

ELI YASSIF

The Hebrew Folktale:
History, Genre,
Meaning

TRANSLATED FROM HEBREW BY
Jacqueline S. Teitelbaum

INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS

Bloomington and Indianapolis

This book is a publication of

Indiana University Press
601 North Morton Street
Bloomington, Indiana 47404-3797 USA

www.indiana.edu/~iupress

Telephone orders 800-842-6796

Fax orders 812-855-7931

Orders by email iuporder@indiana.edu

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Manufactured in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Yassif, Eli, date

[Sipur ha-'am ha-'Ivri. English]

The Hebrew folktale : history, genre, meaning / Eli Yassif ;

translated from Hebrew by Jacqueline S. Teitelbaum.

p. cm. — (Folklore studies in translation)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-253-33583-3 (cl : alk. paper)

1. Folk literature, Hebrew—History and criticism. 2. Jewish folk literature—History and criticism. 3. Tales—History and criticism. 4. Jews—Folklore. I. Title. II. Series.

GR98.Y3713 1999

398.2'089'924—dc21

98-11004

1 2 3 4 5 04 03 02 01 00 99

[J] Parables and Fables

Talmudic literature abounds in fables and parables, generically called *mashal*. They generally serve a rhetorical function, exemplifying or elucidating the topic of discussion. Most fall formally and thematically into the sub-genre of "parable," a literary-rhetorical form used to analogize the idea put forward by the text. This type of *mashal* presents a familiar, perceptible representation or picture as an aid to understanding or fleshing out a complex idea. These "pictures" generally lack a literary plot, and they are not designed to exist as independent tales; they are literary units contextually dependent upon the preacher's analogy to the idea he is developing. This being the case, I do not intend to treat these hundreds of parables as folktales of the rabbinic period. They were generally devised for one-time use, and were not told beyond the confines of homiletic interpretation or legal discussion. Therefore they in no way meet the criteria of folktale.¹⁰⁸

The distinction between fable (narrative *mashal*) and parable in rabbinic literature, for all its fundamental importance, is not unequivocal, and it is sometimes difficult to tell the two forms apart. Below we see a typical example:

["After the doings of the Land of Egypt . . . Ye shall not do" (Lev. 18:3). This bears on the text, "As a lily among the thorns, so is my love among the daughters" (Canticles 2:2)]. R. 'Azariah in the name of R. Judah, son of R. Simon, says: The matter may be compared to the case of a king who had an orchard planted with one row of fig trees, one of vines, one of pomegranates, and one of apples. He entrusted it to a tenant and went away. After a time he came and looked in at the orchard to ascertain what it had yielded. He found it full of thorns and briars, so he brought wood-cutters to raze it. He looked closely at the thorns and noticed among them a single rose-colored flower. He smelled it and his spirits calmed down. The king said: "The whole orchard shall be saved because of this flower." In a similar manner the whole world was created only for the sake of the Torah. After twenty-six generations the Holy One, blessed be He, looked closely at His world to

ascertain what it had yielded, and found it full of water in water [wicked people in wicked environment] . . . So he brought cutters to cut it down; as it says: "The Lord sat enthroned at the Flood" (Pss. 29:10). He saw a single rose-colored flower, to wit, Israel. He took it and smelled it when He gave them the Ten Commandments, and His spirits were calmed . . . Said the Holy One, blessed be He: "The orchard shall be saved on account of this flower. For the sake of the Torah and of Israel the world shall be saved." (*Leviticus Rabbah* 23, 3)

The literary structure, stylistic character, introductory statement, and the linking of this parable to its epimythium, epitomize the talmudic parables as example. Yet it also includes features which enable us to view it as a fable based on an independent tale. The sequential development of the plot, the conflict between the active elements of the story, the increasing complexity of the plot, and its resolution according to the values and expectations of the narrating society all characterize a narrative structure. In addition, the tale is built upon the commonplace folk image (or motif) of "the rose among the thorns." It unfolds into a plot complete with narrative development and tension. In this case, it is especially difficult to evaluate the derivation of the tale: did it originate in folk tradition or was it inspired by the image from the Song of Songs (Canticles 2:2), to bolster the interpretation presented immediately thereafter? The second possibility seems more plausible, as the *mashal* is so extraordinarily suited to the interpretation. Complementarity this precise is most likely the product of custom manufacturing. In any case, this example shows that the foundations of folk literature and the constellation of folk beliefs and customs were mined for use in the many parables scattered through the literature of the period. It is clear that the borders between the period's popular and educated cultures are not easily defined. The sages habitually made sophisticated, imaginative use of the contents and forms of folk literature.

The parable is one of the most ancient literary forms known. Many parables and remnants of animal tales have been found in the writings of ancient Sumer, Babylonia, and Egypt, indicative of intensive activity in these areas both as regards elite literary creativity and folklore. Some would attribute this creativity to the anthropomorphic worldview of the ancient cultures, according to which animals were graced with human thoughts and attributes, and lived in kingdoms analogous to those of humanity, in which they interacted with each other in human ways. The anthropomorphic perspective, paired with the will to comprehend animals' ways of life on account of their proximity to and interdependence with people, was responsible for the many myths and tales on the origins of animal traits and the complex relationship between the animal kingdom and the human world.¹⁰⁹

The ancient Babylonian myth of Etana is our starting point to describe the

connection between an animal tale and a parable. The tale opens with a pact between the serpent and the eagle: they agree not to harm each other, with the sun as witness. The eagle breaks the pact: he swoops down and devours the serpent's offspring. When the serpent returns and discovers his loss, he demands vengeance. The sun instructs the serpent to lie in ambush for the eagle, who is then captured. After pulling off his wings, the serpent hurls his foe into a pit to die of hunger. The extant versions of this ancient myth are few, fragmented, and incomplete. Fortunately, the continuation of the myth of the shepherd Etana, who rescued the eagle and became king, is of less interest to us than the revisions wrought by Aesop (sixth-fifth centuries B.C.E.), who turned this ancient animal myth, dating from 1800-1500 B.C.E., into a full fable:

