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THE PARABLE FORM IN THE OLD TESTAMENT AND THE RABBINIC LITERATURE

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I. CRITERION AND KINDS

ANALOGY is the most familiar of all homiletical tools, and the more pictorial of its end products become parables. Analogy is the touch-stone of the parable, indeed its essence—the story, if there be one, is mere trimming. The grain of mustard seed is no whit less a true example than the Good Samaritan, though the element of narrative is almost lacking. The simple words, "My love is like a red red rose that's newly sprung in June" build up a perfect secular parable in germ, whereas "The Pied Piper of Hamelin" is merely a moral tale in verse. Every specimen of the form has a teaching purpose, but the ostensible theme is never the real point of the pencil, only the knife which sharpens it. When the lover looks at his symbol, the deep red rose, does he care two straws about botany? The analogy of a good parable must above all things be forceful and vivid. A Rabbi wishes to underline the inescapable interdependence of individual and community. Instead of thundering a long harangue to his sleepy listeners, who already know it all in theory, he gains their immediate attention by deftly likening Israel to a company of people sailing in a ship. One individualistic passenger, claiming, in virtue of his paid ticket, absolute rights over the space immediately below him, begins to bore a hole. If his rights are honoured, all must drown.¹ Here the symbol vividly spotlights the thing symbolized, and makes a first-rate parable, though the story aspect is negligible. Punch and

¹ *Seder Eliyyahu Rabba*, quoted Levertoff, *Midrash Sifre on Numbers*, London 1926, p. 36, note 9. See also J.E., Vol. XII, pp. 46 ff. (The footnote abbreviations correspond to those in the writer's *Rabbinic Theology*).

clarity was probably the first purpose of this kind of teaching, though many obscure, esoteric and allegorical examples are found later.²

In Hebrew, a parable is a *mashal*, but a *mashal* is not necessarily a parable. This word has three main groups of meanings: (1) poem, song or taunt song; (2) wisdom teaching or proverb; (3) any kind of parable. It is only with the chief items in the last group of meanings that this article deals. These require some rough preliminary definition.

A fable is a plant or animal story meant to teach a lesson, with characters usually personified; the parable proper is a personal comparison or story, transcribing a real or inventing a potential human experience, or perhaps reflecting a facet of nature, in the artistic extension of a simile; the allegory is the detailed description of one thing which is really a cryptogram for something else not overtly disclosed, though perhaps obvious enough—the artistic extension of a metaphor. In each case, the moral or lesson is one object, the analogy the mirror which reflects it. The definitions are somewhat rough—a fable may be an allegory at the same time, and the distinctions between parable and allegory are frequently blurred. The paramyth is the personification of some moral, mental or spiritual quality, such as Wisdom in the book of Proverbs, or Torah in the Rabbinic writings.³ The paradeigma is the appeal to a famous name of the past as authority or example. This begins within the canon of the Old Testament, for Moses is thus invoked in Psalm 99: 6, Solomon in Nehemiah 13: 26. Hebrews 11 is notable in the New Testament, and Rabbinic examples number thousands. Every contemporary preacher uses the same device, whether from Scripture or from secular biography. Allegorical interpretation, the reading of new meanings into old books, has adequate Rabbinic exemplification, though Philo is its main exponent. It has been variously used to explain the scandalous behaviour of Homer's gods, and to adapt the teachings of the Old Testament to changing social conditions. Akin to this is the allegorical interpretation of the dreams of say Pharaoh or Nebuchadnezzar by the chosen servant of God. The word parable may be used loosely to cover all these forms, except perhaps the last. The present study is concerned particularly with fable, parable proper and allegory.

Introductory formulae to parables are almost entirely lacking in

² Cf. Matt. 13: 11 ff., and Strack-Billerbeck *ad loc.*, with parallels.

