the following paper I would like to address a few components of this process. What are the means and media of creating sense in early Christianity?

How could a meaningful interpretation of the cross and the story of Jesus as a whole take place? It is important to recognize that a vital component of early Christian tradition is the process of *remembering* the life and death of Jesus. For this reason, “creating sense” takes place within and by means of this process of remembering. According to Jan and Aleida Assmann, among others,¹ memory always needs media and form to be constructed, conserved, and communicated. Various forms, such as diaries, wedding rings, photos, or gravestones are used by individuals to remember significant events in their own biographies. Similarly, collective and even cultural memory² is shaped by means of special media, which, according to Aleida Assmann, can be distinguished more abstractly in metaphor, writing, images, bodies and locations.³ Although several forms of collective memory are frequently used by different groups, each group generates special forms which can be regarded as typical for a certain memory and which help to construct the identity of that group.

The following paper deals with the question of the media used in early Christian communities in order to remember the life and death of Jesus. I will focus in particular on language-based memory as it is preserved in early Christian writings and therefore, for the moment, leave aside various other forms such as archaeological artifacts or rituals.

My main hypothesis is that memory requires the repetition and typification of certain forms in order to gain collective meaning. The process of remembering thus not only inevitably leads to the development of certain forms and genres, but this very development of forms can be viewed as a decisive step in the process of “making,” or perhaps more accurately, of “creating sense”.

In the first part of my paper I would like to discuss more general issues of “creating sense in the process of remembering” through the use of genres. In the second part I will then apply these insights to early Christianity with special focus on the parable genre.

1 ASSMANN et al., 1998; BORSÒ et al., 2001; ERL/NÜNNING, 2004.

2 ASSMANN, 2005.

3 In ASSMANN, 1999.

1. Memory and Creating Sense through Genre

1.1 Media and Forms of Cultural Memory

The meaning of conventionalized forms in individual memory was demonstrated by Frederic C. Barlett in his study *Remembering*.⁴ Barlett studied serial memory in particular and was able to show that individual memories are often superimposed with genre schemata. For example, the participants in the study often added the typical first sentence of a fairy tale (“Once upon a time”⁵) even if this sentence was missing in the stories they were working with. In doing this, they categorized stories of a different genre into the familiar genre of “fairy tale”.

The focus of Barlett’s study on individual memory processes is also applicable to cultural memory. Collective memory takes place by means of the categorization of individual events into well-known and pre-shaped forms.

In order to preserve and understand the remembered past of a cultural community for future generations, this past must be stabilized. Therefore, we can draw on Jan Assmann to characterize the particular achievement of cultural memory as the assignment of meaning to the distant horizon of cultural communication.⁶ Both direct participants in the communication as well as subsequent generations should be able to understand and interpret certain past events.

According to Jan Assmann, this stabilization is reached particularly through form and conciseness as mnemotechnical processes.⁷ As examples, he points to the function of literary forms of expression or linguistic styles: “Reim, Assonanz, Parallelismus membrorum, Allitteration, Metrum, Rhythmus, Melos sind Verfahren solcher Stabilisierung, die dem Flüchtigen Dauer verleihen sollen.”⁸ Every cultural community possesses a basic inventory of conventionalized

4 BARLETT, 1955.

5 IBID., p. 123, 130, 134, 140 etc.

6 ASSMANN, 2002, p. 239-247; ID., 1991, p. 14.

7 ASSMANN, 2002, p. 240: “Erst formale Prägnanz verleiht ihnen [i.e. den Sprachhandlungen] die Stabilität kultureller Merkmale. Erst durch Formung erwirbt eine sprachliche Äußerung die Merkmale, die sie einerseits einreihen in die Tradition sprachlicher Formung und dadurch zu einem Gedächtnisträger machen und andererseits erinnerbar machen für spätere Rückgriffe, so dass sie dieses Gedächtnis zugleich voraussetzt und bereichert.”

8 IBID., p. 241 (“Rhyme, assonance, parallelism membrum, alliteration, meter, rhythm, and melody are processes of this stabilization that, within the flow of time, grant permanence to that which is fleeting.”).

forms by means of which the past can take shape and can become an object of cultural memory. “Die Form wird nicht immer wieder neu erfunden, sondern steht in einer Tradition, die sie voraussetzt und aufnimmt, auch dort, wo sie sie willentlich verändert und abwandelt.”⁹ Modifying one of Jan Assmann’s terms, Astrid Erll and Klaudia Seibel have spoken of “forms of re-use” (*Wiedergebrauchs-Formen*) that prefigure cultural memory.¹⁰ Genres can be defined as such forms of re-use in which a genre can be described as the conventionalized form of a text.¹¹ In literary genres, such as historiography or historical novel, this act of memory may be immediately understandable.