An eagle and a fox who had struck up a friendship decided to live close to one another and made their living together a pledge of the friendship. The eagle flew up to a very tall tree and had its brood there, while the fox went into the thicket below and bore her young. Once when the fox went out to hunt, the eagle, having no food, flew down to the thicket, snatched up the young foxes, and helped its nestlings to devour them. When the fox returned and realized what had been done, she was not so much troubled at the death of her young as she was concerned with revenge. As an earthbound creature she could not pursue her winged neighbor and therefore stood and cursed her enemy from a distance, which is the only resort of those who are weak and impotent. But it turned out before long that the eagle paid the penalty for her violation of the friendship. Some men were making a sacrifice in the country, and the eagle flew down and carried off a piece of burning entrail from the altar. When she brought this to the nest, which was made of old dry sticks, a strong wind caught it and started a bright fire. The nestlings, who were still unfledged, were caught in the fire and fell to the ground. The fox ran up and ate them all before the eagle's very eyes. (*Aesop without Morals*, translated by Lloyd W. Daly, New York and London 1961, p. 93)

The connection between Aesop's fables and the literature of the ancient Near East is a familiar and as yet unresolved question, but more pertinent to our discussion is the allusion to this tale in rabbinic literature:

"And he [Jacob said to Isaac his father]: Because the Lord thy God sent me good speed" (Gen. 27:20). R. Yohanan said: He was like a raven bringing fire to his nest. (*Genesis Rabbah* 65, 19)

While it is conceivable that the image of a raven bringing fire to its own nest was based on reality, it is hardly likely. Far more feasible is the deduction that Rabbi Yohanan was referring to the story of Etana, especially because he is interpreting here the classical story of betrayal—Jacob betrayed his brother, Esau—equivalent to the betrayal of the eagle and the fox. Perhaps he reasoned

that the tale was so well-known he did not have to tell it in full, that a hint by way of a familiar adage would suffice. This happens often in rabbinic literature. What path did the ancient myth travel in its migration to the rabbinic period? Perhaps it seeped in much earlier by way of the ancient eastern stock of narrative types and motifs, and perhaps R. Yohanan had in mind Aesop's famous fable. The second possibility is the more likely in view of the vast evidence that Aesop's fables were well known in the Palestine of the rabbinic age, and as the two tales are similar.¹¹⁰

The concise, pithy form of the *mashal* is also significant. Study of the ancient parable has indicated that one typical form was epigrammatic, condensing the tale's plot into a single utterance, and summing up the tale's didactic significance: "The smith's dog could not turn on the heavy sledge, so he turned on the pot of water." This proverb encapsulates an entire narrative plot. The narrator in this instance was not interested in conveying the tale (already well-known), but its ethical lesson. This ancient Babylonian parable has a close parallel in the aggadic literature as well: "... the nations of the world . . . want to incite The Holy Blessed Be He but cannot, so they come and incite Israel . . . It is similar to one who cannot beat the ass, so he beats the saddle" (*Tanhuma, Pekudei*, 4).

The ideological orientation of this epigrammatic parable is plain, for in the rabbinic literature, as opposed to that of the ancient east and Aesop, all parables are quoted in their literary context, and their function is easily defined. Clearly, this literary context reflects not the actual situations in which the parables were told, but the manner in which the sages chose to include them in their literary work. Nonetheless, it does offer clues as to how people of the period perceived such parables. Another pair of examples takes the argument a step further:

Mar Zutra b. Tobiah remarked in Rab's name: This is what men say, "When the camel went to demand horns, they cut off the ears he had." (*Sanhedrin* 106a)

According to Aesop, the parable is as follows:

The camel saw a bull with a fine set of horns. She was envious of them and decided to try to get a pair just like them. So she went to Zeus and asked him to give her horns. Zeus lost his temper with her for not being satisfied with her size and strength, but wanting something more, and not only didn't give her horns but even reduced the size of her ears. (*Aesop without Morals*, translated by Lloyd W. Daly, p. 143)

In these texts the connection between Aesopian fable and rabbinic proverb cannot be attributed to coincidence. The proverb is the essence of the tale. It may omit the ox, the camel's envy, the appeal, and the dialogue with god, but

it retains the essential narrative elements, which convey the tale's significance. The sages used this *mashal* to analogize Bil'am, the son of Be'or, who sought reward for harming the Israelites, and was instead himself punished and killed. The interpreter in this instance chose not to recount the tale in full; he laid out only the essential elements. In so doing, he focused the listeners' attention on the message of the animal tale, offered not for entertainment but for edification. Here we find important proof that the transformation from parable to aphorism was not rabbinically steered, but the result of the folkloric process in action: Mar Zutra quotes Rav, evidence that the proverb was already in circulation, and in the vernacular—Aramaic. In other words, the compression of the tale into an epigrammatic formula was a folkloric process, not a deliberate action in the service of homiletics. Whether in ordinary conversation or during a performance event, speakers prefer allusion to circumlocution. Another, similar example is Aesop's celebrated fable of the shepherd boy who cried wolf. The sages reduced this fable as well to a proverb: "It is the penalty of a liar, that should he even tell the truth, he is not listened to" (*Sanhedrin* 89b).

