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Ancient Hebrew Fables

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TO THE MEMORY OF
MY MOTHER AND KÄTHE

Ancient Hebrew Fables

IT is an overwhelming honour, *zekhuth*, to deliver the inaugural lecture of this postgraduate institution, and I am deeply grateful. The establishment of this Centre is far more than an addition to the academic stature of Oxford; it is a landmark in the history of Jewish Studies in the West. The potentialities are enormous, and we are fortunate indeed in having among the Governors during the first decisive phase two men of outstanding learning and vision: Dr. David Patterson, who has been appointed Principal of the Centre, and Dr. Geza Vermes. Dr. Patterson, by bringing to bear on Hebrew writings of the past hundred and fifty years or so the methods and insights of up-to-date literary criticism, has virtually created a new branch of Hebrew scholarship. Dr. Vermes is one of the leading exponents of the Dead Sea scrolls. His contributions, profound, original and solid, are indispensable for an understanding of these documents. Under the guidance of these two, the Centre bids fair to lead a veritable renaissance in its field.

I

My subject is to be Ancient Hebrew Fables. In a fable, animals, plants or objects, while retaining their essential characteristics, talk and act like people so as to convey a message about human affairs. The fox escaping from a

well at the goat's expense[1] represents a crafty exploiter of naïve trust; the mother toad puffing herself up and bursting,[2] a mediocre parent trying to impress the children as all-powerful; the lion freed from a net by a mouse he spared,[3] a wise exerciser of magnanimity; the oak uprooted by the wind and the reed left standing,[4] a strong man vainly resisting a stronger one and a weak man yielding and thereby ensuring survival. Goings-on in the non-human world around us, by being endowed with our motivations, reactions and speech, become near enough to serve as portrayals of our doings.

Other, more sophisticated, concepts of the genre are tenable. Take the story of the farmer whose mattock was stolen.[5] He summoned all suspects to accompany him to a temple where the god would clear up the matter. But, on the way, he heard the public crier promise a thousand drachmas for information leading to the recovery of property stolen from the temple. As there is no humanized animal, plant or object in this story, it does not fall under the definition here proposed. The same is true, say, of the well-known cautionary tale about the shepherd who cried 'Wolf!' in jest so often that in the end nobody came to his help when he cried in earnest.[6] In some contexts, the exclusion of such pieces would be inadvisable. For the purpose of this lecture, the simple, restrictive approach seems safest.

[1] Phaedrus 4. 9, in *Babrius and Phaedrus*, ed. and transl. B.E. Perry, Loeb Classical Library, 1965. Subsequent quotations from Babrius or Phaedrus will be according to this edition.

[2] Babrius 28.

[3] Babrius 107.

[4] Babrius 36.

[5] Babrius 2.

[6] Aesop 353, in *Fabulae Aesopicae Collectae*, ed. C. Halm, 1852.

Proceeding from it, then, we find that a few specimens—three, to be precise—occur already in the Old Testament and a fair number—some three dozen—in Talmud and Midrash. Yet none is met in the New Testament. If it were the other way round, we should never hear the end of it: Jesus's *Naturnähe*, nearness to nature, in contrast with rabbinic aridity. As it is this way round, the fact has escaped notice.

Is it accidental? It may be. But more probably it is accounted for by his role as a prophet, one of the major roles assigned to him by the evangelists.[1] And the Hebrew prophets do not recite fables.[2] The question, therefore, must be pushed back: why do they avoid this form? One can think of several reasons. For example, a degree of playfulness often attaching to it does not suit their stance. The most important factor, however, is surely their profound aversion to certain heathenish beliefs concerning beasts, trees, stones, vestiges of those damnable cults which they fight day in day out. *Non constat* that Jesus never in fact availed himself of the genre, but the settled prophetic tradition would militate against its inclusion in the gospels. Here, it may be noted, the narrow definition of a fable as introducing animals, plants or objects behaving like people is indeed appropriate: it is exactly this type of narrative which the prophets cannot admit into their repertoire.

2

Educated moderns are used to the fable as a *jeu d'esprit*, our standard being La Fontaine. It drives home a point by

[1] See Matthew 13. 57, Mark 6. 4, Luke 4. 24, John 4. 44.

[2] An adumbration in Ezekiel will be discussed below, pp. 21 f.

a striking comparison. It is interesting but not intense, stimulating but not stirring, superior to a detective story but less exacting than a Shakespearean sonnet. It is elegant entertainment. By contrast, in the ancient world, and here and there even today, it has some very down-to-earth functions. Above all, it meets two needs of those living at the mercy of others: it serves as a code by means of which to propagate ideas the powers-that-be would disapprove of, and it serves as a coating where a somewhat daring request is to be submitted to those powers. This is not to deny that the arresting effect of the comparison always plays a certain part, or that there are ancient fables not attributable to this background at all. Still, on the whole, it does dominate the field.