The past is primarily communicated by narratives; story is the main form in remembering history. This basic statement is only of little help if we want to focus the process of remembering on details. Telling a story can be viewed not only as a special way of talking; stories may be analyzed with regard to their narrative structure and techniques. Hayden White pointed out that an understanding of the past is finalized only if the plot of a narration is analyzed (emplotment). White distinguished four basic plots: romance, tragedy, comedy and satire. In other words, White assumes a form-finding process to be an important stage in remembering the past. I would like to take up this assumption and take it a step further.

Narration or, more generally, language-based treatments of the past cannot be limited to four general plots. As a consequence, I intend to look at the individual linguistic forms and genres used in early Christianity in order to remember the Jesus story, such as gospel narrative as macro-genre, or controversy stories (*Streitgespräche*), miracles, or, in particular, the parables. Before doing so, however, a few more general aspects of genre-theory need to be discussed. What function do genres fulfill in the process of memory?

9 IBID., p. 239f. (“The form is not reinvented over and over again. Instead, it exists within a tradition that requires and adopts it.”).

10 See ERL/SEIBEL, 2004, p. 189, 191: “Wiedergebrauchs-Formen sind daher bedeutungsgeladenen (sic!) Träger von Ideologien des kulturellen Gedächtnisses, d.h. von Vergangenheitsversionen, Geschichtsbildern, Konzepten kollektiver Identität sowie von Wert- und Normvorstellungen.” (“Forms of re-use are thus meaningful carriers of the ideologies of cultural memory. They are carriers of versions of the past, of historical images, of concepts of collective identity as well as of concepts of values and norms.”). Jan Assmann spoke of “Wiedergebrauchs-Texten, -Bildern und -Riten” (“texts, images and rituals of re-use”), see ASSMANN, 1988, p. 15.

11 ERL/NÜNNING, 2003, p. 10: “The concept of genres as ‘locations’ of memory ... points paradigmatically to the variety and complexity of literature/memory relations.”

1.2 Creating Sense through Genre – Functions of Genre

The existence of linguistic “forms of re-use” can be described as a memory that establishes itself through intertextual relations. The conventionalization of certain textual characteristics is the result of a remembering process of communication in which repetitions and updates of a certain form reveal continuity. For example, when a past event is told repeatedly in a certain way or in a distinctive style (e.g. with irony, praise etc.), the memory of this event is molded into this special form. Moreover, the memory is only made possible by this form.

Linguistic forms, however, are in no way vehicles of memory without content. As form-giving entities they have a definitive impact on the processes of memory of any culture.¹² In the genre of historiography, Hayden White named this meaning-giving characteristic of form “the content of the form”.¹³ Taking up the concepts of Russian formalism (Jury Lotman) and of the Prague School (Roman Jakobson), Ansgar Nünning speaks, from a literary perspective, of a “semanticizing of literary forms”.¹⁴

In the light of the focus of this conference, this process could also be called “creating sense through literary forms”. The linguistic forms and structures thus act as independent bearers of meaning and play a central role in the creation of meaning in memory processes. The form and structure of the language are perceived as the sediments of the content, such that they allow for the meaning potential in the memory process that then grants meaning for the producers, tradents and recipients of the artifacts of memory.

One can determine three different functions of genres in the process of remembering: a) a tradition-creating function; b) a community-creating function; c) an identity-creating function.

a) The Tradition-Creating Function of Genres

The memory of events and characters from the past is a process of interpretation that classifies contingent experiences into defined patterns of thought and comprehension. Known patterns must be used in order to interpret unknown and thus incomprehensible events. A particular cultural community has a set of

12 ERLL/SEIBEL, 2004, p. 191: “Collective identities, values, norms and the relationships between the sexes are not stabilized in memory cultures only by means of defined media of memory. Their formal processes such as parable, epos, allegory, tragedy and Bildungsroman contribute to the communication of cultural meaning.”

13 WHITE, 1987.

14 NÜNNING, 2004; regarding this term see also SCHMID, 1977.

patterns which allows these processes of recollective interpretation. Thus, the Cinderella fairy tale can be used as a known pattern to explain the contemporary rise of pop stars such as “Hannah Montana” or “Lady Gaga”.

