



Lieve M. Teugels

The Meshalim in the Mekhilot: An Annotated Edition and Translation of the Parables in Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael and Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai

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I will begin with the conclusion: this is a work that should not just be read but also be carefully studied by all interested in rabbinic literature or in the parables attributed to Jesus in the New Testament and their relationship to the parables of rabbinic literature. The book is the result of the author's long-term research project, "Parables and the Partings of the Way," that began in 2014 and is sponsored by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NOW) with the objective of comparing the parables attributed to Jesus in the New Testament and in early Christianity with rabbinic parallels, especially those of tannaitic literature. The Parables Project has already published a volume of collected papers¹ and now this annotated edition.

As this is the first annotated edition to appear, Teugels provides an introduction not only to the Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael (MRI) and Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai (MRS), the works that serve as the basis for this volume, but also to the series in general. She discusses methodological issues important for understanding the tannaitic midrashic *mashal* (parable) in light of different literary and historical approaches. There are detailed summaries of the scholarship of the leading scholars in their respective fields, past and present, such as David Flusser, Theodor Ziegler, Alan

1. See Eric Ottenheijm and Marcel Poorthuis, eds., *Parables in Changing Contexts: Essays on the Study of Parables in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism*, Jewish and Christian Perspective Series 35 (Leiden: Brill, 2019). The editors of this volume, together with Annette Merz are co-applicants of the "Parables Project" with Lieve Teugels.

Applebaum, Arnold Goldberg, Yonah Fraenkel, Alexander Samely, Daniel Boyarin, and many others.

After the general introduction there is an introduction to the volume. As in any annotated edition, the introduction is critical, as it provides the reader with an understanding of the tools to use the work. There is an introduction to MRI and to MRS, their editions, divisions, and the relationships between the two works. MRI is a tannaitic midrash transmitted as a complete midrashic work, probably from the middle of the third century CE in the land of Israel. It expounds upon the biblical book of Exodus, beginning with the legal sections that appear in Exod 12. MRS, also on Exodus, was preserved in the medieval Midrash ha-Gadol written by R. David Adani (Yemen, fourteenth century) and was basically reconstructed from that work. MRI is considered to derive from material that originated in the school of Rabbi Ishmael (second century CE) and MRS from material that originated in the school of his contemporary, Rabbi Akiva.

Teugels then explains the structure of the volume. There are fifty chapters, each covering one parable (Hebrew: *mashal*) or *mashal* cluster. Each chapter has a translation of the text, textual witnesses and versions, commentary, and parallels. All of this is explained in great technical detail that will serve well the scholar using the edition. The commentary focuses on the meaning and function of the *mashal* and possible historical or other relevant information that sheds light on the text. I cannot discuss all fifty chapters of the annotated edition but will refer to a few chapters and the material presented there.

My first example is a selection that highlights the historical as opposed to the hermeneutical approach (433-39 [Bachodesh 6, p. 226, ed. Horovitz-Rabin; cf. Bavli Avodah Zarah 54b-55a]). The key biblical verse is Exod 20:5, "For I am the LORD your God a jealous God." The MRI text contains two *meshalim* or parables attributed to Rabban Gamliel of Javneh (first-second centuries CE). They both stand in opposition to the views of a "pagan philosopher" who tries to make Rabban Gamliel admit that idols have some power, since if God is jealous he must be jealous of something. Rabban Gamliel replies that God is not jealous of idols but angry at those who worship them. The first *mashal* cited by Rabbi Gamliel is of a man who calls his dog by the name of his father. If the man swears by the life of that dog, with whom should the father be angry, the dog or the son, with the answer clearly the son. The dog here represents an idol and the son those who worship it. The second *mashal* tells of a fire that ravaged a town, but only the temple of idols was saved. Was that not because the idol had power, asked the philosopher? No, said Rabban Gamliel. Kings (= God) wage war against the living and not the dead (= temple of idols). The philosopher does not give up. Why does God not destroy what is worshiped? Rabban Gamliel answers that fools worship many things and God will not destroy the world because of fools.

The historical aspect of the *mashal* revolves around the dog. Scholars such as Saul Lieberman claimed that swearing by the name of a dog reflected the oath of Rhadamantus, a judge in the

Underworld who forbade swearing by the gods. Animals were used in place of the gods.² The irony here is great. The *mashal* attempting to show that idols have no power uses a motif plucked from the world of Greek idols. In spite of that, the *mashal* is meant to be especially offensive to the pagan philosopher as it equates the idol with a dog. Alas, here the rabbis may have been somewhat off mark, since dogs were popular in the Greco-Roman world and less so in Jewish society. The barb might have been less of a barb than Rabban Gamliel thought.³ Teugels is aware of the historical background and presents it to her readers. Some scholars, though, were less interested in any type of historical underpinning to the extent that they found it almost irrelevant with little bearing on the midrash. The point of the *mashal* was that for one who identifies his father with a dog (God with idol), the real God does not exist anymore and cannot and the dog is no more than backdrop.⁴

The next example (390–94 [Bachodesh 2, pp. 207–8, ed. Horovitz-Rabin]) depicts a man protecting his son. The key biblical verse is Exod 19:4: “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on the wings of *nesharim*⁵ and brought you to me.” The midrash attaches to this Deut 1:31, describing how God carried the children of Israel in the desert, just as a man carries his son to protect him.

