CHAPTER 1

The Nature and Structure of Parables

בן אדם חוד חידה
ומשול משלים אל בית ישראל

Son of man, riddle a riddle and tell a parable to the people of
Israel

—Ezekiel 17:2

BACKGROUND

It is told of Solomon, the wise king considered by many the inventor of
dugma (illustration),[1] that in order to understand the words of the wise
and their dark sayings,[2] he said one parable after another and spoke one
word after another until he understood all of the words of the Torah.[3]
A thousand years after the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., when
Maimonides, the medieval Jewish philosopher, theorized about
parabolic discourse, he claimed that the key to understanding all that the
prophets have said and to the knowledge of truth is an understanding of
parables, of their import, and of the meaning of the words occurring in
them; he too went back to the saying of the ancient sages.[4]

   Maimonides states that his goal is to explain the meanings of certain
terms in the prophetic sayings, and pointedly, he proceeds to theorize for
his reader about parables and parabolic discourse. To elucidate the mat-
ter further, Maimonides quotes the scriptural proverb: "A word fitly
spoken is like 'apples of gold in setting of silver' [*ketapuhei zahav
bemaskiyyoth shel kesef*, בתפוחי זהב במשכיות של כסף]."[5] And even though
Maimonides claimed earlier that he addresses this treatise to the ones
who "have philosophized" and "have knowledge of the sciences," he
analyzes the saying very thoroughly, and uses the trope of the apples of
gold in the filigree to illustrate how parables should be understood. We
are told the following:

> Hear now an elucidation of the thought that the Sage has set forth. The
> term *maskiyyoth* denotes filigree traceries; I mean to say in which there
> are apertures with very small eyelets, like the handwork of silversmiths.
> They are so called because a glance penetrates through them; for in the
> [Aramaic] *translation* of the Bible the Hebrew term *va-yashaqeph*—
> [meaning, he "glances"]—is translated *va-istekhe*.[6] The Sage accord-

ingly said that a saying uttered with "a view to two meanings" [my emphasis] is like an apple of gold overlaid with silver filigree having very small holes.

Now see how marvelously this dictum describes a well-construed parable. For he says that in a saying that has two meanings—he means an external and an internal one—the external meaning ought to be as beautiful as silver, while its internal meaning ought to be more beautiful than the external one, the former being in comparison to the latter as gold is to silver. Its external meaning also ought to contain in it something that indicates to someone considering it what is to be found in its internal meaning, as happens in the case of an apple of gold overlaid with silver filigree having very small holes. When looked at from a distance or with imperfect attention, it is deemed to be an apple of silver; but when a keen-sighted observer looks at it with full attention, its interior becomes clear to him and he knows that it is of gold.[7]

Subsequently, Maimonides draws a parallel with what he calls "the obscure parables" in the books of prophecy that have two meanings as well: one with respect to the welfare of human societies and the other, an internal, more profound one which contains wisdom related to truth "as it is."[8] This particular distinction facilitates further speculations about the very act of telling someone *that* a narrative is a parable.

Insightfully, Maimonides observes that to tell someone that a text is a parable is like "removing a screen from between the eye and a visible object," but, disappointingly for us, he also cautions his reader "not to inquire into all details occurring in the parables nor to wish to find signification corresponding to all of them," because in so doing he either drifts aside from the parable's intended subject, or goes into what Maimonides calls "exaggerated fantasies." He assumes, that there is an *a priori* intended meaning and that digression is always ill fated. "Regarding parables," in the words of the great Jewish philosopher, Maimonides, the purpose should nevertheless, "always be to know the whole that was intended to be known."[9]

DELINEATION OF STUDY

Maimonides, known also as Rabbenu Moshe ben Maimon, promptly goes on to expound other philosophical matters and, unfortunately, never teaches to "the perplexed" how the latter could know "the whole that was intended for him to know" about parabolic discourse. And so, some nine hundred years later, we return to the genteel and painstaking art of deciphering "golden apples concealed in silver filigree," an art once mastered by our undisclosing masters and philosophers.

"Why don't our present leaders speak in parables?"

One wonders for a fleeting moment about such a matter and quickly realizes that parables remain, since very early times, as puzzling as they are suggestive and that they require uncommon skill to decode. When a parable is meant to remain cryptic for someone, it will remain so even after all the cycles of decoding. We mean to say that a receiver will not be able to make the correct connection between different parts of the parable, since the narrative's unity and coherence is actually construed by the parabolizer *in* space-time of the parable. On the other hand, if a parable is "intended" for an addressee, he will understand it and, at times, decoding will be easy, even become superfluous. For example, when the disciples ask Jesus why he speaks to "them" [his disciples] in parables, the answer is an additional parable:

> To you it was given to know the secrets of the Kingdom of Heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to him who has will more be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away. This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear nor do they understand.[10]

An ancient narrative form, parables can be found in the African, the Hindu, the Chinese, and the Persian oral traditions. The Babylonian exile has been most assuredly a strong catalyst in the exposure of the Jewish people to the Hindu and Persian mythology and folklore.[11]

Early good parables, like the folktale, tend to be simple and concise with a clear beginning, a crisis, and a well-defined ending, as miniature tales told to educate the masses.[12] These early parables mirrored a mode of existence in the world that allowed man [and woman] to gain knowledge from the wise and instilled in him hope to enter the realm of absolute presence in the world to come.