However, the events are not completely subordinated to these formalized interpretive processes. Any current application of the pattern forms and changes the pattern. Therefore, against the background of contemporary genre theory, it is not possible to understand the existence of genres as “classification grids”. Genres can no longer be regarded as “normative a priori sets” as was the case in the era of “normative *Gattungspoetik*” (genre poetics). However, those, such as Benedetto Croce, who therefore radically deny the existence of genres, are equally mistaken. Drawing on Klaus Hempfer’s and Rüdiger Zymner’s genre theory, I would instead like to speak of a “synthesizing constructivism” that understands genres as a part of a communicative practice.

As Hempfer pointed out: “Wir unterscheiden also zwischen den ‘Gattungen’ als aufgrund spezifischer Textkonstituenten beobachtbaren Phänomenen des historischen bzw. allgemein sprachlichen Kommunikationssystems und deren wissenschaftlicher Beschreibung.”¹⁵ Hempfer speaks of *faits normatifs* that are perceptible for the analyzer as norms of communication in texts but that can also be differentiated from facts such as the birth of Napoleon.¹⁶ Rüdiger Zymner regards this “attenuated nominalism” (abgeschwächter Nominalismus) of developing genres as a part of a hermeneutic practice in communication acts. Zymner notes, “[d]abei stützt sich das erkennende Subjekt auf quasi-normative Fakten, auf Textbefunde und traditionelle Sichtweisen auf die Gattungen, so daß es sich bei dem Konstrukt dann doch eher um eine Rekonstruktion handelt.”¹⁷ Correspondingly, the form in the remembered communication act is simultaneously assumed as well as constituted and extended. Existing forms are used, but in applying them to certain events, by using them with a certain intention, they are transformed or even re-shaped. Thus, the formalizing memory is central to the process of the construction of tradition.

15 HEMPFER, 1973, p. 125 (“We differentiate, thus, between ‘genres’ as phenomena of the historical, literary or general linguistic communication system, observable because of specific text constituents, and their scientific description.”).

16 See IBID.

17 ZYMNER, 2003, p. 59 (“The cognitive subject bases itself upon quasi-normative facts, on textual evidence and traditional ways of thinking about the genres so that the construction is in actual fact a reconstruction.”).

b) The Community-Creating Function of Genres

Linguistic forms are also a “medium of collective memory”. The sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, a pioneer of modern memory research, investigated in particular the role of social groups in the processes of collective memory.¹⁸ Remembering does not take place only in concrete social groups. Common acts of memory also create collective identity.

Collective identity can be constructed to a large extent by means of formally conventionalized memory. A community talks about the same events and in each retelling, the story is not retold in a fundamentally different manner, but rather in a recognizable way. This does not require literal continuity but a structural or formal identity. The memory of certain events that deviates and updates itself is recognizable due to the use of a defined form. Thus, the form guarantees the permanence and the stabilization of the memory as well as of the community.

This can be seen, for example, in a community’s myths of origin as well as, in extreme cases, in the canonization of certain memory literature.

In this way literature is a “Medium der Darstellung und Reflexion, der Modellierung und Konstruktion von Erinnerung und Identität”.¹⁹ In the process of collective and thus also cultural remembering, certain forms or media of memory are established that then become carriers of memory and meaning. In this process, the conventionalized forms of language, and the genres in particular, are able to become the condition and the medium for cultural memory. Thus, genre plays an important role in the “making sense” by a group, or, in other words, in the collective way of creating sense.²⁰

c) The Identity-Creating Function of Genres

The memory culture that is guaranteed by conventionalized forms links the collective dimension to the individual dimension of memory. In this process, genres become the meaning-giving models for the codification of life experiences. I would like to name this particular aspect the “identity-creating function” of genres or the “mimetic function” of genres.

Mimesis thus describes not only a simple reflection of realities but rather a *poiesis*, or in modern terms, a construction of collective as well as indivi-

18 See HALBWACHS, 2006; ID., 1991.

19 ERLI et al., 2003, p. v. (a “medium of the portrayal and reflection, the modeling and construction of memory and identity.”).

20 See first VAN GORP/MUSARRA-SCHROEDER, 2000, p. i-ix.

dual reality by means of the medium of language.²¹ As recently demonstrated by William L. Randall²² and Paul Ricœur,²³ it is narrative genres in particular, which become lendable models for the narration and interpretation of personal life experiences. Drawing on Aristotle's literary mimesis theory, Ricœur has described the understanding of a narration as a threefold mimetic process: The concrete construction as well as the understanding of a documented text (*configuration*) always requires pre-understanding and pre-development (*préfiguration* = mimesis I) to which the text can be related.²⁴ Genres are such pre-existing memory concepts that prefigure the memory process because both producers and recipients of literary works must refer to them. Understanding, however, occurs only in the refiguration and reconstruction of the temporal and life-world existence of the reader (*refiguration* = mimesis III). In this way, working productively with texts in their specific form leads to "narrative identity" through the process of prefiguration, configuration and refiguration.²⁵ Memory genres thus become the recollective and interpretive space of one's own life history. In other words: by means of reading and using literary forms, an individual process of "making sense" can take place.