The following example provides us with two forms (the proverb and the narrative parable) found in the sages' writings (as well as Aesop):

R. Samuel b. Nahmani said in R. Jonathan's name: What is meant by the verse, "Faithful are the wounds of a friend; but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful?" (Prov. 27:6)—Better is the curse wherewith Ahijah the Shilonite cursed Israel than the blessing wherewith the wicked Balaam blessed them. Ahijah the Shilonite cursed Israel by a reed as it is said: "For the Lord shall smite Israel, as a reed is shaken in water" (1 Kings 14:15); Just as a reed grows in well-watered soil and its stem is renewed and its roots are numerous, and even if all the winds of the world come and blow upon it they cannot dislodge it from its place, but it sways in unison with them, and as soon as the winds subside, the reed still stands in its place, [so may Israel be]. But the wicked Balaam blessed them by the cedar: just as the cedar does not stand in a watery place, and its roots are few and its stock is not renewed, and even if all the winds of the world come and blow upon it they cannot stir it from its place, but immediately the South wind blows upon it it uproots and overturns it on its face [so may Israel be]. Nay, more, it was the reed's privilege that a quill thereof should be taken from the writing of the Scroll of the Torah, Prophets and Hagiography. (*Sanhedrin* 105b-106a)

And the proverb: "Our Rabbis taught: A man should always be gentle as the reed and never unyielding as the cedar" (*Ta'anith* 20a).

This example reinforces the two points under discussion: first, the generic transformation undergone by parables from story format to proverbial expression; and second, the dependence of rabbinic parables on Greek and Roman

fables, particularly those attributed to Aesop. The condensed proverbial fable does away with such narrative elements as plot development, dialogue among the tale's protagonists, and so on, imbuing the remainder with expressional character, turning it into a proverb. Still, the pre-existence of the fable's narrative basis is essential, as, without it, the proverb, appearing independently and without associative dependency on the fable, would be unfathomable. Why indeed should man be flexible as the reed but not rigid as the cedar? Only prior knowledge of the tale could give the proverb meaning.¹¹¹

Especially interesting is the manner in which the fable is woven into the commentary on the scriptural verse, so that Bil'am's words, "cedar trees beside the waters" (Num. 24:6), are construed as a curse, not a blessing. The cedar's strength is seen as a weakness, not an advantage. The sages employ the famous fable to illustrate why this is so. As we shall see below, the folk parable, woven into rabbinical literature, functions principally in the service of hermeneutics, as do the hundreds of instances of parable-type *mashal* already mentioned. The parable in the last example, like the proverb to which it was reduced, preaches moderation and adaptation, as opposed to the intransigence and zealotry which ultimately lead to ruin. It seems to me that we cannot ignore this parable's practical significance for the time. The sharp contrast offered by R. Samuel bar Nahmani between the cedar and the reed refers not only to events of the biblical age, but also to events and figures of his time. It may be assumed that he was referring to, among others, those zealots of the preceding period (the Destruction and the Bar Kokhba revolt) whose excesses had had such cataclysmic consequences—the fall of the entire "cedar." The way of the reed, namely, adaptation to changing circumstances and lying low to weather the storm, was more likely, according to this view, to preserve the core.

One way, then, of interpreting this type of *mashal* is as a hermeneutical tool, fleshing out or clarifying complex issues of Scripture. A second avenue is ideological, with practical implications. Both typify the function generally filled by folk parables in rabbinic literature.

The following versions of a famous fable display another link between Aesopian fable and *mashal*:

A hungry fox spied some bread and meat left in a hollow tree by some shepherds. He crawled in and ate it, but his belly swelled so that he could not get out again. As he moaned and groaned, another fox passing by came up and asked what was the matter. When he heard what had happened, he said to the first fox: "I guess you'll just have to wait until you get back to the size you were when you went in, and then you won't have any trouble getting out."

The story shows that time overcomes difficulties. (*Aesop*, translated by L. Daly, *ibid.* pp. 103-104)

"As he came forth of his mother's womb [naked shall he go back as he came, and shall take nothing for his labor]" (Eccles. 5:14). Geniva said: It is like a fox who found a vineyard which was fenced in on all sides. There was one hole through which he wanted to enter, but he was unable to do so. What did he do? He fasted for three days until he became lean and frail, and so got through the hole. Then he ate [of the grapes] and became fat again, so that when he wished to go out he could not pass through at all. He again fasted another three days until he became lean and frail, returning to his former condition, and went out. When he was outside, he turned his face and gazing at the vineyard said: "O vineyard, O vineyard, how good are you and the fruits inside! All that is inside is beautiful and commendable, but what enjoyment has one from you? As one enters you, so he comes out." Such is this world. (*Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 5, 14)

Differences between the two versions are apparent on several levels: Setting—while both are set against a backdrop of Mediterranean agriculture, their respective visual images (a hollow tree trunk versus a fenced vineyard; eating meat and bread as opposed to gorging on grapes) show a different emphasis, stemming perhaps from a different reality. On the level of plot, Aesop's fable employs another protagonist—the second fox—to function as the "donor," who guides the protagonist to a resolution of the conflict. The *mashal* leaves the protagonist isolated throughout, and left to his own devices he solves his predicament. The principal difference is in the way they are respectively characterized. Aesop's fable puts forth a whiny hero, helpless and oblivious of what is happening to him. The *mashal*, conversely, offers an independent protagonist who reacts philosophically to his plight and (not waiting for the fabulist to do it, as usual) gives the event an overall meaning.

Another difference, along the same lines, lies in the styles of epimythium offered by the fabulists—Aesop (or a redactor of his fables) and Geniva (the name or nickname of a sage). Aesop emphasizes practical significance, the lesson to be learned for the sake of a better, easier life. The sages' epimythium is philosophical, existential, and suits the overall context of the Book of Ecclesiastes. The stylistic differences between the two versions follow the same pattern. While the Aesopian version is terse, in simple language (these are features of the Greek original), the *mashal* displays a polished style. Its use of short, concentrated, and measured sentences creates a sense of balance between the separate parts. More distinctive still are the transitions between different, complex modes of expression: the shift from Hebrew to Aramaic, from indirect to direct speech, from declarative statements to the formulation of rhetorical questions, from concrete expression of specific events (the description of the fox's exploits) to a system of generalized, abstract formulations (which resemble the style of the folk proverb).

