PROPP, PARABLES, AND *PAIDEIA*:
WHAT THE STORIES OF JESUS TEACH US ABOUT CULTIVATING CULTURE

By

Rachelle Bowman

A thesis in the field of Literature and Rhetoric for the degree of Masters of Liberal Arts in Classical Studies

Southeastern University

April 2023

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2023

Dedication

I've been reading books of old
The legends and the myths
Achilles and his gold
Hercules and his gifts
Spider-Man's control
And Batman with his fists
And clearly I don't see myself upon that list
But she said, where d'you wanna go?
How much you wanna risk?
I'm not looking for somebody
With some superhuman gifts
Some superhero
Some fairytale bliss
Just something I can turn to
Somebody I can kiss
I want something just like this.[1]

This thesis is dedicated to my husband, Jon Bowman, who has been my cheerleader since the day the Classical Conversations Master's degree program was announced. I spent my three years in this program studying fairytale heroes, but that whole time, I had a real-life hero right beside me. He held me while I cried over difficult assignments, listened to my excited chatter about all I learned, believed in me when self-doubt threatened, planned spectacular date nights when I needed a break, worked weekends to pay my tuition, celebrated my victories, tackled the never-ending laundry pile, cooked countless dinners, and loved me through every high and low over the last three years. This paper, this entire degree, only happened because of his endless selflessness, love, and support.

Thank you, Jon, for coming along on this dream-chasing journey with me. I could not have done this without you—and I would not even have had the guts to try. I love you.

---

[1] Taggert, Andrew

Acknowledgments

Thank you to my thesis committee:

Sincerest thank you to my advisor, Dr. Alisa DeBorde, who dealt with my endless stream of questions with saint-like patience.

To Dr. David Masterson, whose class was the catalyst for me to write about the parables in this project, thank you for your willingness to learn more about Propp to question me at my defense.

To Carol Rauch, who cheered me on, discussed so many of my papers with me, and sent me countless podcasts related to my topic, thank you for being the one who introduced me to Classical Conversations in the first place.

To Maria Wilkening, one of the wonderful students who took on this brand new program along with me and has been an encouragement all along the way, thank you for your willingness to take time out of you busy schedule to be a part of this with me.

Finally, I'd like to acknowledge Trina Donohew. Though she was taken from us far too soon, the way she lived the amount of life she had taught me so much about how to chase my dreams. Her unexpected death occurred as I was finishing this thesis and I would be remiss if I did not take a brief moment to point out that she inspired me to keep on pushing through the hard times to reach my goals.

ABSTRACT

The parables of Jesus are well-known and oft-repeated. They are commonly taught to children in Sunday school, but Jesus used them to reveal truth to his adult audiences. This paper explores the importance of Jesus choosing to use stories to teach adults, whether these stories qualify as folklore, and also whether they can be analyzed as literature. After drawing conclusions on these matters, this paper analyzes several of the parables of Jesus according to Vladimir Propp's Morphology of the Folktale and looks to see if Jesus told stories that fit within Propp's proposed functions. Finally, this paper asks what can be learned from such an analysis in a culture where Christians shy away from their call to engage in the arts to establish *paideia*.

Key words: Propp, parables, *paideia*, storytelling, folklore, creativity, culture, folktale, fairy tales, structuralism

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Introduction

Are Star Wars and Harry Potter the same story? The Internet has been stunned by the similarities between these two wildly popular icons of our culture (Bentley). Vladimir Propp, a Russian scholar who died before either of these stories was written, would not have been surprised by this idea. After a deep analysis of Russian folktales, he claimed that if one were to break down a story into its component parts, those parts would look remarkably similar from one story to the next and thus he concluded that there is only one plot any story can follow. This conclusion can lead to discouragement. What is the point of writing new stories if they are all the same at the core? For the Christian, the search for an answer to this question must lead to the model Jesus gave. Jesus regularly told stories to his audiences in the form of parables. These short stories conveyed great truths in easier-to-understand ways, even though Jesus never broke out of the confines theorized by Propp. Thus, the use of Propp's functions for the analysis of the parables of Jesus gives Christians a clear picture of the limits of human creativity, while also offering encouragement in the Christian call to create culture, or *paideia*.

This paper will explore what finding Propp's functions in the parables of Jesus means for modern Christian students of literature. First, I will explain the history and methodology of Vladimir Propp while also looking at criticism of his work. Following, I will argue the importance of stories and why Propp's work was and is valuable. Because the Bible is not just another piece of written literature but rather God's Holy Word, I will then work through what critics have to say about approaching the Bible as literature to ensure that my analysis is not irreverent. Next, folklore and its various components will be defined to be sure that parables fit

under the umbrella of folklore and can be analyzed using Propp's methods. Accomplishing this, I will go on to analyze the parables of Jesus by applying Propp's functions to those parables that fit the definition of a folktale. Finally, I will argue that the results of this analysis have real-life implications for modern-day Christians, who are designed to create and should be creating—and creating so well that Christian culture should be the standard the secular world looks to for the best in art, theater, music, architecture, and literature.

A Brief History of Vladimir Propp

By breaking down the components of each parable, we can find Propp's functions at work within them. Propp, a Russian folklorist who published his findings in *The Morphology of the Folktale* in 1928, claims that there is only one plot a folktale can follow and that plot is limited to thirty-one functions. These functions are the various actions of the characters within the story. He argues that "all fairy tales are one fairy tale, and that the complete fairy tale has thirty-one different segments which are essentially actions, or as they are called, functions, which always occur in the same sequence" (Brewer 42). According to Propp, nothing can happen within the folktale or fairy tale outside those thirty-one functions. Propp only applied his findings to Russian folktales. However, many scholars have found that his functions work for stories in all genres. For example, Kahlid Lahou's successful application of the functions to *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens was my first introduction to Propp. Very little analysis has been done in bringing Propp's functions together with God's Word, but Pamela Milne applied them to Daniel in her book *Vladimir Propp and the Study of Structure in the Hebrew Biblical Narrative*. In other writings, I have personally applied his functions to Homer's *The Odyssey,* Hawthorne's *The Scarlett Letter*, Austin's *Pride and Prejudice*, Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, the 1990 movie *Home Alone,* and many more. In all of my analyses, well outside the scope of Russian fairy tales, I have been able to attach one of Propp's functions to each action in the plot and found all the stories spanning centuries and continents, still fall within Propp's rules. Although Propp never looked outside his Russian collection of tales, he assumed that this form would ring true in other cultures and writing: "Propp always looked for one unifying principle

behind diversity" (Propp xviii). He thought there was a unifying principle behind stories from all cultures falling into these thirty-one functions, but he never found what that unifying principle was--I posit that these functions of the story plot were an intrinsic part of creation. Propp's overarching idea was that there is only one plot and only a set number of things that can happen in any story. Looking for Propp's functions in the parables will show whether the creator of the universe chose to limit Himself to the existing story functions. If He did, it should greatly impact the Christian view of creativity and the arts.

Propp was focused on the structure of the fairy tale and observed several rules that all the tales followed. First, "functions of characters serve as stable, constant elements in a tale, independent of how and by whom they are fulfilled. They constitute the fundamental components of a tale" (Propp, *Theory* 21). Thus, while the components are always the same, the stories can look quite different because how they are used in the story can vary considerably. This is why we often miss the singular plot all stories share. Second, "The number of functions known to a fairy tale is limited" (Propp, *Morphology* 21). He insisted that there were only thirty-one components, or functions, within a story. Next, "The sequence of functions is always identical" (22). The functions happen in order from start to finish. He does clarify that "by no means do all tales give evidence of all functions. But this in no way changes the law of sequence. The absence of certain functions does not change the order of the rest" (22). While no story is required to include every single function, the functions that do appear must occur in order the way Propp numbered them. Of course, sometimes in creative storytelling, the elements of a story are told out of order. That is acceptable. This re-ordering does not break Propp's rule because if such a tale were rearranged into chronological order, the functions of the tale would also be

found to be in numerical order. Finally, Propp claimed that “all fairy tales are of one type in regard to their structure” (23), which is the logical conclusion of the rules set forth in his previous observations. These rules and functions are simple—some might argue that they reduce something as lovely and imaginative as a fairy tale to a simple math equation, but others find this intriguing and even enthralling.