³ The Lie and Injustice are used in a striking paramyth in *Midrash Yalkut on Genesis*, chap. 56, but the writer knows the passage only at second hand.

the Old Testament,⁴ common but not essential in the New, almost universal in the Rabbinic literature.⁵ As the order is chronological, it is possible that natural Oriental idiom developed into more self-conscious art. The Old Testament demonstrates that the formula is a mere appendage, adding little to the value of the parable. The simplest Rabbinic convention is the bare Hebrew preposition, *lamed*, corresponding to $\omega\varsigma$ in the New Testament, standing alone,⁶ or with the word *mashal* prefixed.⁷ This Rabbinic shorthand implied "The comparison suggested is. . . ." There are several more elaborate formulae, most of them hingeing on the same preposition. A common one runs: — "A parable. To what may the matter be compared? It may be compared to. . . ."⁸ This is similar to the Lucan "Whereunto shall I liken the men of this generation? and to what are they like? They are like unto children. . . ." Matthew uses a similar form.⁹ Two pleasantly variant openings are "In ordinary worldly custom. . . ."¹⁰ and "Come and see how the character of the Holy One, blessed be He, differs from the character of men of flesh and blood."¹¹ The Rabbinic complexity and variation is much greater.

II. THE FABLE

The fable, beloved of the nations of antiquity, might be aetiological, ethical or allegorical in purport. The first kind, dear to the heart of Aesop, made scant appeal to the Hebrew mind, whilst Aesop troubled his head little about the third. In the second type, widely interpreted, there is common ground.

The New Testament is devoid of fables, whilst the traces in the the Old Testament are scanty but significant. It is clearly implied that Solomon was the author of many,¹² but these have not survived, for the two undisputed Scriptural examples are not associated with his name.¹³ The rare canonical use of a delightful form of such clear mnemonic advantage may be due to its ready adaptability to counsels of prudential ethic, offset by its marked limitations as a vehicle of spiritual instruction.

⁴ Is. 28: 23 and Ezek. 17: 2 are approximations to such formulae.

⁵ For exceptions, cf. Sanh 91^a init; Gen. R. X, 9; etc.

⁶ Cf. Gen. R. LXXXVI, 2; Eccl. R. XI, 9, 1; etc., etc.

⁷ Cf. Ber. 35^a; Num. R. XVIII, 3; etc.

⁸ Ber. 7^b, etc., etc. There are numerous sub-variants.

⁹ Lk. 7: 31; Matt. 11: 16.

¹⁰ Gen. R. I, 1; Lev. R. XXIV, 2; etc.

¹¹ Ber. 5^a, 10^a, etc. See also Strack-Billerbeck, Vol. I, p. 653; Vol. II, pp. 7-9.

¹² 1 Kings 4: 33.

¹³ The disputed example, Ezek. 17: 3-10, will be discussed below.

In the superb fable of Jotham (Judges 9: 8-15) the trees seeking a king are the men of Shechem, the olive, vine and fig potential candidates who decline office, possibly indeed Gideon and his son and grandson, as Judges 8: 22 f. might suggest. This is not a piece of spiritual or even political teaching, and it is certainly not a plea for republican government—it is merely skilful unmasking of the deceit and treachery of one bad king, Abimelech. Its brilliant symbolism has embalmed for all time a petty and rather bloody page of history. The punctuation of the English versions is disastrous. Jotham's exposition of his own fable (vv. 16-20) is interrupted by a lengthy parenthesis, a slight blemish on his forensic skill. This is marked as though it consisted exactly of vv. 17, 18, whereas it should extend half a verse further in both directions, beginning after "king" in v. 16, ending after "this day" in v. 19. Jotham begins with an ironical supposition of good faith on the part of the men of Shechem who have made Abimelech king—then his personal feelings overcome him, and he talks just a little too long about their shameful faithlessness towards his own family. The real clinching of the fable comes in vv. 16a, 19b, and 20. The ridiculous pride of the worthless bramble or buckthorn in v. 15 is capped by the merciless sarcasm of v. 19b, where the usurper Abimelech is damned and stripped of every pretence.

Comparable in forcefulness, though briefer in compass, is the tiny fable of the cedar and the thistle in 2 Kings 14: 9. King Amaziah of Judah, flushed with his victory over Edom, boldly challenged his stronger rival, King Jehoash of Israel, to war. The contemptuous message of the fable stung him to fury and hasty attack, to his final ruin.

The Rabbinic literature is very well sprinkled with fables. Some of these were of international currency in the ancient world,¹⁴ but their original setting may be lost in some new imparted emphasis, legislative or dialectic. The heron which on promise of reward removes a bone stuck in the lion's throat is then told that its reward consists in the continued and rather surprising ownership of its head. This is a childhood favourite in Jewish dress, but the fresh implication is that Israel (the heron) must not make too many demands on Rome (the lion).¹⁵ Fable has of course slipped into allegory. Similarly, the thirsty bird dropping pebbles down the neck of an earthenware water-pot becomes in Talmudic argument a snake carrying water to a wine jar with comparable purpose.¹⁶

¹⁴ See *J.E.*, arts. *Aesop's Fables among the Jews*; *Fable*.