These differences between the two versions rule out a reading of the *mashal* as a copy or reworking of Aesop's fable. The fabulist of rabbinic literature did indeed use the central motif of the Aesopian fable—the fox who must regain his former proportions in order to extricate himself—but he wove an original *mashal* around it, with artistic features appropriate to its conceptual context in the *midrash*. It is difficult to believe that the teller of the *mashal* was familiar with the fable in its original form, attributed to Aesop. It, and dozens more, presumably melted into the general stock of folktales over hundreds of years of Hellenistic rule in Palestine, and so was told in numerous versions and contexts by Jewish storytellers, in Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic. One such version was worked into the *midrash* on the Book of Ecclesiastes, because it suited the interpretation desired for a particular verse. Indeed, it seems that the principal variations in the rabbinic, as opposed to the Greek, version stem from the different spin given it in the *midrashic* context, namely as an existential allegory. The fox in the *midrashic* parable does not fatten himself on bread and meat, as in the Greek version, but on grapes, conjuring up a clear association with wine and indulgence. In keeping with the perception of human existence in Ecclesiastes, the fox is a solitary figure, alone in the face of the consequences of his actions and omissions in this world. Indeed, it is only after the events have transpired that the fox turns back to view what has gone before in a generalized, philosophical manner. This outlook is in the spirit of Ecclesiastes, and diametrically opposed to the utilitarian view of the Aesopian fable.¹¹²

Alongside such explicit parallels between the *mashal* and Aesop's fables, there are others sharing a common motif. In such cases it is clear that the sages drew not from Aesop's fables but from the reservoir of Near Eastern motifs that supplied both cultures. Here is one example:

“And the elders of Moab and the elders of Midian departed” (Num. 22:7). A. Tanna taught: There was never peace between Midian and Moab. The matter may be compared to two dogs in one kennel which were always enraged at each other. Then a wolf attacked one, whereupon the other said: If I do not help him, he will kill him today, and attack me tomorrow. So they both went and killed the wolf. R. Papa observed: Thus people say: ‘The weasel and cat [when at peace with each other] had a feast on the fat of the luckless. (*Sanhedrin* 105a)

This parable has counterparts among Aesop's fables. One concerns the lion and the boar who quarreled over who would drink first at the watering hole. As words gave way to blows, they caught sight of a hovering flock of vultures and decided it was better to remain friends than become prey for the vultures (no. 11). Another tells of a snake trading blows with a cat. Nearby mice, usually prey to both, observed the fight and came out of their holes. When the contenders caught sight of their customary quarry, they stopped scuffling and turned on

the mice (no. 122). Despite their basic similarities, the differences in detail rule out a view of such Jewish fables as “copies” or “imitations” of the Greek fables. They are, instead, the product of typical folkloric use of the stock of Greek folk culture, which during the course of hundreds of years had taken root in the folk culture of the eastern Mediterranean.

The *mashal* serves a twofold hermeneutical function: it exposes the inherent difficulty of the biblical verse, and in solving it, sheds new light on its meaning. Moab and Midian were like two dogs who must share their food. Given that friendship and loyalty are unlikely to grace such a relationship, it is perplexing to read of them walking together. The *mashal* resolves this incongruity by explaining their pact as a defensive strategy in the face of mutual peril. The biblical story is now shown to have another aspect, its significance made clearer and sharper with the aid of the *mashal*. Rabbinical literature has many varied examples of folk parables in hermeneutical service. Some representative examples follow:

“After these things did king Ahasuerus promote Haman the son of Hammedatha etc.” (Esther 3:1). This account bears out what Scripture says: “For the wicked shall perish, and the enemies of the Lord shall be as the fat of lambs” (Pss. 37:20), which are fattened not for their own benefit but for slaughter. So the wicked Haman was raised to greatness only to make his fall greater. It was like the case of a man who had a sow, a she-ass, and a filly, and he let the sow eat as much as it wanted, but strictly rationed the ass and the filly. Said the filly to the ass: “What is this lunatic doing? To us who do the work of the master he gives food by measure, but to the sow which does nothing he gives as much as she wants.” The ass answered: “The hour will come when you will see her downfall, for they are feeding her up not out of respect for her but to her own hurt.” When the Calends [the first day of the Roman month—observed as a feast day] came round, they took the sow and stuck it. When afterwards they set barley before the filly, it began sniffing at it instead of eating. The mother then said to it: “My daughter, it is not the eating which leads to slaughter but the idleness.” So, because it says, “And set his seat above all the princes that were with him,” therefore later, “They hanged Haman.” (*Esther Rabbah* 7, 1)

The text leads to a new angle on the biblical text. In a simple reading of the events as told in the Scroll of Esther, Haman's rise to greatness at court is perceived as part of a historical chain of events. The same text read in light of the *mashal*, however, exposes a previously unnoticed irritant. As the foal questioned her master's motives, so will the reader wonder why the Almighty raised Haman up so high. This is one version of the eternal theodicean question: why are the wicked crowned with success? The problem now exposed, the *mashal* proceeds to propose another way of understanding the text. Haman's rise, like

his fall, was part of the Divine plan, just as the sow's extravagant rations were part of the farmer's. The solution to the theodicean puzzle is that injustice is merely a misconception stemming from a limited view; justice does prevail, but is apparent only if one can obtain a full picture of reality as a unified whole originating in Divine plan. This is a characteristic example of a *mashal* expertly wielded to analyze the scriptural text, laying bare the loose ends for scrutiny and then neatly tying them up.

