

REVIEW ESSAY

MIDRASH IN PARABLES

by

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David Stern. *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991. xvi, 347 pp.

With the publication of David Stern's long-awaited book, midrashic research has entered a new stage of sophistication, for until now midrash has not been treated extensively with the methods of literary criticism. I think it would be fair to say that aside from James Kugel's *In Potiphar's House*, this is the first full-length literary critical treatment of midrash in English.¹ And it is a very rich one. Stern has chosen a rich topic, the rabbinic *mashal* (a term I shall leave untranslated for the moment), and has treated it with the complexity, sophistication in literary theory, and philological insight and erudition which it deserves. The result is a feast for scholars of Judaism as well as for historians and comparativists of literature. The book is one of major importance in Jewish studies and deserving, therefore, of a full reading and analysis and not a mere summary.

This is the time to introduce a provisional definition of the term *mashal*. In the Bible, as Stern points out, this noun refers to a variety of forms of figurative speech, including the proverb, metaphors and similes, and allegories. Furthermore, Stern makes the very interesting point that at that level of the language, the term is not used for precisely the same literary

1. I am distinguishing here between literary criticism of midrash and an engagement with midrash that is theoretically and hermeneutically motivated, such as my own work as well as that of others.

genres to which it is applied in rabbinic literature, namely fables and parables. This is particularly intriguing, since, of course, the latter do exist in the Bible (the tale of the Poor Man's Ewe-Lamb [2 Samuel 12] being a prominent example), and are, in later Hebrew usage, referred to as *meshalim* (the plural of *mashal*). Although none of the usages which were current in the biblical language are lost in rabbinic Hebrew, the term certainly most prominent in the rabbinic literary system refers to a particular literary genre, the one that Stern's book concerns itself with. This literary form is most like that which is called "parable" in Western discourse (i.e., in the languages of Christian Europe), so "parable" is the common translation for *mashal* as the name for it.

The formal relationship, however, between the rabbinic *mashal* and the parables of other literatures (especially the Gospels) is precisely one of the significant issues at hand, so Stern wisely decides not to translate the term at all, but to leave it instead in its Hebrew original as *mashal* throughout the book. Moreover, as he points out, "parable" has become a term loaded with an enormous amount of "theological and scholarly baggage" (p. 12). He does, however, offer us a fine definition, "an allusive narrative told for an ulterior purpose," adopting for the purpose the definition of the Greek *αινος* (p. 6) promulgated by W. J. Verdenius. Let me unpack this definition. There are three elements to it: allusive, narrative, and ulterior purpose. First of all, the midrashic *mashal* is a narrative. Although in the Bible, and also in rabbinic literature, other forms (such as proverbs) are referred to as *mashal*, the form that Stern is discussing is always a story. Secondly, it is allusive; although the story is ostensibly told about a king, his wife, daughter, son, etc., in reality it alludes to something else, a real or fictional situation of other people who are in some way analogous to the king and his associates in the *mashal*. Third, it is told for an ulterior purpose, either to persuade people to take a certain action in some situation or to interpret that situation. So far, so good; indeed, excellent. Here, however, is where Stern's description and mine will begin to diverge from each other, for Stern claims explicitly:

Most *meshalim* in Rabbinic literature, however, are preserved not in narrative contexts but in exegetical ones, as part of midrash, the study and interpretation of Scripture. There is no important formal or functional difference between *meshalim* recorded as parts of narratives and those presented as exegeses or midrashim of verses. In both, the Rabbis used the *mashal* as a rhetorical device.

(p. 7)

In my view, there is all the difference in the world—at least functionally and maybe formally—between *meshalim* produced (not merely preserved) in narrative contexts and those preserved in exegetical ones. But before setting out my analysis, I wish to lay out Stern's view as completely as I am able to.

One of the most important aspects of Stern's general description of the *mashal* is his effort to distinguish it from allegory, or better, to demonstrate that the category of allegory is "simply not helpful in understanding the *mashal*" (p. 11).