While Propp’s revolutionary ideas have garnered much support, he has also had his share of critics. The first major critic of his work was his own government. The Russians did not take fondly to Propp’s claim that there was no such thing as an original fairy tale and that all fairy tales are just one tale. Although Propp had only analyzed Russian tales, it quickly became apparent that his work applied to tales from other cultures as well. As a result, the Russian government felt that "the Russian tale has been bled white and robbed of its soul by Professor Propp, let alone the fact that under his pen the fairy tale has lost its historical and class features because he reduces all its images and motifs to prehistory” (Propp, *Theory* xiv). Eventually, Propp’s work was translated and made its way West, and when his popularity grew in the western world, Russia took notice and began to celebrate him (xv). Another concern was with Propp’s functions rather than his supposed political statement. Some critics say that the functions are not clear enough. For example, Function VIII is the most important function in the story. It is the catalyst that causes the hero to do whatever it is that needs to be done. However, Propp broke this function into two parts, calling it Function VIII and Function VIIIa and stating that a story may have one or the other. Function VIII is an act of villainy that causes harm and must be rectified, while Function VIIIa is a lack or a need that one of the characters must fulfill. Either one of these functions can drive the plot—and one of them must. The fact that Propp was not

more precise in the naming and distinguishing of these two functions was a problem for some critics (Milne 76). Fellow structuralist Levi-Strauss says that Propp uses too many functions, and if he had put in just a little more effort, he could have condensed them because many of the functions are the same thing happening at different points in the plot (100). For example, in Function XII, the hero is tested, but in Function XVI the hero goes into direct combat with the villain, which could be considered another form of testing the hero. Of course, based on Propp's observation that the functions must happen in order, it can be concluded that any similar or repeating functions occur because they need to happen at that particular point in the plot. Propp's theory may have flaws, but it does give a very clear picture of the structure of a fairy tale and the rules a story must follow.

Propp is not the only structuralist to try to define fairy tales. Others have proposed different theories of how a fairy tale works. Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* looks at the idea that there is only one hero's tale (Hagan 200). William Foster-Harris wrote *The Basic Patterns of Plot,* in which he claims that there are only three plots a story can follow. On the other hand, Ronald Tobias claims that there are twenty possible plots. Christopher Booker disagrees with both and argues that there are only seven plots any story can tell in his 2004 work *The Seven Basic Plots*. Peter Leithart reduces all stories to just two types of plots: fall/tragedies and redemption/comedies. While all of these came after Propp's publishing of *The Morphology of the Folktale*, Propp had preemptively pointed out the flaw in all this type of analysis: different people could look at the same body of tales and categorize them completely differently (Milne 69). Propp strove to do something different—he isolated not story types, which could be endless, but the various actions that could occur within the fairy tale. His work is

therefore unique, and in my opinion superior, to all the others because the functions are concrete tools that can be used to analyze stories by breaking them down into component parts rather than forcing them to fit arbitrary plot categories by one author or another. Thus, I will use his theory in my analysis of the parables of Jesus.

One of Propp's greatest questions was where the functions of stories came from. Although he only analyzed Russian fairy tales to find these functions, it quickly became obvious that these functions were applicable far outside of Russia. This left Propp wondering about the source from which all stories sprang. Many authors and scholars have weighed in on this topic. Best-selling novelist Stephen King claims that "Stories are relics, part of an undiscovered pre-existing world. The writer's job is to use the tools in his or her toolbox to get as much of each one out of the ground as intact as possible" (King 160). He continues, explaining that he fully believes this in his own writing—he does not write stories, he finds them. Tolkien agrees that stories are quite ancient things, as old as language itself: "It is plain enough that fairy-stories (in wider or narrower sense) are very ancient indeed. Related things appear in very early records; and they are found universally, whenever there is language" (Tolkien 3). Stories seem to be as old as time itself and Propp's study of the functions of the folktale only reinforces that idea. No matter the location of the story's origins they all have the same parts.

Before applying Propp's functions to the parables, there are two things that must be accomplished. First, the importance of stories must be considered. Next, because the Bible is not just another piece of literature, its analysis must be done cautiously. As one who believes the Bible to be the supernatural, inerrant, "full record of God's self-disclosure to mankind" (*What We Believe*), I need permission, so to speak, to look at the Bible as literature and treat it as such. To

do so requires seeing what scholars have to say about this act and weighing their advice before proceeding. Finally, the definition of a folktale must be investigated to be sure that parables are indeed a genre that falls under folktales and therefore can be fully analyzed by Propp and his functions.

The Importance of Stories[1]

The fact that Jesus used stories to teach lessons indicates the power of storytelling. Tolkien said that stories are “not a lower but a higher form of Art, indeed the most nearly pure form, and so (when achieved) the most potent” (Tolkien 6). Those entrusted with the education of children are responsible to “set before the students worthy standards for imitation” (Miller 238). Stories are an important way of setting before students this standard worth imitating. Folklore is particularly good for this task because, “in the folktale, good is good, and evil is evil, and the former will triumph and the latter will fail” (Esolen 97). Science, history, and even math have a story and a history to understand. Jesus taught with the use of stories and we should follow His model because stories develop moral imagination, teach better than facts, and pass on culture to the next generation.

Facts about academic subjects give students simple knowledge. Stories, on the other hand, tell them how to behave with the power that knowledge gives them: “Fairy tales and modern fantasy stories project fantastic other worlds; but they also pay close attention to real moral ‘laws’ of character and virtue” (Guroian 37). Because these laws are obeyed, the reader or listener can think through the plot of the story and ask himself questions: did the main character act with virtue? What made the villain so villainous? If I were in that situation, would I behave like the hero? Would I make virtuous decisions? As these questions are pondered, the student begins to develop character and when faced with adversity, the student already knows what decisions he will make with the need to “preach at” the child. This is precisely the model set

[1] Much of this section originally appeared in my paper entitled “A Problematic Pedagogy” written for EDUC 5183 in December 2021.

forth by Jesus when he teaches using parables. Depriving the child of stories is detrimental to the development of this moral imagination: "…when you starve the child of the folktale, you not only cramp his imagination for the time being. You help render vast realms of human art (not to mention human life) incomprehensible" (Esolen 98). Stories improve the quality of one's life in the long term. They allow students to experience decisions and consequences in a way that can transform their souls.

Stories are not only a better option for teaching morals, but they are also better for traditional academics. Academic knowledge on its own is not known to cause transformation. Stories, on the other hand, speak to us in a way raw facts simply cannot:

> Children (and adults) do not say, 'Tell me some facts'; they want a story. Stories are inherently interesting. Discourse we tolerate; to story we attend. Story entertains, informs, involves, motivates, authenticates, and mirrors existence. By creating a narrative world, stories establish an unreal, controlled universe. The author abducts us and --almost god-like--tells us what reality exists in the narrative world, what happens and why. (Snodgrass 1).

Humans instinctively seem to know that stories teach us more than facts, although modern-day academics fight this concept and look for better ways to teach. Yet, without stories, the most important facet of educating the young soul is missing entirely (Guroian 25). The fairy tale, the folktale, and stories in general, point to truth in a way that facts alone cannot.

