Parables in the ***Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael***

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Introduction

Parables are an ancient form of teaching; in a written form, the use of parables dates back to the Greek story tellers. Their presence in written, homiletic material is a part of both the Jewish and Greek cultures; their simplicity makes them useful teaching tools for a wide audience. It is the intent of this paper to show how parables are used in one Midrash collection, the *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael,* and to suggest that their presence in a halakhic work indicates that sages used them to illustrate their explications to one another.

Their structure is simple, they state a condition that can easily be understood and then create a parallel that is specifically applicable to the audience to whom they are being addressed. They are present in all forms of rabbinic literature, including the Mishnah, as well as in a variety of Midrashim. Perhaps because of their simplicity, the sages themselves were attached to this genre.

> Do not let the parable appear of little worth to you. Through a parable, a man can fathom words of Torah. Consider the king who had lost a gold coin or a precious pearl in his house. May he not find it by the light of a wick worth little more than an issar? Likewise, do not let the parable appear of little worth to you. By its light, a man may fathom words of Torah. *(*Song of Songs Rabbah 1:1)[1]

[1] The Book of Legends, Sefer Ha-Aggadah, Hayim Nathan Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky; Braude, William G. (translator). P. 3

Rabbinic literature is broadly defined as the body of materials produced between the 2nd and 6th centuries C.E. in the academies of both Israel and Babylonia. Within this body are Mishnah, Tosefta, the Bavli and Yerushalmi Talmuds, and the Midrash collections. The term Talmud describes the bodies of work, one created in Israel and the other in Babylonia that are built on the Mishnah, redacted by Rabbi Judah Ha Nasi in Israel c. 200 C.E. The latter encompasses an even broader scope of material and is often classified as *aggadic* (homiletic, non-legalistic). Even within the family Midrash, the two classifications are re-applied so that there is *Halakhic* Midrash and *Aggadic* Midrash. These categorizations are neither completely descriptive, nor completely accurate. Both Talmud and Midrash contain both *halakhah* (legal rulings) and *aggadah* (expositions, stories). It would be reasonable to say, as a convenience to classification, that any of these texts can be described as primarily one or the other.

The *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, for example, is often described as a "*halakhic* Midrash", indicating that its exegetical intent is to refine the understanding of the laws. A description of the Mekilta observes: "It concentrates on the legal sections, but also does not omit the narrative portions."[2] Neusner's description of this text is, "Accordingly, what we have in the Mekhilta attributed to R. Ishmael falls into a different category altogether; the document comprises the first scriptural encyclopedia of Judaism. A scriptural encyclopedia joins together expositions of topics and disquisitions on propositions, in general precipitated by the themes of the scriptural narrative or the dictates of biblical law, and collects and arranges in accord with Scripture's order and program the exegeses – paraphrases or brief explanations – of clauses of biblical verses."[3]

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[2] Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash, H.L. Strack and Gunter Stemberger, P.252-253
[3] Introduction to Rabbinic Literature, Jacob Neusner, p. 251

Based on this description, the *halakhic* or *aggadic* nature of the text becomes secondary to its composition. If it is, indeed, a vehicle for the systematic collection of expositions, then all types of expositions present in the extant literature, written or oral, would be a part of the collection. Thus, even homiletic material, such as folk tales and parables, would have a place in a scholarly text. While it can only be authenticated by observation, the use of parables could also be indicative of the sages sharing materials so that not only could "standard" explications be provided but also so that the repertoire of any one sage could be expanded through exposure to others' homiletic material. The presence of parables in this text would not, in any way, change its classification as a "*halakhic* Midrash".

Before reviewing the text in detail, some overall information may put the material in perspective. The *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* is one of the earlier Midrashim, with clear roots in the Tannaitic period, "All of these features characteristic of the Mekilta stamp it as one of the oldest Midrashim, one which must have originated in tannaitic times and which as such must in the main have been well known to the Amoraim, even though they never refer to it as the Mekilta…"[4] An examination of the sages cited will reveal, much of the material dates from the 2nd century and may represent some of the same source material used in the Mishnah. Another feature that reinforces it being a contemporary of the Mishnah is that its nine divisions are also called "tractates", the same term used in the Mishnah, and not always used in other such collections. It deals with the contents of Exodus, Chapters 12 – 35, with the omission of chapters 24 through 30. This material corresponds, in general, to the portions: Bo, Beshalach, Yitro, Mishpatim, and a part of Ki Tisa. These tractates vary in size, and, for the most part, take their names from their

[4] Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, translated by Jacob Lauterbach, Volume I, P. xx-xxi

content. Tractate *Shirata* deals solely with the twenty-one verses of the Song at the Sea, Tractate *Amalek* begins with the battle with the Amalakites, while *Shabbata* focus on Sabbath observance. "*Mekilta* (root *kul*) is the Aramaic equivalent of Hebrew *middah* or *kelal*, 'rule, norm'. More specifically, it means the derivation of halakha from Scripture according to certain rules; a secondary meaning is the process of halakhic exegesis itself and its result."[5] Thus, in terms of its content and its overall purpose and structure, this text was intended to be a halakhic, clarifying and explicating the laws defined in this portion of Exodus, yet maintaining the exegetical nature of a Midrashic text.

Another method of categorization, which should provide appropriate background to the examination of the parables, needs to be presented before the parables themselves are addressed. Scholars have pointed out that in drawing a distinction between Midrash and Talmud, it has been pointed out that "Midrash means especially 'research, study' and is distinguished, as 'theory', from the more essential 'practice' (*ma'aseh*)."[6] Another difference between these two is how their historicity is to be perceived. "Like the mashal, the ma'aseh is a brief narrative form whose function is openly didactic. But where the mashal's narrative is fictional, the ma'aseh purports to tell a story that actually took place."[7] Since the parable is understood to be fictional, then the audience does not need to have any additional information about the event or its characters.