Stern argues:

Granted, if the term allegory is taken in its largest sense, to describe all discourse that is referential, then the *mashal* possesses allegorical features: the characters portrayed in its narratives, the deeds those characters perform, the situations they find themselves in—these all routinely refer in *meshalim* to something beyond themselves. But even if the *mashal* overlaps with allegory in this respect, it is not itself a mode of literary discourse as allegory is, a type of speech that says one thing and means another. Rather, the *mashal* is a literary-rhetorical form, a genre of narrative that employs certain poetic and rhetorical techniques to persuade its audience of the truth of a specific message in an ad hoc situation.

(pp. 11–12)

Granting, at least for the moment, that Stern's definition of the *mashal* here is in general accurate, it is still not clear how it excludes the category of allegory. One of the emblematic allegories of English literature is John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, a text that could certainly be described in the above terms as both a set of characters and situations which refer to something beyond themselves and as a genre of narrative that employs these techniques in order to persuade its audience of the truth of a specific message. There is, nevertheless, a useful distinction in Stern's difference. It is contained in the term "ad hoc." Unless, as Stern rightly argues, we are prepared to take the word "allegory" in a very broad acceptance, in which case almost every interpretation becomes allegory, then it seems to me that the difference between *mashal* and the literary form which we typically refer to as allegory is in the concreteness of the reference of the former as opposed to the abstractness of the reference of the latter. Thus, to take the example with which I began, the allegorical reference of *The Pilgrim's Progress* is not a concrete and ad hoc situation but a timeless structure of the soul's journey, and this is, moreover, typical of the mode of Western literature that

we call allegory, as well as of allegoresis—the allegorical reading of the Bible. In both rabbinic *meshalim*, on the other hand, and Jesus’s parables in the Gospels, the referent of the figurative narrative is a concrete, particular situation. Accordingly, I think that Stern is absolutely correct in arguing that allegory, while bearing superficial similarities to *mashal*, is not a relevant and useful category for understanding its functioning. I would go further than Stern, then, and claim that allegory involves an entire ontological and even political stance, a yearning for univocity that is foreign indeed to rabbinic literature in general and to midrash in particular.² Another way of thinking about this is in terms of attitudes toward temporality and value. As E. P. Sanders has pointed out:

I think that there is some sense in speaking of “Platonism,” for example, when referring to the widespread view in the Hellenistic world that the true is to be identified with the immutable. . . . It may be that one can give a history of the conception, but the category of Platonism as just defined does, in my view, point to something real in the ancient world. (It is, by the way, a view which is notable by its absence in most of Palestinian Judaism.)³

Allegory (whether as a mode of textual consumption or production) can be identified with this “Platonism” as a structure in which the mutable, metonymic figures of narrative are replaced by the immutable and thus true figures of metaphysics. Since, as Sanders has correctly noted, this view was by and large foreign to rabbinic and other Palestinian Judaism, it follows that the linguistic, hierarchical structure of allegory was also unknown to them, and that both rabbinic *mashal* and Christian parable are something different from allegory, whatever superficial similarities there may be. The *mashal*, as Stern perceptively notes, revels in the specificities of narrative, metonymic, historically unique moments.

As Stern has remarked, the “lynchpin of the conception of the *mashal* that underlies [his] book” (p. 16) is his understanding of the *nimshal*, “the

2. I think that Stern is absolutely correct in identifying the motives of those who deny the allegoricity of parables in “a yearning for Absolute Presence . . . for the parable as Logos” (p. 12), but I would argue that it is this same yearning which also produced and privileged allegory in Western literature from Philo to Bunyan. My forthcoming paper in *Paragraph*, “Allegoresis Against Difference; or, the Metalinguistic Origins of the Universal Subject,” will set out this notion somewhat more fully.

3. E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia, 1977), p. 24.

so-called explanation or application of the *mashal*'s narrative."⁴ Parables normatively, on Stern's account, appear in a real or fictional narrative context to which they allude and which provides their explanatory context. In rabbinic literature, however, most *meshalim* do not appear in a narrative context but in an exegetical context.

indeed, these contexts, as preserved in the literary anthologies of midrash, may in fact be the original context. These settings are doubly removed from a real-life setting: they are literary, and they do not provide a narrative about a real-life setting. Instead, their occasions tend to be exegetical—the study and interpretation of a verse—but these occasions are not in themselves the full setting for the *mashal*'s meaning.