2. Early Christianity as a Remembering Community

2.1 The Gospel of Jesus: The Medium is the Message

Let us now look specifically at early Christianity. Jesus of Nazareth, his words and his deeds as well as his fate on the cross are central subjects of early Chris-

21 Vittoria Borsò also emphasizes the "constitutional mediality of memory:" "storage techniques are not devices external to memory for the reproduction of pre-existing knowledge stored in the functional memory. Instead knowledge of the past is first produced through the relationship of medium and form," BORSÒ, 2001, p. 36.

22 See RANDALL, 1995.

23 See RICŒUR, 1988/1989/1991.

24 See the overview in RICŒUR, 1988, p. 87-135, as well as the entire structure of the three volume work.

25 See particularly IBID., p. 395: "The delicate offspring that originates from the union of history and fiction is the assignment of a specific identity to an individual or a community that one can call its *narrative identity*." The term narrative identity is expressed most precisely in the work *Soi-même comme un autre* (German: RICŒUR, 1996).

tian memory. In recent Jesus studies there have been several attempts to look at Jesus by drawing on various considerations of memory theory²⁶ and to speak of “Jesus remembered”.²⁷ Memory theory is also being increasingly employed to help explain the origins of Christianity and particularly the transmission of early Christian texts.²⁸

I would like to continue along this path. In addition to the fundamental conviction that the retrospective of remembering, and not the idealization of the beginnings, is definitive, further studies looking particularly at the details of the process of remembering are necessary. How does remembering manifest itself? Which forms and genres are selected and shaped in order to remember the fate of Jesus?

The most important form – as a macro-genre – may be the “Gospel narrative”. There has been a long debate within New Testament scholarship concerning whether the Gospels can be classified as “historiography”,²⁹ especially taking up the so called “*bios*” (βίος)-genre used in Antiquity by Plutarch or the Historians like Tacitus on the life of the emperors (*Kaiser-Biographien*),³⁰ or as part of the Jewish prophetic literature (*Propheten-Vita*).³¹ Others classify the Gospels as a new genre *sui generis*, which is a special form of preaching and missionary speech.³² Taking up the “tradition-creating” aspect of the genre, we can easily escape from this conflict: The gospel genre takes over aspects from known, traditional forms (such as *Vita Caesaris* or *Vita prophetorum*). At the same time, however, the “gospel narrative” is more than a biography, it is as Mark headlines his writing εὐαγγέλιον (*euaggelion*), literally “good news”,

26 See ASSMANN/HÖLSCHER, 1988; ASSMANN/HARTH, 1991; FISCHER, 1998; TUVING/CRAIG, 2005.

27 DUNN, 2003. See also SCHRÖTER, 1997; ID., 2001; ID., 2007.

28 See the instructive collection of KIRK/THATCHER, 2005; especially the research review in ID., “Jesus Tradition as Social Memory,” *IBID.*, p. 25-42; HORSLEY et al., 2006; SCHWANKL, 2006; SÖDING, 2007; THATCHER, 2008; RODRIGUEZ, 2009; more critically HÄFNER, 2007, p. 103: “Looking at it as a whole, I have not been able to convince myself that the category of memory is an appropriate hermeneutical model for Jesus research.”

29 CANCIK, 1981, p. 63-102; REISER, 1999, p. 1-27; more recently BECKER, 2005, p. 213-236; ID., 2006.

30 See DORMEYER, 1993, p. 205-228; ID., 2002; WÖRDEMANN, 2002.

31 BALTZER, 1975; LÜHRMANN, 1977, p. 25-50.

32 See HENGEL, 2011.

“news” that has never been heard before. The medium therefore is, at the same time, the message.

The *euaggelion*-genre, as performed by Mark, had important perpetrators of the genre within early Christianity: Matthew and Luke, who definitely knew and used Mark as a source, kept his form; so did John, who most probably also knew Mark. Furthermore, about thirty other “Gospels” were written during the first centuries A.D., as recently presented in the new edition and German translation by Marksches and Schröter.³³

From its beginnings as a Jewish sect who believed in Jesus Christ as the Messiah, the community itself was deeply impacted by the gospel of Jesus. Thus, the Gospel genre gave collective identity to the community in which the story of Jesus was told. In other words: Those who told the story of Jesus Christ no longer named themselves Jews or Greeks, but “Christians” (see Acts 18).

