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MASHAL-Series in Genesis Rabba¹

The *Mashal* is a literary form which has received special attention from a number of sources.² The term is difficult to translate as the Hebrew word seems to have a broader meaning than possible equivalents in other languages. R. Feldman translates it as “similes and parables”.³ P. Fiebig and D. Flusser give “*Gleichnisse*” as a translation.⁴ Wellhausen observed correctly: “Zwischen Vergleich, Sprichwort, Parabel, Allegorie macht das semitische (sic!) *mšl mtl'* keinen Unterschied.”⁵ Accepting this observation my criterion is a strictly formal one as follows: *Mashal*; a micro-narrative form consisting of two corresponding statements, one of which may carry any of the following markers: *Mashal* (Gen R 4,6; 5,1), *Mashal* L (Gen R 8,3; 9,2; 63,9) or only L (Gen R 2,1; 9,8), whereas the other may carry the marker *KAKH* (Gen R 2,1; 3,6). If one statement carries the marker *Mashal* L the marker *KAKH* is optional in the other statement (with *KAKH* – Gen R 10,4; without – Gen R 22,3). If one statement lacks any of the above-mentioned markers then the marker *KAKH* is obligatory (Gen R 49,14 three times, Gen R 32,2 twice).⁶

The text of Gen R includes about 200 units of *Mashal*.⁷ These units sometimes appear in sequence thus forming a series. A series includes at least two sequential units.⁸ The following is an example of a *Mashal* series:

¹ As corpus for this paper served the Midrash Genesis Rabba (= Gen R), ed. Th. Albeck, Berlin, 1912, 4 Vol.

² See e.g. E. Güttgemanns, Die linguistisch-didaktische Methodik der Gleichnisse Jesu, *Studia Linguistica Neotestamentica*, München 1971, 99–183, a monography which is closely connected to our material and includes relevant bibliography and its evaluation on the subject; C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of Kingdom*, New York, 1961; D. Flusser, *Die rabbinischen Gleichnisse und der Gleichniserzähler Jesus*, Bern, 1981; A. M. Goldberg, *Das schriftauslegende Gleichnis im Midrasch*, FJB 9 (1981), 1–90. Cf. also the recent summarizing article of C. Thoma, *Prolegomena zu einer Kommentierung und Übersetzung der rabbinischen Gleichnisse*, ThZ 38 (1982) 514–531, dealing with the “Gattung Gleichnis” and evaluating up to date literature, 516 ff.

³ R. Feldman, *The Parables and Similes of the Rabbis*, Cambridge, 1924, 15.

⁴ P. Fiebig, *Altjüdische Gleichnisse und die Gleichnisse Jesu*, Tübingen, 1904, in the Introduction. Flusser (n.2) *passim*.

⁵ Wellhausen, *Das Evangelium Marci*, Berlin, 1903, 30–31.

⁶ This paper deals with *Mashal* only, not with antithetical units of *Mashal* which usually open with *Benohag SheBaOlam*.

⁷ Excluding antithetical units. See n. 5.

⁸ Considering an uninterrupted sequence of units of *Mashal* as a series does not fit in the definition of D. Flusser, *Jewish Sources in Early Christianity*, Tel-Aviv, 1979, 101–102, Hebrew, who defines series of *Mashal* as definite determinations in 3rd person present, not building a series but describing a situation.

Gen R 49,14: The rabbinical text deals with the lines “and God went his way as soon as he had left off speaking to Abraham” (Gen 18,33). God, according to the Old Testament, told Abraham his intention to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah and Abraham pleaded for the survival of the righteous.

The first unit of the series is as follows: A judge waits as long as the advocate is pleading the case. When he becomes silent, the judge rises. Similarly, “God went his way as soon as he left off speaking to Abraham.”

The second unit of the series: The advocate goes on pleading as long as the judge is willing to listen. When the advocate stops talking... Similarly, “God went as soon as he... etc.”

Third unit: The plaintiff waits as long as the advocate is pleading and the judge is willing to hear. When the judge rises and the advocate is silent the plaintiff sets forth on his mission. Similarly, “and God...etc.”

Sometimes the name of a Rabbi and the word “said” appear before the *Mashal* unit (first, second, etc.). For example, Gen R 32,3:

First unit: R. (Rabbi) Jonathan said: A potter does not test defective vessels because he cannot give them a single blow without breaking them. Similarly, God does not test the wicked but only the righteous; thus, “God tries the righteous” (Ps 11,5).