¹⁵ Gen. R. LXIV, 10. The story is taken directly from Aesop.

Haman is the villain of several shafted fables. In his impossible desire to destroy Israel, he is likened to a foolish bird trying to turn land into sea, sea into land, all with its own beak.¹⁷ One stockowner possesses an idle and well-fed sow, with a hard-working but hungry ass and filly. The ass comforts her offspring with assurances of safety, for work secures life, whereas the sow is fattened only for the butcher. Even so Haman is exalted for greater punishment.¹⁸ It is claimed that the Rabbis once possessed many excellent fox fables,¹⁹ and outstanding examples have survived.²⁰ The realm of botany is not neglected—in the wind, the reed possesses greater survival potential than the mighty cedar.²¹ Some fables are completely allegorical. A cock and a bat await the light of dawn—yet how can this serve the bat in his blindness? The cock is a symbol for the Jew, the bat for the Gentile, the dawn for the Messiah, who, on the Rabbinic presuppositions of the immediate context, is useless outside Judaism.²²

There is a multi-lingual field of research in the literary history of the fable, but this is scarcely for the student of the Bible to tackle. The two examples in the Old Testament are excellent of their kind, but remain devoid of doctrinal or theological importance. The writer has no knowledge of Indian sources, but would suspect that the most masterly use of the form in all secular literature is associated with the name of Aesop. These stories, whoever wrote them down, have a perennial, bubbling spontaneity and lifelikeness, ably reflected in the sparkling French verse of La Fontaine, but usually marred sadly in the Rabbinic re-telling. Superadding an allegory to such a fun-filled trifle—which need not even be “improving”—is like dropping a large beefsteak into the lightest and most perfect soufflé. The Biblical writers may have been wiser in their generation in realizing for the most part that the form was not suited to their purpose.

¹⁶ A. Zar. 30^a. For other stories, cf. Lev. R. XXII, 4; Deut. R. I, 10.

¹⁷ Esth. R. VII, 10.

¹⁸ Esth. R. VII, 1. The full story is somewhat longer.

¹⁹ Sanh. 38^b-39^a.

²⁰ Cf. Ber. 61^b; Eccl. R. V, 14, 1. The latter is cited in the writer's *Rabbinic Theology*, pp. 168 f.

²¹ Sanh. 105^b f. Perhaps this is more correctly a parable than a fable. Cf. also Taan. 20^b; Gen. R. LXXXIII, 5; Num. R. II, 12.

²² Sanh. 98^b. The passage Ezek. 17: 3-10 is of this type—cf. p. 135, n. 13 *et infra*. Cf. Sanh. 105^a or Num. R. XX, 5; Ex. R. XX, 6; Song of Sol. R. II, 14, 2.

III. THE PERSONAL PARABLE

One type of Old Testament parable might be fittingly described as personal—addressed to an individual face to face, in assessment or criticism of his policy or conduct. With a slight change of direction, the two fables of the last section could furnish brilliant examples, for both concern particular people in a vivid and personal way—but one is transmitted through a third party, and the other is spoken about Abimelech, not to his face. Of course parables, like other creations of the human mind, fall into groups which are fluid rather than absolutely watertight.

There are three personal parables in the Old Testament, each outstanding, but mounting in dramatic power in the order in which they are given. King Ahab had received some divine commandment not Scripturally recorded to destroy Ben-hadad king of Syria, just as Saul had been enjoined not to spare Agag. Ahab, like Saul, was disobedient, probably rather with a view to political advantage than from any humane prompting. An unnamed prophet boldly accosts him, parabolically transferring the royal action to himself in fictitious and figurative circumstance, then craves a judgment. Ahab, cleverly trapped, condemns the prophet, and thereby unwittingly condemns himself out of his own mouth.²³ The plea of the woman of Tekoa to David against the banishment of Absalom is contrived by a parable of precisely the same kind,²⁴ as is that famous and heart-searching indictment of Nathan on David, which culminates in the blood-freezing words: "Thou art the man!"²⁵