Ancient parables were thoroughly interpreted by their addressor. In *Jesus and His Jewish Parables,* Bradford Young suggests that the *darshan,* the expounder of parables, reformulated many of the classic answers to the question he was pondering in new contexts and according to new teaching concerns. Following Flusser and Young, David Stern asserts that when the *darshan* was called upon to compose a *mashal,* a parable, for a particular verse he was able to draw upon stereotypical elements that his people enjoyed and understood, because his audience was part of an existing semeiosis.[13] The parabolist used parabolic speech mainly as an efficient tool to communicate a message, to "interpellate"[14] the listener, and point him in the right direction in regard to religious belief and to the art of living.

While I acknowledge the importance of parabolic tales to their respective cultures and their relevance for the study of folklore,[15] I focus

here on a single path that traces the scriptural parables and their modifications up to modern times. Specifically, I investigate the transformation of the "apples of gold in their silver settings,"[16] into Kafkaesque, undecipherable "imperial messages" (termed so after of one of Kafka's parables[17]) and reveal changes in the scriptural parables, the synoptic Gospels, and modern parables. Against this backdrop, I read the medieval Kabbalist and Chassidic parables. In passing, I show that philosophers, medieval sages, and even some modern writers, such as Agnon, use at times parables as an embellishment to their personal style, and at times, simply as homage to the old sages and ancient cherished traditions.

The parables I examine in this study, many of which have ancient Near-Eastern sources, appear interwoven in the Hebrew Scriptures, in the New Testament, and, later, in modern literary texts. In dealing concomitantly with the complex cultural milieu of parables and the transformations incurred in this narratives over time, I reveal to the reader a number of insights about their specific nature and structure, while at the same time I illuminate narrative, thematic, and rhetoric differences as time progresses.

PARABOLIC ELEMENTS

Parables in literature have been defined as short allegorical stories designed to teach a moral lesson in an oblique way. Parables have been customarily defined in terms of three parameters: in terms of teaching, which places them next to pedagogical discourse, in terms of their allegoricity, which likens them to all tropological discourse, and in terms of obscuring a truth, which brings them close to rhetoric and to philosophical discourse. Yet, despite all similarities to other discourses, we simply "know" that parables are not philosophical texts, nor are they truly pedagogical manuals. Everyone seems able to recognize a parable for what it is, namely, a literary discourse with an easily discernable identity and a specificity of its own.

Thomas Aquinas claims that, "He speaks enigmatically who speaks by ways of parables." He also notices that, while these narratives present an impediment to understanding, the unlearned learn better through parables in many other ways.[18] Evidently, this graspable "doubleness" characterizing parabolic narratives has always been most confounding.

One realizes soon that at the core of their discursive makeup exists a signal that propels the addressee into two equally powerful, yet opposing, directions. One learns that on the one hand, parables, a primitive communicatory force, invoke elementary passions and short-circuit the

path to understanding by putting the addressee in touch immediately with a primeval "ought," or "must do," an early, inbred in humans, deontic mode (performance as obligation). On the other hand, parables baffle the mind because, as David Stern succinctly puts it, "their messages are allusive and their means indirect."[19]

A paradox is invariably created in the mind of a parable teller. The parabolist must take the story from reality and refer to the real world. At the same time, he has to go beyond reality, and invoke the all-powerful "Other" authority (that of God and the Scriptures, in antiquity), in order to obtain what is needed, namely a moral lesson that will influence the listener.[20]

And yet, despite their inherent doubleness, in the past, parables have been a most efficient and convenient tool in the service of those who propounded them for ideological purposes. In ancient times, these narratives were used extensively when an important message had to be delivered, or a critical point had to be made and explicit, "straight," language did not suffice.

Why so?

Because, in essence, parabolic discourse proposes a "likeness" between two dissimilar elements (life events or phenomena and verses of the Scriptures) and disguises with linguistic craft the "seam" in its discursive texture. Understanding (extradiscursively) the pragmatic relation established between the two disparate narrative parts in the parable is therefore the crux of the matter. In fact, in a number of recent studies it was argued most convincingly that the *nimshal*, the moral lesson at the end of a parable, is actually primordial, preexists in fact the *mashal*, and in no way should it be considered only an ornamental appendix, an "epimythium," as some New Testament scholars like Jeremias, Jülicher, Via, Dodd have claimed.[21]

THE PARABOLIC MODE

The following parable (attributed in *Pesikta Rabbati* to Rabbi Berachiah Hakohen Berabbi[22] and elsewhere to a Rabbi Levi, a third generation Palestinian Amora rabbi considered a master of the *Aggadah*), we learn how the parabolist uses parabolic speech to convey a certain ideology to his addressee.

R. Berachiah Hakohen Berabbi said:

To what may Israel be compared?
    To one who had a son whom he placed on his shoulder and took to the market. There, when the son saw a desirable object, he said to his father, Buy it for me, and his father bought for him what he wanted

the first time he asked, the second time, and the third. But then, when the son saw someone whom he asked, Have you seen my father? He said to his son: You fool, you are astride my shoulder, whatever you wish I buy for you, and yet you ask that man, "Have you seen my father?" What did the father do then? He threw his son from his shoulder, and a dog came and bit the son. (This sentence dos not appear in this version but appears in *Pesikta de Rav Kahana*, where the parable is attributed to R. Levi an Amoraic rabbi.) Thus, after Israel went out of Egypt, the Holy One encompassed them with seven clouds of glory, as is said "He compassed him about, He cared for him" (Deuteronomy 32:10). They asked for manna: He gave it. For quail: He gave them. After he gave all that they asked, they proceeded to ruminate "Is the Lord among us, or not?" (Exodus 17:7) the Holy One said to them: You ruminate as to My presence in your midst? As you live, I shall make you aware of it. Here is a dog to bite you. And who was the dog? Amalek, for the very next verse in Exodus says, "Then came Amalek" (Exodus 17:8). Thus it is said, "Remember" (Deuteronomy 25:17).[23]