Second unit: R. Jose b. (ben) R. Hanina said: A flax worker knows that the more he beats flax of good quality the more it improves, but if it is of inferior quality, he cannot give it a single blow without it splitting. Similarly, God does not test the wicked but only the righteous, as it says “God tries the righteous.”

Third unit: R. Eleazar said: When a man possesses two cows, one strong and one weak, on whom does he put the yoke? He chooses the strong one. Similarly, “God tries the righteous.”

In Gen R there are 27 series as follows: 17 series with two units each: 3,6; 9,4; 8; 10,9; 13,11; 28,6; 30,9; 10 (two series); 45,5; 49,8; 51,2; 52,5; 57,3; 63,8; 74,7; 84,5;

three series with 4,5 and 6 units: 8,3; 42,3; and 17,8 correspondingly.

Each *Mashal* series has a point of reference. It serves as an organic connector in each series. All the units focus around this point. Taking this into consideration it is possible to classify the series in two groups. One group deals with one Bible quotation only, the other with several quotations or is connected indirectly with the biblical text.

A statement in the Old Testament presents a puzzle which the Rabbis attempt to explain and illustrate in the *Mashal*. In the example above, Gen R 49,14, the point of reference was Gen 18,33 which includes the question of

apparent injustice to the righteous. The answer of the Rabbis is clear and direct in the *Mashal*; only the righteous can show his own power by overcoming trouble.

An example of another *Mashal* series is Gen R 2,1. The units deal with Gen 1,2: “and the earth was *Tohû* and *Bohû*.” The words *tohû* and *bohû* present an enigma which the Rabbis try to interpret through a series of *Mashal* units.

First unit: This may be compared to a king who bought two slaves on the same bill of sale and at the same price. One he ordered to be supported at the public expense, while the other he ordered to toil for his bread. The latter sat bewildered and astonished (he could find no reason for his treatment). “Both of us were bought at the same price, yet he is supported from the treasury whilst I have to toil for my bread, how amazing!” Thus the earth sat bewildered and astonished saying: “The angels and man were created at the same time. Yet the angels are fed by the radiance of the Shekhinah, whereas men, if they do not toil, they do not eat.”

Second unit: R. Judah b. R. Simon said: compare this case to a king who bought two bondmaids, both on the same bill of sale and at the same price. One he commanded not to stir from the palace, while for the other he decreed banishment. The latter sat bewildered and astonished. “Both of us were bought on the same bill of sale, and at the same price,” she exclaimed, “yet she does not stir from the palace while for me he has decreed banishment.” Thus the earth sat bewildered and astonished saying “the celestial and terrestrial beings (angels and men) were created at the same time. Why do the former live eternally whereas the latter are mortal?” Therefore “and the earth was *Tohû* and *Bohû*”.

Third unit: This may be compared to a royal infant sleeping in his cot while his nurse sat by anxious and troubled. Why? Because she knew she was fated to receive punishment at his hand. Thus the earth foresaw that she was destined to meet her doom at the hand of man, as it is written “Cursed is the earth for your sake” (Gen 3,17). Therefore the earth was *Tohû* and *Bohû*.

The text reports something about earth, not about heaven. The words about the earth are difficult to understand. The *Mashal* series puts the statement in a new context where they can be more easily interpreted. Some other examples of series that deal with only one Bible quotation are: Gen R 45,5 (referring to Gen 16,5) as will be shown later, Gen R 63,8 (referring to Gen 25,25).

Sometimes the problem which the Rabbis address through the series emerges from their own interpretations of several Bible quotations rather than a single one. For example: Gen R 17,8 deals with the word *wayehî*. The

Rabbis discover that each time the verb occurs followed by the word *bymê* (“And it came to pass in the days of...”) it denotes trouble. They employ 5 examples in the form of *Mashal* to illustrate this observation. Each of the *Mashal* units corresponds to another verse in the Bible. For instance, the first unit refers to the words “And it came to pass in the days of Amraphel: that they made war.” This may be compared to a king’s friend who dwelt in a province and on his account the king used to visit the province and show it favour. But when the barbarians attacked, the citizens lamented: “Woe to us for the king will no longer show favour to his province as was his wont” (if his friend is killed). Thus it is written “and they turned back and came to Ein-Mishpat” (Gen 14, 7), etc.

Sometimes the problem which the Rabbis address has no biblical reference at all. In Gen R 17, 8 the series includes 6 units dealing with the differences between man and woman.⁹ A series of anonymous questions is posed, answered by a *Mashal* series. Both the question and the answer do not deal directly with a verse but with a custom. For example, the first and second units of this series:

“And why must a woman use perfume, while a man does not need perfume?” “Man was created from earth” he answered, “and earth never putrefies, but Eve was created from a bone. If you leave meat three days unsalted, it immediately goes putrid.