Rabbinic parallels to these personal parables are readily discoverable, though they may scarcely be comparable in quality. Two Rabbis pointedly follow opposite procedures in a small ceremonial matter, whereupon one of them aptly compares himself and his fellow to a man with a fine beard, who spitefully cuts it off in retort to a compliment.²⁶ A man too adjectival in his prayer of praise to God is compared to one who lauds a king for his possessions in silver, totally ignoring the fact that he has many in gold.²⁷ The best example is really borrowed straight from Aesop. Rabbi Isaac the Smith was beset by two eager junior colleagues, one of whom wanted Halakhic or legal instruction, the other Haggadic or homiletical. Each kept rudely pressing his own requirements, whereupon the older man rebuked them by personal parable. A

²³ 1 Kings 20: 39-40.

²⁴ 2 Sam. 14: 6-8.

²⁵ 2 Sam. 12: 1-4. These three passages must be read in their contexts.

²⁶ Ber. 11^a.

²⁷ Ber. 33^b.

middle-aged man, he said, had two wives, one his senior, one his junior. The younger wife, wishing her husband to look more her own age, kept pulling out his white hairs—the older lady, with the same motive in directional reverse, kept pulling out his black ones. But the poor man was merely left bald, and both ladies dissatisfied. Perhaps the students perceived the fitting of the cap.²⁸

A sub-variant of this type, not found in the Old Testament, answers, like the parable of the Good Samaritan, a personal query or objection. A Roman Emperor maintained in conversation that God, in taking Adam's rib to fashion Eve, acted as a thief. His feminist daughter retorted that the Deity resembled a burglar who stole a silver dish, only to leave a golden one in its place—an admirable answer from her point of view.²⁹

The personal parable may be a quip of cross-talk, or a powerful rebuke. Like the fable, it does not occur in the New Testament.

IV. THE PARABLE FROM NATURE

There are several striking and familiar parables from nature in the Old Testament, such as the comparison of Israel to an unfruitful vineyard,³⁰ or a wild vine,³¹ likewise the lesson of the ploughman's work.³² The legal Rabbinic mind sometimes sees, sometimes fails to see, the beauty of nature, and the universal in the particular. One Rabbi reasons that if a man sows stolen wheat, the grain itself should demonstrate the iniquity of the thief by failing to grow. But natural, not ethical, law prevails in this weary world, and the scamp may have an excellent crop, though he will still need to reckon with God ultimately.³³ A much better though more allegorical example is the comparison of the Shekinah to the mighty ocean, and the tent of meeting to a cave by its rocky shore. The sea could fill that cave again and again and again, yet seem no drop diminished—equally the radiance of the Shekinah is no whit lessened however often it fills the tent of meeting.³⁴

V. THE ACTED PARABLE

Another common feature of the Old Testament rarely found in the New is the acted parable. When Ezekiel lifts the knife to remove, divide and dispose of his own hair at God's command the action

²⁸ B.K. 60^b.

²⁹ Sanh. 39^a.

³⁰ Is. 5: 1-7. Contrast Is. 27: 2 f.

³¹ Ezek. 15. Cf. Ezek 17.

³² Is. 28: 23-29. Cf. ants, Prov. 6: 6 ff.

³³ A. Zar. 54^b.

³⁴ Song of Sol. R. III, 10, 1.

is richly symbolic—as are several other such actions in the same book.³⁵ The reader will recall Zechariah's two staves, Beauty and Bands,³⁶ the rent garment of the prophet Ahijah,³⁷ the literal interpretation of the book of Jonah, and many other examples. It may perhaps be conceded that Jeremiah did not go around in person compelling the nations to drink of the wine cup of the Lord's fury,³⁸ and that this example may be regarded as a parabolical narrative rather than an acted parable. In other cases, there is no reason to suppose that the prophet did not literally fulfil the Lord's command.

The Rabbis, unlike the prophets, were not the inspired mouth-pieces of God, and this type of parable was unsuited to their office. There is a single quoted example, attributed to the ingenious feminist daughter of the Emperor abovementioned, which affords a meagre parallel.³⁹ To clinch her argument, this lady placed a piece of raw meat under her armpit, later offering the unsavoury morsel to her disgusted father. But for the anaesthesia concealing the divine theft of Adam's rib, she declared, the father of the race, repelled, would have made the mistaken choice of bachelorhood.

