

PAROIMIAI IN THE FOURTH GOSPEL¹

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As a teacher, Jesus is known for His prolific use of parables. In the Synoptic Gospels, so-called parables (sg. *parabolē*, pl. *parabolai*) formed the media for His proclamation of the kingdom message.

With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he explained everything. (Mark 4:33)²

It is generally believed that the Synoptic *parabolai* include several literary forms, such as similitude, example story, parable, and allegory.

In the Fourth Gospel (FG), however, the term *parabolē* is not employed. Instead, we see Jesus using *paroimiai* (sg. *paroimia*) as His media of instruction. The Greek noun *paroimia* is found only four times in this Gospel:

This figure (*tautēn tēn paroimian*) Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. (10:6)

"I have said this (*tauta*) to you in figures (*en paroimiais*); the hour is coming when I shall no longer speak to you in figures (*en paroimiais*) but tell you plainly of the Father." (16:25)

His disciples said, "Ah, now you are speaking plainly, not in any figure (*paroimian*)!" (16:29)

The only other occurrence of the term in the NT is found in 2 Pet 2:22, where the term refers to a saying in Prov 26:11 as well as to a proverb which finds no parallel

¹This article is based on my doctoral dissertation, *The Johannine Paroimia*, Ph.D. diss., Andrews University, 1992.

²All Scripture quotations are from the RSV unless noted otherwise.

in Scripture.³ Peter uses this term in a classical way, meaning a proverb. The vast difference Johannine use of the term makes can be easily detected by the three Johannine texts given above.

A question arises from this situation: What is a *paroimia* in the FG? How shall we define the term? Does this refer to a particular literary form? What can we learn from the examples of *paroimiai* in the FG? I shall attempt to answer these questions in this article.

According to Greek lexicons we may list a number of possible meanings for the term *paroimia*: (1) proverb, maxim; (2) figure, comparison, dark saying; and (3) digression, incidental remark.⁴ Standard lexicons do not fully agree in regard to Johannine use of the term. This situation creates a need to investigate the text to see what the term refers to in the text. At least the consensus between two major lexicons is that Johannine use does not refer to proverbs.⁵ I agree with this.

First, I shall pay special attention to John 16 to find out the meaning of the prepositional phrase *en paroimiais*, which will lead us to the proper understanding of the term *paroimia* in the FG. Then, I shall look into the *paroimia* of 10:1-5. Lastly, applying the definitions and other information which emerges, I shall give examples of other *paroimiai* from the FG. I will not describe the functions of *paroimiai* in this paper.

En Paroimiais in John 16

The saying in 16:25 and its immediate context provides more clues as to the meaning of *paroimia* than the aside in 10:6 and its literary context. We may list four clues for the meaning of *en paroimiais*. The first one is found in the same verse. It is the use of the Greek word *parrhēsia*, which means "plainly"; here it is used in contrast with *en paroimiais*. This tells us that by speaking *en paroimiais* Jesus did not speak plainly. Either His language or His manner did not make His speech plain.

The second clue is found in 16:17-18, where the disciples asked questions among themselves. They did not understand certain sayings of Jesus. Jesus' saying of 16:25 was spoken in response to these questions.

³J. N. D. Kelly, *The Epistles of Peter and of Jude* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1969), 350, finds this proverb "well illustrated from the widely popular *Story of Ahikar*."

⁴Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, comps., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, new (9th) ed., rev. and augmented by Henry Stuart Jones with the assistance of Roderick McKenzie (1948), s.v. "Paroimia"; Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. and adapted by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, 2d ed., rev. and augmented by F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (1979), s.v. "Paroimia."

⁵Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. "Paroimia"; Bauer, *Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. "Paroimia."

Some of the disciples said to one another, "What is this that he says to us, 'A little while, and you will not see me, and again a little while, and you will see me'; and, 'because I go to the Father'?" They said, "What does he mean by 'a little while'? We do not know what he means."

The third clue is also found in the questions above regarding Jesus' use of an ambiguous word, *mikron* in Greek, translated "a little while." The ambiguity of the word created misunderstanding.

The fourth clue is that the idea of "going to the Father" was a difficult concept for them to grasp. A mysterious idea was involved.

What emerges from this picture is that some sayings of Jesus were difficult to understand due to His use of an ambiguous word or a mysterious idea. The disciples failed to understand His *paroimiai*, which were hard sayings. The audience was to identify the meaning of certain words in the sayings, which were like riddles. We therefore define *paroimia* as a "riddle" in the sense of a difficult saying.