The vast gap between the object of analysis (the Divine plan revealed in the Scroll of Esther) and the subject of the fable (the fattening of a pig for the pagan new year) indicates that the latter was not an original creation devised by sages or preachers to illuminate the scriptural verse. It was apparently a folk fable cited by the preacher (or by an editor of the portion in the Midrash on the Scroll of Esther) for the stated exegetical purpose. Had the preacher intended to create a new *mashal* to this end, he would almost certainly have chosen parable form, which is more congenial to the subject and its sacred nature (for example, a fable about "a king of flesh and blood"). This was in fact the case for hundreds of other parables. Additional proof that the parable was not authored here is the conclusion of the tale of the donkey's daughter, who refused to eat after seeing what befell the sow. The concluding moral has no bearing on the scriptural issue of Haman's rise. The ending shows us that the point of the original fable had less to do with the fattening of the pig for slaughter than with its idleness as the reason it met such an end. Any beast who did not prove himself useful might suffer the same fate (which was precisely the moral of the Aesopian parallel of the fable [no. 145], in which the calf was allowed to remain idle as she was destined for the slaughter). It seems that even the point of the original fable was altered to suit the scriptural verse. Still, in other respects, the fable as it appears in the midrash is probably quite similar to the form it took in the folk tradition. Its protagonists and earthy, somewhat vulgar subject, and its narrative qualities—the trio of heroes, repeated dialogues, and the simplistic message, in praise of work and scornful of idleness—indicate the manner in which it was probably told orally. With the transformation to scholarly literature, it took on hermeneutical trappings and became the key brought forth to elucidate a theological problem (divine justice). The same literary process overtook other fables which found a home in Midrash Esther Rabbah. There are, for example, two similar folk fables concerning Haman, one likening him to a chicken who tried to vanquish the sea by bringing all its waters from the source to dry land (*Esther Rabbah* 7, 10), and the other comparing Haman to the lion who invited the other animals to dine with him, and covered his home with the skins of animals on whom he had preyed (*ibid.*, 7, 3).¹¹³

"Abraham begot Isaac." Do I not know that Abraham begot Isaac?! R. Hananiah Rabbah said: 'This can be compared to a dove that was chased

by hawks and ravens. She fled from them and went in and sat on her nest. People said: "These eggs are from the hawk," and another said, "From the raven." Another said to them: "As long as they are eggs we do not know if they are from the raven or the hawk, but leave them until she [hatches them] and they become chicks, and you will know from whom they are." Thus Sarah was often moved about, [she was] with Pharaoh, with Avimelekh. Thus [people] began to say: "She conceived by Pharaoh," and others said, "She conceived by Avimelekh." The Almighty said to them: "The mouth of those who speak lies shall be stopped" (Pss. 63:12). Wait until she births, and you will see whom he resembles. At once the Almighty instructed the angel in charge of the newborn's form, he said to him: "Do not fashion him to resemble his mother, rather his father, so that all will know that he is none other than his father's." He came out forthwith resembling his father. Hence it is said, "These are the generations of Isaac, Abraham's son. Abraham begot Isaac." (*Aggadot Bereshit* 37)

Once again there is a fundamental discrepancy between the fable and its epimythium. Neither Pharaoh nor Avimelekh pursued Sarah; she was, on the contrary, delivered to them almost willingly. Moreover, these events transpired many years before Sarah conceived at the age of ninety, when she was still young and beautiful, hence they could hardly be suspected of Isaac's paternity. Perhaps most surprisingly, Sarah is likened to a dove who would allow the other birds to do with her as they would, and whose offspring's paternity is in question. This suggestion of infidelity is presented as by "those who speak lies," but the basic analogy proposed by the preacher between the dove in flight and Sarah is no less perplexing. This could not have been the preacher's intention. These implications are the result of the tale's "excess meaning"—details extraneous to its exegetical implementation: the animal tale itself suggests many more ramifications than the preacher intended in his effort to expound on the text. This disparity generally stems from the attempt to yoke together two essentially different literary units. Had the preacher devised a new *mashal* expressly for the exegetical purpose here, no such difficulty would have arisen. This was the case in the fables discussed earlier of the biblical Yotam, and the donkey, her foal, and the sow. The sages tended to make analogies between independent folk fables and exegetical notions on a single level, without considering other possible colorings the tale might bestow on the text they undertook to interpret.

Up to this point we have found the *mashal* to be an exegetical tool. It has yet another purpose, and that is in the service of debate—nationalist, religious, and political:

R. Simeon b. Jose b. Lakunia said: In this world Israel is likened to rocks, as it says, "For from the top of the rocks I see him" (Num. 23:9); "Look unto

the rock whence ye were hewn" (Isa. 51:1). They are compared to stones, as it says, "From thence the shepherd of the stone of Israel" (Gen. 49:24); "The stone which the builders rejected" (Pss. 118:22). But the other nations are likened to potsherds, as it said, "And He shall break it as a potter's vessel is broken" (Isa. 30:14). If a stone falls on a pot, woe to the pot! If a pot falls on a stone, woe to the pot! In either case, woe to the pot! So whoever ventures to attack them receives his deserts on their account. (*Esther Rabbah* 7, 10)

The proverbial fable, condensing an entire story into a single sentence, is cited for exegetical purposes—to explain the fact that it was the peoples of Persia, not the Jews, who were disadvantaged by Haman's plans. It is nonetheless clear that the implication is not time-specific. It has implications for the rabbinic period no less than for the period of the Scroll of Esther. The mashal's function in this homiletic interpretation is to have the past speak for the present, to emphasize the positive outcome of a long-ago clash with other peoples and thereby inspire confidence for the present in the listeners. Of particular interest is the manner in which the popular form of the fable was modified for use in the sermon. The Aesopian parallel follows:

The clay pot said to the copper one: "Do your bouncing away from me, for if you so much as touch me, I'll break even though I touch you unintentionally."