Much more could be said about the Gospel genre, its form, and its function. In the following, however, I would like to take a micro-genre into account: Drawing on the insights of early form criticism (H. Gunkel, R. Bultmann),³⁴ I am convinced that linguistic forms for the preservation of early Christian memory were not created through the literary efforts of the Evangelists. Instead, much earlier, short forms acted as the media of a primarily oral memory culture. We can describe such typified short forms as genres which can still be recognized within the macro writings of the Gospels. Parables, for instance, may be seen as such a form in which the collective memory of early Christianity became the definitive and identity-creating media of memory.³⁵

2.2 The Parable Genre and Creating Sense

Based on recent research on the oral culture of memory,³⁶ it is abundantly clear that figurative texts can be memorized more easily than abstract texts and thus that they, in particular, were able to become the material for a narrative community.

Even the ancient rhetoricians were familiar with the importance of images in support of memory, an example of this being the famous method of *loci*.³⁷

33 See MARKSCHIES/SCHRÖTER, 2012.

34 See on this my remarks in ZIMMERMANN, 2008, p. 131-167; also with focus on parables ID., 2011a.

35 BYRSKOG, 2008.

36 See the overview in RUBINS, 1995; also FOLEY, 2006.

37 See Quint. *Inst.* XI 2,39; Plat. *Phaedr.* 267a, see BLUM, 1969, here particularly 12-32: “the mnemonic images.”

More recently, in an interesting article Armin D. Baum pointed out the great importance of imagery for the powers of memory.³⁸ He reflects on the psychological research on memory that has empirically proven that language-based images are much easier to memorize than abstract facts.³⁹ “Je bildhafter eine zu speichernde Information [ist], desto stärker [wird] das verbale vom imaginativen Kodierungssystem unterstützt.”⁴⁰ Thus, one can conclude that figurative narrative texts or, in our definition, parables⁴¹ have a constitutive role in oral memory cultures.⁴²

Let me briefly point out how parables “create sense” by taking up the three functions of genre:

The parable genre is already known in Antiquity, in a few Hebrew writings (OT)⁴³, as well as in Greek literature, being part of the *paradeigmata*.⁴⁴ However, while there are only a few parables in the Old Testament, the Gospels are full of parables. Parables (Gerhardsson speaks of “narrative Meshalim”) have played a central role in the collective memory of the early Christians. Taking up the historical memory that Jesus told parables, the early Christian communities followed this line in re-telling and even inventing new parables. The parables from the so called “Sayings source Q” or the first Gospel, Mark, have been re-told within Matthew, Luke, and the Gospel of Thomas. The Parable genre creates sense in creating tradition.

38 See BAUM, 2004.

39 The “dual-coding-theory” of Paivio is definitive. He proved that memory functions through a combination of verbal and image-based encoding; see PAIVO, 1986; ID., 1991.

40 BAUM, 2004, p. 8 (“The more figurative a piece of information, the more the verbal codification system is assisted by the image-based system.”).

41 See ZIMMERMANN, 2009, p. 170: “A parable is a short narrative (1) fictional (2) text that is related in the narrated world to known reality (3) but, by way of implicit or explicit transfer signals, makes it understood that the meaning of the narration must be differentiated from the literal words of the text (4). In its appeal structure (5) it challenges the reader to carry out a metaphoric transfer of meaning that is steered by co-text and context information (6).”

42 See in particular GERHARDSSON, 1961; also RIESNER, 1988, especially p. 392-404: “protective transmission.”

43 See GERHARDSSON, 1991.

44 See Aristotle, *Rhet.* II 20-22; Quintilian, *Inst.* V 11, see for details ZIMMERMANN, 2011b.

The disciples of Jesus told parables and thus called an oral community of memory to life. According to the definition used in the *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu* parables are fictional, but also realistic narrative. They refer to daily life.

The parables of Q, for instance, preserve the world of Galilean peasants by telling about laboring in the field and harvesting (parable of the mustard seed Q 13:21f.; see also Q 6:43-45; 10:2; 13:18f.), shepherding (parable of the “lost sheep” Q 15:1-7*), or the life in a small household (parable of making bread, Q 13:20f.; see also Q 6:47-49; 11:14-20; 13:20f.).⁴⁵ Nevertheless, for two reasons it would be inappropriate to narrow our view of the parables in a backward-looking socio-historical manner. On the one hand, these lifestyles are recollected in later communication contexts so that a conscious mixing of the social relationships occurs with pedagogical intention. The individual tradents, narrators, and listeners are meant to reflect on their own social relationships in the remembering process. Thus, space is created for a variety of social points of view that have historically been disregarded, such as in the domain of finance or justice.⁴⁶ Because of its realistic context and interactions, a parable’s world can become a (contra) model for one’s own shared life. In other words, the parable creates sense in constituting *social community* in various narrative situations.⁴⁷