(p. 17)

Given this understanding, then, Stern defines the *nimshal* as “a device of compensation for the missing narrative: instead of a narrative frame, there is now an exegetical context, which is provided through the invention of the *nimshal*” (p. 16). An immediate palpable consequence of Stern's description is that the *mashal* proper is taken as primary and dominant; that is, it exists and a context is provided for it by the *nimshal*. In spite of Stern's recognition, then, that the *nimshal* is not historically secondary to the *mashal* (so-called) proper—indeed, that there is no separate term for it in rabbinic literature—he nevertheless provides a description within which the *nimshal* is logically secondary: “The *nimshal* is merely a device for facilitating understanding, not necessarily an attempt to conserve the original or true meaning” (p. 18), and a fortiori, it would seem, not essential to the ontologically originary text. Stern, thus, both explicitly rejects and implicitly accepts the supplementarity of the *nimshal*. This descriptive practice is, of course, no accident or oversight on Stern's part, but critical to his entire theory of the exegetical *mashal* as being neither formally nor functionally different from a *mashal* told in a narrative situation, i.e., related to the actual protagonists in a real-life or fictional narrative.

Stern produces the following account of the *nimshal*: he argues (following an analysis of psychoanalytic discourse by Peter Brooks) that the relationship between *mashal* and *nimshal* is that of *sjuzhet* to *fabula*. These are Russian formalist terms to describe respectively the narrative as it is presented in the

4. As Stern properly notes, the term *nimshal* itself never occurs in rabbinic literature and only appears in medieval Hebrew (p. 13).

text and the story as it is represented to have happened. Thus, for instance, the *sjuzhet* may tell the story in reverse order (as in flashbacks) but the *fabula* is represented as having taken place in the usual order of earlier and later. Now Stern writes:

If the narrative recounted in the mashal-proper is the *sjuzhet*, then its *fabula* may be one of several other narratives. It may be an ideal narrative, a conventional *fabula*, standing behind the specific events presented in the mashal-proper. It may also be the *nimshal*'s narrative, which one scholar has described as "a statement of a convention or code, through which the real story, the *nimshal*, receives its narrative and normative meanings." Finally, it may be the ideal master-narrative or *fabula* of the covenantal relationship between God and Israel in its full scope, which is truly realized only in Scripture but which stands behind the *nimshal*'s partial narrative of one moment in that relationship. The full meaning of the mashal, however, lies not in any one of these narratives alone but in their combination and their intersection within the mashal.

(p. 70)

Since I am the "one scholar" mentioned in the preceding passage, I have a certain proprietary interest in at least part of this description, and aside from containing a rather bizarre error, I have not been able to fathom the depths of Stern's meaning here. But first the error. Obviously what I described as the statement of the convention or code through which the *nimshal* receives its meanings was the *mashal* and not the *nimshal*. Otherwise, and as it stands in Stern's quotation, the statement simply contradicts itself, for the *nimshal* cannot be the means by which the *nimshal* receives its meanings. It follows, then, that if anything, it is the *nimshal* which takes the place of *sjuzhet* on my account, while the *mashal* provides a kind of schematic, ideal *fabula*, the precise opposite of Stern's depiction. But what then of Stern's description? The *mashal*-proper is, according to him, the *sjuzhet*, the recited text, i.e., the primary literary object whose *fabula* is either "an ideal narrative" or "the ideal master-narrative." These are presented as alternative possibilities which ultimately complete each other, but I find it difficult to understand the distinction between them. What is the first "ideal narrative" if not a single moment in the "ideal master-narrative," and since, in any case, any particular *mashal-nimshal* text narrates only "one moment in that relationship," how is the total ideal master-narrative represented other than by *synechdoche*? Finally, if we disregard the garbled incognito quotation of my quite contradictory position, how does the *nimshal* figure as *fabula* to the

mashal's sjuzhet, since they do not represent two forms of one narrative but two narratives which stand in some kind of figurative relationship to each other? In my view, then, Stern's abstract, theoretical account of the status of *mashal*-proper and *nimshal* simply does not work. Fortunately, I find that my lack of satisfaction with the abstract aspects of Stern's theory of the *mashal* affects not a whit my delight with his concrete readings and, indeed, with his poetics of the *mashal*, but more of that below.