This is an original way of expressing an ideology which insisted on the special relationship between God and his people Israel. The parabolist first shows the ubiquity of God, and his paternal interest in his people, while Israel is depicted as an authentic brat who misbehaves and forgets his God. As in Jesus' parables (Matthew 7:7–11) and (Luke 11:9–13), the son makes demands upon his father and all of his demands are readily met. The parabolist invites the listener to make an inference. The argument is (קל וחומר, *argumentum a minori ad maius*), that if a father is so very generous, how much the more so will God be. This parabolic argument puts God in glorious light. The child [of God] on the strong and protective shoulders of his father [God]) forgets him [God], and so, the father throws him off. The dog who bites the child represents Amalek that is discussed in the antecedent homily. The addressee must have been persuaded. Clearly our sermoneur felt that, to tell of the intimacy between God and his people, he ought to speak in parable, a mode he found both elegant and poignant.

ETYMOLOGY

The term "parable" comes to us from the Greek *parabolē*, which is derived in turn from the verbal form *paraballō*, which can be translated as "put side by side," or "parallel to" or "comparing item 'a' with item 'b.'" The term designating the prototype midrashic parable[24] is *mashal*, and it was commonly rendered by the Greek *parabolē*, or *paroimia*. For other than synoptic gospels, the term *parabolē* is also used for allegory, riddle, exemplum or symbol.

The etymology of the word *mashal* was most pertinently derived by L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner from the Akkadian root *masalu*, which means to "resemble," or "be like."[25] The rabbinic midrashic word *mašal,* with its variant *matlā* can also mean any of the following: a riddle, an allegory, an oracle, a wise saying, or a proverb.[26] A shift in the connotation of the word must have taken place in rabbinic parables. The rabbis have extended the meaning of the word to encompass a story parable as well.

Presumably, early parables were designed to be told *aggadaically,* namely in the very process of storytelling. The earliest parables were spontaneous improvisations and were a part of the oral teaching. Only later did they become fixed and written. The Dead Sea Scrolls describe in detail the practice of the sect to have someone expounding regularly the teaching of the Scriptures in an unrehearsed manner. Parables were shaped upon the scaffold of artistry, *technē,* long before they became a literary genre to investigate.[27]

The etymology of the word *mashal* in Hebrew has two distinct sets of meaning: "to rule" and "to resemble." In Hebrew, to "tell tales" (למשול משלים), means definitely both to "rule," and to "illustrate," "liken," and "propound."[28] This double connotation must have doubtlessly frustrated the translators and later must have caused great interpretational complications and confusion among the Church fathers as well as the early scholars of synoptic gospels who had to read the texts already translated into Greek and interpret the word *parabolē* (obviously different from the Hebrew word *mashal* but with an equally complex connotation).

Early parabolic narratives were highly stylized and had a stereotypical format.[29] The classic parables, also called *meshalim,* had, commonly, two distinct parts following a short introductory formula: a story proper, and a moral lesson. The story proper in a rabbinic text is called in Hebrew a *mashal,* and the moral lesson is called the *nimshal.* In Hebrew, both words are derived from the same root *M.S.L.* and offer a graceful, categorial, and phonological unity. It must be noted that the English translation of these two words (the Greek version as well) fails to capture the elegance and the linguistic range that they capture in Hebrew by representing different aspectual forms of the same grammatical categories.

EARLY PARABOLIC DISCOURSE

Modern discourse analysts have, for a long time, concentrated their creative energies solely on the study of gospel parables, which date back to

the first century C.E. and are attributed to Jesus. Yet, interestingly, parabolic discourse not different from the one in the synoptic narratives may be traced back to the Hebrew Scriptures. Tucked away among the verses of sacred literature, are early biblical parables[30] and some excellent early rabbinic parabolic narratives that quietly preexisted the synoptic gospels.[31]

With the destruction of the First Temple (586 B.C.E.) and then the Second Temple (70 C.E.), profound historic and ideological crises befell the Jewish people. Jews found themselves frequently cast out of the land but, even more tragically, they felt as though the "divine presence" had departed from Jerusalem.[32] The fulfillment of the *mitzvot* (commandments) became in many instances forbidden, or made very difficult, and worship in the Temple had ceased. Despite these hardships, most of the nation remained faithful to its religion and was frequently ready to rebel, or undergo martyrdom.