An examination of the *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* reveals only four instances where *ma'aseh* is used in the text. In Tosefta, by contrast, there are 319 instances. At the same time *mashal,* the term for parable appears 26 times in the Mekilta*,* 14 times in the *Tosefta*, but only once in the Mishnah. In the Babylonian Talmud, there are 30

[5] Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash, H.L. Strack and Gunter Stemberger, P.252
[6] Ibid., P.234
[7] Parables in Midrash, David Stern, P. 13

occurrences, while the Yerushlami has only 9. The Sifre on Devarim, a commentary on most of the book of Deuteronomy, and another early Midrash, has 52. This simplistic analysis might suggest that the parable is more common literary device in the earlier texts, and is replaced by other devices as the literature matured. It can also suggest that the sages wanted to share their homiletic material. As Stern points out in his introductory remarks, many of the sages "collected" parables to use them in their homiletic presentations. In Stern's example, which is a passage from Vayikra Rabbah 28:2, the scholar Bar Kappara was able to recite 300 fables about foxes![8] While scholars may have no need of parables for their own understanding of the text, their role as teachers provides a potential reason for their presence.

The one parable in the Mishnah is found in the Bavli on Sukkah 28a; it first presents the legislation it is defining and provides the parable as the only explanation:

> All the seven days [of the festival] a man must make the sukkah his permanent abode and his house his temporary abode. If rain fell, when may one be permitted to leave it? when the porridge would become spoilt. They propounded a parable. To what can this be compared? To a slave who comes to fill the cup for his master, and he poured a pitcher over his face. (M.Sukkah 2:9)

This parable conforms to the standard format, containing a comparison between a real life example and a hypothetical situation. It is clearly fictional; there is no specific mention of people or places. And, as will be discussed later, the "king" here represents God. The presence of this parable seems to indicate that even Rabbi felt that in this case a simple explanation, where common sense rather than a carefully worded ruling, would be more efficacious.

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[8] Ibid., P.4

There are 26 places in the Mekilta where a parable is used and introduced by the standard term, *mashal* in the Hebrew. If each instance in the text of an allegory is counted, the count would be somewhat higher. Neusner, for example, claims that the explication of the phrase, "I will sing unto the Lord for He is highly exalted", Exodus 15:1, constitutes a parable: "The only composition I that I find genuinely well-realized is No. 15 (his analysis), which systematically illustrates its parable with proof texts showing how God differs from a mortal king."[9]

> When a king of flesh and blood enters a province, all praise him to his face, saying that he is mighty when he really is weak; that he is rich when he really is poor; that he is wise when he really is foolish; that he is just; that he is faithful; when he has none of these qualities. They all merely flatter him. It is not so, however, with Him by whose word the world came into being. Mek. Shirata 1 (Lauterbach, line 110)

Since it is not introduced with the standard formulation, it may not have been the author's intent to establish it as a parable, so, for the purposes of this presentation, it will be excluded. If, however, all of the allegorical material, such as in Neusner's citation, as well as the folk material, such as the stories about locating the bones of Joseph,[10] were to be included, it would further underscore the sharing of homeletic material and reflect the prevalence of parables in the writings of this period.

There are three parables in Tractate *Pisha*, nine in *Beshallah*, seven in *Shirata*, one in *Amalek*, six in *Bahodesh*, and one in *Nezikin*. There are none in *Vayassa*', *Kaspa*, or *Shabbata*. The distribution of parables is illustrated in the following graph:

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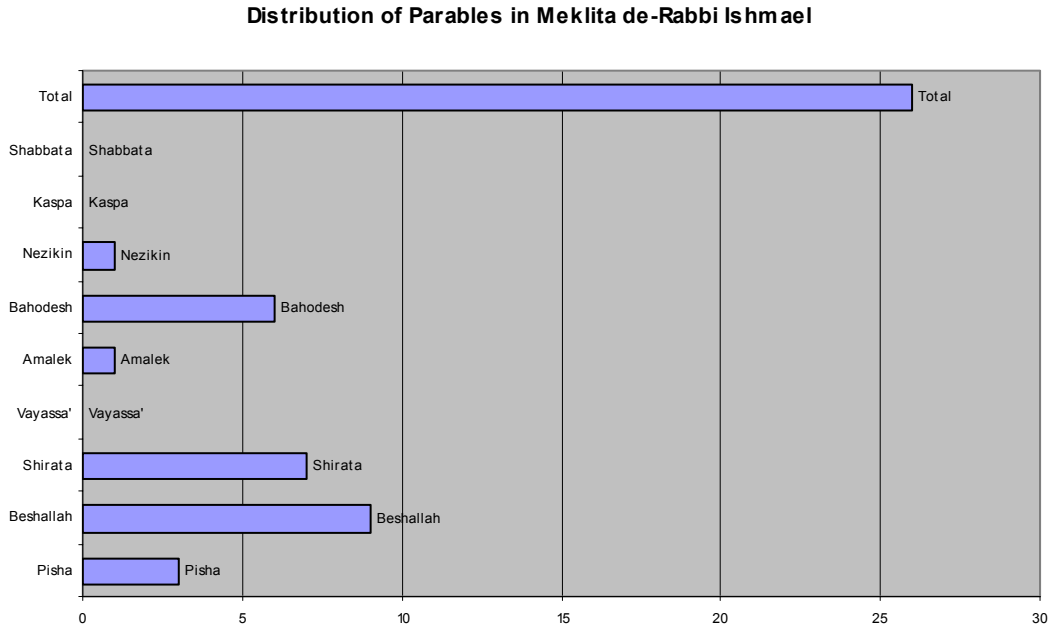
[9] Introduction to Rabbinic Literature, Jacob Neusner, P. 266
[10] Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, translated by Jacob, Lauterbach, Volume I, P. 177-181



There does not seem to be a clear pattern to the distribution of the parables in the text; there are clearly other places where the use of a parable would be appropriate. This may, in fact, reflect Neusner's contention that there are, in fact, nine individual authors of this Midrash, one for each tractate.[11] Nine of these parables have specific attributions; one each to R, Jose the Galilean, R. Gamliel, R. Judah, and Absalom the Elder; two are attributed to R. Simon B. Yohai, and the remainder to R. Judah HaNasi. One of those from R. Judah is used twice, once in Tractate *Beshallah* and again in Tractate *Bahodesh*. With the exception of Absalom the Elder, who is only connected to a parable, all of these sages are cited in other places in the text. The most obvious common element between these sages is that they are known to have been in the land of Israel in the Second Century of the Common Era. The other citations, outside of the parables, include these sages as well as other Palestinian and Babylonian names.