In contrast to Stern's approach, I have argued and continue to claim that the so-called *nimshal* is ontologically primary in the exegetical *mashal*, in the sense that the *nimshal* represents the biblical narrative for which the *mashal* is the interpreting text.⁵ When Stern cites my work on the *mashal*, he does so in the following manner: "For a similar idea, see Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington, Ind., 1990), 80–92, who seems to believe, however, that providing a rationale for exegesis is the *mashal's* primary function!" (p. 321). I do not *seem* to believe this; I believe it and state as much several times in my book, but in the light of Stern's frank amazement at such an idea, perhaps it needs elaboration.

Now obviously, there is one sense in which this statement is simply nonsense, namely, if we take it to mean that exegesis is the primary function of *meshalim* in general. Rather what I mean, clearly, is that when the *mashal* is used in an exegetical setting, then, indeed, providing a rationale for exegesis is its primary function.⁶ I would suggest, therefore, that when the *mashal* became a nearly ubiquitous feature of midrash, it underwent a sea-change in both form and function. (I am, of course, making what seems to me the quite reasonable assumption that parables such as those found in the Gospels were chronologically prior to midrashic *meshalim* as found in texts from the third century and later.)

5. Remember, once more, that Stern agrees that the very separation of the exegetical *mashal* form into two separate units is an artifact of later provenance. Stern also argues that "the *nimshal* has priority, chronologically as well as ontologically, over the *mashal*-proper," meaning, however, something quite different by this.

6. This does not exclude the possibility of later, near-mechanical production of pseudo-exegetical *meshalim* in imitation of the prestigious form. The example discussed by Stern on pp. 174–175 seems to me to be just such a case. It may be that like the Indian blind men describing the elephant, Stern's *mashal* fits better his late midrashic texts, while mine is a more appropriate description of the early texts that I deal with in my book. This is not, however, the whole story, as I shall try to demonstrate in the next section.

My understanding of the form and function of the midrashic *mashal* is as follows: Midrash, like all interpretation of narrative, whether formal or informal, involves the filling in of gaps in the narrative text. The gap itself is a complex concept, which essentially means any place in the text that requires the intervention of the reader to make sense of story.⁷ Gap filling, in accord with the theories of Menahem Perry and Meir Sternberg (or for that matter those of Hayden White), involves the application of cultural knowledge, i.e., the mobilization of narrative schemata which are in the repertoire or sociolect of the culture in question. In this sense, the schemata are both intertextual and ideological in nature, but in neither case is this nature generally available to the consciousness of people in the culture. For midrashic reading of narrative, these narrative schemata are rendered explicit in the form of the *meshalim*, which carry the cultural knowledge (ideology) of what sort of plots God, Israel, and the Nations of the World can play out with each other. It follows, then, that the so-called *nimshal*, which is the actual filled-out biblical story, is ontologically prior and axiologically primary in the *mashal* text, and that the function of the *mashal* in such contexts is, indeed, to provide a rationale for precisely this way of filling the gap, as at least a possible and plausible one, and thus a rationale for exegesis. Rather than the *nimshal* being an interpretation of the *mashal*, then, the *mashal*, on my view, is an interpretation of the *nimshal*. Of course, this does not deny (indeed it emphasizes) that midrashic interpretation, like any other, is not ideologically “innocent,” but, on the other hand, neither does it ascribe to midrash any greater deceptiveness in its rhetoric than to any other hermeneutic method—including, of course, the “scientific” interpretations of modern scholars.

What are the consequences of adopting either Stern’s description or mine? In the first place there are exegetical consequences; particular texts will be somewhat differently interpreted and evaluated, as I shall now try to illustrate.