That life is uncertain for a poor man when a grasping man of power lives close by. (*Aesop*, translated by L. Daly, p. 218)

In the Aesopian version, as in all the many other versions of the parable, sympathies lie with the fragile clay boat, at the mercy of the copper boat. It certainly bears more than a passing similarity to the situation of the Jewish people, the inevitable loser in any conflict with the other, strong nations. Yet the fabulist of the midrash gives the fable an entirely new spin. For the sake of allusion to the appropriate verses, he had to replace the copper craft with one of stone, with the aim of imbuing his Jewish audience with a sense of security in their power to survive clashes with other peoples of the world. He perversely identifies the weak and vulnerable party with the copper (or stone) boat, and in so doing seeks to underscore Jewish fortitude and endurance. Clearly, this fable was refashioned to suit the exegetical aim—the story of the Jews' salvation in the Scroll of Esther. Yet the main purpose of the modifications was polemical-political. In their numerous skirmishes with the other nations of the world, in the time of the fable's telling no less than in the past, the survival of the Jewish people was assured. The ones to suffer any such conflict would be the rival nations, as past experience showed.

One type of mashal designed as a polemic is the controversy-parable. Here the plot revolves around an argument or debate, and the victory of one pro-

tagonist over the others is the main subject of the tale and its messages. One example of this type was presented above in the fable of the she-ass, the filly, and the sow, where the first two debate the justice of fattening the third. Two typical fables belonging to this category survived in the rabbinic literature, and deserve our attention:

[1] The wheat, the straw, and the stubble engaged in a controversy. The wheat said: "For my sake has the field been sown"; and the stubble maintained, "For my sake was the field sown"; Said the wheat to them, "When the hour comes, you will see." When harvest time came, the farmer took the stubble and burnt it, scattered the straw, and piled up the wheat into a stack, and everybody kissed it. In like manner Israel and the nations have a controversy, each asserting: "For our sake was the world created." Says Israel, "The hour will come in the Messianic future and you will see. . . ." (*Genesis Rabbah* 83, 5)

[2] R. Joshua b. Levi said: Moses said to Israel: "If you will not obey the judges, then sin will be on your head." This may be illustrated as follows. The tail of the serpent said to the head, "How much longer will you walk first? Let me go first." The head replied: "Go." The tail went and came onto a ditch of water and dragged the head into it; it encountered a fire and pulled [the head into it]; and coming to thorns, dragged it amongst them. What was the cause of all this? Because the head followed the tail. So when the rank and file follow the guidance of the leaders, the latter entreat God and He answers their prayer; but when the leaders permit themselves to be let by the rank and file, they perform must share in the visitation that follows. (*Deuteronomy Rabbah* 1, 10)

The latter mashal is typical of the blending of exegesis and polemics. The text opens with a verse and its explication, in a manner characteristic of aggadic commentary. The preacher argues here that Mose's statement upon the appointment of judges carried with it a veiled warning of the consequences of disobedience. At this point, R. Joshua ben Levi brings in the fable to give weight to Moses's words. The text's conclusion, which functions as an epimythium, indicates that it was in fact told for the purpose of influencing contemporary behavior, not as commentary. Obedience to contemporary leaders and luminaries was an issue in every period, but the fact that R. Joshua ben Levi chooses to interpret the biblical verse in precisely this manner shows that he was referring to an issue of practical concern to his listeners. The traditional nature of interpreting Scripture and the folk wisdom of the fable reinforce each other in this text, and are used to further an actual social-political struggle, whose precise details are beyond our reach.¹¹⁴

The first fable, unlike the second, indicates directly the target of the polemic,

namely the nations of the world engaged in theological debates with the Jews. The epimythium deals with the sages' response to competing religious and cultic perceptions on a question of great import, namely, which nation is "God's people," or which is the chosen religion, and how can it be proven so. Easily understood and featuring elements from the daily life of the period, a typical agricultural fable is employed. As in the fable concerning the quarrel between the snake's head and tail, initially there is no objective means of knowing which of the three types of produce is preferred; only the results will tell. Indeed, as the end of the agricultural process—sorting at the threshing floor—shows which of the three is truly the most valuable to man, so too the Almighty will make clear in the End of Days which is truly the chosen people. In both the fables quoted here, and in others mentioned above, the preachers display extraordinary artistic ability in using folk fables for rhetorical purposes. Tailoring an independent folk fable, with its baggage of characteristics and meanings, to the subject of the homily requires the use of precise techniques of artistic and ideational transformation. The flawless application of these rhetorical techniques is responsible for the difficulty in ascertaining where lies the "seam" between "original" parts of the folk fable and the new homiletic foundations which turn it into an integral part of rabbinic commentary.

The actual performance event at which a *mashal* was told is very rarely in evidence. Given that the depiction of an event is fictional, and not a reflection of an actual performance event (as in the fable of Yotam), we gain a glimpse of the sages' view of the fable's ideal venue and the role they assigned it in the historical and social reality of their time.

Antoninus [the Roman emperor or local governor] said to Rabbi: "The body and the soul can both free themselves from judgment. Thus, the body can plead: The soul has sinned [the proof being] that from the day it left me I lie like a dumb stone in the grave [powerless to do ought]. Whilst the soul can say: The body has sinned, [the proof being] that from the day I departed from it I fly about the air like a bird [and commit no sin]." He replied: "I will tell thee a fable. 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 the figs, 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 it?' 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, place it in the body, and judge then together." (*Sanhedrin* 91a–b)