Stories are also a highly effective way to pass on culture and tradition. C.S. Lewis addressed the importance of stories in *The Abolition of Man*, arguing that stories were a part of the propagation of culture, the way a culture passes on what it means to be human, to be a good

man, an excellent mother, a strong leader (Lewis 23). As will be discussed in a later section of this paper, Christian culture is severely lacking in modern-day America. Stories, especially folktales and fairy tales, are a key factor to reestablishing this culture for the next generation.

Moral imagination, academics, and cultural propagation are all improved through storytelling. Many great scholars, like Lewis and Tolkien, agree that stories are important, but above all, Jesus used stories to pass the truth on to his audience. And if He thought stories were important, so should we: “We would do better, at least frequently, to clothe the abstract in concrete experiences and story, just as Jesus did” (Snodgrass 2). Stories are a powerful tool for conveying truth, goodness, and beauty and ought to be used whenever possible.

The Bible as Literature

Scholars stand on all sides of the argument for literary analysis of Scripture. Some say no, the Bible is not literature and cannot be treated as literature under any circumstances. Others say there are times when it is acceptable and times when it is not. Still, others say that yes, the Bible is literature and can be poked and prodded in any way a scholar may choose. First, several scholars give warning that analyzing the Bible as literature can be dangerous and detrimental. Theology professor Dr. Klyne Snodgrass, whose award-winning book on the parables comes in at over nine hundred pages, explains that "Repeatedly scholars have reduced the artful stories in the Gospels to colorless plot structures with meanings so banal that one wonders why they would have ever been told" (34) While Snodgrass's warning here must be kept in mind, I argue that it is possible to analyze the structure of the parables without distorting the art and beauty of the stories—quite the opposite, I look to analyze them to appreciate the art, order, and beauty within these short tales, not to destroy them. Snodgrass also warns that "the parables are among the most abused and mistreated stories ever told. They have been twisted, shortened, subverted, realigned, and psychologized for centuries by pastors and scholars alike" (6). There is a great burden on anyone who believes that the Bible is the holy word of God and yet chooses to write about them in an academic setting. Great caution must be taken to not abuse or mistreat the parables for academic ends. Norman Jones, Dean of English at Ohio State, agrees that care must be taken because too often treating the Bible as literature leads to mistreating Scripture entirely:

> In the later twentieth century, Northrop Frye hailed the Bible as 'the great code' of Western literature and art, the defining myth of Western culture. He also described the language of

> the Bible as 'visionary.' Frye's terms--great code, myth, visionary--arguably reflect a cultural trend of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in which some hoped that beautiful literature might take the place of traditional religious belief (23).

Literary scholars must then be careful not to push the Bible as literature to the point that it becomes *just* literature, rather than God's word.

Another point some scholars make is that too much of the Bible does not fit the definition of literature. The Bible is non-narrative and there are too many voices contained within it (Hunt 337). In his article "On the Bible and Literary Criticism," Harvard professor of Hebrew literature James Kugel states, "In some important ways, the Bible is not literature, and that, more precisely, 'literary analysis' is not, simply because it exists, an operation to be performed on any text that comes along" (219). Just because one can look at the Bible as literature and analyze it as such does not necessarily mean one should. Although this is not a conclusive list, the point is clear: analyzing the Bible as literature is a contested practice. If one is not cautious in how the analysis is approached, Scripture can be mistreated, abused, or lowered to the level of ordinary literature.

Some scholars fall in the middle of the road and say "maybe." Intentions matter above all in the decision to move forward with literary analysis of Scripture. Kugel warns: "the Bible is not just literature, and if we are going to read it as such, let this reading not imply that we wish to put it on par with other merely human texts, such as Homer, Virgil, Shakespeare, and Milton" (217). He explains that when the Bible started to be read as literature in the sixteenth century, it made people start to view it as nothing more than a human text. He also reminds the analyst that searching for something in a piece of literature may cause one to force it to be found--even if it is not there. Therefore, we must be honest about our intentions and our conclusions (223). In

addition, context should be considered when approaching any folklore, but especially the Bible (Bowman 387). Finally, the parables must be handled with respect and care. Snodgrass reminds us that "every parable must be approached in its own right and not assumed to look like or function like other parables" (7). Still, Snodgrass also sees the need for far more writing to be done on the parables. As one of the leading experts on them, he laments that "numerous studies of the parables exist, as the bibliography and endnotes here testify, but if any area in NT studies exists where further publication is needed, surprisingly, it is the parables of Jesus" (3). While Snodgrass fears the mistreatment of the parables, he also admits the need for giving them more attention.

However, plenty of well-respected scholars say yes, the Bible can be studied and analyzed as literature—and even some of the previously mentioned scholars waver and offer opposing opinions from their own statements above. Cambridge professor Derek Brewer, who delivered a speech titled "The Gospels and the Laws of Folktales," explains that there was a time in academic history when a speech such as his would be highly offensive to biblical scholars, but things have shifted, and it is now more acceptable—in fact, it is the folklorists who now find it offensive to apply folklore law to the Bible, although he'd like to see that tide change on both sides:

> I am nevertheless somewhat surprised to find that on the whole biblical scholars seem not to have made quite as much use as they might have done to folklore scholarship, while on the other hand, I am also surprised that those many distinguished students of the folktale who have brought the study of the subject so far in the present century have on the whole paid remarkable little attention to biblical narratives. (37)

Thus, according to Brewer, we need more literary analysis of the Bible, not less— especially in the field of folklore, which is the focus of this paper.

Other scholars agree. Author Cheryl Hunt argues that treating the Bible as literature makes it more accessible to all. She claims that this type of exercise in analysis can help people move past seeing Scripture as just a dry collection of rules and regulations and will give Scripture the ability to capture imaginations and engage more people in the text (340). When scholars approach the Bible as literature, something that is familiar and often loved, it can make them more willing to engage with Scripture. Therefore, biblical literary analysis should be done. Norman Jones, Dean of English at Ohio State, argues that "other texts thus form the background or context necessary for readers to make sense of a given text... Taken as a whole, the Bible creates more complex meanings through this kind of intertextuality among (and sometimes intratextuality within) its component parts" (19). In other words, looking at the Bible as literature —and comparing it to other literature—allows one to make more sense of it and to find more truth throughout it. Austrian folklorist Leopold Schmidt recommends the Old Testament as the best place to begin learning about folklore and indeed saw it as a form of literature (Dundes 1). Harvard professor James Kugel was previously quoted arguing that the Bible does not meet the full definition of literature. He counters his own argument, however, when he asks: "Do we never have the right to read the Bible as literature, our literature (indeed, being already being readers of other literature can we do anything but)? ... The answer to these questions must be no" (229). Even though in some situations analyzing the Bible as literature should be avoided, there are times when it is justifiable. Finally, beloved storyteller and respected professor J.R.R. Tolkien believed "The Gospels contain a fairy story or a story of a larger kind which embraces all the

essence of fairy-stories" (15). If the Gospels are a story, they can be analyzed as such. These scholars and their arguments point me toward believing that it is possible to proceed in analyzing the parables as literature without diminishing their value or meaning.

In conclusion, it seems one does indeed have the right to look at the Bible as literature, even while holding the view that the Bible is God's perfect and holy word. Many of the scholars mentioned who caution against this act counter themselves and say that there are times when it is acceptable or even necessary. Great care must be taken, and great respect given to treat the Bible as God's word and not just a story. Above all, intentions matter. Things can go wrong quickly when the Bible is categorized as literature. One must have clear goals in mind at the start and must also heed the warning of not trying to force analysis to prove something that is not there.