What is at stake here? Nothing less, or so it seems to me, than the status of midrash itself. The difference between our two approaches can perhaps be summed up by citing two statements of Stern’s:

In midrash, exegesis may be the *mashal*’s occasion, but its exegetical occasion does not exhaust the *mashal*’s meaning, which goes far beyond both exegesis and narrative alone, lying instead in their intersection, in the rhetorical and

7. For an excellent description of the theory of gaps, see Stern, pp. 74–75.

thematic effects of the *mashal*'s narrative and exegesis alike. That the Rabbis . . . cannot recognize this is symptomatic only of the absolute importance they wish to attribute to midrash as mere study of Torah, not as a reflection in any way of their own ideology.

(p. 67)

The Rabbis' own reflections on the *mashal* will not help us in theorizing its meaning or constructing a poetics . . .

(p. 67)

These statements are the preface to a searching interpretation of the function of the midrashic *mashal* and by implication of midrash, one with which I could hardly be more in disagreement, although I am not claiming by saying this that it can either be dismissed or even disproven. I am now going to summarize this account of Stern's, drawing out its implications both for a general hermeneutic theory (of midrash and otherwise) and for the specific reading practices in which we will engage in reading midrashic *meshalim*.

The key to Stern's understanding of the *mashal* as a type of midrash is essentially that it involves conscious deception on the part of its users, the rabbis—a view not altogether different from most understandings of midrash in general. Stern writes:

In genre, the Rabbinic *mashal* can be defined as a parabolic narrative that claims to be exegesis and serves the purposes of ideology. In this, the *mashal* is similar to biblical narrative, which, as Meir Sternberg has shown, claims to be history and uses that claim, with an appearance of history-likeness, as a medium for impressing a world-view, an ideology, upon its reader. So, too scriptural exegesis, or exegesis-likeness, works for the Rabbis as an ideological medium.

(p. 68)

Although Stern does not explicitly state it here, it is hard to avoid the impression that he is working with a model of deliberate deceptiveness on the part of both the biblical and the midrashic authors (an impression, incidentally, that I do not pick up in Sternberg's work). This impression is strengthened considerably when one reads sentences such as the following: "A good part of the *mashal*'s art lies in its capacity for *obscuring* its ideological purpose. Sometimes this is accomplished simply by *hiding* rhetoric under the cloak of

exegesis; at other times, by *pretending* that the midrashic interpretation of the verse is indeed the necessary, inevitable meaning” (p. 68, emphasis added). The cumulative effect of these pronouncements is certainly that the *mashal* (compared by Stern to the *roman à thèse*) is conscious pseudo-exegesis. Presumably this theory of the *mashal* has consequences for our understanding of midrash in general. Indeed, Stern states as much when he says, “Before the *mashal*, there is always a *nimshal*, and even before the *nimshal* there already exists an exegesis which, in turn, is *largely motivated by a preconceived rhetorical function or desire*” (p. 69, emphasis added). It leads, once more, to a reading of midrash which is practically the contrary of the one I defended in my book. In the rest of this section of this essay, I would like, then, to reflect on hermeneutics—suspicious, ingenuous, and otherwise.

The question which I wish to pose is: Under what conditions is it intellectually and ethically appropriate to presuppose that the people-in-a-culture willfully equivocate in the explicit and implicit presentation of the intentions of a cultural practice? For let us be quite clear here. Stern is claiming nothing less than this when he asserts that the rabbis had preconceived ideological intentions for their *meshalim* which were then made simply to hang on pseudo-exegesis in order to lend authority to the ideology. The rabbis lied twice according to Stern: once when they produced the *meshalim* in this form, and once again when they made their pronouncements that until the *mashal* existed one could not understand the Words of Torah, which as you will remember, Stern stigmatized as virtually worthless for understanding the *mashal*. In my opinion, one needs to have very good reasons for making such claims about anyone. If someone were to ask what I would consider good reasons, I would say working under conditions in which it was politically inexpedient to reveal one’s true intentions, such as those outlined by Leo Strauss in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, a situation which simply does not obtain for midrash in general. Moreover, in the case of midrash there are very good external reasons for not adopting such a conception. For the classical rabbinic period, midrash is the only form of biblical interpretation which has been passed down to us. It seems to me that it would be odd indeed to conclude that the rabbis were not engaged in the study of Torah in order to find out what it means, i.e., in exegesis, and even odder to suppose that they were but did not choose to pass on the results of such reflection, only giving us their ideological, secondary, and prevaricious use of Scripture for the purpose of rhetorical persuasion of common people.