“And why has a woman a shrill voice, but not a man?” “I will give you an example,” he answered, “if you throw meat into a pot it makes no sound, but when you throw a bone in it, you hear a sound immediately.”

From here on I will discuss only those series which refer directly to one biblical verse. The others (those which deal with more than one biblical verse or are indirectly connected with the biblical text), even when they do have a common point of reference, the focus is actually outside the series, and therefore they do not really function as a series but rather as individual units. A study of the series helps to trace the line of thinking of the Rabbis. Thus far my approach has been to look at each series and see how a biblical verse served as a common point of reference. Now I will examine the problem from a different angle and pose the question “How does each unit interpret the verse to which it refers, and do the different units of a series offer several interpretations for the same verse or do they reconfirm one interpretation?” Let us look at an example:

⁹ The same question is answered also by non-*Mashal* units, e.g. the first answer: The man looks toward the place of his creation (viz. the earth) while the woman looks toward the place of her creation (viz. the rib). I do not refer to these.

Gen R 45,5 deals with the words *hmsy lyk* “My wrong upon you” (Gen 16,5). The first unit begins: R. Berakhia . . . “I have a grievance against you.” I imagine two men put in prison and as the king passed, one of them cried out, “Do me justice!” The king ordered him to be released, whereupon his fellow prisoner said to him, “I have a grievance upon you, for had you said ‘do us justice’ he would have released me as he released you, but since you only said ‘do me justice’ he released you but not me. Similarly, had you said ‘we go childless’ then as he gave you a child so would he have given me one; since, however, you said only ‘and I go childless’ (Gen 16,5) he gave you a child and did not give me one.”

Second unit: This can also be compared to two people who went to borrow seed from the king. One of them asked, “Lend me seed!” and the king ordered that it should be given to him. Said his companion to him, “I have a grievance against you. Had you said, ‘lend us seed’ he would have given some to me just as he did to you. Similarly, now that you have said ‘to me you have given no seed’ he gave to you but not to me.”

In the first unit Abraham and his wife are compared to prisoners and cannot free themselves from a given situation. In the second they are tenants coming to borrow seeds. In the first unit Sarah sees herself as a prisoner because she cannot fulfill herself, she cannot give birth. In the second she is a tenant who needs to borrow a son from God (the soul is given to man as a deposit) in order to survive, to perpetuate her existence.

Another example: In Gen R 22,9 (Gen 4,9) the quotation is: “and God said to Cain, ‘Where is Abel . . . etc.’” The series is as follows:

First unit: This may be compared to a prefect who was walking in the middle of the highway and found a man slain and another standing over him. The prefect asked who had killed the man. The other told him: “I ask you and you ask me the same question.” The prefect said, “this is no answer.”

Second unit: This may be compared to a man who entered a garden and gathered mulberries and ate them. The owner of the garden pursued him and asked, “What are you holding?” “Nothing”, said the man. The owner replied, “But your hands are stained with juice.” Similarly, God said to Cain, “The voice of your brother’s blood cried to me from the ground.”

Third unit: This may be compared to a man who entered a pasture ground, seized a goat and slung it behind him. The owner pursued him demanding, “What are you holding in your hands?” “Nothing,” answered the man. “But it is bleating at your back,” countered the owner. Similarly, “The voice of your brother . . . etc.”

This series includes three units in intensifying sequence. Consider the place in which the deed occurred and the incriminating evidence which was

found in each case: Highway – a frequented place; garden – near to a frequented place; pasture – far from a frequented place. The evidence, correspondingly: a man near a body – circumstantial evidence; stained hands – traces of the deed; the bleating of the goat – obvious evidence (*corpus delicti*). The series reviews three possible circumstances of Cain's deed, dismissing each time the possibility to claim him "not guilty". He was found either near the body, with signs of the deed on him when found, or trying to hide the corpse. Each unit in a series locates the verse of the Bible on a different "stage." Sarah is seen once as a prisoner, once as a borrower. In the example of Cain three different "stages" are created in order to locate the various possibilities mentioned.