The continuous occupation by various conquerors and the distrust of those ruthless conquerors (the Romans in particular), necessitated a kind of language that could hide both the ancestral knowledge and the ancestral practice, while still allowing the people to learn about them (for example, the *amidah*, or silent meditation, signals to us the existence of coded speech and behavior).[33]

Early Jewish parables reflect the religious heritage, culture, language, and social concerns of the Jewish people during the Second Temple period. These ancient Jewish parables must have been used in public sermons on Sabbaths or festivals, and only later regularized and written down. Like the Greek *ainos*, a literary genre that includes fables like those by Aesop and several Odyssean stories, a number of *Midrashic meshalim* contain anthropomorphisms and were being told to forewarn the addressee of the real danger of certain actions, such as rebelling and protesting against the oppressors. Some parables have a certain pattern of association with lower orders.[34]

As Fishbane correctly asserts, exegesis and parable arise out of a practical crisis of some sort—the incomprehensibility of a word or a rule or the failure of the covenantal tradition to engage its audience, and parables, like annotations, allusions, and other synthetical reasoning, come to engage further the audience. A rich legacy of graspable parabolic symbols was available to the addressee who could select them freely when needed.[35]

Given the characteristic changes experienced in oral transmission, as well as a typical loss of material due to historical, sociopolitical, or even biological factors, some of the very early parables are lacking segments of the moral lesson, or the introductory formulaic structures, or both, a phenomenon quite prevalent in the evolution of an oral literary form.[36]

With the fall of Jerusalem (the land, the Temple and the king gone), when the only contact with the holy left for Israel was *the divine word*, the people yearned to reconcile themselves with the God whose word they had continuously violated. Repentance was conceived of now as compliance with YHWH's commands. Israel's religious self-confidence having been shattered, it was as if they could reestablish their relationship with God upon *the written word*.

This fear may also explain the sudden feverish compilation and canonization of sacred literature. One after the other, the Torah, the Prophets, and other sacred writings underwent canonization. For example, the Pentateuch was canonized during the Babylonian exile. Upon their return to the land, a group of scholars headed by Ezra brought to Jerusalem a new progressive attitude.[17]

During the Golden Age of Israel's creativity in pre-exilic times, the religion of Israel exerted no influence on its surroundings. Later, in the Second Temple, however, in its own fervor to find "grace," Judaism actually agitated the gentile world. Hence, its influence gradually spread, until by Hellenistic times there were myriads of converts and "God fearing" among the nations, as Kaufman calls them, and an ideological battle raged between Judaism and paganism.[18]

The Jews took up the task of eradicating idolatry from the world. After considerable struggle, proselytism evolved in Judaism religious. The belief in resurrection, in judgment, and divine retribution in the afterlife gradually came into being. Jews began to speak with passion of "the world to come" as the world of truth and oppose it to "this world." Jeremiah's words reflect this budding idea of a better man for a better world. According to the Scriptures, Jeremiah said there that the redeeming act of God waits upon man's initiative, man must first choose God.[39]

The split between those who conformed to this belief and chose God and those who did not is accurately depicted in various scriptural texts. The most poignant examples of synoptic text seem to be the parables related to Jesus's christological teachings, where he insists that one must choose God at every moment.

Jesus' preaching and his parabolic teachings of the vision of the New Covenant can be easily understood in this context. His parables, though thoroughly transformed and elaborated by the Early Church, can still be easily dated and related to the issue of choice of divinity and etched as part of the ancient Judaic practices of that time, which are reflected in other rabbinic texts as well.[40] Indeed, while a precise dating of these ancient Jewish parables seems almost impossible,[41] as narratives, they show a vitality and a sophistication that is hard to ignore, and an affinity to synoptic speech that is impossible to disregard.

Even a quick glance at an early parable reveals an architectonic very

similar to those attributed to Jesus, with a few irregularities.⁴² These
parables do not have a scriptural verse as their ending, nor serve a spe-
cific exegetical function, the way the later rabbinic parables do. At the
same time, one cannot help noticing that these narratives are of similar
literary excellence and beauty. Below is an poignant example of how the
Rabbis clothed the divine refusal to Moses's plea to enter the Promised
Land in the form of a pastoral parable:

> The Holy One, blessed be He, said unto Moses: How canst thou desire
> to enter the land? This might be likened unto a shepherd going out to
> tend the royal sheep. The sheep were taken captive. When the shepherd
> thereafter sought to gain admittance to the royal palace the king said
> unto him, "If thou enter now will not the people [seeing thee uncon-
> cerned] say that thou art to blame for the capture of the sheep?" Even
> so was it here. The Holy One, blessed be He, said unto Moses: It is to
> thy praise that thou broughtest out 600,000 of them, but now that
> thou didst bury them in the wilderness and art bringing in another gen-
> eration it will be said that the generation of the wilderness has no por-
> tion in the world to come [hence thou didst leave them behind].
> Remain therefore at their side and enter with them, as it is written,
> "There a portion [i.e., a grave] was reserved for the Lawgiver that he
> might come of the Lord."⁴³ Hence Scripture says "Ye shall not bring
> *this* congregation into the land,"⁴⁴ but the congregation [sc. resur-
> rected] that came out with thee from Egypt.⁴⁵

Analyzing the linguistic characteristics mentioned above and the
structural idiosyncracies of early parables such as this one may help us,
in the future, to date with more precision the early rabbinic parables and
to reclaim a parabolic tradition, which clearly has preceded and may
have parented the acclaimed synoptic Gospels.

SYMBOLICITY

Parables are told to represent reality also "symbolically"; therefore, in
order to proceed with our analysis, we wish to review for our reader the
notion of symbol. In his classical essay entitled "On Symbols," Umberto
Eco argues convincingly against the Peircean classical definition. To say
that a symbol is "something" that represents "something else" by virtue
of an anagogical correspondence or a continued system of terms, each
of which represents an element of another system is, according the Eco,
at best a very vague explanation for what a symbol is.⁴⁶ A symbol, claims
Eco, must be seen primarily as a textual modality, because it is first and
foremost produced textually. In other words, to Eco, a symbol is above
all a (textual) replica. To the extent to which parables "symbolize," or

represent an event "symbolically," it follows that parables too are mere textual replicas, or "textual strategies," and their symbolicity must be taken into account.