[11] Introduction to Rabbinic Literature, Jacob Neusner, P. 255

The first parable used is in Tractate Pisha; the text being discussed is Exodus 12:1: "And the Lord spoke unto Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, saying…" In the discussion, having explained that God was speaking to Moses and Aaron simultaneously, the discussion focuses on why the text mentions that the conversation occurred in Egypt, reaching the conclusion that the Shekinah does not usually come to rest outside of Israel. After the topic is discussed from several points of view, there is a verse from Jonah, "But Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the Lord" (Jonah 1:3). The sages debate further whether the presence of God can be outside of the land, coming now to the conclusion that, indeed, the presence can be anywhere, as proven by words from Job: "There is no darkness nor shadow of death, where the workers on iniquity may hide themselves" (Job 34:22). The discussion now moves back to Jonah. After analyzing Jonah's actions, it concludes first that he leaves the land because he believes that the Shekinah will not follow him, and second that Gentiles are more likely to repent than Israelites. In order to clarify this conclusion, the first parable is introduced.

> They give a parable for this: A priest had a slave who said: "I will run away to the cemetery wither my master cannot follow me." But his master said to him: "I have other heathen slaves like you." Mek. Pisha 1 (Lauterbach, line 82)

The parable is used here to conclude the overall discussion, which involved several, somewhat conflicting sources. The parable does not conclude the discussion but makes it clear that, despite the conflicting sources, the obvious conclusion is that God can be anywhere and that there are many prophets who would be more obedient than Jonah.

In the same tractate, two parables are presented in the discussion of Exodus 13:1-4, "And the Lord spoke unto Moses, saying: Sanctify unto Me all the first-born,

whatsoever openeth the womb among the children of Israel, both of man and of beast, is Mine." The parable is introduced in the discussion of the phrase, "is Mine". There is then discussion of the issue whether consecration of the first-born is done so that it may be rewarded, or whether there is still greater significance to the act. It then presents as its proof text a citation from Jeremiah (23:7-8), "…As the Lord liveth, that brought up the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt…" This citation is immediately followed by an anonymous parable:

> One can illustrate it by a parable, To what can it be compared? To the following: One was very desirous of children. After a daughter had been born to him, he would swear by the life of the daughter. When again a son was born to him, he left off swearing by the daughter and swore only by the life of the son. Mek. Pisha 16 (Lauterbach, line 65)

It is immediately followed by another parable, presented in the name of R. Simon b. Yohai:

> One can illustrate it by a parable, To what can it be compared? To the following: One was traveling along the road. He encountered a wolf and was saved from him. So he kept telling the story of the wolf. Then he encountered a lion and was saved from him. So he forgot the story of the wolf and kept on telling the story of the lion. He then encountered a serpent and was saved from him. So he forgot the story of both of them and kept on telling the story of the serpent. So it is with Israel. Later troubles cause the former ones to be forgotten. Mek. Pisha 16 (Lauterbach, line 68).

The parables focus not on the concept of "first", but rather on the idea of most recent. Immediately following the parables, the discussion illustrates this point by citing the name changes of Abraham, Sarah, and Israel, reinforcing the point made clear by the parables – recent history and greater miracles are more vivid that previous experiences. In these examples, the parables are framed by discussion, and the parables serve to move from one point to another

The next parable appears in the second tractate, *Beshallah*, in its presentation of Exodus 14:1-9, specifically for Verse 5, "And the heart of Pharaoh and his servants was turned towards the people." Unlike the previous parables, this one is presented without any other citations from Scriptures within the explanation:

> A parable: To what can this be compared? To one who said to his slave: "Go and get me a fish from the market." The slave went and brought him an ill-smelling fish. He said to the slave: I decree that you eat the fish or receive a hundred lashes, or you pay a hundred maneh." The slave said: "I will eat it." He began to eat, but could not finish. He, therefore, said: "I will take the lashes." After receiving sixty lashes, he could stand no more. He therefore said: "I will pay the hundred maneh." The result was that he ate the fish, received the lashes, and paid a hundred maneh. Mek. Beshallah 2 (Lauterbach, line 110)

The text provides the conclusion, "So also it was done to the Egyptians." As in the previous ones, the parable is framed with discussion, and, again, the parable provides the conclusion for the first part of the discussion, and allows the introduction of new material for further the discussion. This parable clearly explains that despite their attempts to circumvent any process, the Egyptians got their just reward. In another interpretation of

the same verse, a different parable is introduced to offer a variation on this explanation. In this one, the focus is not on whether the Egyptians deserved their fate, but on whether they appreciated the value of the Israelites:

> R. Jose the Galilean, giving a parable, says: To what can this be compared? To a man to whom there has fallen as an inheritance a bet-kor of land (approximately 4.37 acres) which he sold for a trifle. The buyer, however, went and opened up wells in it, and planted gardens, trees and orchards in it. The seller, seeing this, began to choke with grief. Mek. Beshallah 2 (Lauterbach, line 144)

And as with the previous example, the parallel is proved: "So it happened to the Egyptians who let go without realizing what they let go."[12] But there is another interpretation to be presented, so the Mekilta continues:

> Another interpretation: R. Simon the son of Yohai giving a parable, says: To what can this be compared? To a man to whom there had fallen as an inheritance a residence in a far off country, which he sold for trifle. The buyer, however, went and discovered in it hidden treasurers and stores of silver and of gold, or precious stones and pearls. The seller, seeing this, began to choke with grief. So also did the Egyptians who let go without realizing what they let go. Mek. Beshallah 2 (Lauterbach, line 149)

These two parables have the same message: not only did the Egyptians deserve their fate, but they failed to appreciate what treasure they had. In these two parables, part of the message is the need for individual responsibility even for collective acts; the other part being that one must be aware of what is present and available, and should be appreciative

[12] Ibid., P. 198

of it. Both serve the same purpose, they allow closure of the discussion at hand so that the text can move to another interpretation.