Finally, parables have a so-called “appeal structure”. As figurative language they do not transport one single meaning. It is not obvious how a parable is to be interpreted. The meaning is not fixed. But this very aspect is important for the “identity-creating function” of the parable. Parables must be read and interpreted again and again. They are – as Crossan puts it – “discussion starters”. In this way, the early Christians could reflect upon their own life in discussing parables. Within the famous Parable of the Prodigal Son, for instance, a reader can identify himself with the lost son, experiencing mercy from the good father. Another can identify himself with the older son, being angry about the special treatment of the prodigal brother. Others may discuss the duty of a Christian community to welcome outcasts such as slaves, prostitutes etc. by following the example of

45 See a systematic overview of the concrete figurative domains in ZIMMERMANN, 2007, p. 36-39. Further on the sociological-geographical localization, for example ROHRBAUGH, 1993; HERZOG II, 1994; BÖSEN, 2002; BEAVIS, 2002.

46 For example see the parable of the entrusted money (Q 19:12-26) or the parable of the defendant going to trial or punishment (Q 12:58f.).

47 See HERZOG: “(The parables are seen as) a codification designed to stimulate social analysis and to expose the contradiction between the actual situation of its hearers and the Torah of God’s justice.” See HERZOG II, 1994, p. 28; again LABAHN, 2011.

the father. In any case, the parables stimulate the process of finding an identity; parables create sense by means of their mimetic function.

2.3 The Parable of the Wicked Tenants (Mark 12:1-12) as a Case Study

In order to flesh out these ideas I would like to analyze one example in detail. Through a consideration of the Parable of the Wicked Tenants from the Gospel of Mark it is possible to demonstrate how “sense was created” within the early Christian remembering process:

Mark 12:1-12 (the parable of the Wicked Tenants)

Greek Text (NA²⁸)

English translation (NRSV)

Καὶ ἤρξατο αὐτοῖς ἐν παραβολαῖς λαλεῖν·

Then he began to speak to them in parables.

ἀμπελῶνα ἄνθρωπος ἐφύτευσεν καὶ περιέθηκεν φραγμὸν καὶ ὠρύξεν ὑπολήνιον καὶ ὠκοδόμησεν πύργον καὶ ἐξέδετο αὐτὸν γεωργοῖς καὶ ἀπεδήμησεν.

“A man planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a pit for the wine press, and built a watchtower; then he leased it to tenants and went to another country.² When the season came, he sent a slave to the tenants to collect from them his share of the produce of the vineyard.³ But they seized him, and beat him, and sent him away empty-handed.

² καὶ ἀπέστειλεν πρὸς τοὺς γεωργοὺς τῷ καιρῷ δούλον ἵνα παρὰ τῶν γεωργῶν λάβῃ ἀπὸ τῶν καρπῶν τοῦ ἀμπελῶνος·

⁴ And again he sent another slave to them; this one they beat over the head and insulted.

³ καὶ λαβόντες αὐτὸν ἔδειραν καὶ ἀπέστειλαν κενόν.⁴ καὶ πάλιν ἀπέστειλεν πρὸς αὐτοὺς ἄλλον δούλον· κακείνον ἐκεφαλῶσαν καὶ ἠτίμασαν.

⁵ Then he sent another, and that one they killed. And so it was with many others; some they beat, and others they killed.

⁵ καὶ ἄλλον ἀπέστειλεν· κακείνον ἀπέκτειναν, καὶ πολλοὺς ἄλλους, οὓς μὲν δέροντες, οὓς δὲ ἀποκτεννόντες.⁶ ἔτι ἓνα εἶχεν υἱὸν ἀγαπητόν· ἀπέστειλεν αὐτὸν ἔσχατον πρὸς αὐτοὺς λέγων ὅτι ἐντραπήσονται τὸν υἱόν μου.⁷ ἐκείνοι δὲ οἱ γεωργοὶ πρὸς ἑαυτοὺς εἶπαν ὅτι οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ κληρονόμος· δεῦτε ἀποκτείνωμεν αὐτόν, καὶ ἡμῶν ἔσται ἡ κληρονομία.

⁶ He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’⁷ But those tenants said to one another, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.’⁸ So they seized him, killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard.

⁸ καὶ λαβόντες ἀπέκτειναν αὐτὸν καὶ ἐξέβαλον αὐτὸν ἔξω τοῦ ἀμπελῶνος.