Defining Folklore

The next step is to define folklore and determine whether the parables qualify. Although I have written considerably on applying Propp's functions to literature outside the realm of folklore, he was focused solely on the folktale and the conclusions of this analysis will carry more weight if the parable is a type of folklore. Folklore is an expansive topic. Oxford English Dictionary defines folklore as "the traditional beliefs, legends, and customs current among the common people" (*Folklore*). Traditional beliefs, usually referred to as myths, are "stories that articulate the values, beliefs, and worldview of a people" (Jones 7). Legends are a bit more complex than myths: "Something remarkable takes place, which it is desired to record. To record it, the man, the events, the sayings, are reported. But the telling focuses on the inner point, which is remarkability, rather than on the actuality" (Brewer 45). Myth is a way of sharing beliefs while legends share events that occurred, although the stories become exaggerated over time. Finally, folktales fall under the "customs" aspect of the definition. Even so, each of these definitions is still missing a key factor, at least according to one of the leading experts on folklore, Alan Dundes. He insisted that one of the key distinctive of folklore is that it begins as an oral tradition. As such, multiple versions of the same folktale exist. Aa anyone who has ever played the childhood game "telephone" can understand, anything repeated changes with repetition. Therefore, "variation is the very hallmark of folklore" (Dundes 5). Thus, although all folklore finds its roots in oral storytelling, the types are differentiated based on the content of the stories told.

Many folklorists believe that folklore is constantly created in every culture and in every geographic region, some going so far as to claim that “television is the folktale of our time and deserves to be studied as such. For all its modern technology it has an extraordinarily archaic appeal” (Brewer 41). Dundes disagrees with Brewer, however. He says that one of the key aspects of folklore is that it is passed only orally, at least at first: “Almost all high and popular culture exist in fixed, unchanging form either because a novel or short story is locked into print, or a television program or motion picture is locked into videotape or film” (Dundes 2). Folklore is a broad topic—it seems as though just about any form of storytelling can fit under its umbrella depending on the definition chosen. For the purposes of this paper, I will follow Dundes recommendation and include the distinction that folklore must have oral roots and should have multiple versions.

Folktales fit under this definition of folklore but can be broken down even further, into fables and fairy tales. Both have an oral history and a narrative, which “consists of a storyteller and a story in which a sequence of events moves from tensions to resolution” (Hagan 199). In other words, both must have a plot. Fables differ from fairy tales in that they are "best limited to those narratives in which the characters are usually animals” (Beavis 475). That leaves the difference between fairy tales and fables being that while both are forms of narrative folklore, fables use talking animals as the main characters while fairy tales use humans as the main characters. Fairy tales, therefore, are stories that were passed down orally and have a plot and human main characters. The next question to pursue is whether the parables of Jesus align with the definition of a fairy tale and can be analyzed as such.

What is a parable? The Oxford English Dictionary defines parable as “a (usually realistic) story or narrative told to convey a moral or spiritual lesson or insight; esp. one told by Jesus in the Gospels” (*Parable*). Looking at the first component, the story or narrative, we can continue. The Greek word παραβολή (parabolē) that is used in the Gospels means “parable, illustration, comparison” (*Παραβολή*). Klyne Snodgrass explains that παραβολή can mean a proverb, a riddle, a contrast, a simple story, or a complex story (10). Specifically looking at biblical parables, there are some found in the Old Testament as well as the more well-known parables of Jesus in the New Testament. The Old Testament parables are more like fables, with talking animals or anthropomorphic vines or trees (Goulder 51). The New Testament parables, on the other hand, focus on people. Excluding the mustard seed parable in Mark, seeds always have a human sower (Snodgrass 18). Even so, Snodgrass does categorize the New Testament parables of Jesus as falling under the same category as fables and myths (8). He is not alone in this. A renowned expert on New Testament parables, Adolf Julicher, also equates the narrative parables with fables (Beavis 474). Although some parables Jesus told were proverbs or riddles, this paper will concern itself only with the narrative parables.

The second part of the definition clarifies that the parables have a point: they must convey a spiritual truth. According to Goulder, the parable specifically aims to reach opposition (58). Snodgrass agrees with this assessment. He explains that “parable in its broadest sense refers to an expanded analogy... such analogies first and foremost are comparisons or contrasts used to explain or convince” (2). Parables are not really meant for those who already understand or agree with the truth being conveyed. They are stories meant for those who need higher truth brought down to an understandable level— which is the point of the fable or fairy tale overall.

The next step in determining if a parable is a folktale and can be analyzed as such is by looking at the definition of a folktale and parable together. It was previously determined that folktales are stories that were passed down orally and have a plot and human main characters. New Testament parables are clearly oral literature. The biblical text states repeatedly that Jesus spoke the parables in front of an audience. For example, Mark 13:10-11 says, "Then the disciples came and said to him, 'Why do you speak to them in parables?' And he answered them, 'To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given'" (ESV)**.** This verse makes it clear that the parables were spoken to an audience. In addition to that, the Gospels themselves were passed orally for quite some time before being written down: "the Gospels in their earliest stages are now generally accepted as having been orally transmitted... Mark, as it seems to be generally assumed, was written down in about 65-70 AD" (Brewer 38). The parables are an oral tradition within another oral tradition, making them doubly able to meet this criterion.

Another element of a folktale is that it has a plot and humans as the main characters. While that is not true for all the parables in the New Testament, it is true for a great deal of them. Finally, folktales must exist in multiple versions. Several of the parables exist in more than one Gospel, with slight variances between the recordings. This is a key feature of the folktale. But it could also be argued that with so many different translations of the Bible (over 900!), all the parables qualify as existing in multiple, slightly varying, versions (*Number*). That would mean that based on the characteristics of the folktale, *all* the narrative parables of the New Testament qualify and can be analyzed as folktales. Notably, "The Parable of the Lost Sheep," "The Parable of the Sower," "The Parable of the Wicked Tenants," and "The Parable of the Talents and the

Minas" are parables that repeat from Gospel to Gospel. These four parables will be the focus of the paper, as their appearance in multiple Gospels most closely fits the oral tradition of folklore—they were initially told orally and were eventually recorded by different people with slight changes between versions.

Propp & The Parables

The Parable of the Lost Sheep

In “The Parable of the Lost Sheep,” Jesus tells the story of a man who loses one of his one hundred sheep and still chases after it, even though he has ninety-nine others. When the sheep is found, the man celebrates—and even invites his friends and neighbors to celebrate with him. The parable can be found in Matthew 18:10-14 and also in Luke 15:1-7. The two versions are similar but do have slight differences, which give it the obvious mark of folklore. In addition, “it is reasonable to think that Jesus told this parable several times and quite possibly for different purposes” (Snodgrass 103), which would also account for the slight changes in the tale between the two authors.

The Matthew version begins as nearly every story does, with a “once upon a time.” In this case, the Initial Setting (Propp’s Function 0) is “If a man has one hundred sheep” (12a). From that moment, the audience knows what this story will be about; the setting has been declared. Immediately following, Jesus explains that “one of them has gone astray” (12a). Absentation (Function I) occurs when a family member leaves home. Propp’s full title for this function is “One of the members of a family absents himself from home” and in his details of the function, he explains that absentation can include “going to work, to the forest, to trade, to war, ‘on business’” (Propp 26). That is clearly what is happening here—one of the sheep has strayed from its home. While it is not exactly the forest, the same concept is there—the sheep left the safety of home and is out in the wild. One could argue, however, that sheep are not actually

family members, but the parable makes clear two things. First, the sheep represent people. The parable ends with Jesus explaining, “So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish” (14). Jeremias explains, “As the shepherd rejoices over the lamb brought home... so will God rejoice” (107). Because it is an allegory, the sheep do not need to be literal family members for absentation to take place. They represent God’s children gone astray. Second, the man cares deeply for his sheep. It is a creative use of Absentation, but Absentation nonetheless. The fact that one of the sheep has gone astray fulfills a second function as well. This is allowed, according to Propp, who called such an instance the “double morphological meaning of a single function” (69)—one action can be used to represent two of his functions. The second function fulfilled is Function VIIIa, known in brief form as “Lack.” In long form, this function is titled “One member of a family either lacks something or desires to have something” (35). This Function is paired with Function VIII, Villainy. Either Function VIII or VIIIa is required in any story because it is the driving force behind the plot. Either there is villainy that must be justified or a lack exists that must be fulfilled. In this case, the man lacks one of his sheep and this is what will drive the plot.

