CHAPTER TWO

METHODOLOGICAL INTRODUCTION:
ON THE SELF-REFERENTIAL READING OF PRK TEXTS

Chapter One began with a mashal that compared God to a king courting a noblewoman. I read this mashal as referring to PRK’s own work of courting, the courting of the many non-rabbinic Jews of its time. In this chapter, I will offer a methodology for reading midrashim in this way, for reading them as a window into the rabbis’ own self-conception. I will also offer two other examples of such readings, and use them as a way to let the texts introduce their own themes and concerns. That is, this chapter is a second introduction of sorts, a textual introduction. Many of the issues discussed in an abstract way in the previous chapter, such as persuasion, intimacy, indulgence, and historical change, will be re-introduced here through a textual lens, showing that these themes are not just my idea of what PRK is about, but also the way the rabbis themselves describe their own project.

This method of reading texts as reflective of their authors’ processes is one that I learned from David Stern. Applying the literary theory of an “implied reader” to the mashal, Stern shows that midrashic texts often tell us something about the midrashic process of interpretation.¹ Thus, for instance, the pedagogue who sits and sings and plays on his flute in reaction to (and in interpretation of) his master’s choice of punishment for his son, represents the “paradoxical yet triumphant” nature of the biblical interpretation which is characteristic of such midrashic texts.² Below I will apply this method of reading to PRK texts, but with one important difference. Stern sees the characters in his midrashim as “implied interpreter”

² Stern, Parables, 87.
figures who tell us something specifically about the midrash’s exegetical process. My analysis of PRK texts, on the other hand, will find the issues reflected in these midrashim to be of a more homiletical and rhetorical nature, questions of persuasion, not questions of interpretation.

This method of self-reflexive reading has also been influenced by the work of other scholars. Christine Hayes makes use of expressive criticism and psychoanalytic theory to show that certain Talmudic texts are a window into the thoughts and anxieties of their rabbinic authors.\(^3\) Similarly, Fraade shows how the rabbis, in writing about the biblical priests’ roles in the temple, were actually writing about their own contemporary roles as rabbis.\(^4\) And in her study of early Christian gnosticism, Elaine Pagels finds that early Christian writers used Jesus to “think with,” that the arguments about Jesus’ corporeal resurrection about monotheism were actually arguments concerning their own roles and authority (e.g. “one God, one bishop”).\(^5\)

While this self-reflexivity may be characteristic of a variety of rabbinic and non-rabbinic texts, there is something about the rabbinic mashal which is especially conducive to self-reflexivity. First, the mashal’s two-tiered design of mashal and then parallel nimshal creates more non-exegetical space in which to make such self-reflexive statements. That is, the mashal is not one step removed from the biblical text, as are most commentaries, but two steps, leaving more room and making it easier to conceal a self-reflexive statement, which, by its nature, concerns the rabbis, not the Bible.

Second, the mashal’s generic archetypal language creates a paradigm which, while officially filled by the biblical nimshal, is also easily applied to other realms, including the self-reflexive one of the rabbis’ own project in creating such midrashim. The mashal proper, that is, the initial parable, concerns a generic king and his wife and children and the various archetypal scenarios that take place in that non-specific fictive realm, such as the anger of the husband or father. Eventually, the nimshal applies the

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\(^3\) Christine E. Hayes, “Displaced Self-Perceptions: The Deployment of Minim and Romans in B. Sanhedrin 90b–91a,” in Religious and Ethnic Communities, 249–289.

\(^4\) Fraade, From Tradition to Commentary, 69–121.

\(^5\) Elaine Pagels, The Gnostic Gospels (New York: Vintage Books, 1979). Other clear textual examples of this phenomenon include the way in which Philo depicts Moses as the law-giver, and the way in which Paul depicts Jesus as the head of the body of his followers, both using their depictions of these previous leaders as a way to talk about their own leadership roles. As we will see, the same is true for the rabbis’ depiction of the biblical figures in PRK.