The tale belongs to the well-known cycle of the friendship between the Roman Emperor Antoninus Pius (137–161 C.E.) and Rabbi Judah the Patriarch. The question of the historicity of these tales has hardly lacked for attention. The same can be said for the mysterious individual for whom Antoninus spoke and for the reflected relationship between the Jewish leadership and the Roman rulers. In this tale, Antoninus turns to Rabbi as to his own spiritual teacher with a theological-ethical question—the separation of body and soul and its ramifications for the doctrine of reward and punishment. Such questions intrigued Greek philosophers as well, and it can perhaps be assumed that the matter-of-fact formulation, different from the sages' customary manner of presenting such questions, indicates an external-Hellenistic source. The *mashal* is recounted by Rabbi in the very popular parable form: "a king of flesh and blood," but thematically it belongs to the category of narrative parables with a folk origin, as can be seen from its continuity of plot, its parallels, structure (the triad of protagonists), and the use of such "folk" types as the handicapped and thieves.¹¹⁵

The narrative situation reflected here is one of a ruler or philosopher who turns to Jewish sages for answers to theological questions. The latter customarily turned to the broad strata of society in an effort to simplify and concretize a philosophical problem. They would draw an example from everyday life to turn the philosophical problem into something basic and easily understood. Hence Rabbi Judah the Patriarch (assuming, for the moment, that the tale reflects an actual encounter) employs a typical folk parable to illustrate his response to the theological problem. The situation described here is of a meeting between two intellectuals, and the parable serves as proof in the philosophical discussion (as was often the case in Greek philosophy). Perhaps the discussion was public—before Rabbi Judah the Patriarch's students, for example—or maybe it was a private conversation between a Jewish sage and a Greek scholar, or maybe it never actually transpired outside the imagination of the sages, who fashioned it according to the accepted literary conventions of their time. This parable is one example of dozens of parables with similar opening statements, and they do not enable us to firmly define the event at which they were told.

The two most famous fables in rabbinic literature are included in the tales of R. Joshua ben Hananiah and Rabbi Akiva. R. Joshua told the fable of the Lion and the Egyptian partridge to calm the rebellion brewing in the Beit Rimon valley after the Romans reneged on their commitment to rebuild the Temple (*Genesis Rabbah* 64, 10); the fable of the fox and the fishes appears in Rabbi Akiva's tale of the death of the martyrs (*Berakhot* 61b). These two stories lay out public performance situations in which the fabulists (in these instances, two of the foremost *tannaim*) seek to influence the politics of their audiences. In the first tale, R. Joshua ben Hananiah uses the famous Aesopian fable ("The Wolf and the Heron") to persuade the raging Jewish crowd to accept the sages'

dictum not to revolt against the Romans. It is difficult to ascertain definitively whether or not the story truly reflects an actual historical event. It does, however, indicate the sages' view of the fable's function.

The fabulist made no essential changes to the tale to make it fit the situation he sought to reflect. The parallel between Rome's refusal to live up to its commitment to rebuild the Temple and the bone caught in the lion's throat is neither simple nor obvious. Perhaps the fabulist was under pressure, as the story implies, and he retrieved the fable from memory without the luxury of time to rework or match it to the situation at hand. In this case it can be stated that the fable worked (and worked well, if we are to take the tale at face value) not only because of its logical match to the epimythium, but primarily on account of its humor: the audience laughed at the naive partridge who believed the lion's promise, and in so doing recognized its own naivete in trusting Rome's assurances. Furthermore, the audience grasped the futility of the bird's desire to take revenge on the lion, analogous to a revolt against Rome. The fable's success hinges on the use of rhetorical means verging on demagoguery—that is, playing to the audience's emotions, as opposed to an attempt to persuade it by logic, on an intellectual level. The story argues that R. Joshua and the sages, who dispatched him to the task, never intended to sway the crowd with an analogy—the primary mechanism of the *mashal*—rather they set out to move them with humor and emotion.¹¹⁶

Rabbi Akiva was known for “publicly bringing gatherings together and engaging in the study of Torah.” He replies to Pappus ben Judah's entreaty not to disobey royal decree with his fable of the fox and the fishes. This performance event, too, was public, and Rabbi Akiva, in answering Pappus, was in fact addressing his many students who, according to the story, were present. Researchers' attempts to unearth parallels to this fable in Aesop's writings and beyond have turned up nothing. The fable's character, style, and structure notwithstanding, it was not taken from Aesopian literature, but apparently created originally as a Jewish fable. One proof of this is that, in response to the fox's suggestion to the fish that they come and live with him on dry land, where they would be safe from the fishermen, the fish answer: “Art thou the one that they call the cleverest of animals? Thou art not clever but foolish . . .” This statement indicates that the fabulist was quite familiar with the Aesopian stock of fables in which the fox is the archetype of wiliness and cleverness, an archetype he sought to belie. In other words, the fabulist functions here within the literary conventions of the Aesopian fable (hence the striking similarity to them), yet attempts to create a fable of antithetical content and message. As a result, the creatures do not behave predictably: the fox, so admired by the Greeks for his cunning, turns out not to be the truly clever character, whereas the meek and silent fishes are the archetype of the Jewish people. Here the process of Hebrew fable creation seems to peak with regard to the Greek parable: no more

retooling of readily available fables, but invention of new ones which fully reflect the sages' religious and social perceptions, with a clear connection to the form and character of the Aesopian fable.¹¹⁷