Moving on, the man decides to “leave the ninety-nine on the mountains” (12b). This is Function X, Beginning Counteraction. The man has decided what he will do about his lack—and here it becomes evident why the lack is the driving force behind the plot. The lack is what causes the man to choose to search and the rest of the plot falls like dominoes from there. Thus, the man heads out “in search of the one that went astray” (12b), fulfilling Function XI, The Hero Leaves Home, also called Departure. Propp clearly differentiates Departure from Absentation. Departure is “the route followed by the story and on which the action is developed is actually the route of

the seeker" (Propp 39). Thus, the way to differentiate between the two is which character leaving is part of the hero's actions. In this case, the sheep leaving causes the problem (Lack), while the hero leaving is the first step to the solution (Departure). This is why Propp says one must be careful when analyzing a story because the same action—leaving home—can fulfill multiple functions and serve multiple purposes: "the means by which functions are fulfilled influence one another, and identical forms adapt themselves to different functions" (Propp 70). Continuing, when the man in Matthew's parable finds the sheep, he rejoices greatly over it: "And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray" (12). Several functions are put into action in this conclusion to the story. Function XV, The Hero Is Delivered to the Object of His Search, occurs because the man finds the sheep. Function XIX, Lack Liquidated, occurs when the initial lack is satisfied. This can happen in several ways but one of them is "the object of a quest is obtained as a direct result of the preceding actions" (Propp 54), which is precisely what occurs in this story. In this case, the man lost his sheep, set out to find it, and now it is found. Therefore, Function XIX has been completed. Although it is not stated in the words written by Matthew, it is implied that the man took the sheep home to be with the other ninety-nine—he would not have gone out searching, rejoiced, and then not returned home with the sheep. That would not make logical sense. This is therefore Function XX, The Hero Returns.

Finally, there is the rejoicing. Function XXXI is officially called "Wedding," but Propp explains that "the hero sometimes receives a monetary reward or some other form of compensation in place of the princess' hand" (Propp 64). Other happy endings can also be included within the function—Propp gives six examples of ways this function can be fulfilled.

The wedding is the happiest of the happily-ever-after options; as Peter Leithart challenges his readers, "Try to imagine a better happy ending than a wedding" (30). In this case, the lost sheep has been found and rejoicing occurs: "he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray" (13). Function XXXI is fulfilled because the man who sought the sheep has found his reward, an acceptable replacement for a wedding.

Turning to the Luke 15 version of the parable, the same pattern emerges even though some details differ. There is an initial setting although, in this version, Jesus does not lay it out as a random man in a story. He asks his audience directly to put themselves in the shoes of the man with a lost sheep: "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine...?" (4a). In this version, Function 0, Initial Setting, is laid out in the form of a question to the audience. The question also includes other functions. Function I, Absentation, exists there also because the listener is alerted to the fact that a sheep is missing. In addition, Function VIIIa, Lack, is found in the question because the missing sheep is revealed to be the man's lack. Once again, the man decides on his action, which is to "leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost until he finds it." Doing so fulfills Function X and Function XI—he decides on counteraction, and he leaves home. The man finds the sheep in verse 5: "And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing." This is Function XV, "The Hero Is Transferred, Delivered, or Led to the Whereabouts of an Object of Search" as well as Function XIX, "The Lack Is Liquidated." His purpose for going on his adventure was the lost sheep. This lack drove the plot of the tale and has now been filled. After finding the sheep, the man heads home. In Luke, this is explicitly stated rather than implied as in Matthew: "He lays it on his shoulders rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls his friends and his

neighbors saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost’”(6b). This fulfills two functions. The man returning home is Function XX, “The Hero Returns”; and the celebration is Function XXXI, “Wedding”—as stated in the analysis of Matthew’s “Lost Sheep” parable, this moment qualifies as an alternative to a wedding that can still fulfill the function.

This parable differs widely from Matthew’s version on the surface. Matthew's version is laid out in the subjunctive: “if a man had one hundred sheep”. Luke’s version opens with a question to his audience: “What man of you...?” Both of these openings indicate that the story about to be told is fictional—it is a “what if?” question used to point the listener to truth, rather than a true story. In Matthew, the man goes to the mountains to find the sheep and in Luke, he goes into the “open country.” The man in Matthew celebrates his found sheep privately, while the man in Luke calls all his friends and neighbors to celebrate with him. These slight differences are expected in a folktale, as previously discussed, and confirm that these parables do in fact fall under the category of folklore. But, looking at the structure of each, Matthew’s pattern is 0, I, VIIIa, X, XI, XV, XIX, XX, XXXI, and Luke’s is also 0, I, VIIIa, X, XI, XV, XIX, XX, XXXI. Despite all the slight differences in detail, at the heart, the structure of the tale is *exactly* the same. While each author may have filled in the gaps when recording the event of Jesus telling the story, they did in fact tell the same story without compromising the core story structure of what Jesus said. In both cases, Jesus upheld all of Propp’s rules of folktales. The lack is the driving force of the plot, and the functions occur in numerical order. There are also no elements of the story that cannot be labeled with one of Propp’s functions.

The Parable of the Sower

In “The Parable of the Sower”, Jesus explains that when seeds are sown, not all of them with turn into healthy plants. The parable is found in Matthew 13:3-23, Luke 8:4-15, and Mark 4:3-20. A man goes out and spreads seed. Some of the seed is eaten by birds; some did not grow good roots and died. Others were choked by thorns, but some grew strong and produced a great harvest. Joachim Jeremias points out that although some forms of frustration to the sower are mentioned, not every possible thing that could happen to a seed is mentioned (119). He also points out that the huge harvest that the small amount of seed brought in shows the “abundance of God, surpassing all human measure. To human eyes much of the labor may seem futile and fruitless, resulting apparently in frequent failure; but Jesus is full of joyful confidence” (120). Snodgrass calls this parable difficult. He goes so far as to claim that it does not have a developed plot, but rather a “fourfold similitude” (146). I disagree and have successfully broken down the parable into a plot with assigned functions that follow Propp’s rules.

In Matthew, the parable begins with Function 0, Initial Setting: “A sower went out to sow” (3b). This statement also implies the sower’s lack—if one is sowing seeds, one needs and expects them to grow into healthy plants that will provide crops. So, this statement also provides Function VIIIa, Lack. The next several statements are about what happened to the seeds. First, “some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them” (4). Next, “Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away” (5-6). Still others, “fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them” (7). On the surface, it appears Snodgrass might be right—this seems like a list of things

that happen to scattered seeds, not a plot to folktale, but a careful reader looking at Propp's functions will see that this closely resembles Function XVI, "The Hero and Villain Join in Direct Combat." At first, this may seem like a stretch, but the sower's job is to plant seeds and produce crops. His enemy, then, is the natural elements that prevent that from happening. When he sows, he is always combating nature and therefore Function XVI does fit. Some of the seeds do as they should: "Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty" (7-8). The driving force behind the sower going out at all was to produce crops and at that point, he has succeeded. His lack is liquidated (Function XIX). The story is complete because a lack was established and then filled. While the plot of the story is quite simple—only Functions 0, VIIIa, XVI, and XIX—it exists and can be broken down into functions.