VI. ALLEGORY

There is abundance of pure allegory in the Old Testament. Beautiful if sombre is Ecclesiastes' symbolic description of old age.⁴⁰ More detailed than the vine parables abovementioned is the description of Israel as the vine out of Egypt in Psalm 80.⁴¹ If the reader cares to compare these two allegories with two familiar parables, the differentiating features will soon be apparent. Ezekiel 19 and 23 furnish further examples. Ezekiel 17 is an interesting amalgam of fable, allegory and superadded exposition, which does not fit neatly into any single category.

In the Rabbinic literature also, allegories are very plentiful. Here is a short one, given complete⁴²: "At the time when Solomon married the daughter of Pharaoh, Gabriel came and affixed in the sea a reed, which attracted to itself a sandbank on which Rome, that mighty capital, was built." The meaning is that Solomon's

³⁵ Ezek. 5: 1-4. Cf. also 3: 24-26; 4: 1-12; 24: 3 ff.; Is. 20: 2 ff.; etc.

³⁶ Zech. 11; cf. Ezek. 37: 15 ff.

³⁷ 1 Kings 11: 30-32.

³⁸ Jer. 25: 15-33. See *H.D.B.*, Vol. III, p. 662, col. 1.

³⁹ Sanh. 39^a. Cf. p. 139, n. 29, *supra*.

⁴⁰ Eccl. 12: 1-7.

⁴¹ Cf. Jer. 2: 21.

⁴² Shab. 56^b.

marriage into heathendom was symbolically the initiation of Rome, that cause of the ultimate destruction of Jewish sovereignty. Again a night watcher fears dangers, natural, animate and directional. A lighted torch enables him to avoid sharp thorns and unseen pits; daylight brings immunity from beasts and bandits; directional problems are solved by the crossroads. The journey is life, the lighted torch the divine commandment, daylight the Torah, and the crossroads death.⁴³ Details may be criticized, but analogy and imagination blend into an artistic whole capable of triumphing over certain logical defects.

The Talmud contains a weird collection of mariners' tales, all probably political allegories of contemporary situations.⁴⁴ The fish with sand and grass on its back, which sadly frightens those who mistake it for an island, possesses a more familiar Miltonic variant.⁴⁵ In a very elaborate example,⁴⁶ some sailors on a ship perceived a precious gem lying on the sea bed, guarded by a circumjacent snake. They sent down a diver, but the snake attacked the ship, only to be attacked in its turn by a raven. The bird's sharp beak severed the serpent's head, and the blood incarnadined the water all around. A second snake replaced the head of its companion, healing the deadly wound, whereupon the first snake returned to its attack on the ship. Its head was however cut clean off a second time by a bird. At this juncture the diver returned from his successful mission, and threw the precious stone into the ship, where some dead, salted birds were lying. As soon as the stone touched the birds, it restored them to life, and they flew off with it. What exactly was in the mind of the perpetrator of this story?⁴⁷ Some three minutes of reflection gave me a possible interpretation in Rabbinic terms, offered without guarantee. Suppose that the precious stone represents the Torah, the Jew's ethical goal. The diver would then be the seeker after Torah, the first snake the evil inclination rooted in his nature. The birds would signify the equally inherent good impulse, which gains the first victory, the blood of the slain snake, sin. Satan the adversary, angered by moral integrity, appears as the second snake, reviving the first from death, or re-quickening the temporarily conquered evil impulse, otherwise temptation. The ship becomes the totality of Judaism, and the dead salted birds those Jews whose adherence to the Torah is imperfect or lacking. Contact with the Torah brings

⁴³ Sot. 21^a.

⁴⁴ B.B. 73^a ff.

⁴⁵ B.B. 73^b. Cf. Milton, *Paradise Lost*, I, 200 ff.

⁴⁶ B.B. 74^b.

⁴⁷ Rab Judah the Indian.

their souls to life, just as it will bring their bodies to resurrection.

The parable, the big brother of the simile, is usually, though not invariably, perspicuous, whereas the allegory, the big brother of the metaphor, makes greater intellectual demands, and may remain meaningless without the key.