The next parable presents an alternative formulation of a parable. It is introduced with the word *l'mah domin* (to what can this be compared). In all other respects, it is a true parable: it has an introductory statement indicating an allegorical statement, it describes the situation, and then it provides the comparison:

> To What were the Israelites at that moment like? To a dove fleeing from a hawk, and about to enter a cleft in the rock where there is a hissing serpent. If she enters, there is the serpent! If she stays out, there is the hawk! In such a plight were the Israelites at that moment, the sea forming a bar and the enemy pursuing. Immediately they set their mind upon prayer. Mek. Beshallah 3 (Lauterbach, line 86)

Although its format is slightly different, this parable serves the same function as the previous ones; it describes the situation in clear, every day terms that can be easily understood, even if the text references, both before and after it, may not as easily known or understood. By clearly describing the position of the Israelites, the parable is able to provide a solution to the dilemma without the sages having to talk about when prayer and supplication is appropriate. Because a parable again brings closure to the discussion, one might be tempted to define them as a literary device for concluding a discussion; however, while there are many occasions in which the parable functions in this way, there are other examples where it does not.

In the next chapter the parable appears when the text is commenting on Exodus 14:15, "And the Lord said unto Moses: 'Wherefore criest thou unto Me? Speak to the

Children of Israel that they go forward." Here the parable introduced with the conventional formulation, but it is again preceded by several Scriptural references. The text immediately preceding it is from Jeremiah 33:25 and concludes a discussion of what commandments pertain to both day and night. The parable brings the discussion back into focus with its inclusion of the very verse being explicated.

> R. Absalom, the elder, giving a parable says: To what is this like? To a man who go angry with his son and drove him out of the house. His friend then came to him, requesting that he allow the son to come back to the house. He said to his friend: You are only asking me on behalf of my own son. I am already reconciled to my son. So did the Holy One say to Moses: Wherefore criest thou? Is it not on behalf of my own sons? I am already reconciled to My sons. Speak unto the children of Israel that they go forward. Mek. Beshallah 4 (Lauterbach, line 36)

This is the first parable in the Mekilta where there is a direct Scriptural reference within the parable itself, and builds on a theme that has already been introduced through parables: the idea of individual and collective responsibility. Here the parable can be seen as both helping to understand the text, and providing another lesson that is inherent in the text itself.

The explication of Exodus 14:16-21, specifically the verse, "And the angel of God who had been going in front of the camp…" contains two parables. The first is given in the names of R. Judah:

> To give a parable, to what is this like? To a man who is walking on the road with his son walking in front of him. If robbers who might seek to capture the son comes from in front, he takes him from before himself and puts him behind

himself. If a wolf comes from behind him, he takes his son from behind and puts him in front. If robbers come from in front and wolves from behind he takes the son up in his arms. When the son begins to suffer from the sun, his father spreads his cloak over him. When he is hungry he feeds him, when he is thirsty, he gives him to drink. So did the Holy One, blessed is He, do. Mek. Beshallah 5 (Lauterbach, line 16)

This is the first parable, thus far, where it is the first explanation offered in a discussion. It is not framed by any other explanations or citations; however, it is followed by a citation from Hosea: "And I taught Ephraim to walk, taking them upon my arms, but they knew not that I healed them." (Hosea 11:3). The discussion then continues with other Scriptural references and ends with the conclusion that God/*Elohim* was still judging the people. And, as has been seen before, the parable serves to makes the text understandable even if the audience is not familiar with the Scriptural references.

The next parable is used as a way to explain why the sea did not immediately part when Moses raised his staff. This is the first parable in Mekilta where a king is used as a representation of God; several of those that follow also have a "king" as their protagonist. As Stern points out, "The one character in the mashal who is never a type or stock character is the king … The image of God as king – ubiquitous in the Bible and common in other ancient Near eastern literature – is distinct in the mashal in that the king here is a genuine character."[13]

To give a parable, to what is this matter like? To a king who had two gardens, one inside the other. He sold the inner one, but when the buyer came wishing to enter the inner garden, the keeper would not let him. The buyer spoke to the

[13] Parables in Midrash, David Stern, P. 93

> keeper in the name of the king, but the keeper would not yield. He then showed him the king's ring, and still he refused to yield. So the buyer had to go and bring the king himself with him. As soon as the buyer came, conducting the king, the keeper started to run away. The buyer called out to him" The whole day I have been telling you the order of the king but you would not accept it; and now why are you running away? The keeper answered him: It is not on account of you that I am fleeing, it is on account of the king. So also when Moses came and stood by the sea, ordering it in the name of the Holy One, blessed be He, to divide itself, and it would not consent…As soon as the Holy One, blessed be He, with His might and glory manifested Himself, the sea began to flee… Mek. Beshallah 5 (Lauterbach, line 60)

The parable not only explains the hesitation, it also suggests that even a properly designated messenger of the "King" cannot accomplish what the "King" Himself can. Thus, it contains not only a way of understanding the text; it presents additional information about the relationship with God. In previous parables, such as those dealing with the fate of the Egyptians, the parable has also been used to both expound on the text and to provide a moral lesson. Again, the parable is framed by the discussion, but here the Scriptural citations are all presented after the parable.

The next chapter contains one parable which is given as explanation of whether the tribe of Benjamin entered the sea, or whether it was the tribe of Judah. The discussion begins with the statement, "R. Meir relates one version and R. Judah relates

another version."[14] Given this introduction and two citations from Psalm 68, the parable is used to clarify the point that both tribes are to be rewarded.

> To give a parable, to what is this like? To a king who had two sons, one grown up and the other still young. He said to the young one: "Wake me at sunrise," and to the older one he said: "wake me after three hours of the morning." When the young one came to wake him at sunrise, the older would not let him, declaring: "He told me to wake him only after three hours of the morning." And the younger one said to him: "But he told me 'at sunrise'." While they were standing there wrangling with each other their father woke up. He said to them: My sons, after all, both of you had only my honor in mind. So I will not withhold your reward from you. Mek. Beshallah 6 (Lauterbach, line 8)

Following the parable, there is a discussion of the rewards each of the tribes received, as well as a recapitulation of the events at the sea. Using several citations from Scriptures, the discussion concludes with praise for Judah, and the indication that it was actually "the princes of Judah" that entered the sea first and thus should be the only one rewarded. In this case, the parable provides an explanation which the subsequent text later repudiates; the text does not, however, invalidate the lesson of the parable itself. In all of the other parables, the parable's message is the prevailing opinion.