The traditional categorization of the *mashal* has generally been according to the type of protagonists: animal, vegetable, mineral, or human. Each of these categories is represented in the fables and parables presented herein: fewest in number are the fables of (normally) inanimate objects. Among these we saw the parable of the stone and the clay pot, and that of the creation of iron (the trees are apprehensive about iron's creation, as it will one day be used to chop them down, but God assures them that unless they join with the iron [as in an ax], it will be unable to harm them). Fables of plants are more numerous. The examples from this category presented earlier are the reed and the cedar; the straw, the stubble, and the wheat; and the rose among the thorns. Parables with human heroes are less well-represented, but to them we must add the hundreds of king-parables, whose protagonists are always human. But the most prevalent type of *mashal* in rabbinic literature features animals. Most of the examples discussed so far belong to that category, in direct proportion to their numbers among the narrative fables of the rabbinic period. However, this division of fables according to their protagonists is no longer justified. Those featuring human beings or animals may very well serve the same function, while others with like protagonists often serve entirely different functions. This said, it should also be mentioned that the division according to the protagonist can illuminate a central feature of the parable—its stereotypical character. The heroes of *mashal* always embody some trait, idea, or human type. Frequent use of stereotypical images facilitates brevity, condensation, and immediate absorption. Every reader or listener knows what the lion, the fox, or the sheep represents, and so the fabulist can use this common “code” to send home the fable's message. Closer examination of the *mashal*'s categorization according to protagonist type does not reveal creation or use of stereotypes in the manner of Aesopian fables. The straw, the stubble, and the wheat, for example, represent traits or types only within the confines of a single *mashal*. Before their function in that *mashal* is revealed, the audience of listeners could not divine what they stood for. The same holds true for the donkey, the foal, and the sow, and the camel and the dogs. The snake, for example, a protagonist of several fables, represents the Jewish people on one occasion, commanded by Moses to obey the elders and judges, yet another time the snake appears as a traitorous creature, and then elsewhere as faithful and appreciative. The figure of the lion is an exception. It always symbolizes a powerful and self-centered ruler (see the parables of the lion and the Egyptian partridge, and the lion who invited the beasts to a feast). The last example we looked at, Rabbi Akiva's fable of the fox and the fishes, is salient precisely for its awareness of its protagonists' stereotypes. In fact, the meaning of the fable arises from this awareness: we have a

reversal of the traits as shaped by Hellenistic culture. The fable meshes well into the orientation we identify with others from the rabbinic period—ignoring the stereotypes fashioned by Hellenistic literature or in opposition to them. It seems that alongside the ideological rejection of other values of Hellenistic culture, the stereotypes characteristic of its primary didactic genre were also rejected, and with them their attendant meanings and ideas. This is a prime example of matching literary means to an ideological orientation.

Rabbinic literature is full of animal tales that are not fables. They describe the world of animals without an allegorical-symbolic orientation. They reflect the manner in which people of the day viewed the animal kingdom or explained its unusual phenomena, but without a clear intent to discover a moral or make an analogy between them and the human world. The story with which we opened this section, the myth of Etana, is an animal tale, not a fable. It exhibits an anthropomorphic perception of the world. Historical studies show that animal tales preceded fables in the literature of the cultures that arose in the cradle of humanity. The fable is a literary form requiring of the narrator and audience a measure of abstraction and ability to analogize, in order to learn some lesson from the world of animals or inanimate objects. Such complex thought indicates a higher level of development than anthropomorphism, which tries to understand the world of animals within a humanity-based frame of reference. And it is, in fact, generally accepted that only after the primitive belief in the humanity of animals faded was the ethical conclusion, the epimythium, added to the tale, thereby transforming the tale and the animal myth from a simple belief into an ethical wisdom tale.¹¹⁸

Whether or not this theory of development is correct, rabbinic literature preserved animal tales alongside the many animal fables. These tales generally deal with unusual phenomena in the animal kingdom: the monstrous size of the beasts, the whale and the ram, the strength and roar of the mighty lion, the doe's miraculous foaling in spite of her narrow womb, or the wondrous way the ibex finds water in the parched desert. A typical animal tale follows:

[It is written, "When a man's ways please the Lord, He maketh even his enemies to be at peace with" (Prov. 16:7)] . . . R. Samuel b. Nahman said: The verse refers to the serpent. The school of Halafta b. Saul taught: A serpent is very fond of garlic. It once happened that a serpent went down into a house, where he found a dish of garlic, of which he ate and he then spat [his poison] into it. Now there was a snake in the house, which could not fight against it; but as soon as the first departed, it went and filled the dish with earth. (*Genesis Rabbah* 54a; *Tanhuma*, Buber edition, *Beshalach* 3, PT *Terumot* 8, 3)

The tale describes the world of animals in human terms: the dichotomy between the good hero and the bad, the concept of loyalty as perceived in the

human world, the saving of a man's life as the embodiment of good. While here the snakes do not speak as humans as in other tales (that of the Garden of Eden, for example), typical human characteristics are overtly assigned to them. Another characteristic feature of the animal tale is the attribution of their behavior and traits to Divine will. Indeed, in common to all the animal tales thus far mentioned is their pronounced conviction of God's greatness revealed through the wondrous traits of the animals—encapsulated by religious thinkers of the Middle Ages in the verse, "He has made his wonderful works to be remembered." (Pss. 111:4) The interest in the traits and deeds of animals in rabbinic literature is not presented as an end in itself, but because that way lies evidence of the Almighty's guidance of the world:

When Rabbi Akiva came to this verse he said: "O Lord, how manifold are thy works, etc. You have creatures living in the sea and living on land. Those that live in the sea would die if they were to go onto the land. And those that live on land would die if they were to go into the sea. [There are] those that live in flame and those that live in air. Those that live in flame would die if they went out into the air. And those that live in the air would die if they went into the flame. The place where one lives is the death of the other, and the place where the other lives is the death of [the first] and I say: O Lord, how manifold are thy works and them all, etc." (*Sifra shmimi* 5, 52, 2, Finkelstein edition, p. 218)¹¹⁹

Here we can indicate the dividing line between folk and learned culture of the rabbinic period, a line discernible in most of the examples of *mashal* cited above. Animal tales are among the most numerous in every culture's stock of folk literature; certainly the rabbinic period is no exception. The tales and fables which survived in the canonical literature reflect numerous and varied types which were part of the period's reservoir of tales. But when these animal tales appear in the rabbinic literature, they no longer serve (with a few exceptions) the folk culture which seeks to describe the animal world by means of human relationships and terms, to satisfy natural human curiosity about the world of these near-yet-different creatures. In the rabbinic literature, they and the natural world serve as a theological tool for the understanding of God's will.