VII. RABBINIC PARABLES INTERPRETING THE OLD TESTAMENT

There are several main types of Rabbinic parable. An important group has for its purpose the direct interpretation of the Old Testament. Before Solomon's day, we are informed,⁴⁸ the Torah was confusing and difficult to understand. A heavy basket requires handles for its manipulation, likewise the Torah requires parables for its exposition—these the resourceful monarch supplied. The Hebrew word for "handles" is in the dual number, and means literally two ears. Similarly, parables illuminating Scripture are likened to cord tied to cord to reach the bottom of a deep well, a precious pearl lost and re-discovered with a farthing wick, and so on.⁴⁹ The apt modern sermon illustration is of course precisely parallel in function. In the Rabbinic examples, the *peshat* or literal meaning of the O.T. text is pictorially illuminated, but it is not changed, even when the analogy seems a little far-fetched. Saul, in approaching the witch of Endor after he had himself banished all necromancers from the land,⁵⁰ is likened to a king entering a province, ordering the slaughter of every cock therein, then inconsistently demanding one to ensure his early waking.⁵¹ This is excellent. One Rabbi, convinced that the forbidden fruit was the fig, compares Adam to a prince of loose morals, the fig tree to a slave girl with whom he commits adultery. After his sin, all the other trees decline to help him—the fig alone sympathetically provides garments for himself and his partner.⁵² The exegetical value of this parable may be questioned, but it does no violence to the *peshat*. Ahasuerus and Haman are likened to the respective owners of two fields, one containing an unwanted mound, the other an unwanted ditch. Ahasuerus is overjoyed to give away his mound—the Jews—and Haman eager to use his available means of trying to exterminate them—the ditch. This parable is based on Esther 3.⁵³ Solomon asking for an understanding heart is compared to a favoured councillor who requests the hand of the king's

⁴⁸ Song of Sol. R. I, 1, 8.

⁴⁹ *Ib.*

⁵⁰ 1 Sam. 28: 3, 7 ff.

⁵¹ Lev. R. XXVI, 7.

⁵² Gen. R. XV, 7.

⁵³ Meg. 14^a, *init.*

daughter in marriage, knowing that all his other earthly desires will then flow to him by inheritance.⁵⁴ Job, in the utterances of his despair, is likened to a drunken and mutinous soldier, rebelling boldly and rather vulgarly against the governor of the city—who stands for God—and then trembling in fear before his awful power.⁵⁵ Theological literature abounds in more perceptive evaluations of the personal character of Job—nevertheless here also the rules are not broken.

Clearly these examples and others like them are parables, not allegories. They expound with varying success the literal meaning of the O.T. They never reduce a scriptural personage or event to a mere symbol for something other than itself. In parable proper, Abraham would always remain himself, he would never, as in Philo, become a cryptogram for the soul seeking God, or anything else. That is allegorical interpretation, which may be found in the Rabbinic literature, but does not concern us here.

VIII. PARABLES OF GOD'S DEALINGS WITH MAN

In a second group of parables, the Rabbis explore, fully if not always too perceptively, God's dealings with man. In a certain kingdom, the blind walk on an evil, thorny road, the seeing on one scented with spices—both roads have been created by royal edict, for some reason unexplained. Similarly, God constructs a good road through life for the righteous, and an evil one for the wicked.⁵⁶ This fails to square with the observed facts of life. But the notion is interesting, first as a throwback to the earlier Jewish heresy of unflinching material prosperity for the righteous in this mundane realm, challenged in the book of Job, and further as a contrast to the more realistic words of Jesus about the broad and narrow ways.⁵⁷ Another parable open to serious criticism is that of the kindly moneylender (God), who forgives and forgets the former debts of his clients (human sinners).⁵⁸ This almost impugns the righteousness and holiness of God. Post-biblical Judaism frequently soft-pedalled the true doctrine of sin, found in all its stark realism in Psalm 51. Yet other parables show deep consciousness of human transgression. A solar eclipse is interpreted as a symbol of God's condign wrath—the Deity is like the parabolic mortal who has invited his servants to a banquet, become offended

⁵⁴ Eccl. R. I, 1, 1, interpreting 1 Kings 3.

⁵⁵ Ex. R. XXX, 11.

⁵⁶ Ex. R. XXX, 20.

⁵⁷ Matt. 7: 13-14.

⁵⁸ Ex. R. XXXI, 1.

by them, and extinguished the lamp in anger.⁵⁹ During the Feast of Tabernacles, when Israel dwelt in tents, rain was interpreted as a sure sign of God's displeasure—observant Israel, intending obedience, is then like the servant who comes to fill his master's wine cup, only to find the contents of the pitcher hurled in his face.⁶⁰ Despite possible aetiological quibbles, these are trenchant parables. Some examples of the class are conceited, some contrite, according as Jewish election or Jewish sin dominates the mind of the teacher.