The next, and last, chapter in Tractate Beshallah also contains one parable, used to clarify the verse from Exodus 14:27, "And the Egyptians fled against It." As in one of the previous occurrences, the parable is the first explanation presented.

> To give a parable, to what can this be compared? To a dove that flees from a hawk and enters the palace of the king. The king opens the eastern window for

[14] Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, translated by Jacob, Lauterbach, Volume I, P. 232

> her and she goes out and flies away. When the hawk, pursuing her, enters the palace, the king shuts all the windows and begins shooting arrows at him. So also when the last of the Israelites came out from the sea, the last of the pursuing Egyptians entered into the bed of the sea. The ministering angels then began hurling at them arrows, great hailstones, fire and brimstone. Mek. Beshallah 7 (Lauterbach, line 28)

Following the parable is a citation from Ezekial 38:22 that simply provides the source for the use of "And I will plead against him with pestilence and with blood …great hailstones, fire and brimstone," There is no discussion framing the parable; the parable represents the entire explication of the verse. By comparing Israel to a dove and the Egyptians to a hawk, the sages are not only clearly indicating which one "The King" favored, but are also defining the Egyptians as predators.

In Tractate Shirata, the first parable is in the second chapter where the verse, "The horse and his rider" (Exodus 15:1) is discussed. While the immediate issue is whether the soul stands trial after death, the real topic is why the horses of the Egyptians were killed. The parable itself is incomplete in the text; however, the same parable is found in the Bavli on Sanhedrin 91b. The parable is attributed to R. Judah Ha Nasi and is in response to a question from Antonius about whether the body is judged separately from the soul. With same variations, the text and the parable are the same in both the Mekilta and the Bavli. The text before the break is from the Mekilta, the text after it, from the Bavli.

> To give a parable for this, to what is this like? To the following: A king of flesh and blood had a beautiful orchard. The king place in it two guards, one of whom was lame and the blind … Mek. Shirata 2 (Lauterbach, line 130)

> I will tell thee a parable. To what may this be compared? To a human king who owned a beautiful orchard which contained splendid figs. Now, he appointed two watchmen therein, one lame and the other blind. [One day] the lame man said to the blind, "I see beautiful figs in the orchard. Come and take me upon thy shoulder, that we may procure and eat them." So the lame bestrode the blind, procured and ate them. Some time after, the owner of the orchard came and inquired of them, "Where are those beautiful figs?" The lame man replied, "Have I then feet to walk with?" The blind man replied, "Have I then eyes to see with?" What did he do? He placed the lame upon the blind and judged them together. So will the Holy One, blessed be He, bring the soul, [re]place it in the body, and judge them together, as it is written, He shall call to the heavens from above, and to the earth, that he may judge his people: He shall call to the heavens from above-this refers to the soul; and to the earth, that he may judge his people-to the body. (M.Sanhedrin 91b)

In the actual discussion before the parable is presented, the anonymous text makes sure that the horse is not given the opportunity to say "The Egyptian drove me against my will…" and the rider is not given the opportunity to say, "the horse ran away with me against my will…"[15] The parable clearly makes the responsibility mutual, so yet again, the parable is used to both explicate the text and provide a moral lesson.

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[15] Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, translated by Jacob, Lauterbach, Volume 2, P. 21

This is one of two places in the Mekilta where Antonius asks Rabbi a question. In this text, the answer is a parable. In the other the response is: "I do not know. However, we have it written…" The question posed was: "I want to go to Alexandria. Is it possible that it will set up a king to defeat me?"[16] Rabbi, as indicated, does not provide a conclusive answer, perhaps suggesting that what is written may not be applicable to a Roman, since his single citation from the text is: "And there shall be no more a prince out of the land of Egypt." Ezek. 30.13. In both of these examples, the response to Antonius is the most direct one possible. Here, the parable provides a simple and coherent response, just as the other response is simple and coherent. It would seem that when a direct answer is not possible, a parable might serve the same purpose.

The verse, "This is My God and I will glorify Him" (Exodus 15:2), provides the occasion for the next parable. The question the sages are pondering is posed in the name of R. Eliezer, "Whence can you say that a maidservant saw at the sea what Isaiah and Ezekiel and all the prophets never saw?" Mek. Shirata (Lauterbach, line 28) Then, using textual references, one from Hosea and the other from Ezekiel, neither of whom never saw God directly, "The heavens were opened and I saw visions of God" (Ezekiel 1:1),[17] a parable is used to express how even the most humble were able to recognize God, or perhaps an unmistakable manifestation of God.

> To give a parable for this, to what is this like? To the following: A king of flesh and blood enters a province surrounded by a circle of guards; his heroes stand to the right of him and to the left of him; his soldiers are before him and behind him. All the people ask, saying: Which one is the king?" Because he is of flesh and

[16] Ibid., P.50
[17] Ibid., P. 24

> blood like those who surround him. But, when the Holy One, blessed be He, revealed himself at the sea, no one had to ask: "Which one is the king?" But as soon as they saw Him they recognized Him, and they all opened their mouths and said: "This is my God and I will glorify Him. Mek. Shirata 3 (Lauterbach, line 32)

It is worth noting that this is the first parable in the Mekilta where the *nimshal*, the conclusion, contains a direct Scriptural reference that is the same as the verse being explicated. The parable actually deals with the entire verse and is followed by further discussion of the first part, "This is My God". This next parable, which is offered to conclude the discussion of the verse, contains two Scriptural references; both of which are from the book of Genesis. Although this is the only time in Mekilta where two so closely linked parables contain Scriptural references, it is unlikely that there is any significance other than their being the ones the sages felt offered the most appropriate explanation.

