CHAPTER 5

Between Hermeneutics and Rhetorics: The Parable of the Slave Who Buys a Rotten Fish in Exegetical and Homiletical Midrashim

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Dineke and I have always shared a fascination for ‘weird’ midrashim, most notably about the beautiful Joseph. The present parable about a poor slave who has to eat the rotten fish that he bought by mistake is equally strange, though less appealing. I hope nevertheless that it will catch her attention and that she will and enjoy its adventures throughout rabbinic literature. Fate has arranged that our carriers have crossed at several points: one marking point was when I was reader of her dissertation and one of the ‘opponents’ at her defence at the Faculty of Theology of Utrecht University which has since become part of history itself. After many wanderings, especially on my side, our paths are now crossing again as I will follow her in her position of lecturer of Jewish Studies at the PThU. I see this as a new step, and in no way an end of our adventures into fascinating Jewish texts.

1 Introduction

In the two Mekhiltot, Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael (MRI) and Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai (MRS)1, a parable (Hebrew: mashal) is used to explain that

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Pharaoh and his servants’ ‘change of heart’. Where they first had agreed to let the Israelites go (Exod 10:7), they later had a change of heart and said: What is this we have done, letting Israel go from our service? (Exod 14:5). According to the midrashic reading that follows, the Egyptians experienced the loss of the Israelites as a punishment as bad as the ten plagues. The parable, or mashal, that is used in the course of the midrash, features a slave who has to eat a rotten fish and undergo other humiliations because of the mistake of buying that fish in the first place. The parable has something of a comic tragedy: it is absurd and excessive. In the Mekhiltot (third cent. CE), the mashal has an exegetical function in the midrash—it serves to explain the apparent discrepancy between the two verses. This same mashal is, with some variations, also found in Pesikta de-Rav Kahana (PRK, fifth cent. CE), and Tanchuma Buber (TB, seventh-ninth cent. CE). In each of these works, its form is moulded, and is function adapted, to fit the new literary context and purpose. In this paper I will trace the working of this mashal as it moved from one exegetical context to another by closely reading the respective texts. Special attention will be given to the interplay between hermeneutics and rhetoric throughout the versions. The latter issue deserves a brief introduction.

2 Rhetorics and Hermeneutics; Homiletical and Exegetical

In almost every study about rabbinic meshalim, most notably David Stern’s, Parables in Midrash, Daniel Boyarin’s, Intertextuality and the reading of Mid-

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2 This paper is an offshoot of my work on tannaitic meshalim in the NWO-funded project ‘Parables and the Partings of the Way’ conducted at Utrecht University. I am preparing an annotated edition of all tannaitic meshalim. The first volume to be published will deal with the parables in the two Mekhiltot.

3 I use both terms indiscriminately in this paper. A rabbinic mashal has generally two parts: the ‘mashal proper’ and the ‘nimshal’, the application of the mashal. When I want to make that distinction and refer to only one of these two parts, I make that explicit.

4 The dating of midrashic works is tentative and often contested because of long redaction histories. I followed the dates suggested by G. Stemberger, Einleitung in Talmud und Midrash. 9. Auflage, (München: Beck, 2011). The present mashal is also found in Midrash Mishle (ca. ninth cent. CE), where it functions in a midrash on Prov 27:17. In my discussion of this mashal in my annotated edition of the meshalim in the Mekhiltot, I also discuss this parallel. For the sake of the present argument, the discussion of the version of Midrash Mishle would lead us to far astray. However, the message of the mashal as it is found in the Mekhiltot is preserved better in Midrash Mishle than in TB and PRK.