IX. PARABLES OF HUMAN SITUATIONS

A third group of Rabbinic parables deals with life's challenges and dilemmas, whether in personal or in community reference. A man languishing in prison prefers penniless freedom today, rather than hypothetical freedom with much money tomorrow.⁶¹ It is very bad taste to offer consolation to a mourner twelve months after his bereavement—this is like re-breaking a man's leg after it has healed, merely to demonstrate your medical skill a second time.⁶² One Rabbi requests the blessing of another. But he already possesses children, riches, learning in the Torah—what more can he want? He is like a desert tree with luscious fruit and pleasant shade, standing by a sparkling stream—could such things be imagined in the desert. The tree cannot be further blessed except with the hope that all shoots taken from it may grow up just like it. So this already fortunate man cannot require further benediction, save in the careers of his sons.⁶³ In community reference, there is, despite widespread hostility towards proselytes, a pleasing parable of a king endowed with many flocks and herds, who yet shows especial kindness towards the stranger stag which has voluntarily forsaken its more usual haunts and companions. The proselyte has made similar sacrifices, and should be welcomed with like honour.⁶⁴ Again the successive dangers of Israel are likened to the history of a man who escapes in turn from a wolf, a lion and a snake. Always he is very voluble about his last experience, until the next one banishes all thoughts of it from his mind.⁶⁵ The number and interest of these parables depends on the fact that nothing is better fitted to explain life than life itself.

⁵⁹ Sukk. 29a.

⁶⁰ Sukk. II, 9.

⁶¹ Ber. 9b.

⁶² M. Kat. 21b.

⁶³ Taan. 5b—6a.

⁶⁴ Num. R. VIII, 2.

⁶⁵ Ber. 13a.

X. RABBINIC PARABLES WITH FAMILIAR N.T. PARALLELS

The Christian reader of the Midrash will feel quite at home when he encounters the man who loses a small coin in his house, lights lamps, and searches carefully till he finds it—how much more thorough should be his search after words of Torah, which will quicken him in this life and the next.⁶⁶ The reader familiar with the East will automatically supply the correct mental background of mud hut and flickering earthenware “virgin lamp”. The parable of Jesus is superior. Palestinian ladies wear dowry coins in their hair to this very day, especially in Bethlehem. In an Eastern home, it is most unlikely that the man would go down on his knees to look for the coin, whilst his wife sat idle! Again, a king hires many labourers to work all day in his vineyard. One is so outstanding that the monarch draws him aside after a little, and enjoys his company rather than his labour. Yet this man also receives full pay, despite the grumbles of the others, for the king declares that he has performed as much work in his brief period of activity as the others in their longer one. The intended analogy is the Rabbi who learns more Torah in a short life than his less able colleagues have learned by ripe old age.⁶⁷ A king bade many guests to his banquet, without disclosing the precise hour at which it was to begin. The wise prepared themselves, and remained near the palace in their best attire, with clothes washed white and head anointed with oil—the unwise returned to their avocations, and were caught unawares. These latter were compelled to stand throughout the feast, and remain hungry.⁶⁸ This is intended to illustrate the text: “Let thy garments be always white; and let thy head lack no ointment.” In a similar parable, each invited guest is instructed to bring something on which to sit. Some bring unsightly pieces of wood or stone, then grumble at their predictable discomfort, to the very vocal anger of their kingly host. They symbolize those who in Gehinnom suffer eternal punishment through their temporal fault.⁶⁹ The last two examples have obvious links with the Gospel parables of the bidden and unbidden guests, and the man without the wedding garment. According to the Talmud, God gives the soul in purity, and expects to receive it back unstained—the doctrine of Original Sin is sometimes unpopular in Judaism. A king is said to distribute magnificent

⁶⁶ Song of Sol. R. I, 1, 9. Cf. Luke 15: 8-10.

⁶⁷ Eccl. R. V, 11, 5; Song of Sol. R. VI, 2, 6; Shab. 153^a. Cf. Matt. 20: 1-16.

⁶⁸ Eccl. R. IX, 8, 1.