> To give a parable, a king had a son who went to a far away country. He went after him and stood by him. Then the son went to another country, and the king again followed him and stood by him. So also, when Israel when down to Egypt the Shekinah went down with them, as it is said: "I will go down with thee into Egypt" (Genesis 46:4). When they came up from Egypt the Shekinah come up with them, as it is said: "And I will surely bring thee up again (Genesis 46:4). (Mek. Shirata 3 (Lauterbach, line 65)

As with other examples, the parable is used to close the discussion.

In the continuation of the discussion of Exodus 15:2, the text offers the following as its first explanation of the verse, "My Father's God and I will exalt Him."

> I am queen, the daughter of kings; beloved, the daughter of beloved ones; holy, the daughter of holy ones: pure, the daughter of pure ones To give a parable: A man goes to betroth a woman. Sometimes he may be ashamed of her, sometimes he may be ashamed of her relatives. I, however, am not of that kind, but I am queen, the daughter of kings; beloved, the daughter of beloved ones; holy, the daughter of holy ones: pure, the daughter of pure ones. Mek. Shirata 3 (Lauterbach, line 78)

This simple parable represents one entire commentary on this verse. It serves to underscore that the Israelites' lineage is pure – they are descendants of ancestors who had a relationship with God and were chosen by God. Unlike others, they will never have to be ashamed of who they are or of who their relatives are. They, like their ancestors, will continually praise and exalt God. One of the explanations that follows reinforces this idea with the simple explanation: "Not only for the miracles which Thou hast performed for me … but for the miracles that Thou hast performed for my fathers …"[18]

In Mekilta's presentation of Exodus 15:9-10, there is another parable; this one is associated just with the phrase, "The enemy said…" It appears after several pages of discussion where there are at least three distinct interpretations of these words and accompanying explanations of them; the parable is in the last explanation, and achieves closure. The parable is offered as a way of explaining the vainness of the five Egyptian boasts, which were stated as: "The enemy said: "I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoil; my lust shall be satisfied upon them; I will draw my sword, my hand shall destroy them.'" Exodus 15:9

[18] Ibid., P.29

> To give a parable, to what can this be compared? To the following: A robber standing behind the king's palace, defiantly says: "If I find the prince, I shall seize him, I shall kill him, I shall crucify him, I shall also make him die the most cruel death." So also did the wicked Pharaoh boast defiantly in the land of Egypt…Thus all these thousands and all these myriads sank as lead because of the boast of one. Mek. Shirata 7 (Lauterbach, line 57)

Within the telling of the parable, there are five references to God laughing and scoffing at the words of Pharaoh. The first three are from Psalms (2:1-4, 59:8, 59:9); the last two are from Ezekial (38:13, 38:18-20). The parable, however, stands on its own even when the interpolated proof texts are omitted.

As in the previous one, the next parable appears as the third and last interpretation of the verse "Thou stretchedst out Thy right hand" (Exodus 15:12). It is preceded by four Scriptural citations, two each from Ezekiel (25:16, 25:13) and Zephaniah (2:13, 1:4). Like some of the other parables, the conclusion (*nimshal*) is a direct Scriptural reference; in this parable, it is from another prophet, Isaiah.

> To give a parable, to what is this like? To this: When eggs are placed in a man's hand, if he but turns his hand a little they all fall and break. For it is said: "So when the Lord shall stretch out His hand, both he that helped shall stumble and he that is helped shall fall…" (Isaiah 31:3) Mek. Shirata 9 (Lauterbach, line 20)

The whole verse from Isaiah is:

> Now the Egyptians are men, and not God; and their horses flesh, and not spirit. When the Lord shall stretch out his hand, the helper shall stumble, and he who is helped shall fall down, and they all shall perish together. Isaiah 31:3

Even if the reader were not familiar with the entire verse, which links the text from Exodus to this selection from Isaiah, it would still be possible to understand the explanation being offered. Knowledge of the verse being cited adds richness to the understanding, but is not strictly necessary. While the parable does provide an appropriate allegory for the text, it could also have been used as the explication for the earlier verse, "The horse and his rider…" (Exodus 15:1)

In dealing with the conclusion of the "Song at the Sea", the Mekilta first discusses the verse, "The Lord shall reign …" and then presents the entire verse, "The Lord shall reign forever and ever." First, the sages pose the question: "When?" and their question is as much about the rebuilding of the Temple, as it is about the reign of God. In the parable, however, it is not necessary for the physical palace to be rebuilt for the king's reign to be recognized.

> To give a parable, to what is this to be compared? To the following: Robbers entered the palace of a king, despoiled his property, killed the royal household and destroyed the palace of the king. After some time, however, the king sat in judgment over them. Some of them he imprisoned, some of them he killed, some of them he crucified. He then again dwelt in his palace. And thereafter his reign was recognized in the world. Mek. Shirata 10 (Lauterbach, line 43)

In the first three tractates of the Mekilta, there are 19 parables; the remaining seven parables are scattered through the remaining six tractates. There are no parables in the short Tractate Vayassa' which provides the explanation for Exodus 15:22-17:7. The one parable in the next tractate, Amalek, occurs in the second chapter which deals with Exodus 17:14-16. This parable is used for the discussion of the verse, "And rehearse it in

the ears of Joshua…" The discussion focuses on the point that, with these words, God is hinting to Moses that he will not be leading the Israelites into the Land:

> To give a parable, this may be compared to the case of a king who decreed against his son that he should not come unto him into his palace. The son entered the first gate and the guards kept their peace. He entered the second gate and again the guards kept their peace. But at the third gate they rebuked him and said to him: It is enough for you to have come so far. So also was it when Moses conquered the lands of the two nations, the land of Sihon and the land of Og, and gave it to the tribe of Rueben and the tribe of Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh. Mek. Amalek 2 (Lauterbach, line 22)

The discussion prior to the parallel presents the idea that Moses was ignoring the "hint" that Joshua will be his successor: R. Eleazar of Modi'im says: "This is one of the four cases of righteous men to whom a hint was given. Two of them apprehended and two did not. Moses was given a hint but he did not apprehend it." Mek. Amalek ((Lauterbach, line 16) According to the text, David and Mordecai understood what the hint was; Jacob and Moses did not. As has happened in previous text, the parable brings the discussion to an end; the subsequent discussion is about lines of authority and supposes, as happens later in the text, that Moses will challenge God's decree about his entering the Land.