Riddles are statements of truth(s) that are not readily understood. They are given to reveal the truth, but in veiled language. One OT example may illustrate this point.⁶ Samson told a riddle based on his experience, but he did not tell anyone about the incident on which the riddle was based. Without his revelation, no one could get the meaning. His bride's friends threatened her, she importuned Samson, he revealed the meaning to her, and she betrayed him (Judg 14:12-20). Jesus' riddles in John are not exactly like Samson's; they were less difficult, and Jesus revealed much about Himself on many occasions.

Based on the questions found in 16:17-18 we can identify three *paroimiai* in chap. 16:

"But now I am going to him who sent me." (v. 5a)

"You will see me no more." (v. 10b)

"A little while, and you will see me no more; again a little while, and you will see me." (v. 16)

These sayings were enigmatic to the disciples. They are important truth statements about His destiny and His relationship to them. Not only the enigmatic nature of the sayings but also the audience's limited grasp of spiritual knowledge caused difficulty.

There is a scholarly tendency to include all the sayings of Jesus in the category of *paroimia*. Detailed study of *tauta* in John, however, has shown that it refers to what is immediately preceding but not to all the sayings of Jesus uttered in the FG up to 16:25.⁷

⁶See my dissertation, 123-26, for riddles in the OT and in the Greco-Roman world.

⁷See my dissertation, 99-116.

A note of clarification is necessary here. Many scholars believe that *en paroimiais* refers in part to the saying in 16:21 about a woman in childbirth. They may be influenced by the proximity of v. 21 and v. 25. This is unfortunate. The saying of v. 21 is parabolic when focused on the function of comparison. It can also be proverbial when focused on gnomic content. It was spoken to emphasize the contrast of situations—sorrowful and joyful—which Jesus described in vv. 20,22. It was not given to introduce a truth statement, but only for purposes of comparison. It can be a figure of speech. Nevertheless, it should not be included in the list of *paroimiai*, because v. 25 is not referring to the saying of v. 21; rather, it was a response to the reactions of the disciples in vv. 17-19. We may say, however, that Jesus used a proverbial-parabolic saying in v. 21 as He led the audience to a deeper understanding of His words, especially His riddles. We would like to describe the process thus: *paroimiai* given, misunderstanding occurred, expansions of *paroimiai* given, parabolic-proverbial saying employed in the expansion, riddle solved (partly).

The *Paroimia* of John 10:1-5

In John 10:1-5 Jesus describes situations connected with a sheepfold. In v. 6 the Evangelist labels this cluster of sayings as a *paroimia*, and he adds that the hearers did not understand it. We need to classify this *paroimia*. It is neither a similitude nor an example story, as commonly found in the Synoptic Gospels. At first glance it looks like a parable or an allegory. However, including it either in the category of parable or allegory is difficult on several accounts. First, one thing is very clear from the aside in v. 6, namely, that the audience did not understand it. From 16:25, we also know Jesus did not always speak plainly. Generally, a parable or allegory is not meant to confound the understanding. One may quote Mark 4:11-12 to refute this, but I am not referring to Jesus' use of *parabolai* in that context; I am referring to a parable or allegory as a literary form. And there are many *parabolai* readily understood by the audience in the Synoptics, as Mark 4:33 notes: "With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it."

Second, by this *paroimia* Jesus intended to reveal a solemn truth, but not plainly. *Ekeinoi* in v. 6 must refer to some of the Pharisees mentioned in 9:40-41, where Jesus condemned them because they claimed that they were not blind. Jesus not only revealed truths about Himself, but he wanted to reveal the audience's true nature as well. He chose to do it "not plainly" instead of doing it openly. He was extremely careful not to incite their opposition. While he identified the sheep gate and the Good Shepherd, he did not explicitly identify the thieves, robbers, and hirelings. This identification the Pharisees themselves were to make. Jesus wanted to say to them: "I am the Good Shepherd, and the Gate for the sheep, but you are robbers, thieves, hirelings, and, at best, strangers." Jesus seems to speak

to them: "Since I have identified the Good Shepherd, it is your turn to identify the thieves, robbers, and hirelings."

Third, an expansion of the riddle follows immediately. In the Synoptics the explanation of the parables came later in the private circle (Mark 4:34). Here, identification followed immediately in the expansion of the *paroimia*, but not all the important information was given. The role of the Good Shepherd was described in detail in this expansion. Since, the information was not complete about the identification of the robbers and thieves, the audience was left to seek the solution to the riddle.

Fourth, the reaction after the expansion in vv. 7-18 reveals that they did not understand what He was saying. Had they understood what He was saying, they would have been unable to accept His identification of Himself with the Good Shepherd and the Gate for the sheep.