In Mark, the parable is nearly identical. The story begins with the initial setting, Function 0, "A sower went out to sow" (3). As with the Matthew version, this also implies the sower's lack, Function VIIIa. The seeds face the same struggles as in Matthew. First, some of the seed "fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it" (4). Just as before, "Other seed fell on the rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and immediately sprang up, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away" (5-6). Finally, the rest of the lost seed "fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain" (7). The seed all meets the same fate that it did in Matthew—and even in the same order. Function XVI is once again fulfilled because the sower has combatted the enemy. Finally, some of the seed grows successfully and produces the crops that the sower has set out to grow: "And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold" (8). This fulfills Function XIX, "Lack

Liquidated." The story uses the same functions as in Matthew—Function 0, VIIIa, XVI, and XIX —and is driven by the same lack, and that same lack is fulfilled at the end of the story when grain is produced from the seed.

Moving on to Luke, the story is nearly identical to the first two recordings of the parable. Function 0 occurs in verse 5 when "A sower when out to sow his seed." The seed goes through the same trials as it did in Matthew and Mark. Some "fell along the path, and was trampled underfoot, and the birds of air devoured it" (5b). This verse shows a slight variance from Matthew and Mark, as expected in folklore, because some of the seed is trampled rather than eaten. This difference does not affect the structure—all the seed on the path was still destroyed. Some of the seed "fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture" (6). In Matthew and Mark, the seed that fell on the rock struggled due to a lack of soil, but Luke focuses on the lack of water instead. Regardless, the seed does not produce grain in either case. Other seeds "fell among the thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it" (7). Overall, the fate of the seeds is remarkably similar, and the entire struggle can be assigned to Propp's Function XVI because it is still combat with the enemy. Finally, "some seed fell into good soil and grew and yielded a hundredfold" (8). This fulfills Function XIX, "Lack Liquidated" just as it did in Matthew and Mark. Luke's version includes Functions 0, VIIIa, XVI, and XIX, exactly like Matthew and Mark.

Once again, we see slight variances between versions of "The Parable of the Sower" from Gospel to Gospel but within a stable structure. The exact struggle the seed faces after it was sown varies slightly and the production of grain is slightly different as well, but overall, the structure of the story remains the same: there is an initial setting (Function 0), the main character

has a lack (Function VIIIa), the main character must combat a villain (Function XVI) and the initial lack is fulfilled—the main character has what he sought at the beginning of the tale (Function XIX). While each of the authors may have used some creative license, recalled different details, or perhaps even recorded different times Jesus told this parable, they all remained true to the structure of the story and did not veer from it.

The Parable of the Wicked Tenants

In "The Parable of The Wicked Tenants," a landowner leases his property before he leaves the country for a time. When harvest time comes, he sends his servants to the property to collect his fruit from the tenants who were caring for the land. Tragically, the servants are all killed by the tenants. He repeats the process with the same results, and finally, he sends his son to the tenants in hopes that they will be more respectful to him. However, the tenants kill the son just as they had the servants who had come before him. Eventually, the landowner returns and destroys the tenants for what they have done. This parable is found in Matthew 21:33-46, Mark 12:1-12, and Luke 20:9-19. In all three versions, the story is recorded as being told in the same setting (Snodgrass 281). While some parables are assumed to have been recorded from different times that Jesus told the tale, "The Parable of the Tenants" appears to be recorded from the same instance by all three authors.

The parable in Matthew begins as most tales do, with Function 0, Initial Setting. It begins, "There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants" (33a). The audience can picture all the work the man did and the care he took with the property before leasing it out. They also know that the main characters are the man and the tenants. The initial setting has been made clear. The story continues, explaining that the man "went into another country. When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit" (34). This is Function I, Absentation, which occurs when the main character himself or a family member is removed from the main setting of the plot. Next, whatever is going to move the plot forward must be revealed. Some might say that this a story driven by lack—the man wants the fruit produced by his land

thus he continually sends servants to fetch it. However, fruit does not seem sufficient justification to push the man to continue to risk bodily injury and murder. If Function VIIIa, Lack, exists in a story, it must drive the plot. In this case, it does not seem to be the driving force that would lead the man to risk his own son. Luckily, Propp provides another option for driving the plot. Sometimes there is not a lack strong enough to move things along. When that happens, this story typically has an act of villainy—which is precisely what occurs in "The Parable of the Wicked Tenant." Villainy is Function VIII. Propp explains that "a tale, while omitting villainy, very often begins directly with a lack" (35). The reverse is also true—a tale that omits lack will begin with villainy. In Propp's study of the Russian fairy tale, villainy was more common; in this analysis of the parables of Jesus, lack has been more common.

The villainy is then revealed in verse 35. When the servants have arrived at the property, "the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another." The wicked tenants do not want to give up the land or the harvest and are willing to commit murder to keep possession of both. Propp's long version of the title of Function VIII is, "Villain Causes Harm or Injury to a Family Member." Propp explains that several things can occur in this function. One of them is "the villain pillages or spoils the crops" (31), which is the goal of the villains when they harm the servants. Another is "the villain causes bodily injury" (32), which happens to the one servant lucky enough to be beaten rather than murdered. Finally, a third thing that can happen in Function VIII is "the villain commits murder" (33), which happens to the other two servants. In stories with Function VIII instead of VIIIa, the villainy is what drives the plot rather than the lack. This means from this point out, all that occurs is driven by the wicked tenants and their decision to murder the landlord's servants. The story continues with the man

sending more servants who are also murdered: “Again he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them” (36). The man tries again, this time sending his own son: “Finally he sent his son to them saying, ‘they will respect my son,’ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance’” (38). They follow through on that idea and kill the man’s son. The villainy is prolonged and repeated in this story, but it still all falls under Function VIII.

When the plot is driven by lack, that lack must be fulfilled, but when villainy drives the plot, the villain must be defeated. This occurs in “The Parable of the Wicked Tenants” when the tenants are destroyed by the landowner: “He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons” (41). The tenants were able to kill the servants and even the son, but they were no match for the landowner in the end. This fits Function XVI, “The Hero and the Villain Join in Direct Combat” (51). The hero won the combat when the wicked tenants were put to death, which fulfills Function XVIII, “The Villain Is Defeated.” The driving force of the plot, the villainy, has been concluded, allowing the story to end.

The parable is similar in Mark, although there are some slight variances. As is typical, it begins with an Initial Setting, Function 0: “A man planted a vineyard and put a fence around it dug a pit for the winepress and built a tower and leased it to tenants” (12). Absentation, Function I, quickly follows when the man “went into another country.” Unlike in Matthew, in the Mark version, the landowner initially just sends one servant to the tenants to collect his harvest—and he is beaten and sent away, but not killed: “And they took him and beat him and sent him away empty-handed” (3). This is still Function VIII, Villainy, because bodily injury occurred. A second

servant (again singular, unlike in Matthew) is sent, and he too is beaten: “Again he sent to them another servant, and they struck him on the head and treated him shamefully” (4). This continues on for some time: “And so with many others: some they beat, and some they killed” (5). The villainy in Mark escalates more slowly, but it is villainy nonetheless. When the landowner sends his son, he meets the same fate as in Matthew: “He had still another, a beloved son. Finally, he sent him to them, saying ‘They will respect my son’” (6). Still, just as in Matthew, the tenants do not respect the son. Instead, they kill him: “And they took him and killed him and threw him out of the vineyard” (8). All of these actions fall under Villainy, Function VIII. In the end, the landowner must “come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others” (9). This is both Function XVI, Hero and Villain Join in Direct Combat, and Function XVIII, Villain is Defeated. Once again, because villainy rather than lack drives the story, the story can conclude once the villain is overcome.

