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B. T. D. Smith

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Part One

INTRODUCTION



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Chapter I

THE *MASHAL*

The various uses and connotations of the word παραβολή in the Synoptic Gospels find their explanation in the fact that in the LXX version of the Old Testament Scriptures it was the word commonly chosen by the translators to represent מִשְׁלָּה, *mashal*, a term with a very wide range of meanings, apparently derived from a *verbum primitivum* meaning “to be like”.¹

1. Probably the earliest use of the word *mashal* was to denote a popular saying or common proverb. In I Sam. x. 12 we are told “Therefore it became a *mashal*, Is Saul also among the prophets?” “Out of the wicked cometh forth wickedness” is quoted in I Sam. xxiv. 13 as a proverb of the ancients. Ezekiel quotes two current sayings, “The days are prolonged, and every vision faileth” (xii. 22), and “The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge” (xviii. 2).²

It is not immediately obvious why the term *mashal*, “likeness”, “comparison”, though appropriate enough as a description of two of these sayings, should be applied to all of them.³ The explanation seems to lie in the fact that the most characteristic form in which popular wisdom conveys its comments upon men and affairs and its advice upon the practical conduct of life is that

¹ Cf. Eissfeldt, Otto, *Der Maschal im A.T.*, 1913.

² Other popular sayings, not described as *meshalim*, are recorded in Gen. x. 9, II Sam. v. 8, xx. 18. Probably many are preserved in the prophetic books.

³ The explanation that whenever the proverb is used there is a comparison of the old saying with the new circumstance is dismissed by Eissfeldt as involving too abstract an idea to be primitive.

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of the analogy. The following are examples taken from the Rabbinic literature:

“Every pumpkin is known by its stem.”

“Many old camels carry the hides of young ones.”

“Two *kabs* of dates—one *kab* of stones and more.”

“With two dogs they killed the lion.”

“He ate the date, and threw away the stone.”¹

From the *Story of Ahikar* come the two following:

“While thou hast shoes on thy feet, tread down the thorns.”

“The tail of the dog gets him meat, and his mouth gets him blows.”

The proverb “Out of the wicked cometh forth wickedness” is expressed still more pungently in our own “What can you expect from a pig but a grunt?”² It is probable that originally *mashal* denoted popular sayings of this character, although it had received a wider connotation before we meet with it in use.³

2. How readily the proverb can become a taunt may be seen from Ezek. xvi. 44, “Behold, every one that useth proverbs shall use this proverb against thee, saying, As is the mother, so is her daughter”, or Lk. iv. 23, “Doubtless ye will say unto me this parable, Physician, heal thyself”. But it is also possible to become or be made a *mashal*, an “awful example”, an object of popular contempt and ridicule.⁴ The psalmist’s complaint, “I became a *mashal* unto them, . . . I am the song of the drunkards”, will explain the use of *mashal* for a taunt-song in three passages in the prophets—Is. xiv. 4, Mic. ii. 4, Hab. ii. 6. These taunt-songs of the prophets may well have been framed after earlier models, lampooning verses, or ballads celebrating the defeat of an enemy, of which latter we appear to possess an example in Num. xxi. 27–30.

¹ Cohen, A., *Ancient Jewish Proverbs*.

² Manson, T. W., *The Teaching of Jesus*, p. 60.

³ Cf. Eissfeldt, *Der Maschal*, p. 42; Oesterley, W. O. E., *Proverbs*, p. lxxv.

⁴ Deut. xxviii. 37, I Ki. ix. 7, Jer. xxiv. 9, Ezek. xiv. 8, Ps. xlv. 14, lxix. 11, II Chron. vii. 20.

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Proverb and Wise-saying

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3. Every proverb ultimately goes back to one wise-man: the use of *mashal* for the proverbs of the people explains its subsequent use for the aphorisms of the wise.¹ It is probable indeed that the *Hakamim*, who seem to have turned to account the wise sayings of other peoples, did not disdain to make use of the traditional proverbs of their own race, even if their maxims in their present form betray their literary origin.² While the earliest Hebrew proverbs which have come down to us are single-line sentences, the most characteristic form of the literary proverb is the couplet, as for example:

“A wise son maketh a glad father:
But a foolish son is the heaviness of his mother.”
(Prov. x. 1.)