There was again a division among the Jews because of these words. Many of them said, "He has a demon, and he is mad; why listen to him?" Others said, "These are not the sayings of one who has a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?" (vv. 19-21)

Still, there is no indication that the people understood Jesus' sayings. Even those who denied that Jesus had a demon and were positively inclined toward Him do not seem to have understood His words. Later, in vv. 26-28, another expansion is seen.

In general, we would identify this cluster of sayings in 10:1-5 as hard sayings, but specifically, they constitute a riddle. The hearers should do their own part in identifying the negative characters in the riddle. When they find the solution, they find themselves severely condemned: "You are thieves, robbers, hirelings, and strangers!" Perhaps it was better for Jesus not to be too direct and explicit in what He was trying to convey.

I will not list here those many scholars who believe that this *paroimia* is a parable, nor the reasons why I do not agree.⁸ Also, I will not delineate here the many scholars who accept this as an allegory, or my arguments against such an idea.⁹ I would like to mention, however, a number of scholars who call a *paroimia* a riddle. They include W. B. Stanford, Johannes Schneider, C. K. Barrett, O. Kiefer, E. Haenchen, Wilbert F. Howard, Kenneth Grayston, John D. Turner, and Rudolf Schnackenburg.¹⁰ Schnackenburg is prominent among these because he discussed this with precision. He concludes that the *paroimia* in 10:1-6 "is a real riddle—and, in fact, is the only figurative discourse to be characterized as

⁸See my dissertation, 142-44.

⁹See my dissertation, 145-53.

¹⁰See my dissertation, 153-57, for relevant biographic data.

such. . . . It constitutes a way of speaking that is *sui generis*.”¹¹ I would accept this conclusion, except that I see other riddles in the FG, including the ones in chap. 16.

Examples of Johannine Riddles

I would like to locate as many riddles as possible in the FG, applying what we have found in the previous sections. I believe we can identify twenty-one riddles. They are the sayings found in the following verses: 2:19; 3:3; 4:10,13-14,32; 6:32-33,35,51,53; 7:33-34; 8:21,31-32,51,56,58; 12:32; 13:8,10,33,36b; 14:19. I will discuss several examples, namely, 3:3; 4:10,13-14; and the riddles of chap. 6.

The first example of a Johannine riddle we are going to look into is one given to Nicodemus. When he came to see Jesus in the night, Jesus said: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus did not understand this saying. There are three ways of interpreting the Greek word *anāthen*: “again,” “from the beginning,” or “from above.” Nicodemus understood *anāthen* as “again” or “anew,” taking the idea of birth in a strictly literal sense, namely, a physical rebirth, not a supernatural and spiritual rebirth. The saying was a riddle for him. The Jewish view of spiritual life was based on being born of Jewish parents. Jesus offered a corrective and expanded the riddle (3:5-8):

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘you must be born anew.’ The wind blows where it wills, . . . but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit.”

Here Jesus not only interpreted the word *anāthen* by “of water and the Spirit” but expanded the idea of being born of the Spirit. A parable about wind was employed to illustrate spiritual birth. Still, Nicodemus failed to understand (v. 9). At that point Jesus rebuked him for his failure and gave him the reason for the failure (vv. 11-12):

“Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen; but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?”

Then Jesus expanded on the theme of salvation (vv. 13-15):

¹¹Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 2:285.

“No one has ascended into heaven but he who descended from heaven, the Son of man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

The new birth begins by believing in Jesus, who is lifted up on the cross. The riddle is related to the death of Jesus. The double *amēn* formula is found three times in Jesus’ pronouncements (vv. 3,5,11). This testifies to the solemnity of the truth of these sayings.

To summarize, Jesus gave a riddle, and it was misunderstood. He expanded the riddle, and Nicodemus failed to understand. Then Jesus again expanded the riddle. The riddle and its expansions are linked together.

The second example of a Johannine riddle we will consider is found in chap. 4, where Jesus dialogued with the Samaritan woman. He said to her,

“If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.” (v. 10)

The woman misunderstood the expression “living water” because of its ambiguity and the place of their conversation. They were talking at the well. This saying is a Johannine riddle. She responded, “Sir, you have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep; where do you get that living water?” (v. 11).

The sayings in vv. 13-14 become another riddle because Jesus was not speaking about ordinary water:

Every one who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.

This riddle was not understood by the woman. She responded, “Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw” (v. 15). She apparently misunderstood “living water” as a reference to a well that gives a constant supply of flowing water.¹² Jesus was talking about spiritual things, but her mind was on physical, material things. Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman were in similar situations. Jews were no better before God than Samaritans. Although the woman did not understand Jesus’ sayings, she believed in Him as the Messiah, and having believed, she drank the water as Jesus meant. She, in turn, became a spring of living water for the people in her village.