The parable as told in Luke also begins with Function 0, Initial Setting: “A man planted a vineyard and let it out to tenants” (9). It progresses to Function I, Absentation, when the man “went into another country for a long while” (10). When harvest season rolls around, the landowner once again sends a servant who is beaten and sent away, and so he sends another: “When the time came, he sent a servant to the tenants so that they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. And he sent another servant. But they also beat and treated him shamefully and sent him away empty-handed” (10-11). Still not willing to give up, the man sends a third servant: “And he sent yet a third. This one also they wounded and cast out” (12). Villainy, Function VIII, is prolonged as it was in Matthew and Mark. Luke’s version differs a bit: all three are injured but not killed. As

previously explained, Function VIII is still fulfilled because the villain has caused injury and this villainy drives the plot of the story. The villainy continues when the landowner sends his son, whom the tenants also kill: "But when the tenants saw him, they said to themselves 'This is the heir. Let us kill him so that the inheritance may be ours'" (14). Function XVI, "The Hero and Villain Join in Direct Combat", occurs when the man decides to "come and destroy those tenants" (16a). When he gives the vineyard to others, it is made clear that the tenants have been defeated, fulfilling Function XVIII. The story can then conclude.

In all three versions of this parable, despite slight differences in the details, the pattern of functions is identical. Function 0 begins the story, quickly followed by Function I, Absentation. Villainy, Function VIII, is the problem in all three versions of the story although the extent of the villainy varies. Function XVI and Function XVIII complete the tale each time—the hero combats the villain and the villain is defeated. Although Matthew, Mark, and Luke did not record the parable the same way, once again the structure is kept perfectly intact. Jesus told this parable in each instance following Propp's rules. The functions occur in numerical order, and there is a driving force behind the plot. In addition, each event within the plot can be assigned a function. Jesus never breaks away from these "laws" of folklore.

The Parable of the Talents and the Minas

The "Talents and the Minas" is a parable found in Matthew 15:14-30 and Luke 19:11- 27. In it, Jesus tells the story of a man and his servants. Each servant is giving some money and the man goes away. In Matthew, three servants are given talents, which are a unit of weight (Tönsing). Thus, "five talents" is telling the audience the weight of the silver or gold. In Luke, ten servants are each given one Mina, which is a Greek monetary unit (*Mina*). One talent was roughly equal to fifty to sixty Minas, so the Matthew version with five talents is significantly more money than the Luke version (Scott). When the nobleman returns, he asks the servants to show what they have done with the money and rewards each servant accordingly. In Matthew, all three servants are questioned; in Luke, only three of the ten are questioned. The first and second servants invested their money and grew it, but the third one buried it and did not use it, afraid of wasting what his master had given him. The two who increased their gift were rewarded but the one who did nothing with his gift was punished.

Before I analyze the tale, there are some strange factors to point out. These two parables are unusual in many ways. First, they are not often written about, a fact that frustrates scholars who do attempt to write about them. Both Kline Snodgrass and Luke Timothy Johnson take a moment to put this out in their writing on the parable (Johnson 140; Snodgrass 519). It also leaves modern authors trying to include this parable with fewer resources to cite. Second, the book of Mark does not have the complete parable but does have a single verse that seems to reference it: "it is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to stay awake" (Mark 13:34). The

Mark version does not have a full narrative plot; therefore, it will not be broken down into functions here. The previous parables analyzed in this paper were very similar from Gospel to Gospel, but the Matthew and Luke versions of the Talents/Minas differ greatly: "Of 301 words in Matthew's version, and 281 in Luke's only fifty are identical" (Snodgrass 523). In addition, Luke weaves in a subplot about what the nobleman does after he leaves the servants, a plot that Matthew ignores altogether, leaving scholars to debate what happened in the oral passing of this particular tale. Understanding these distinctions will help the analysis process to make more sense.

The Matthew plot starts with Absentation, Function 0. The man was leaving on a journey and called his servants to him before he left. They are given an interdiction, Function II: the man "entrusted to them his property. To one, he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his ability." An interdiction can either be a warning not to do something or a command to complete a task (Propp). While the parable does not outright say that the men were commanded to invest and use these talents, it is implied because "Matthew's intent with the parable is clear. He understood the parable as an exhortation for followers of Jesus to be faithful in their obedience until his return" (Snodgrass 534–35). The interdiction also implies a lack because the men will have to give account for their talents when the man returns. Thus, Function VIIIa also occurs here. When the master does eventually return home, Function XII, "The Hero Is Tested" occurs. Each servant must give account for the talents given to him. The servant with five talents "traded with them, and he made five talents more" (15). When he showed them to the master, he was told, "Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much" (21). The first servant's initial lack is fulfilled, Function XIX, and he is

rewarded, Function XXXI. The second servant, who was given two talents and doubled them shows the master his results and is told the same as the man with five. Thus, this servant also goes through Functions XII, XIX, and XXXI. The final servant tells the master, “I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground” (24). The servant is tested, Function XII, but he fails the test. This reveals that he is not the hero at all, but rather a villain. This is Function XXVIII, False Hero or Villain Is Exposed. Finally, the servant is told, “You wicked and slothful servant!” (26). The one talent is taken from him. This fulfills Function XXX, Villain Is Punished. While the servants take different paths after the interdiction, each path still follows Propp’s functions.

The parable in Luke has details that differ from the Matthew version. It begins with, “A nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and then return” (12), which is Functions 0 and I: Initial Setting, and Absentation. An interdiction is given in a very similar manner as it is given in Matthew, fulfilling Function II: “Calling ten of his servants, he gave them ten Minas, and said to them, ‘Engage in business until I come” (13). Unlike in Matthew, where the interdiction was only implied, it is spelled out clearly here. Function VIIIa occurs with Function II just as in Matthew: the servants are given an interdiction and with that interdiction, their lack is also revealed. The amount of money and the number of servants is different: Matthew had only three, who received different amounts, while Luke introduces ten, who all receive the same.

The nobleman leaves on his journey. Matthew leaves it at that, but Luke goes off on a rabbit trail and explains exactly what the man did while he was away: “his citizens hated him and

sent a delegation after him, saying, ‘We do not want this man to reign over us’” (14). Does this need to be worked into the plot of the parable and assigned a function (or functions)? I contend that it does not. Scholars debate whether this is even part of the original parable or was added later before it was recorded on paper: “Most scholars accept that the throne claimant elements were added later, although some argue that Luke’s account preserves an original parable essentially as told by Jesus” (Snodgrass 537). Snodgrass refers to this as a separate plot entirely; thus, I have chosen not to include it in the plot narrative.

Moving along in the plot of the servants, the three servants who are highlighted can be followed on their separate paths. When the nobleman returned, the first servant said “Lord, your Mina has made ten Mina more” (16). The hero was tested, Function XII, and passed the test. He was told, “Well done, good servant! Because you have been faithful with in a very little, you shall have authority over ten cities” (17). His lack is liquidated, Function XIX, because he has increased his money as he was told to do. He is rewarded, fulfilling Function XXXI. The pattern is repeated with the second servant, who has made five Minas, and is rewarded with five cities, also fulfilling Functions XII, XIX, and XXXI. Finally, a third servant confesses, “Lord, here is your Mina, which I kept laid away in a handkerchief; for I was afraid of you because you are a severe man” (20-21). The hero is tested, and fails the test, thus revealing that he is a villain, Function XXVIII. The nobleman says to the third servant, “I will condemn you with your own words, you wicked servant!” The villain is punished for not following orders, Function XXX. As with the previous two parables, the versions of “The Parable of the Ten Minas” have differing details in Matthew and Luke, but the functions remain the same if the plot of the nobleman’s experiences on his travels is ignored or treated as a separate plot altogether. Both parables start

with Functions 0 and I, Initial Setting and Absentation. Then comes an interdiction and lack, Functions II and VIIIa, followed by the testing of the hero, Function XII. In both cases, two of the servants are revealed to be heroes because they succeed in the testing. Their lack is liquidated, and they are rewarded, Functions XIX and XXXI. In both versions, the third servant is tested and fails the test, revealing him to be the villain, Functions XII and XXVIII. Finally, he is punished in both Matthew and Luke, Function XXX. Even though it was written down by two different men based on their memory of the oral telling, the structure never falters even if the details do, just as in the other parables analyzed.