⁶⁹ Eccl. R. III, 9, 1. Cf. Matt. 22: 2-14; Luke 14: 15-24.

garments to his servants—some cherish, some soil them in workaday pursuits. But a day of reckoning comes. With the careful servants the king is well pleased, with the others he is furiously angry.⁷⁰ This may be compared with the dominical parables of the Talents and the Pounds.

It is exceptional for the Rabbis to offer any direct exposition of their parables, as Jesus does in the case of the Sower. There is an isolated example, which may be quoted in full⁷¹ :

A parable. It is like a king who had a garden in which he built a lofty tower. He then gave command that labourers be disposed in the midst of it, and occupied in his work. Next he decreed that every man who toiled with zeal and conscientiousness in his work should receive his wages in full, whilst everyone who was lazy should be handed over to the authorities. The king of this parable is the King of Kings, and the garden is this world, which the Holy One, blessed be He, gave to Israel, that she might observe Torah in the midst of it. And he arranged with them, and made the declaration that he who observes the Torah, behold! he will be in Paradise before His face, whilst he who does not keep it, behold! he will be in Gehinnom.⁷²

This example exhibits a curious divergence from the usual Rabbinic form.

Most of the familiar Gospel parables are yarns of the first quality. Many Rabbinic examples are a trifle anaemic by comparison, but good stories may be found there too. In one typical example, a travelling merchant turns his real estate into precious stones, and cleverly fools the intercepting robbers on his journey with the pretence that they are mere glass baubles. He reaches the safety of a town, where the robbers follow, only to find him selling his "baubles" at a very high price. Their righteous anger at such shameful deceit is however a little too late to be effective. This parable shares with the last one cited the unusual distinction of an added explanation—the commandments of God observed in this life (the merchant's journey) do not reveal their true value. That is discerned only in the world to come (the town).⁷³ Many other stories could be produced.⁷⁴ It was however stressed at an earlier stage that the essence of parable is not story but analogy. The Prodigal Son happens to be a superb story, but the pearl of great price does not lose its parabolic status because it is a rather bare analogy.

⁷⁰ Shab. 152b. Cf. Matt. 25: 14-30; Luke 19: 12-27.

⁷¹ Ex. R. II, 2.

⁷² The Midrash amplifies further, but this is the parable proper.

⁷³ Ex. R. XXX, 24.

⁷⁴ Parables and mere stories.

XI. "PARABLETS"

There is another kind of parable, the epigrammatic or thumbnail type, which fits both the first and second definitions of the word *mashal*. The Bible teems with examples—"The slothful man saith, There is a lion without, I shall be slain in the street"⁷⁵—"For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed."⁷⁶

Some of the Rabbinic "parablets", if it be permissible to coin a word, are of a high order of excellence. Knowing that the camel has small ears, it is possible, without even knowing that there is an allegorical reference to the death of Balaam, to appreciate the saying: ⁷⁷ "The camel went to ask for horns, so they cut off the ears he already possessed." Another example runs: ⁷⁸ "A weasel and a cat prepared a feast from the fat of those whose luck was evil." This probably means that the co-ordinated forces of the unscrupulous are dangerous for the unwary. Twice the Israelite idolatry of the Golden Calf at Sinai is summed up in these words: ⁷⁹ "A parable. A lion does not trample and become excited because of a basket of straw, but because of a basket of flesh." This means that Israel made her infamous idol, not in poverty but in prosperity, when endowed with much gold. Strong passions are evoked by strong incitements. Again it is epigrammatically declared that if a stone strikes a pot, or if a pot strikes a stone, there will inevitably be a breakage—but the stone is certain to win in the unequal contest.⁸⁰ Those who have handled the common earthenware pots of the Middle East will readily appreciate the point.

XII. CONCLUSION

The notes above touch merely the fringes of a subject which has ramifications and parallels in many languages and literatures. Most modern sermon illustrations are parables of one sort or another. The Oriental mind, in ancient as in contemporary times, was considerably more given to picturesque speech and memorable utterance, and the striking analogy possesses mnemonic as well as didactic value. After 2,000 years, the teaching stories of Jesus are still the finest the world has ever known. Yet the Rabbis and others produced some quite creditable examples.

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⁷⁵ Prov. 22: 13.

⁷⁶ James 1: 6.

⁷⁷ Sanh. 106^a.

⁷⁸ Sanh. 105^a.

⁷⁹ Sanh 102^a. Cf. Ber. 32^a.

⁸⁰ Esth. R. VII, 10.