RHETORICAL ART AND PARABOLIC DISCOURSE

Parables are, above all, a fine rhetorical artifact. That a particular parable means something specific to someone is largely the work of auto-reflexivity. That is to say that the meaning of a parable is essentially the by-product of that parable's internal cohesion, and its cohesion, one should not forget, is the veiled artifact of a skilled craftsman of parables. In fact, parables, most vividly the *Midrashic* ones, assume that the reader/addressee/listener knows *a priori* the literal text as well as the metatext upon which the parabolist builds the parabolic system of tropes with its intricate system of transformations.

The parable's movement of displacement from one time-space frame to another generates an isotopic (analogical) world into which it implodes, and syphons in as it were, the addressee and keeps him occupied with complex processes of decoding. The parabolic movement is either a circular movement that eventually brings its addressee back to the parable's starting text, or it regresses into itself, and thus, as is the case in modern parables, it "absorbs" the reader (see analysis of the Parable of the City of Tamara). In both cases, the addressee enters a uniquely complex activity of interpreting.

The receiver of a parable is taken from one point to another and from one narrational segment to another in a chain of textual substitutions with the false understanding that all the segments are logically derived from one another. In reality, the propulsory force in the decoding "game," where a parabolist explains a text by offering a parable, is the receiver's own desire. And the syntax of that desire manifested in language as moving energy is made visible at the level of discourse.[47]

Parabolic narratives as adroit linguistic artifacts can be better understood in the light of Aristotle's views about rhetoric as an art. In *The Art of Rhetoric*, Aristotle claims that orators or, in this case the propounders of parables, usually persuade not by laying down their 'Art,' (τέχνη), literally 'tricks' or impersonations of rhetoricians, but by establishing "the true, or apparently true" from the means of persuasion applicable to each individual subject. Aristotle goes on to say that as a persuasive art, in the sense of craft, "Rhetoric assumes" (literally "slips into the garb of") the character of Politics, with all its implications.

All orators produce belief, Aristotle further claims, by employing "as proofs," examples (*enthymemes*) and "nothing else." Orators per-

suade, asserts Aristotle, because that which is persuasive "appears to be proved" by propositions that "are convincing."[48] In this respect, parabolic discourse belongs to the 'art' of rhetoric *par excellence*. We suggest that parables are the place where the competence of the pupil and that of the master is being construed. Indeed, parables convince only after the shrewd parabolist convinces, namely, after he brings in the examples that sway and seduce the addressee. In the parables attributed to Jesus, for example, quite clearly the seduction takes place only after the parabolist has evidenced in his persuasive speech his moral character in order to charm the addressee.

One can go one step further and claim, as Nietzsche does, that there is no non-rhetorical language. The concept of "truth," Nietzsche tells us, is "a mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms. Truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they *are* illusions."[49] Eugenio Donato also reminds us that:

> Telle est la loi de la représentation ou de la représentation ici plus que jamais sont indissociable: s'y représent ce qui ne se présente pas et ne peut pas se présenter c'est à dire s'y représente ce qui s'est toujours déjà représenté.[50]

As rhetorical devices, parables produce desire in both the addressor and the addressee who become willing to continue their condition, namely to go on decoding parables. They instill in the addressee a genuine passion for the game of finding out their "truth" and put him in a state of desire. The addressee is seduced by the parabolist and his parabolic game of simulation in which there are no answers, only a rhetoric return to an "original text."[51] To Derrida, who forcefully assaulted our notion of origins, this is of utmost significance. "In the difference between the original and the second tablets[52] and the repetition . . . our own acts are secondary and exegetical," he claims. "Yet, this negativity in God, is our freedom, our transcendence and the verb which cannot find its originary purity except in the possibility of the Question."[53]

We suggest that the passion aroused in the seduced addressee in the process of parabolizing causes him to believe the truth of the parable, that is in actuality construed *in* the parable, and to perform *as* a believer. To that extent, the parabolic narrative creates the conditions of possibility of its circulation as a system of signs and as value.[54] That is to say, as a system of signs, a parable has the power to duplicate itself, to repeat itself, essentially become a "topos" without a center. At the same time, a parable "helps the addressor in his quest to escape the closure of the 'identical.'"[55]

In erasing the distance between the original text (the emitted narrative) and its own interpretation, parabolic discourse puts into question

the entire apparatus upon which the discourse of knowledge is founded, namely the operation of immediate intuitive understanding with its internal lack (*prima facie,* the parable makes no sense) and the reactivation of the process in the shape of individual speech (the introductory question in rabbinic parables: "Why do we say that . . . ?").[56]

THEMATICS

Parables have very distinct thematics. Many of the themes present in parables reflect the intention of the particular parabolist to move, or to sway the addressee in a particular way, by focusing on a complaint (blame), apologia, or consolation (praise, eulogy), usually presented in a polemic context. A parable may be told to exonerate man before man, and man before God, or to exculpate God before man. An accusatory parable is written for the same purpose. "The Prince and His Nursemaids" can be interpreted as blaming Israel for not being close to the Torah:

> A parable, to what may the matter be compared? To a king who had a young son. He entrusted him to two nursemaids. One occupied herself with harlotry and the other with witchcraft. The king commanded them to give his son milk but not to teach him their ways. Thus the Holy One blessed be He warned Israel concerning the Egyptians and the Canaanites, "Do not learn from their ways," and He said, "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it."[57]

