

EXAMPLES OF EARLY RABBINIC PARABLES

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Note: The headings contain the following information: the title given by Johnston; the reference to the rabbinic work where found; the rabbi to which the parable is attributed and approximate date (in parentheses); the number and page number in the book by Harvey K. McArthur and Robert M. Johnston, *They Also Taught in Parables: Rabbinic Parables From the First Centuries of the Christian Era* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).

1. The Exceptional Laborer, Sifra on Lev. 26:9 (Anonymous), #68, p. 58

And I will have regard for you (Lev. 26:9).

They parable a parable. Unto what is the matter like? It is like a king who hired many laborers. And along with them was one laborer who had worked for him many days. All the laborers went to receive their pay for the day, and this one special laborer went also. He said to this one special laborer: I will have regard for you. The others, who have worked for me only a little, to them I will give small pay. But you will receive a large recompense.

Even so both the Israelites and the peoples of the world sought their pay from God. And God said to the Israelites: My children, I will have regard for you. The peoples of the world have accomplished very little for me, and I will give them but a small reward. But you will receive a large recompense.

Therefore it ways: *And I will have regard for you.*

2. The Well-Rooted Tree, Mishnah Aboth 3:18 (R. Eleazar b. Azariah, ca. 80 A.D.), #2, p. 19

He whose wisdom is more abundant than his works, unto what is he like? To a tree whose branches are abundant but whose roots are few; and the wind comes and uproots it and overturns it. But he whose works are more abundant than his wisdom, to what is he like? To a tree whose branches are few but whose roots are many; so that even if all the winds in the world come and blow against it, it cannot be stirred from its place.

[Some manuscripts insert Jer. 17:3, 8 at the appropriate places.]

3. The Errant Son, Deuteronomy Rabbah 2:24 (R. Meir, ca. 130 A.D.), #114, p. 83

Another explanation of *Thou wilt return to the Lord thy God* (Deut. 4:30).

R. Samuel Pargrita said in the name of R. Meir: Unto what is the matter like? It is like unto the son of a king who went out into evil ways. the king sent a tutor [פִּדְגָג] to him, and he appealed to him, saying: Repent, my son. but the son sent him back to his father with the message: How can I have the effrontery to return? I am ashamed to come before you. Thereupon his father sent back word: My son, is a son ever ashamed to return to his father? And is it not to your father that you will be returning?

Even so the Holy One, blessed be He, sent Jeremiah to Israel when they sinned, and said to him: Go, say to my children, Return. Whence this? For it is said: *Go and proclaim these*

words, etc. (Jer. 3:12). Israel asked Jeremiah: How can we have the effrontery to return to God? Whence do we know this? For it is said: *Let us lie down in our shame and let our confusion cover us*, etc. (Jer. 3:25). But God sent back word to them: My children, if you return, will you not be returning to your father? Whence this? *For I am become a father to Israel*, etc. (Jer. 3:9).

4. The Foolish Shipmate, Leviticus Rabbah 4:6 (R. Simon b. Yohai, ca 130), #113, p. 82

It is said, *Shall one man sin, and wilt Thou be wroth with all the congregation?* (Num. 16:33).

R. Simeon b. Yohai taught: A parable. It is like men who were sitting in a ship. One took a borer and began boring beneath his own place. His fellow passengers said to him: What are you doing? He said to them: What does that matter to you? Am I not boring beneath my own place? They said: Because the water will come up and flood the ship for us all.

Even so did Job say: *And be it indeed that I have erred, my error remaineth with myself* (Job 19:4), and his friends said: *He adds transgression unto his sin, he extends it among us*—you extend your sins among us.

5. The Lame and Blind Caretakers, B. Sanhedrin 91a-b (Judah ha-Nasi, ca 200), #49, p. 48

Antoninus said to Rabbi: The body and the soul can both free themselves from judgment. Thus can the body plead: The soul has sinned, [the proof being that] from the day it left me I lie like a dumb stone in the grave. And the soul can say: The body has sinned, [the proof being that] from the day I departed from it I fly about in the air like a bird.

He said: I will parable to thee a parable. Unto what is the matter like? It is like unto a king of flesh and blood who had a beautiful orchard [פֶּרֶס] which contained splendid figs. And he placed in two keepers, one lame and the other blind. 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. Some time after, the owner of the orchard came and said to 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 with? What did he do? He placed the lame man upon the blind and judged them both together as one.

Also [רַחֵם] will the holy One, blessed be He, bring the soul, replace it in the body and judge them together, as it is written: *He shall call to the heavens from above, and to the earth, that He may judge his people* (Ps. 50:4). *He shall call to the heavens from above*—this refers to the soul; *and to the earth that He may judge His people*—to the body.

6. The Slave and the Rotten Fish, Mekilta Beshallah 3 (Anonymous), #40, p. 40

They [the Egyptians] said: If we had been plagued without letting them go, it would have been enough. But we were plagued and let them go. Or, if we had been plagued and let them go without our money being taken, it would have been enough. But we were plagued, we let them go, and our money was taken.

A parable. Unto what is the matter like? It is like unto one who said to his slave: Go get me a fish from the market. The slave went and brought him an ill-smelling fish. He said to the slave: I decree that you eat the fish or receive a hundred lashes or pay a hundred *maneh*. The slave said: I will eat it. He began to eat but could not finish. He therefore said: I will take the

lashes. After receiving sixty lashes he could stand no more. He therefore said: I will pay the hundred *maneh*.

Even so was it done to the Egyptians. They were plagued, they let Israel go, and their money was taken.

7. The Escape from Three Perils, Mekilta Pischa 16 (R. Simeon b. Yohai, ca 130), #39, p. 40

R. Simeon b. Yohai says: They parable a parable. Unto what is the matter like? It is like one who was walking along the road, and he encountered a wolf and was saved from him. And he was going along recounting the story of the wolf. Then he encountered a lion and was saved from him. He forgot the story of the wolf and went along recounting the story of the lion. Then he encountered a serpent and was saved from him. He forgot the story of both of them and went along recounting the story of the serpent.

Even so is Israel. Later troubles cause the former ones to be forgotten.

8. The Wise and Foolish Servants, B. Shabbath 153a (R. Johanan b. Zakkai, ca 80), #19, p. 27

We learned elsewhere, R. Eliezer said: Repent one day before your death [cf. Sirach 5:7]. His disciples asked him: Does one know on what day he will die? He said: Then all the more reason that he repent today, lest he die tomorrow, and thus his whole life is spent in repentance. And Solomon too said in his wisdom: *Let thy garments be always white; and let not thy head lack ointment* (Eccl. 9:8).

R. Johanan b. Zakkai said: A parable. It is like 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. They said: Is there anything lacking in a royal palace? The fools went about their work. They said: Can there be a banquet without preparations? Suddenly the king desired the presence of his servants. The wise entered adorned, while the fools entered soiled. The king rejoiced at the wise but was wroth with the fools. He said: Those who adorned themselves for the banquet, let them sit, eat, and drink. but those who did not adorn themselves for the banquet, let them stand and watch.

[A parallel version of this parable in Ecclesiastes Rabbah 9:8:1 has an explicit application attached to the end: “Even so in the Hereafter, as Isaiah declared, *Behold, My servants shall eat, but ye shall be hungry.*]