Most birds carry their young between their legs to protect them from avian predators. The *neshar* does not fear such predators and fears only humans below it who might shoot an arrow; therefore, it carries its young on its shoulders. The parable relates of a traveler with his son walking before him. Robbers came, he moved his son behind him. A wolf came from behind and he placed his son on his shoulders to protect him, just as the vulture does and just as God proverbially does (Deut 1:31). The parable is not an exact fit. The danger for the young of the vulture is only from below, while for the son of the traveler it is from both in front and behind. The midrash shows a good knowledge of nature and realia, understanding the dangers found in both, and pointing out how to survive. The added benefit is that for the children of Israel, God is doing the protecting and saving. Unlike the first example we brought above, this midrash has parallels in MRS that expand upon the “like a *neshar*” motif with four different parables to which I shall refer now (395–402 [Exod 19:4 Bachodesh, p. 138, ed. Melamed]), although not in order of their appearance in the text.

2. Saul Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine: Studies in the Life and Manners of Jewish Palestine in the IInd–IVth Centuries C.E.* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1952), 125–27.

3. Joshua Schwartz, *History, Society and the Land of the Jews*, vol. 2 of *Jews and Christians in Roman-Byzantine Palestine: History, Daily Life and Material Culture* (Bern; Lang, 2018), 544–656.

4. Yonah Fraenkel, *Darkhei ha-aggadah vehamidrash* (Givatayim: Yad letalmud, 1991), 380–81.

5. Teugels translates *neshar* (singular)/*nesharim* (plural) in the verse and in the midrash as eagle. This is a common mistake. *Neshar* is not eagle, the Hebrew *`ayit* (the generic Aquila), but rather the vulture (Gyps or the biblical Gyps fulvus). The eagle is a predator while the vulture scavenges on carrion. The midrash works just as well for the vulture who protects its young. See in detail, Zohar Amar, *The Tradition of Fowl in Jewish Halacha* [Hebrew] (Tel-Aviv: Oren, 2004, 36–43. For the sake of convenience, I will use *neshar*.

Parable 2 of MRS is closest to the parable in MRI. Unlike other birds who hold their young between their knees, fearing other birds, the *nesher* does not fear other birds and therefore puts its young on its wings (obviously better than shoulders). The parable in MRS describes the *nesher* as a barrier between its young and humans. Thus, God placed angels as a barrier between Israel and Egypt (Exod 14:9). The parables are similar with respect to the *nesher* but are somewhat different in the *nimshal* or in how they play out.

The other *nesher* parallels are quite different. In parable 1, the connecting text, surprisingly, is not Exod 19:4 but rather Deut 32:11, “Like a *nesher* who rouses his nestlings.” A *nesher* hovers over its young, as did God, who “hovered” over Israel when he came to offer the torah. In parable 3, the spreading of the *nesher*’s wings over and over again is compared to the children of Israel who walked twelve miles and then returned and repeated the process over and over again. In terms of context, the parable clearly does not really belong here and indeed has numerous parallels, one of which in Sifre Deuteronomy (314, pp. 356–57, ed. Finkelstein) was probably the original source of parable 3. The final parable, parable 4, continues the pessimistic understanding of the actions of *nesher*. Just as the *nesher* can quickly soar and also quickly descend, so Israel can quickly ascend but just as quickly descend, with the biblical text from Hos 7:12: “When they go, I will spread my net over them, I will bring them down like the birds of the sky. I will chastise them when I hear their bargaining.” How the mighty *nesher* and Israel have fallen. Why these pessimistic teachings and parables were tacked on to a collection of teachings on Exod 19:4 is not clear. My guess is that the form *nesher* was more important than the contextual fit.

These are musings on just three of the fifty chapters. As I wrote at the beginning, this is an extremely important work, and it will serve as a model for future publications of the series and for other works on parables and rabbinic literature. Its importance, though, is not limited to the study of parables. Anybody dealing with rabbinic literature or ancient Judaism will need to use this work and to study its methodology. I look forward to the future publication of additional works in the series, whether by Lieve Teugels or her partners.