⁹ τί [οὖν] ποιήσει ὁ κύριος τοῦ ἀμπελῶνος; ἐλεύσεται καὶ ἀπολέσει τοὺς γεωργοὺς καὶ δώσει τὸν ἀμπελῶνα ἄλλοις. ¹⁰ οὐδὲ τὴν γραφὴν ταύτην ἀνέγνωτε· λίθον ὃν ἀπεδοκίμασαν οἱ οἰκοδομοῦντες, οὗτος ἐγενήθη εἰς κεφαλὴν γωνίας. ¹¹ παρὰ κυρίου ἐγένετο αὕτη καὶ ἔστιν θαυμαστὴ ἐν ὀφθαλμοῖς ἡμῶν; ¹² Καὶ ἐζήτουν αὐτὸν κρατῆσαι, καὶ ἐφοβήθησαν τὸν ὄχλον, ἔγνωσαν γὰρ ὅτι πρὸς αὐτοὺς τὴν παραβολὴν εἶπεν. καὶ ἀφέντες αὐτὸν ἀπῆλθον.

⁹ What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others. ¹⁰ Have you not read this scripture: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; ¹¹ this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes’?’ ¹² When they realized that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowd. So they left him and went away

Indeed, this is a unique, surprising, and strange story. How could it transport meaning? How does it “create” sense? Let me, once again, take up the three dimensions mentioned above:

a) The Tradition-Creating Function: The Jewish Background

This parable takes up motifs from Jewish tradition: The vineyard is a well-known metaphor for Israel (see Isa 5:1-5, the so-called “song of the vineyard”).⁴⁸ Furthermore, the slave sent by the Father may recall the motif of prophets sent to Israel. The Hebrew word *ebed* (slave) is used in the expression *ebed YHWH* for the prophets. This allusion is even more convincing because the killing of the prophets is a motif within Old Testament theology.⁴⁹ The fate of the tenants must have been provoking against this traditional background. In this way the parable is part of the conflict between Jesus and the Jewish leaders (in the plot of the Gospel it is told near Jerusalem, where Jesus was crucified).

Within early Christian writings, this parable itself has a history of tradition: It occurs four times: Following Mark, Matthew (Mt 21:33-41), Luke (Lk 20:9-19) and Thomas (Saying 65) tell the same story with slight, but important differences. They reflect and influence different communities, which can be reconstructed behind the various occurrences. This leads me to the next point:

48 See WEREN, 1998.

49 See e.g. O.H. STECK, 1967.

b) The Community-Creating Function: From a Peasant Revolt to Antijudaism

The story reflects a conflict-laden socio-historical background within first-century Judaism. Taking Verse 7 as a key verse, William R. Herzog marks the general conflict of ownership, inheritance, and heir. The story wishes to undermine the credibility of the social system as known in first-century Judaism. The tenants want to kill the son of the landlord, because they are the lawful heirs and owners of the land. The text therefore might reflect the summons for a violent revolt by a suppressed class of Galilean peasants.⁵⁰ However, violence brings about a violent reaction, as we can read in the story. Thus “the parable may codify the futility of armed rebellion.”⁵¹ It appeals to avoiding violence even among those who suffer from this “spiral of violence”.

Within the Gospel of Matthew the setting has changed. He locates the parable in the final section of his Gospel where an internal conflict between traditional Jews and “Christian” Jews is reflected. Still being part of or not far from the Jewish community, the congregation of Matthew is searching for a new identity beyond the border of Judaism. The death of the “son” is clearly interpreted as the crucifixion of Jesus,⁵² and the destroying of the vineyard refers to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. by the Romans. Taking the vineyard as a metaphor for Israel into account, the violent tenants are those Jews who don’t believe in Christ. Accordingly, the concluding verse in Matthew 21:43 says: “Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produce the fruits of the kingdom.”

The people addressed are no longer the people of Israel, but a community defined ethically (by “the fruits”) and with Christian terminology (kingdom of God).

Within the ongoing parting of the ways between Christianity and Judaism in the second century, this interpretation, an example of which can clearly be seen in Irenaeus, was the most prominent.⁵³ In the late fourth century, John Chrysostom, patriarch of Antioch, interprets the Parable of the Wicked Tenants as a text “wherein he exposed the whole chain of events by which God abandoned

50 See e.g. the revolts arising in or out of Galilee, e.g. peasant revolts as described in Josephus, *Vita* 66.375) or revolts led by rebels such as Judas the Galilean (see Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.433; *Antiquities* 18.1-10; 18.23).

51 See HERZOG, 1994, p. 113.

52 This interpretation is also in mind behind the expression “beloved son” taken from Mark, see Mark 1:11; 9:7, see also 15:39.