This idea of living water was later further developed by Jesus, and this time it was given to the Jewish public. In 7:37-38 we read that Jesus stood up at the

¹²This was a common expression used at the time of Jesus for a spring or fountain of flowing water. See, e.g., *Didachē* 7; Rev 7:17; 21:16; cf. Cant 4:15LXX; Jer 2:13; 17:13; Ezek 47:1-12; Joel 3:18; Zech 14:8; John 7:38; Rev 22:1-2.

Feast of Tabernacles and said, "If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" Believing in Jesus is receiving the water and drinking. Jesus proclaimed this truth on the last day of the Feast. The narrator's aside reveals that it was not understood. John observes that Jesus said this about the Spirit who would be given after the glorification of Jesus, which apparently refers to His death, resurrection, and ascension to heaven, especially the latter.

The next set of riddles to be studied is found in 6:32-33,35,51,53. Jesus first said,

"Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven; my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world." (vv. 32-33)

John 6 is the most complicated chapter to deal with, because of many repetitions. It seems that variations of the riddle about bread appear.¹³ Not knowing what Jesus meant by the bread of God, His hearers asked Jesus to give them this bread always, just as the woman at the well asked for the water. Jesus identified Himself with this bread and amplified the meaning of having the bread (vv. 35-40):

"*I am the bread of life*; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst. But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. All that the Father gives me will come to me; and him who comes to me I will not cast out. *For I have come down from heaven*, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me; and this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up at the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that every one who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day." (Emphasis supplied)

In light of v. 41 it is clear that the cause of misunderstanding, which led to their murmuring, was the emphasized parts in the above quotation. The Jews quoted Him as saying, "I am the bread which came down from heaven." Therefore, the difficulty is based on a combination of Jesus' words in v. 35 and v. 38. Verse 38 is an interpretation of v. 33, and v. 33 should be understood together with v. 32. The people's misunderstanding was about the origin of Jesus. They were partly right when they said that Jesus came from Nazareth (v. 42), but Jesus wanted to reveal His true identity. The statement Jesus made of His real origin became a riddle.

A long string of sayings follow in 6:43-51. Verse 51 needs attention:

¹³Variations of the bread riddle include, "For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world" (v. 33); "I am the bread of life" (vv. 35,48); and "I am the living bread which came down from heaven" (v. 51; cf. vv. 41,58).

“I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

Identifying Himself with the bread from heaven is one big riddle, and identifying this bread with His own flesh is another riddle. In response to this double riddle the Jews began to debate the question, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” (v. 52). Jesus then expanded the riddle by saying (vv. 53-58),

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. *For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.* As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats me will live because of me. This is the bread which came down from heaven, not such as the fathers ate and died; he who eats this bread will live for ever.” (Emphasis supplied)

Here Jesus indicated that eternal life depends on eating His flesh and drinking His blood. This is another riddle. Eternal life includes resurrection life, but it begins in the present with partaking of Jesus’ life and death by faith. Again Jesus’ listeners could not understand. They labeled His words a “hard saying” (v. 60). From that time many disciples drew back and no longer went about with Jesus. For them it remained a riddle. But in v. 63 Jesus unlocked the riddle to those disciples that did not abandon Him: “It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.”

To summarize, we see at least four riddles closely linked (6:32-33,35,51,53) showing how the Johannine riddles develop. In the FG, miraculous signs drew people near to Jesus, but His words repelled many away from Him. The bread riddle is central in John 6. Its variations developed in three forms: (1) I am the bread of life; (2) My flesh and blood is bread and drink; and (3) eating Me is crucial for life.

Summary

Synoptic *parabolai* and Johannine *paroimiai* are different species. *Paroimiai* in John 16 refer to three difficult sayings of Jesus, which we labeled as riddles. Although the *paroimia* of 10:1-5 has similarities with a Synoptic parable or allegory, it is a Johannine riddle. Four riddles explicitly labeled as *paroimiai* become the basis for identifying other *paroimiai* in the FG. Many hard sayings in the FG could be counted as Johannine riddles, but we list only twenty-one. We have discussed several examples.

In the FG riddles are truth statements which were not understood readily. Because of the misunderstanding on the part of the audience, Jesus would explain

some riddles, while others He expanded. When the riddles were expanded, they were not understood immediately. The larger portion remained as riddles until the time of His death and resurrection.

Most Johannine riddles cluster around the grand riddle of the death of Jesus. Thus, the death of the Messiah, the grand riddle, was hidden from the eyes of the characters in the FG, while the readers can understand the riddles, for the Evangelist provides an omniscient perspective.