This is not to say, of course, that the *mashal* or midrash fully comprehends its own motivations, effects, and implications. No text does, nor does any textual practice or practitioner, including Stern and me. It is not inappropriate, then, for the belated, the scholarly, the critical to investigate what else is going on, to ask what latent, hidden, or repressed meanings a practice carries in addition to the overt, explicit ones that it declares for itself by its form and attendant explanations within the culture. A scholar of midrash can certainly ask what historical conditions produced a certain interpretation, what ideological or polemical investments were served by a given exegesis in midrash whether *mashal* or another form, what is left out, contradictory, or incoherent in a literary text, and what that can teach us about the conditions of production of the text.⁸ I am not arguing against a hermeneutics of suspicion but against one that does not pay heed to or respect the right which people-in-a-culture have to speak for themselves first and foremost. And what the rabbis tell us when they speak for themselves is that midrash is interpretation of the Bible and that the *mashal* in its exegetical usages serves that purpose. Whether or not this mode of interpretation suits our canons of interpretive theory and sense of how language works is beside the point. Stern's rich and fine book would be both richer and finer if, in addition to or before his analysis of the rhetorical functions of the *meshalim* that he treats, he paid more attention to the way that they function as interpretations of the biblical verses that they propose to interpret.⁹

At this point I would like to analyze an example of Stern's actual interpretive practice as it grows out of his theory. The example involves the readings of a pair of *meshalim* on a single verse, Lamentations 2:1, "He has cast down from heaven to earth the majesty of Israel." Space does not allow citation of the full texts, so the analysis and the critique will have to be somewhat schematic, but I hope they will be sufficient to establish what is at stake here. In the first of the two *meshalim* which Stern cites, the narrative compares God to a father and Israel to an infant child. The *mashal* tells us that as the child cried through history the father raised it higher and higher, first

8. I think that this aspect of analysis was missing in my own book on midrash, in which I was wholly engaged in the first step. Steven Fraade's *From Tradition to Commentary: Torah and Its Interpretation in the Midrash Sifre to Deuteronomy* (Albany, N.Y., 1991) seems to me to go a long way to achieving balance between these two elements.

9. I am not claiming that Stern never does this, but often enough he will cite a *mashal* without even giving us the biblical context within which it appears, foreclosing totally the possibility of reading the *mashal* as an interpretation of that context.

on his knees, then on his arms, and finally on his shoulders. For each of these situations a relevant verse is cited. The child then “dirtied” the father and in anger was cast down to the ground. Stern acknowledges that the verse is somewhat difficult; he does not, however, regard the difficulty as a sufficient cause for the interpretive effort of the rabbis, arguing rather for an elaborate hidden motif that culminates in the homiletical point that

As a result of God’s responsiveness, Israel rose to awesome heights over time, but fell in an instant by dirtying the very One who had raised the people so high. Indeed, had Israel not risen so high in God’s favor, had He not taken such care to protect and nurture His people, their descent would not appear so calamitous. Even so, their downfall is only a single, temporary moment in the history of Israel’s covenant with God. Sooner or late, the child Israel will cry again, and God will lift up His people, taking them in His arms once more.

(p. 109)

This is indeed stirring stuff, but I submit that it is Stern’s homily, not the midrash’s.¹⁰ I would suggest rather that the primary motivation for production of the *mashal* was the difficulty of the verse. What does the image of “casting down from heaven to earth” mean? Israel is, after all, on the earth to start with. The *mashal* answers this hermeneutic difficulty by indicating that Israel’s history is a history of rising status with God which has been metaphorically described in the Bible as the successively higher and higher places on the father’s body that the child has been held. These metaphors are indeed found in the biblical text, as the citations from Hosea in the *nimshal* show, and by placing the verse from Lamentations into a narrative relation with those prophetic verses, we come to understand the metaphorical function and meaning of the verse in Lamentations. Just as Israel’s rising status was describable as that of an infant being held higher and higher by his parent, so the precipitous fall can be described as being thrown down from the parent’s shoulders to earth. I detect nothing of the message of comfort that Stern seems to find in this text, but that is a matter of taste and there is no arguing with taste. I would submit, however, that to make this “apologetical” point the main thrust of the *mashal* is simply to substitute a hypothetical side effect for the primary work that the *mashal* is doing.