In this early parable, the first nursemaid is identified with the Egyptians and the second with the idolatrous Canaanites. One can read this parable as a disguised blaming of the people of Israel for having failed to observe the Torah and its precepts.[58]

Parabolizers craftily take into account the addressees' responses to their parables when construing them. Flexible rhetorico-poetical devices, their parables are made to mean different things to different readers. The parables are being "tailored" for a particular occasion by syncretizing (combining) many different disparate texts to produce the same effects. In this fashion, parables tell obliquely about underground ideologies or rituals, communicate secrets, dangerous opinions, are instruments of praise, blame, or reproof, apology, or eulogy.[59]

For example, in the desire to demonstrate that two particular verses in the Scriptures should indeed be placed together, Rabbi Akkiva composed the following blame parable and syncretized two completely disparate images, that of the daughter of the priest, and the centurion. The parables, "The Centurion Who Became a Deserter" reads:

Here is a parable. To what may it be compared? Unto a centurion who had served his term but failed to enter his primipilate (to which he would have been promoted in due time), and fled. The king commanded that the head of the deserter be cut off. Before the execution, the king said: "Fill a vessel with golden denarii and carry it before him, and say unto him: "If you had behaved like your colleagues, you would have received the vessel of golden denarii, and [preserved] your soul, but now, you have lost both your soul and your money!"

So also with the daughter of a priest who has played the harlot; the high-priest goes in front of her and says to her, "If you had behaved in the way which your mothers had behaved, you may have been found worthy to become the ancestress of a high priest in like manner [like me]." But now you have lost both yourself and your honor!"

Thus these two sections, "And the daughter of any priest . . ." (Leviticus 21:9) and "The priest who is chief among his brethren . . ." (Leviticus 21:10), are brought together.[60]

God and Man

"The Parable of the King's Banquet," attributed to the famous Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai, thematizes the king and the kingdom:

Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai said: This may be compared to a king who summoned his servants to a banquet without appointing a time. The wise ones adorned themselves and sat at the door of the palace, ["for,"] said they, "is anything lacking in a royal palace?" The fools went about their work, saying, "can there be a banquet without preparation?" Suddenly the king desired [the presence of] servants: the wise entered adorned, while the fools entered soiled. The king rejoiced at the wise but was angry with the fools. "Those who adorned themselves for the banquet," ordered he, "let them sit eat and drink. But those who did not adorn themselves for the banquet, let them stand and watch."[61]

The theme of the king and his kingdom can be found in numerous rabbinic parabolic texts and prevails in the Gospels as well. This theme, like many other popular themes in the Scriptures, is taken up later by medieval and premodern mystics and chassids (a new context and for different purposes). We use the concept of theme in Beardsley's sense, namely, as an idea relatable to the real world that can be extrapolated from a narrative.[62] This notion of theme is different from the notion of *sjužet* of a tale mentioned by the renowned Russian formalist Juri Lottman or the notion of *sjužet* investigated by Vladimir Propp in *The Morphology of the Folktale*.[63]

To illustrate a theme's function, we probe the parable attributed to Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai that problematizes the relation between God

and man. This parable indicates to the addressee the proper behavior man has to display vis-à-vis his God, and the proper preparations he should make in this life, in order to rejoice and encounter the divine in the world to come. Like dozens of other parabolic narratives with the same theme, this parable brings to the foreground the notion of an ever-lasting bond between God and his people.

The parable thematizes man's proper demeanor vis-à-vis the Lord and helps the addressee learn how to conduct himself correctly in this world. In this fashion, it empowers its addressee and guides him in his preparation (and in his quest) for the world to come, which appealingly and significantly is called in Hebrew עולם אמה, the world of truth. Finally, this parable thematizes the everlasting existence of God and of the world to come, which *is* the world of truth, and in essence reveals to man the wisdom in dealing with the Lord, even though it does it obliquely.

The World to Come

Scriptural texts tell very accurately about the circumstances in which each parable was told, thus greatly facilitating our task of establishing intertextual connections and disguised narrational correspondences. In the following example, we learn in the pre-parabolic text that the following parable was told by R. Johanan ben Zakkai on his deathbed. "The Parable of the Crossroads" has as its theme his predicament at the moment of his death:

> Then Rabbi ben Zakkai said: What is [my] situation like? It is like a man who was traveling all day on a highway. Towards dusk he reaches a crossroads, with one road leading to a settlement, the other to the wilderness, but he did not know which road to take.
>
> So with me כך אני: All my life I have traveled upon one road, and now I stand at a crossroads: One road leads to life in the world to come, the other to shame and everlasting contempt, and I know not where they are leading me—whether to life in the world to come, or to shame and everlasting abhorrence.[64]

The parable holds first a complaint by the learned rabbi who, at the end of his journey in this world, finds himself at crossroads and does not know how to decide in order to take "the right turn." But the parabolist also *praises* the rabbi at a deeper narrative level. He focuses his attention on the honesty and sincerity of the noble sage who is not afraid to be remembered by his pupils, as one who is pondering the impenetrable mysteries of the divine even as he dies. Lastly, the parable is meant *to console* the simple man who eventually finds himself afraid before his own death. By a typical scriptural induction קל וחמר implies the parable, if the great sage R. Johanan ben Zakkai was confounded before his

death, how much more perplexed should we simple mortals be.