53 See KLOPPENBORG, 2006, p. 22-25.

Israel and transferred His blessings and inheritance to the Christian Church.”⁵⁴ In his homily on the parables Chrysostom states: “That for the crucifixion, their crime, they (i.e. the Jews) were to endure extreme punishment: the calling of the Gentiles and the casting out of the Jews.”⁵⁵ The anti-Judaist interpretation of the parable has been brought to the fore – and at the same time the Christians, as a religious community of their own, could define their collective identity.

c) The Identity-Creating Function

For the last aspect – the identity-creating function of genre – I would like to leave the environment of the first century and consider a modern or postmodern reader. How can this parable be interpreted today? Does this text still make sense?

New Testaments scholars have struggled with this parable. Especially the anti-Jewish impact of this story was, and is, a challenge for any reading. How can Christians involved in the Jewish-Christian dialogue understand this text? Two examples: Luise Schottroff – a German feminist scholar – considered this parable to be a “Horrorgeschichte”⁵⁶ (“horror story”). This text cannot be a parable for the kingdom of God. The profit-orientated and violent owner of the vineyard can hardly be a metaphor for the merciful God, as preached by Jesus. Thus, the parable must be regarded as an anti-parable, it presents an opposing account to the parables focussing on the kingdom of God.

According to Schottroff the stone-saying is the key verse for an eschatological meaning of the text. God is turning the rules of violence upside down and acts contrary to human convention. In this way, the text is a “Hoffnungstext für das leidende jüdische Volk”.⁵⁷

A different interpretation is presented by Richard Q. Ford. He proposes that the Parable of the Wicked Tenants is a story for our time, and when he wrote his article, “our time” was the time of the second Iraq War (2003). According to Ford, the landowner in the parable, carefully living within the laws of his time, honestly believes in his right to claim the lease of the vineyard. It is because of this conviction in law and order that he was able to send his son, with no protection at all, into the grasp of obviously dangerous tenants. However, the law was not just at all, therefore it causes violence.

54 MILAVEC, 1989, p. 83.

55 Quoted after IBID.

56 SCHOTTHOFF, 2005, p. 17.

57 IBID., p. 37 (“a text of hope for the suffering people of Israel.”).

Along these lines, he compares the United States occupying Iraq with this landowner. Like him, the USA was so confident in the lawfulness of their imperialism that they were blind to the more complicated cultural background and even more to their own interest in “one-fifth of the world’s remaining supply of oil”.⁵⁸

The identity stimulating reading is most obvious in the following parts. Ford writes:

At the very moment we are reading these lines, our own children, in a far country, are being killed. [...] Just as the son’s innocence had no effect on the tenant’s hostility, so our soldiers’ good intentions have no effect on Iraqi opposition. [...] But soon *our* reason will be overtaken by our rage; then, as it is so easy to do when first hearing Jesus’ parable, we will simply turn upon the killers we have provoked.⁵⁹

In this way Ford interprets not only the story, but follows Ricœur’s hermeneutics: it is the story which interprets the reader’s present reality. The story has an identity-creating function.

3. Shaping Genre and Creating Sense – Some Concluding Remarks

Collective memory requires media and forms. To interpret the past, forms that are well-known and recognized in a community will be utilized. In this way “forms of re-use” are employed in order to shape the memory in a certain way.

However, in the memory process of early Christians, well-known linguistic forms such as wisdom sayings, *chreia* or *Meshalim* were not only used, they were also reshaped and reinvented in the collective memory process. For example, the *Meshalim*/parables experienced an unprecedented boom.

As linguistic forms themselves are subject to a history of origination and modification and are tied to a certain *Sitz im Leben*, I am convinced that genres play a central role in the process of creating sense in early Christianity tradition. There were, however, no pure and fixed forms and genres at the beginning. Instead forms were shaped, modified and reinforced only in the process of transmission. A genre thus proved and established itself during transmission.

58 FORD, 2003, p. 1.

59 IBID., p. 4.

From a dynamic point of view, a decisive step in the fixation and literalization of memory can be seen in the linkage to genre. The form-bound memory is no longer completely free.

In this, a process of interaction takes place. Certain forms shape memory. Additionally, memory is shaped by these forms within this very process.

To mention only one example: The fact that the narrator remembered Jesus in parables also shaped the process of Christological interpretation. In the end, Jesus himself was able to be regarded as a “parable of God” or in New Testament terminology as “the image of God” (see Col 1:15; John 1:18).

In this way we detect a “semantization of the form”, or in the light of this conference: a “making sense through genre”.

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