10. Obviously Stern would not agree with this judgment, thus proving once more the old nostrum that what I say is the פשוט, what you say is שרר.

I think that the other example is even clearer. In the second *mashal* on this verse (pp. 109–114), we are told that “the Majesty of Israel” means the icon of Jacob which, according to rabbinic and prerabbinic legend, decorated the Divine throne. Stern effectively elucidates the linguistic operations by which this interpretation is effected. The *mashal* constructs a rationale whereby a king becomes angry at his subjects and convinced that they are rebelling against him out of arrogance at having given him a magnificent crown. He accordingly throws the crown to earth to reduce their arrogance. Similarly, God is convinced that the rebellion of Israel is produced by their arrogance at knowing that the image of their eponymous ancestor decorates the Divine throne, so God throws this icon to earth to remove their arrogance. I find here a perfectly straightforward attempt at interpretation of a difficult verse—not to say, of course, that this is what I think the verse “means.” Stern finds here something else entirely:

The *mashal* conveys this apologetic message by using the rhetorical technique of surrogacy. By substituting the icon for the people (or majesty) of Israel, the *mashal* transposes the horror of the catastrophe from a truly threatened subject (the people of Israel) to an innocuous object (the icon). The real threat is thereby eliminated, and its scriptural source is neutralized. Did the Rabbis honestly believe that this is what the verse meant—that *tiferet yisrael* actually referred to an icon, or that God really hurled a decorative image off His throne and down to earth? Not necessarily. But the cleverness of the exegesis, along with the rhetorical technique of surrogacy, would have been sufficiently distracting to divert the audience from the verse’s more horrible implications.

(p. 113)

Ultimately readers will decide for themselves whether this is a convincing interpretation or no. Let me provide just the following considerations. I do not think that the icon would have been understood by contemporary Jews as a mere decoration. The fact that the face of Israel had been chosen to represent humanity on God’s throne—in Stern’s own insightful interpretation—was hardly a trivial matter. The loss of that status, symbolized by the casting down of the icon, would also hardly be seen as trivial. Indeed, it would symbolize and concretize fully the horror of Israel’s reduced situation in the world. Finally, in principle, what sort of rabbis would we imagine them to be if they willfully distorted the interpretations of verses in order to distract and divert the audience from the true meaning of verses? Rather I suggest that the rabbi found a way to make sense of the verse in a way that enhanced and

did not hide its horrible implications. When, as in one of Stern's examples, the rabbis wish apologetically to indicate that the destruction of the Temple was not so terrible because the people were not destroyed, they say so.

The virtues of Stern's book are many and considerable. I would not want the reader to conclude from even the quite fundamental disagreement he and I have on the best description of the *mashal* that this conclusion is in any way in doubt. I will conclude this discussion, then, with an account of what I take to be some of the major achievements of Stern's work.

