DAVID STERN'S PARABLES IN MIDRASH REVISITED

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In Parables in Midrash, David Stern offers an extensive analysis of the Rabbinic mashal (parable), one particular mode of discourse found frequently in the midrashic literature. Stern is not interested simply in analyzing the exegetical techniques of midrash but in looking at how narrative discourse in the midrashic process functioned as an effective literary tool. He approaches this subject from the standpoint of a post-structuralist literary critic. Rather than following the common practice of focusing upon the hermeneutics of midrash and its ability to find multiple layers of meaning in the biblical text, Stern asks us to view midrash as a "narrative of exegesis," not simply a system of interpretation (p. 44). Midrashic literature contained various forms of narrative that enabled a Jew to maintain a connection with the text of the Torah, a text that often seemed alien to the Jew's current situation. The mashal is one example of such a narrative form. As such, it was not simply a vehicle for deriving alternative meaning from Scripture but a way of transforming Scripture into a "familiar presence."

Stern defines the mashal as "a literary-rhetorical form, a genre of narrative that employs certain poetic and rhetorical techniques to persuade its audience of the truth of a specific message relating to an ad hoc situation" (p. 12). Being neither fable, allegory, nor ma'aseh, the mashal relates a fictional event to express a message allusively, through indirect means. In this book, Stern wants to provide a full description of the mashal's poetics, thematics, rhetoric, and composition, as well as the role meshalim may play in their literary contexts (p. 2). His analyses are often intriguing and plausible, but they nevertheless are fraught with methodological difficulties.

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2 Parables, p. 44. The rabbis were not alone in their desire to transform the biblical text into a relevant entity, as the Qumran and early Christian literatures attest. Stern thus believes that his book offers a fresh way of looking not only at the Rabbinic meshalim, but at the parables of Jesus as well (pp. 188-206).
Stern's task is formidable. To fully analyze the mashal as he proposes, one would have to study the meshalim contained in about twenty different documents produced at different times over a span of some five hundred years. The extensiveness of the task and Stern's desire to present his results in an easily digestible format helps to explain the presence of the glaring methodological problems in Stern's book. First of all, rather than trying to present an analysis of the hundreds and hundreds of meshalim recorded in midrashic literature, Stern concentrates on just twenty-four, all located in a single Rabbinic document, Eikhah Rabbah. He thus assumes that these parables are representative of the parables of all other Rabbinic documents, that is, that the midrashic literature is a monolithic whole and that whatever traits may be discerned in one document and in its individual parts must be representative of all. But since these documents, as noted, were produced over a five hundred-year period, how can it be legitimate to treat them monolithically?

This faulty underlying assumption goes untested because of a questionable technique. While Stern asserts that the same features he identifies in the parables of Eikhah Rabbah exist in meshalim generally, rather than illustrating this fact, he simply says that this would be apparent to anyone who, like him, had analyzed all of the pertinent texts. We are asked, that is, simply to take Stern's word for one of the most basic foundations of his argument as a whole. The sweeping categorizations Stern makes about the Rabbinic mashal may indeed be correct; but it is exactly this that needs to be proven by the presentation of all of the evidence. At the very least, a thorough analysis would have to be offered of the meshalim in several documents, with these meshalim showing a clear commonality of characteristics before any meaningful extrapolation could be made about the entire mass of Rabbinic meshalim. Yet, repeatedly, without any evidence given by way of support, Stern makes assertions about what one does or does not find in the entire literature of meshalim.

A prime example of this procedure occurs when Stern evaluates three hypothetical models of the mashal's rhetorical purpose: Illustration, Secret Speech, and Rhetorical Narrative (pp. 48-53). He asserts that while examples can be produced of meshalim that illustrate lessons or that suggest secretive messages the uninformed cannot fathom, neither the Illustration model nor the Secret Speech model offers a depiction of rhetorical function broad enough to describe meshalim generally. Stern sees the Rhetorical Narrative model as the most helpful. By this rather nondescript designation, Stern means that the mashal is (p. 51):