“As vinegar to the teeth, and as smoke to the eyes,
So is the sluggard to them that send him.” (Prov. x. 26.)

The oldest collection in the Book of Proverbs (x. 1–xxii. 16) consists almost entirely of such couplets. But as employed by the *Hakamim* the *mashal* gradually developed, by way of the combination of maxims dealing with the same topic (cf. Prov. xxvi. 3–12), or the elaboration of the thought contained in a maxim (cf. Sirach xxix. 4–6), until it became an essay in miniature (thus Sirach xxxviii. 24–xxxix. 11 may be regarded as an expansion of the opening couplet).³ Even the speeches of Job, as the utterances of a wise-man, can be described as *meshalim* (xxvii. 1, xxix. 1).

Of the words employed other than *mashal* to describe the sayings of the wise, only one need detain us. In Prov. i. 6, Ps. xlix. 4, lxxviii. 2, Sirach xlvii. 17, the word *hidah* occurs.

¹ Prov. i. 1, 6, x. 1, xxv. 1, xxvi. 7, 9, Eccles. xii. 9, Sirach i. 25, iii. 29, vi. 35, xviii. 29, xx. 20, 27, xxxviii. 33, xxxix. 2, 3, xlv. 5, xlvii. 17, I Ki. iv. 32, Ps. xlix. 4, lxxviii. 2.

² Cf. Bultmann, R., *Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition*, 2nd ed. p. 93.

³ Cf. Charles, R. H., *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha*, I, p. 268; Bultmann, *Geschichte*, pp. 93, 104.

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The *Mashal*

Hidah, “riddle”, came to denote speech which is indirect, as opposed to speech which is plain, open, and straightforward. Thus, in Num. xii. 7, 8 God says of Moses that he will speak to him mouth to mouth, and not in *hidoth*, by way of visions and dreams. Habakkuk (ii. 6) uses *hidah* of an enigmatic taunt-song. Ezekiel’s allegory of the Eagle is described as a *hidah* (xvii. 2 f., see below, p. 7). The word is used in Judg. xiv. 12 f., I Ki. x. 1 in its primary meaning. The riddle, like the proverb, is one of the characteristic forms in which the wit and wisdom of primitive peoples find expression. If the *mashal* originally denoted a figurative saying, it had obvious affinity with the *hidah*, since both are dependent upon analogy for their significance. Solomon, wisest of the wise-men of Israel, is credited with special skill in the solution of riddles and in their composition.¹ It has indeed been suggested that some of the literary proverbs (e.g. Prov. xxii. 1, xxx. 15 b–19) may represent transformed riddles.² But the riddle proper does not occur in the Wisdom literature—the *hidah* like the *mashal* has undergone a change—so that when we read in Prov. i. 6 of “the words of the wise, and their *hidoth*” we must suppose that the word is now applied to figurative sayings or brief pregnant aphorisms which called for some thought before they could be appreciated—and the wise-men naturally prided themselves on the profundity of their sayings. Thus in Sirach xxxix. 2, 3 (the Hebrew text here is still lacking), the scribe is depicted as one who will enter into the subtleties of parables (ἐν στροφαῖς παραβολῶν), seek out the hidden meaning of proverbs (ἀπόκρυφα παροιμιῶν), and be conversant in the dark sayings of parables (ἐν ἀνίγμασι παραβολῶν). As examples of such *hidoth* we might select the following:

“Drink waters out of thine own cistern,
And running waters out of thine own well.” (Prov. v. 15.)

“There is that scattereth, and increaseth yet more;
And there is that withholdeth more than is meet, but it tendeth only
to want.” (Prov. xi. 24.)

¹ I Ki. x. 1, Josephus, *Antiq.* VIII, v, 3; cf. Sirach xlvi. 15, 17.