Such parables were told to provide the reader/addressee with strength at a crucial moment in life, when man senses a most profound alienation, at the moment of his death. The wisdom how to leave this world, how to part with our friends and foes, is possibly as difficult to attain as it is fundamental; therefore it needed to be taught by our great sages.

The editor who included the parable of Rabbi Johanan Ben Zakkai in the volume of *Semachot* wished to teach his addressee that, to a certain extent, we remain blind and lame in the King's garden and are required to learn how to transcend our inadequacies even on our last day in this world.[65]

In the congenial shade of this note we should mention that the same themes and rhetoric can be found in the parables of "the Kingdom," attributed to Jesus. Even a cursory reading of "The Parable of The Lamp and the Lampstand" (Matthew 5:14–16), "The Reed and the Wind" (Matthew 13:1–9; Luke 8:4–8), "The Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen" (Matthew 21:33–46; Mark 12:1–12; Luke 20:9–19), establishes multiple affinities with the rabbinic parables.

Of This World

We recognize in the parable of R. Johanan ben Zakkai a masterly narrative construct and a style altogether similar with "The Parable of The Great Supper" (Matthew 22:1–14, Luke 14:15–24), or "The Parable of the Sower" (Matthew 13:1–9, Mark 4:1–9 Luke 8:4–8) and other brilliantly construed parables attributed to Jesus.

"The Parable of the Sower" in the Gospel of Matthew brings to the foreground the theme of the proper posture when receiving wisdom. The parable belongs to the rhetorical mode of praise and blame, and speaks at the same time to different types of addressees. When Jesus is asked what the parable means (in the post-parabolic text, Matthew 13:53–54), he gives a perplexing answer: "After the parables which he spoke to the people which *only the apostles understood* [my emphasis]. . . ." In the Epistle of Barnabas XVII, 2, Jesus says, "of things present and things to come . . . you will not understand because they are hid in parables."

Yet, Jesus, like the other ancient rabbis who propounded parables, begins immediately to explain what he means by his comments, and to our mind, theorizes about parabolic discourse. First Jesus tells that "to those outside everything is parable," and "they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand."[66] This statement would seem strange and confounding had Jesus not proceeded immedi-

ately to explicate the parables in detail after the parabolic statement, and interpret thoroughly their meaning. We tend to agree with David Stern who contends that Jesus' claim that parabolic speech is "not-understood" was only a rhetoric ploy enabling him to distinguish his disciples from the non-disciples.[67] Jesus pretended and simulated to show lack of understanding by the "others." This modality of speech has been recognized in Semiotics and interpretative semantics as a clever elocutionary device and was termed *faire-croire*, or "make believe." A common logical-linguistic modality, "make-believe" is an important aspect of language use in the process of modalization of discourse.[68] The text of "The Parable of the Sower" reads:

> That very same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat there; and the crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables saying: "A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they had not much soil, and had no depth of soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched; since they had no root they withered away. Other seeds fell upon thorns, and the thorn grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundred fold, some sixty, some thirty.
> He who hears let him hear.[69]

This parable thematizes yet another kind of wisdom. It deals with the proper way to acquire it and use it *after* it has been imparted to us. Jesus, our synoptic parabolist, teaches that it is not sufficient to "sow," namely to disseminate knowledge. That "the sower" went out and "sowed," does not mean yet that those seeds will "bear fruit," namely that wisdom will be acquired and that action will be taken by the addressee. In this light, getting wisdom requires the addressee's own assertion and energetic intervention by an explicit action. Moreover, wisdom has to be spread on fitting, "good soil" for it "to take root," a "solid root," declares Jesus.

The scriptural verse that organizes the texture of this parable, "He who hears let him hear," is told in order to intensify the double meaning sustained by the narrative, but also to bring support and authority to it. The listener is invited not to be a mere listener; he is called upon to be a "proper hearer" of the parable and taught to discern between parabolic texts and their divine metatexts. The addressee is asked to learn to "hear," namely understand and discern this parabolist's wisdom from that of others, that is to say "hear" Jesus's teaching as a very special kind of teaching: christocentric and eschatological, addressed to a particular listener who should become a disciple and a convert.

PARABOLIC TEXT AND CONTEXT

Parables commonly do not stand alone the way folktales do and parabolists, like other storytellers, had to access very quickly a preexisting pool of information.[70] Parables, therefore, were told or written in a special ideologico-political context and knowing the context and the metatext for a particular parable facilitated considerably the task of the interpreter.[71] It must be said, however, that being too intimate with a context caused the interpreter to have tunnel vision, and his interpretations seemed narrowed at times by his own ideology.

In looking over the text of "The Parable of the Spoiled Son" we distinguish a particular context that inscribes narrationally the events before the beginning of the parable. The introductory story deals with the reasons why Amalek could have been permitted by God to attack Israel, his chosen people. In this case, a *proem*,[72] the introductory part of a homily, sets the scene for the parable, which is attributed to a certain rabbi. The introductory formulaic structure found customarily in rabbinic parables follows immediately: "What may this [X] be compared to?" In addition to this introductory formula, one may see elsewhere the simpler structure: "What does it resemble?" (למה דומה הדבר)

The proto-morphic, the original morphemic particle, *it* (*zeh*, זה), or the *thing* (*hadavar*, הדבר) are made to be co-referential with a sentential or morphemic element in the introductory story. In prototypical early parable, next follows the story proper, also called the *mashal*, which is connected structurally to the second part by a morpheme. The [morpheme] particle *thus, therefore* (*lekhen*, כך) and other rhetoric-morphemic variants of the above introduce the second part of the parable, or what we usually call in Hebrew *the nimshal*, or the moral lesson.