The next parable does not appear until Chapter 2 of the next tractate, Bahodesh, in the discussion of Exodus 19:4, "And how I bore you on eagles' wings." This parable is the same as one that was used in Beshallah, although there are some slight differences in the wording, and in its conclusion. The previous one was attributed to R. Judah, but no attribution is made here. In the first presentation, the parable is used to introduce the

discussion and is followed by other textual references leading into a different topic. Here the parable is introduced with an explanation of how eagles carry their young. The explanation and the parable are the only discussion presented for the interpretation of this verse, although it is preceded by another complete discussion of the same verse.

> To give a parable: A man was going on the road with his son walking in front of him. If robbers, who might seek to capture the son comes from in front, he takes him from before himself and puts him behind himself. If a wolf comes from behind him, he takes his son from behind and puts him in front. If robbers come from in front and wolves from behind he takes the son and puts him upon his shoulders. As it is said: And in the wilderness, where thou hast seen how that the Lord thy God bore thee, as a man doth bear his son" (Deuteronomy 1:31). (Mek. Bahodesh 2 (Lauterbach, line 31)

Unlike R. Judah's version of this parable, the conclusion contains a Scriptural citation, which clearly restates the lesson of the parable.

The fifth chapter of this tractate, dealing with Exodus 20:2, begins with the question, "Why were the Ten Commandments not said at the beginning of the Torah? It is immediately followed by a parable:

> They give a parable. To what may this be compared? To the following: A king who entered a province said to the people: May I be your king? But the people said to him: Have you done anything good for us that you should rule over us? What did he do then? He built the city walls for them, he brought in the water supply for them, and he fought their battles. Then when he said to them: May I be your king? They said: Yes, yes. Likewise, God. He brought the Israelites out of

> Egypt, divided the sea for them, sent down manna for them, brought up the well for them, brought the quails for them. He fought for them the battle with Amalek. Then He said to them: I am to be your king. And they said to Him: Yes, yes. Mek. Bahodesh 5 (Lauterbach, line 2)

The parable provides most of the explanation for the verse; God needed to perform miracles for the Israelites before they would be ready to accept Torah. Having been the recipient of miracles, they would not choose otherwise. This discussion, however, is followed by a disclaimer in which Rabbi clarifies that the acceptance of the Law did not include "secret acts". Speaking for the Israelites, the Mekilta says, "… but we will not make a covenant with Thee in regard to secret acts lest one of us commit a sin secretly and the entire community be held responsible for it." Mek. Bahodesh (Lauterbach, line 17) It is worth noting that this is a second example where a parable has been used to present the concept of responsibility. Since responsibility is certainly one of the ideas in the text, the redactors have found the parable that best suits the message.

The next parable reflects this same structure, where a question is asked and then answered with a parable. The parable is then followed by additional discussion, which expands on the concept of the verse, if not the parable. The verse is Exodus 20:3, "Thou shalt not have other gods before Me."

> To give a parable: A king of flesh and blood entered a province. His attendants said to him: Issue some decrees upon the people. He, however, told them: No! When they will have accepted my reign I shall issue decrees upon them. For if they do not accept my reign how will they carry out my decrees? Likewise, God

> said to Israel: "I am the Lord they God, thou shalt have no other gods – I am He whose reign you have taken upon yourselves in Egypt. (Mek. Bahodesh 6:2)

Like both the preceding parable and the one that follows, the parable is about a king, who, of course, represents God. Since the text involves the direct relationship between God and the Israelites, the choice of these parables is most appropriate because it defines the relationship in human terms. Later in the same chapter, where the verse is: "For I the Lord they God am a jealous God" (Exodus 20:5), another parable is used. It is the second interpretation provided for the verse, and is stated in the name of R. Gamaliel.

> I will give you a parable: To what is this comparable? To the conduct of king of flesh and blood when he goes out to war. Against whom does he wage war, against the living or against the dead? The philosopher then said: "Indeed, only against the living." Then he said again: But if there is no usefulness in any of them, why does He not annihilate them? Said R. Gamaliel to him: But is it only one object that you worship? Behold, you worship the sun, the moon, the stars and the planets, the mountains and the hills, the springs and the glens, and even human beings. Shall he destroy His world because of fools? (Mek. Bahodesh 6 (Lauterbach, line 113)

This parable is unique within the Mekilta in that it contains a dialogue between one of the sages and a philosopher. The use of the term "philosopher" is an indication that the fundamental issue is a part of the contest between Greco-Roman thought and the Jewish beliefs contained in the Scriptures. This term would alert the reader to the fact that the "philosopher" represented this pagan school of thought.

The last parable in this tractate is presented in Chapter 8. This one contains no dialogue and conforms to the more usual format, including the appearance of the king as the representative of God. The text being discussed is all of Exodus 20:12-14, specifically how the commandments were arranged on the tablets. According to the Mekilta, "Thou shalt not murder" appears opposite to "I am the Lord thy God"; the parable then explains the significance of this placement:

> To give a parable: A king of flesh and blood entered a province and the people set up portraits of him, made images of him, and struck coins in his honor. Later on they upset his portraits, broke his images, and defaced his coins, thus diminishing the likeness of the king. So also if one sheds blood it is accounted to him as though he had diminished the divine image. For it is said: "Whoso sheddeth man's blood … for in the image of God made He Man (Genesis 9:6) Mek. Bahodesh 8 (Lauterbach, line 72)

The parable thus not only reinforces a concept stated in the verse from Genesis, it also explains the verse being explicated.