² Cf. Cheyne, T. K., *Job and Solomon*, p. 127.

Proverb and Riddle

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“Hast thou found honey? eat so much as is sufficient for thee;
Lest thou be filled therewith, and vomit it.” (Prov. xxv. 16.)

“He that observeth the wind shall not sow;
And he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap.”
(Eccles. xi. 4.)

“If thou blow a spark, it shall burn;
And if thou spit upon it, it shall be quenched:
And both these come out of thy mouth.”
(Sirach xxviii. 12.)

“A name made great is a name destroyed.”
(*Pirqe Aboth*, ed. Taylor, i. 13.)

“He who increases not decreases.” (*Ib.*)

The word occurs in association with *mashal* in two Psalms which belong to the Wisdom literature. In lxxviii. 2 the Psalmist speaks of his *mashal* as *hidath* because he proposes to teach his contemporaries the lessons of Wisdom indirectly, by means of stories from the past. Psalm xlix, which is concerned with the problem of the prosperity of the ungodly, appears to be described as a *hidah* on the ground, not of its form, but of its subject-matter.

4. The root meaning of the word *mashal* is prominent in three passages in Ezekiel, where it is employed of predictions in allegorical form. The first of these, xvii. 2 f., exemplifies again the traditional association of the *mashal* with the *hidah*:

“Son of man, put forth a riddle, and speak a parable unto the house of Israel; and say, Thus saith the Lord God: A great eagle with great wings and long pinions, full of feathers, which had divers colours, came unto Lebanon, and took the top of the cedar: he cropped off the topmost of the young twigs thereof, and carried it into a land of traffic; he set it in a city of merchants. He took also of the seed of the land, and planted it in a fruitful soil; he placed it beside many waters; he set it as a willow tree. And it grew, and became a spreading vine of low stature, whose branches turned toward him, and the roots thereof were under him: so it became a vine, and brought forth branches, and shot forth sprigs. There was also another great eagle with great wings and many feathers: and, behold, this vine did bend its roots toward him, and shot forth its branches toward him, from the beds of its plantation, that he might water it. It was planted in a good soil by many waters, that it might bring forth branches, and that it might bear

fruit, that it might be a goodly vine. Say thou, Thus saith the Lord God: Shall it prosper? shall he not pull up the roots thereof, and cut off the fruit thereof, that it may wither; that all its fresh springing leaves may wither; even without great power or much people to pluck it up by the roots thereof? Yea, behold, being planted, shall it prosper? shall it not utterly wither, when the east wind toucheth it? it shall wither in the beds where it grew.”

The thought that such a *mashal* needs interpretation is brought out in xx. 49 (xxi. 5 Heb.), where Ezekiel, having been commanded to utter a prediction in allegorical form, complains “Ah Lord God! they say of me, Is he not a speaker of parables?”: the message is then repeated in plainer terms. It is, however, certain from the use of the word *mashal* in Ezekiel that this passage must not be taken as implying that every *mashal* is of necessity obscure, but only this particular form of the *mashal*. It should also be remembered that Ezekiel’s prophecies are literary compositions, and that their significance must have been obvious to his contemporaries in general. The suggested obscurity of the allegorical form is largely a device to introduce the exposition whereby the lesson is repeated and driven home.¹ In the case of the remaining passage, the *mashal* of the caldron (xxiv. 3 f.), a commentary follows immediately.

Ezekiel’s allegories have clear affinity with other forms of figurative speech in the Old Testament.

We have two examples of the Hebrew fable preserved for us. When Abimelech, after slaughtering his brothers, was made king by the men of Shechem, his youngest brother Jotham, who had escaped the massacre, emerged from his hiding-place and cried:

“Hearken unto me, ye men of Shechem, that God may hearken unto you. The trees went forth on a time to anoint a king over them; and they said unto the olive tree, Reign thou over us. But the olive tree said unto them, Should I leave my fatness, wherewith by me they honour God and man, and go to wave to and fro over the trees? And the trees said to the fig tree, Come thou, and reign over us. But the fig tree said unto them, Should I leave my sweetness, and my good

¹ The same device is employed in *Hermas*, *Sim.* 5, iii.