First and foremost, Stern's account of the composition of the *meshalim* out of a repertoire of stereotyped narrative elements, characters, and functions is absolutely convincing (p. 23–37) and far superior to any other theory of what Stern aptly refers to as the “paradox . . . [of] the subtle differences and the remarkable similarities that simultaneously exist among meshalim, and for the ways in which both resemblance and difference are connected to the mashal's exegetical and ideological dimensions” (p. 36). Moreover, as Stern points out, this compositional technique was of significance not only for the production of the *meshalim* but also for their consumption. The fact that the audience recognized traditional motifs certainly enhanced the rhetorical effect of the composition, anchoring the interpretative moves made on the biblical text in the intertextual, ideological expectations of the audience and thus strengthening the prestige and authority of that ideology. This would further explain the continued use of such stereotyped narrative elements even for literary (i.e., written) *meshalim* when the exigencies of on-the-spot composition no longer were active, a process which Stern explicitly remarks. On pp. 37–42 he analyzes, then, the composition of a particular *mashal* in which he shows how the building up of the text from traditionary elements results not in a mechanical composition but in a fresh, surprising, and rich text, “For *how* the darshan actually employed the stereotypes—from choosing the motifs and language he used to deciding how to actually join and present them in a plot—was entirely his own doing, a matter of his skill as a narrator and the result of the exegetical and ideological pressures under which he composed” (p. 37). Stern's beautiful interpretation of this text is a model of sensitive and close reading, one, moreover, which mobilizes the most vital insights of recent literary theory, without itself being in any sense a mechanical “application” of them.

Furthermore, in addition to the many individual interpretive insights strung like pearls throughout the text, there are sections of the book which

seem to me to be just right in the descriptive, analytical strategies and tactics. In particular, I think Stern is particularly good on the poetics of the *mashal* and his application of various narratological concepts to analysis of the *mashal* stories. The analysis of point of view (pp. 82–86) seems to me just about perfect. These stories, which to the untutored eye might appear artless and primitive, are shown by Stern to be in fact very subtle and narratologically complex little texts. Just to take one example, Stern interprets one *mashal* in which the king leaves his consort alone for an extended period of time and argues:

Point of view and authorial/narratorial manipulation need not operate only through devices of intrusion. Focalization also works through strategically placed gaps and lacunae that require the reader to fill them to narrative sense. A useful example of this technique can be seen in Eikha. R. 3.21, where absence of an explanation for the king's departure has the dual effect of making his behavior look unfair and of making his consort's helpless plight especially worthy of sympathy.

(p. 86)

This is, I submit, an example of how much richness a literary approach can bring to the interpretation of a text. And the text is simply studded with such insights.

Exemplary of Stern's interpretive insight is his observation that the antithetical king-comparison form, "A flesh-and-blood king does such and so, not so the King of Kings," is not merely a doxological magnification of the Glory of God, for "a common rhetorical function of this structure was to condemn the Roman imperial cult and to refute its claims for the divinity of the Roman empire" (p. 23). This is the sort of generative insight that will certainly lead to much further fruitful research and interpretation by both Stern and others. Moreover, this comment is accompanied by a typically brilliant exegetical comment with regard to a specific text which is worth summarizing here. The *Mekhilta* includes a famous antithetical comparison whereby God is compared to Roman kings who are praised for qualities which they do not have, while God is, of course, only praised for qualities which He does have. On this Stern notes, "The *mashal*'s irony lies precisely in understanding that the flattery paid to the emperor in the *mashal* is modeled in part upon the conventional praises sung to the gods" (p. 23). Again, on pp. 93–97, Stern demonstrates how God is the only fully realized character in

the narratives of the *meshalim*, and once more, how the very modeling of the Divine protagonist on the Roman king provides an ironic appropriation of and rejection of the imperial cult. I believe that these extraordinary hermeneutical discriminations are wholly new and alone would justify the book. More than this, Stern's remarks on the king *mashal* as a means of accommodation with (and resistance to) the dominant Greco-Roman culture and his comparisons with the Christian art of late antiquity promise to provide fruitful avenues for research on Jewish responses to cultural imperialism for years to come (pp. 95–97). Finally, in this same section, which I think is the best in the book, Stern's comments on rabbinic anthropomorphism in the portrayal of God are simply stunning; no other word comes close to doing them justice.

Indeed this is the sum meaning of the anthropomorphic paradox: the Rabbis were able to portray God's full complexity only by imagining Him in the human image. Why? Because only human behavior presented the Rabbis with a model sufficiently complex to do justice to God. In the king-mashal's narratives, the anthropomorphic imagination of the Rabbis reached its greatest height of achievement.

(p. 101)

Once more, the literary mind has interpreted what for historians, philologists, philosophers, and theologians has been only a conundrum. I, for one, would not give up such exegesis for a wilderness of theory.

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