The last parable in Mekilta (the only one in Tractate Nezikin*)* comes in the explication of the phrase "He shall pay double' within the verse "If the thief is discovered while tunneling in, and he is struck and dies, there is no blood-guilt on his account. If the sun shone upon him, there is no blood-guilt on his account. He shall make restitution; if he has nothing, he shall be sold for theft. If the theft shall be found in his possession – whether a live ox or a donkey or a sheep or a goat – he shall pay double (Exodus 22:1-3). In the discussion, the sages are ranking different kinds of theft, "There are seven kinds of thieves. First, there are those who steal the hearts of people; He who urges his neighbor

to be his guest when in his heart he does not mean to invite him; he who frequently offers gifts to his neighbor knowing well they will not be accepted; and he who makes his guests believe that he is opening a barrel of wine especially for him when in reality it has been sold to the retailer. Also one who cheats in measuring and swindles in weighing; one who mixes seed of St. John's bread (carob) among seeds of fenugreek or sand among beans, or puts vinegar into oil; - And furthermore, he is accounted as one who, if he could, would deceive the Most High." Mek. Nezikin 13 ((Lauterbach, line 51) To further underscore the severity of the crime, Rabbi Simon b. Yohai is cites a verse from Proverbs, which is also a part of the parable used to illustrate the point:

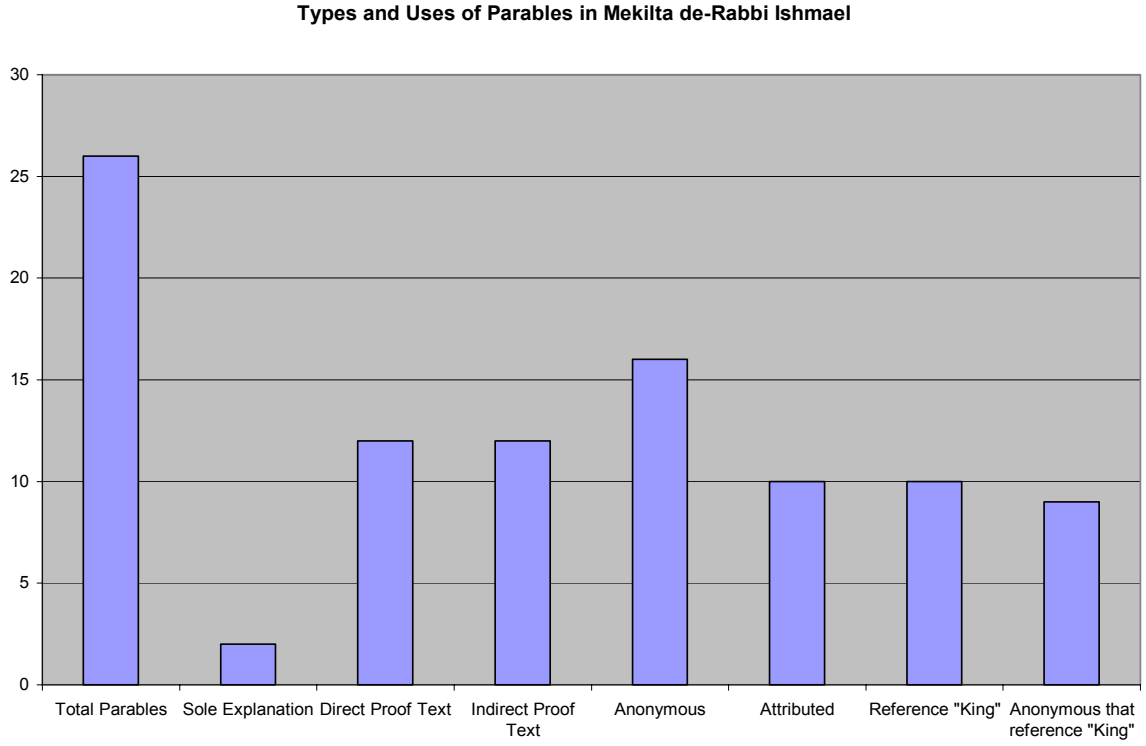
> They illustrate this by the following parable: One comes out from another man's house carrying away a load of things. A friend of his meets him and says to him, "What are you doing?" He answers: "Take your share and do not tell on me." After a while the owner of the stolen articles comes and says to the friend of the thief: "I adjure you, tell me, have you seen so-and-so coming out from my house and carrying away a load of things?" He answers: I swear that I do not know what you are talking about?" Behold, such a one forfeits his life and to him applies the verse: "Whoso is partner with a thief hateth his own soul (Proverbs 29:24)". (Mek. Nezikin 13 (Lauterbach, line 81)

The parable itself has no attribution, but Strack and Stemberger attribute it to R. Ishmael, "Ishmael interpreted three Pentateuchal references allegorically for the halakhah: …Mek Nezikin 12 on Exod.22.2."[19] This reference is made in their listing of the thirty-two *middot*, (rules for the treatment of Scripture); the parable is the 26th *middah* on this list,

[19] Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash, H.L. Strack and Gunter Stemberger, P.28

attributed to R. Eliezer ben Yose ha-Gelili. Note that neither the *middot* of Hillel nor those of Ishmael include the parable.

Having presented each of the parables in the Mekilta, it is possible to draw some conclusions. While it cannot be said that each parable is used in the same way, it is clear that each is intended to provide an accessible explanation of the verse being presented. In two instances the parable is the sole explication offered. In twelve instances, the parable becomes the "proof-text" for the direct Scriptural reference, while in another twelve it is the "proof-text" for a Scriptural reference which is in itself a proof-text for the text from Exodus. Where it is used as a proof for another Scriptural reference, it makes it possible for the reader to understand both the primary passage and the text being cited. In ten cases, it is framed by other discussion of the text, while in the others it brings closure to the discussion. The fact that it used to bring closure in some places suggests that even if the rest of the discussion was not clearly understood, the presence of the parable would suffice as an explanation. This usage can be graphically illustrated:



In every place where a parable is used, it provides an appropriate allegorical example that can be easily understood. Although it has been acknowledged that the intended audience for these texts was a relatively sophisticated one, the presence of these parables and the other folk material immediately make these interpretations accessible to a broader audience. If the author(s)/redactor(s) were, indeed, writing for their peers, then their utilization of this homiletic material may reflect their interest in preserving this material and in utilizing the mode of teaching by metaphor.

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