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Allegory. Fable and Parable 9

fruit, and go to wave to and fro over the trees? And the trees said unto the vine, Come thou, and reign over us. And the vine said unto them, Should I leave my wine, which cheereth God and man, and go to wave to and fro over the trees? Then said all the trees unto the bramble, Come thou, and reign over us. And the bramble said unto the trees, If in truth ye anoint me king over you, then come and put your trust in my shadow. . . ." (Judg. ix. 7 f.)

The contemptuous reply of Jehoash to the king of Judah's challenge to battle was:

"The thistle that was in Lebanon sent to the cedar that was in Lebanon, saying, Give thy daughter to my son to wife: and there passed by a wild beast that was in Lebanon, and trode down the thistle." (II Ki. xiv. 9.)

The Old Testament also provides examples of the parable in the narrower sense of the term, of which two may be quoted. The first is Nathan's parable of the poor man's lamb:

"There were two men in one city; the one rich, and the other poor. The rich man had exceeding many flocks and herds: but the poor man had nothing, save one little ewe lamb, which he had bought and nourished up: and it grew up together with him, and with his children; it did eat of his own morsel, and drank of his own cup, and lay in his bosom, and was unto him as a daughter. And there came a traveller unto the rich man, and he spared to take of his own flock and of his own herd, to dress for the wayfaring man that was come unto him, but took the poor man's lamb, and dressed it for the man that was come to him." (II Sam. xii. 1 f.)

With this may be compared the fictitious story told by the woman of Tekoa to David at the instigation of Joab:

"Of a truth I am a widow woman, and mine husband is dead. And thy handmaid had two sons, and they two strove together in the field, and there was none to part them, but the one smote the other, and killed him. And, behold, the whole family is risen against thine handmaid, and they said, Deliver him that smote his brother, that we may kill him for the life of his brother whom he slew, and so destroy the heir also: thus shall they quench my coal which is left, and shall leave to my husband neither name nor remainder upon the face of the earth." (II Sam. xiv. 5 f.)

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In view of later use it would seem that chance alone is responsible for the fact that in the Old Testament the word *mashal* does not actually occur in connection with either of these two classes of figurative speech.

5. The application of the word to the oracles of Balaam (Num. xxiii. 7, 18, xxiv. 3, 15, 20, 21, 23) cannot be due merely to the fact that in some of them figurative language is employed, for figurative language is found throughout the Old Testament. The *meshalim* are prophetic: Balaam under the influence of the spirit of God unveils the secrets of the future. The use of the word *mashal* in these passages appears to correspond to its use in the Book of Enoch. Here “parable”¹ is used of apocalyptic prediction, and it is noteworthy that the opening passage of the book contains an echo of the Balaam narrative:

“The words of the blessing of Enoch, wherewith he blessed the elect and righteous, who will be living in the day of tribulation, when all the wicked and godless are to be removed. And he took up his parable and said—Enoch a righteous man, whose eyes were opened by God, saw the vision of the Holy One in the heavens, which the angels showed me, and from them I heard everything, and from them I understood as I saw, but not for this generation, but for a remote one which is for to come. Concerning the elect I said, and took up my parable concerning them:

The Holy Great One will come forth from his dwelling,
And the eternal God will tread upon the earth, (even) on Mount Sinai,
And appear from his camp
And appear in the strength of his might from the heaven of heavens. . . .

And behold! he cometh with ten thousands of his holy ones
To execute judgement upon all,
And to destroy all the ungodly. . . .”²

¹ *Mesal*, παραβολή: see i. 2, 3, xxxviii. 1, xliii. 4, xlv. 1, lvii. 3, lviii. 1, lx. 1, lxviii. 1, lxix. 29. The book survives in Ethiopic, derived from a Greek translation of the original Hebrew. There are also some Greek fragments.

² Translation from Charles, *Apocrypha*, II.