Overall, the parables of Jesus that definitively qualify as folktales follow all the rules Propp discovered centuries later. Each one has either Function VIII or VIIIa, moving the plot forward either with a character's lack or an act of villainy. Each story's functions happen in the proper order. Each action in the tales can be identified as and labeled with one of Propp's functions. Jesus always adhered to the rules of stories and never added a function outside of those eventually isolated by Propp. He did sometimes use the functions creatively, but he was creative without breaking the rules—long before the rules were ever written down. Jesus used what existed to point others toward truth.

Paideia

Jesus told stories that fit within all of Propp's functions and rules. So what does that mean? And why does it matter? The fact that Jesus taught using stories that were not completely creative and new has far-reaching implications. John 1:1-3 says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made" (ESV). John uses the Greek word λόγος, logos, for "Word" (*Logos*). This *logos* means word, but it can also mean doctrine, reason, or cause. The first verse "makes it very clear that this Logos, Jesus, is identical to the Creator: the Word was God" (*John 1*). It is generally accepted that this verse proclaims that Jesus is the creator of the universe. Jesus created everything—and all of his work was original. Yet, as a human, Jesus limited his stories to re-creation. As humans ourselves, all of our creativity is really copycat work of the original creation. We can only re-create, never truly create.

If Jesus was comfortable with only re-using what He had already created, how much more comfortable with this idea should we be? Too often Christians are afraid of the arts or do not give it their best effort. It only takes a brief look at "Christian culture" to see that for the most part, our art, music, theater, films, literature, and even comedy are generally subpar and not far-reaching. For example, the Christian film *God's Not Dead* was reviewed on Rotten Tomatoes with the following: "Deploying sledgehammer theatrics instead of delivering its message with a dose of good faith, *God's Not Dead* makes for bad drama and an unconvincing argument to the unconverted" (*God's Not Dead*). The music industry pumps out an endless flow of new music for

listeners to consume, while Christians are stuck with worship choruses that repeat the same four or five words endlessly (Wood). Perhaps the problem stems from the iconoclasm of the Middle Ages—Christianity as a whole still seems hesitant to engage in the arts. In fact, several recent studies have shown that Christians and members of other religious groups are far less creative than others within their own geographic regions. For example, Adam Okulicz-Kozaryn conducted a study in which "creativity was measured as a proportion of people in occupations classified as creative and patents per capita. Results indicate that religious counties are less creative, even controlling for education, income, political orientation, urban-rural continuum, and prevalent industry." It seems strange at first to think that regular church attendance and belief in God can hinder creativity, but cultural researcher Connor Wood argues that this makes perfect sense. Christians, as well as members of other religions, expend much energy conforming to the religion's culture and ideals, or "uniting individuals into collectives" while creativity, at least in the modern world, is focused on the individual's expression of self. This has not always been the case. After all, "nobody can examine the history of Western art and conclude that religion and creativity are strangers. The extent to which creativity and the religious sense diverge and find themselves in opposition is a function of the secular age" (Dreher). As culture pulled away from religion, religion pulled away from creativity.

Tthe Bible calls for Christians to develop a strong Christian culture for the sake of their children. Ephesians 6:4 commands, "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (ESV). On the surface, this verse might appear to simply mean that parents should take their children to church, but a deeper study of Ephesians 6:4 reveals that there is more to this verse than even the best English translation can

explain. The word *paideia* was used in the original Greek. In English, *paideia* means "instruction that trains someone to reach full development (maturity)" ("Paideia"). While this definition is accurate, it barely scratches the surface: "The word *paideia* goes far beyond the scope and sequence of what we call formal education. In the ancient world, it was all-encompassing and involved nothing less than the enculturation of the future citizen" (Wilson 11). The Greeks wanted their citizens to be well-educated, mature adults. The focus was on children growing up to be accomplished, moral, and loyal citizens (Downey). The Greeks strove for an ideal culture which they called *paideia*; their concept of education was the means to that end: "They were concerned with nothing less than the shaping of the ideal man, who would be able to take his place in the ideal culture. Further, the point of *paideia* was to bring that culture about" (Wilson 11). The author of Ephesians understood this. Thus, *paideia* was used for a specific purpose—to exhort parents to raise their children in a completely Christian culture. When Christians find themselves living in a world where that type of full immersion and enculturation is not possible, they are thus commanded to create that culture, allowing their children to grow to be mature, educated adults who seek the wisdom of the Lord in all their endeavors. This *paideia* does not exist in our modern world—studies have clearly shown that Christians are not engaging in the arts at nearly the same rate as others—which means we are defying a command given in the Bible. [2]

It is time for this to change. Human beings are created in the image of God. Genesis 1:27 says, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." If humans are created in the likeness of God, and God is the creator of

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[2] This paragraph originally appeared in my paper entitled "The Path to *Paideia*" written for EDUC 5343: Classical Arts and the *Paideia* of God, April 2021.

the universe, humans are made to create. And yet, Christians, the very people who believe humans are created in the image of God, are failing to be like Him in this way. As in all things, we can look to Jesus as our model. Jesus created stories to point his listeners to truth. And yet, his stories were not anything particularly special or unique—they only used Propp's functions. Creativity, therefore, does not require absolute originality and is not something to be feared. Creativity simply involves knowing what the parts are and finding new ways to use them. Stephen King says, "...good story ideas seem to come quite literally from nowhere, sailing at you right out of the empty sky: two previously unrelated ideas come together and make something new under the sun. Your job isn't to find these ideas but to recognize them when they come" (King 25). Recognizing how to connect unrelated ideas using tools such as Propp's functions can help Christians to begin creating better stories—from literature to film—for the *paideia* we are commanded to cultivate. Of course, the same is true for other forms of art—each has rules, tools, and basic skills to master that allow for "new" things to be created. As Christians begin to allow themselves to learn more about art of all kinds, and bravely step into the world of creativity, they can follow the model Jesus offers and begin to establish *paideia*.

Conclusion

Analyzing the parables of Jesus in the context of Propp's functions brings to light the limits of human creativity. But instead of discouragement, this should bring great encouragement to Christians trying to fulfill the call to build a strong *paideia*. Because humans are limited to re-creation and imitation, creativity is not a matter of true originality but rather of mastering the parts and finding new ways to put those parts together. Although Propp's functions teach us that all stories are, at heart, the same, stories still hold great power to transform the heart—and the culture. Jesus chose storytelling through parables because He knew it was the best tool for pointing people to truth—and He did so with only the basic elements of storytelling that already existed. Christians must break free from their current apathetic state of avoiding art and culture because by doing so, we are as guilty as the servant who buried his talents. While we may have shied away from the creative arts due to the modern movement of self-expression and "personal truth," Christians must change directions and follow the model Jesus set forth. We should engage in the arts with whatever talent, passion, or ability God has granted us. Doing so is a gigantic step toward cultivating the Christian *paideia* commanded in Ephesians 6:4.

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