Special attention needs to be given to the *nimshal*. We must deal with its primacy and its actuality, because parables use rhetoric to generate a connective chain of appearances. The cycle of rhetorical *faire-croire* (make believe) follows a well-known pattern. First, the story proper appears to create the moral lesson. In turn, the moral lesson becomes its proof, and both the story and the moral lesson become the vehicle of veridiction (being accepted as true) of yet another text, which, when veridified, or established as true, becomes the "voice of authority." It is easy to see how the addressor of parables as artist and manipulator generates "a truth" and "an authority" that is, in fact, the truth and the authority of the parable. In the connection established by the use of the morpheme "therefore," an entire rhetorical chain is put in function by the parabolizer and made to work.[73]

A typical rabbinic or Gospel parable concluded with a verse from the Bible, which interestingly, functioned both as the prooftext and the

climactic point/reason for which the parable was told. That is to say that when a particular scriptural verse needed to be drilled into the listeners' psyche, it caused usually the invention of a parable which could teach it to them better and more swiftly.[74] For the interpretation of Jeremiah 23:7–8, for example, "The Traveler and the Perils" was elicited:

> R. Simeon bar Yochai says: One can illustrate it by a parable. To what can it be compared? to the following: One was traveling along the road. He encountered a wolf and was saved from him. So he kept telling the story of the wolf. Then he encountered a lion and was saved from him. So he forgot the story of the wolf and kept on telling the story of the lion. He then encountered a serpent and was saved from him. So he forgot the story of the lion and kept telling the story of the serpent.
>
> So it is with Israel. Later troubles cause the former to be forgotten.[75]

As one quickly learns here that the reason for telling this parable is to talk about the redemption of Israel, and that the parable was occasioned by a sermon in which the ancient sage wanted to illustrate the biblical verse actually quoted in the narrative:

> "Therefore, behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when men shall no longer say, 'As the Lord lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt,' but 'As the Lord lives who brought up and led the descendants out of the house of Israel out of the north country and out of all the countries where he has driven them.' Then they shall dwell in their own land." (Jeremiah 23:7–8)

MODERN CRITICISM AND PARABOLIC DISCOURSE

Parables that come to us from antiquity display what Hartman has called "a macaronic" intermeshing of texts, namely, a robust intertextuality.[76] Indeed, it would be hard to conceive of what a parable would mean without the entire tradition to which it was harnessed and of which it speaks parabolically. Like the "blind" and the "lame" of the parable, interpreters could never get "to the fruit of the king's orchard," had the sweet fruit of wisdom in these narratives been decontextualized.

To get a better understanding of parabolicity one indeed has to look back and learn how and why these narratives intertwined and generated this parabolic productive chain. As Brad Young asserts, we need to do a comparative study, even though "the synoptic gospels more than other texts provide the opportunity for studying how the homiletical parable which was taken from the spontaneous animated teaching of Jesus was turned into the literary parable."[77]

We suggest that rabbinic parables were also used to understand how Jesus spoke to his contemporaries because they provided insights into the Jewish customs and culture and contained similar themes and motifs. We hope that by insisting on the change in the mode of propounding, the transitions from an oral to a written discourse, and by investigating parables up to modern days we may throw further light on parabolic discourse as a whole.

Even though it is difficult to associate now parables with "pop" literature, *midrashic* parables seem to have been very popular and perhaps the scribes and the editors did not see them as sufficiently "philosophical," or a "high enough" literature to write them down separately.[78] To our mind, these are precisely the reasons for which we do not find collections of parables per se. Unfortunately, many of the rabbinic *meshalim*, compositionally and thematically similar to those attributed to Jesus, were propounded orally by rabbis long before the destruction of the Second Temple, but were written down together with other scriptural material only during the second or third century C.E.

While in their *midrashic* guise parables remained governed by a special kind of metonymic displacement (in relation to an omniscient, divine law), we must remember that these narratives have always been syncretized texts, namely, have been artistically put together from disparate narratives brought together for persuasion purposes. To put it in current terminology, parabolic discourse has always been "polysemic" (many meanings) and "polyphonic" (many voices), two features that ought to have made it appealing to contemporary theorists.

Yet, unhappily, parables have not succeeded in captivating literary theorists until recent decades. With the exception of biblical exegetes, few modern critics have ventured into the ocean of rabbinic literature, partly because of lack of knowledge of the sources and partly because other types of discourses have captured their imagination. As a result, the great challenge posited to Western logocentrism by *midrashic* textual strategies was not understood until lately. Only in the mid-eighties, in analyzing open texts, did scholars like Geoffrey Hartman, Daniel Boyarin, and David Stern argue convincingly that *Midrash*, unlike other textual strategies, resists closure.[79] Unlike postmodern indeterminacy, Midrash is predicated upon the existence of a point of view from which to behold the empirical world and the flux of time; it is predicated upon the existence of an omniscient, merciful, and eternally present God. "Because of this feature, *Midrash* is one method that can destabilize all actuality but itself, one language to govern understanding. Most importantly, by presupposing the existence of God, in *Midrash* all contradictory interpretations can coexist"; all interpretations remain governed by the divine language that is also their veridiction. "In *Midrash*, without