The fact that 30% of all the *Meshalim* (*Mashals*) are written in series and that most of the series are ordered in pairs or in trios justifies a closer examination of this configuration. In the example of Abraham and Sarah each unit gives a background to Sarah's words and locates them in a possible context, but the meaning of the quotation "my wrong upon you" is the same in both cases. The same is true in the case of Cain. The Rabbis do not change the verdict nor the conclusion. They "play" a dead case, while it is impossible for them to bring new evidence. (They try to suggest symbolically the signs of blood but not insist on the point as there is no evidence for it in the biblical text.) They can not alter the verdict. All they can do is ratify a given text.

In another verse, Gen R 30,9, the two different units are a background for two different approaches to the verse. R. Judah said: Only in his generations (by comparison) was he a righteous man. It is as if a man who had a wine vault opened one barrel and found it vinegar, another and found it also vinegar, the third, however, he found only turning sour. "It is turning," people said to him. "Is there any better here?" he retorted. Similarly, "In his generations he was a righteous man."

R. Nehemia said: If he was righteous in HIS generation (in spite of his corrupt environment) how much more so had he lived in the age of Moses. He might be compared to a tightly closed phial of perfume lying in a graveyard and which nevertheless gave off odour. How much more, then, if it were outside the graveyard.

Although the two units do not contradict the facts of Noah having been seen as righteous, they do define this quality of his meticulously and show that those same words admit different interpretations. The one shows Noah as "relatively" righteous in comparison with his contemporaries. The other praises him, giving him all the more credit because he was different from his contemporaries.

Another example, Gen R 30,10 (Gen 6,9): R. Johanan said: It was as if a

shepherd stood and watched his flocks. Resh-Lakish said: It was as if a prince walked along while the elders preceded him. From R. Johanan's perspective: We need his proximity. According to Resh-Lakish: He needs us. The series explains both its own image ("*Bild*") and the verse in different ways. The relationship between the flock and the shepherd is that the flock needs its leader, while the human leader in the second case needs his advisers, the elders, to counsel him when he rules.

Thus far I have presented the idea of the *Mashal* series and elaborated on those which deal with one Bible quotation. We have seen in the discussion of this type of series how one basic idea is expressed by the individual members. This method of presentation is reminiscent of the biblical phenomenon of *parallelism membrorum*. This device is a stylistic feature of ancient oriental literature. I think it is appropriate to differentiate here between *synonymous parallelism* and *complementary parallelism*.¹⁰ With *synonymous parallelism* a figure is repeated in different words but with much the same meaning. The second image is an echo of the first. *Complementary parallelism* involves a second figure of parallel construction to the first but the meanings are not the same. The two images are complements to each other and together they build a whole idea.

An example of *synonymous parallelism* can be seen in Gen 4,23 and Ps 104,23. Some other examples are found in: Jes 1,3; Ps 27,1; 30,4; Prov 5,1.

Complementary parallelism can be found in Ps 104,32 and Jes 1,23. Some other examples appear in Num 24,15, Jes 1,2, Ps 137,5–6 and many others.

Parallelism is an integral feature of the poetry of the O.T. The Rabbis derived their creative power from the O.T. and lived under its influence. When they did not deal with *Halakha*, they dealt with human behavior. I suggest, therefore, that the phenomenon of the series discussed in this paper can be traced to the Bible. Those series which reaffirm a single interpretation, e.g. Gen R 22,9; 45,5; 10,9; 9,3; 49,8 can be considered an elaboration of the synonymous phenomenon. The other group, which I find related to the biblical *complementary parallelism*, is exemplified by Gen R 30,9; 10; 3,6; 9,8; 13,11; 28,6; 29,3; 32,3; 49,2. In correlating the parallelism in the rabbinical texts with the biblical phenomenon, one could raise the well known

¹⁰ I am well aware that the term "synonymous" is misleading. Even verbal synonyms are not always regarded as identical and there is some question if there is such a thing as identical synonyms. See e.g. L. Bloomfield, *Language*, New York, 1933, 145. Also, L. F. Hockett, *A Course in Modern Linguistics*, New York, 1958, 130f.

questions about the formation of the rabbinical texts and how they came into our hands.¹¹ I do not feel that these questions discredit my hypothesis that the Rabbis were inspired by the Bible. I can only assert Kugel's words¹² in modification to this specific context: In rabbinic exegesis, parallelism per se did not exist... The Rabbis themselves wrote parallelistic prayers... because such was, after all, the very method... that were their models... and perhaps the "seconding" impulse was a rhetorical reflex basic to Hebrew...

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¹¹ It has often been asked whether the texts are a one-man creation or did several people take part in the interpretation, or perhaps one man "edited" and ordered the units to build a chain, a series.

¹² J. L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry*, New Haven, 1981, 108.