To expand a little. The fable occupies a place within the wider category of parable, an account of one thing or event shedding light on another. *Parabole* means 'a throwing alongside', 'a juxtaposition'. As an illustration that is not a fable, we may recall the prophet Nathan's rich man who robbed a poor man of his only treasure:[1] the despicable theft brings out the ugliness of David's adultery.

A high proportion of the fables of antiquity—those in the nature of a code—belongs to a specific variety of parable, namely, allegory, the light of which is to reach only a select body. The original meaning of *allegoria* is 'the other utterance in public', different from the real one in private. Mankind is divided into outsiders and insiders: the latter alone are meant to understand. Again to quote an example that is not a fable:[2] 'Son of man, say to the forest of the south, Hear the word of the Lord, I will kindle a fire in you, and all faces from the south to the north shall be burned therein'—incomprehensible to the masses.

[1] II Samuel 12. 1 ff.

[2] Ezekiel 21. 1 ff.

Just as there are several legitimate concepts of a fable, so there are of parable and allegory. John Bunyan uses the latter term of his *Pilgrim's Progress* though he is writing for all (more or less). In the present context, for clarity's sake, and in deference to its etymology, let us confine it to that declaration the actual significance of which is not to be universally accessible.[1]

Frequently, allegory keeps the secret from inferiors unworthy of it. A weaker person's or group's fear, however, of a stronger one will also lead to its use. Plutarch's view[2] that the Delphic oracle resorted to ambiguity in order to avoid provocation is not without substance; indeed, it should be constantly borne in mind when dealing with cryptograms in the prophets. The two motives are apt to merge: the weaker party may despise the stronger, leave it in the dark both because instruction would invite punishment and because it would be to cast pearls before swine.

All sorts of gradations and fluctuations occur. The deeper truth may be covered over most carefully or by the thinnest veneer. It may be guarded for a while only and then divulged—whereby the allegory turns into an ordinary parable (on the basis of the definitions proposed above). Sayings by Jesus or Johanan ben Zaccai which they wished to be fully grasped by their disciples only can now be read, with the teaching spelled out, in the New Testament and the rabbinic sources.[3] The interpretation of the Song of

[1] Cp. the section 'Allegorizing' in: David Daube and Reuven Yaron, *Jewish Law*, to appear in B'nai B'rith Jewish Heritage Classics edited by D. Patterson and L. Edelman.

[2] *Moralia* 407C ff., *Oracles of the Pythian* 25; see David Daube, *Civil Disobedience in Antiquity*, 1972, p. 71

[3] Matthew 15. 1 ff., Mark 7. 1 ff., Numbers Rabba 19 on 19. 2. See David Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism*, 1956, pp. 141 ff.

Songs as depicting the relation between God and Israel may well have begun as an esoteric doctrine, to be popularized in the first century A.D.[1] The history of this work shows also that a pronouncement not at the outset carrying a secondary message may be endowed with one: the Song of Songs was composed as a eulogy of earthly love and it is pious exegetes who detected in it the allusions to another kind. As for fables, mostly the moral prefixed (promythium) or appended (epimythium) is later than the principal narrative.

Of the two attitudes favouring allegory, contempt for outsiders and fear of them, it is the latter which comes chiefly through in ancient fables.[2] Phaedrus claims[3] that the form originated among slaves who thus communicated thoughts and feelings they could not express openly. This is perhaps to go too far; the biblical fables, for instance, exhibit no particular connection with slavery. But even they, we shall see, present the viewpoint of a person or group faced by superior might and forced to exercise caution; and the fables of the classical West do prove at least the genre's enormous popularity with slaves. He himself was a freed slave—as was his forerunner Aesop—and several items in his collection evidently come from his years of servitude. A donkey[4] is urged by his owner to run away with him as the enemy forces are approaching. He figures out, however, that a take-over by the enemy will neither reduce nor increase the load he has to carry: he is being exploited to the full now and that will just go on. So why should he get out of breath? And he stays put. With his readers in mind, Phaedrus in the promythium

[1] See Mishnah Yadaim 3. 5.

[2] See *Civil Disobedience in Antiquity*, pp. 53 ff.

[3] 1. 3, Prol. 33 ff.

[4] 1. 15.

explains that the fable is about the poor of Rome unaffected by changes of government—Seianus's rise and fall and the like; this is not too remote from the original setting. Essentially, the Uncle Remus stories are slave fables from the south of the United States of America.

As a code of the oppressed or embattled, the fable has obvious advantages: it is vivid and it is easy to remember and pass on. A further quality must recommend it especially to the lower strata, slaves and poor: it is undemanding—its audience requires no high education and it takes up a minimum of their time and concentration. Presumably it is this latter feature of the genre, its simplicity, which, in conjunction with its socio-political operation, caused literary circles of the classical age to look down on it.[1]

We must, however, add a reservation. In many cases, the exclusion of outsiders is partial only; at times it is almost *pro forma*. Surely, Phaedrus's fable just adverted to was seen through by any slave-owner who paid attention. True, the extent to which the oppressor can be duped should not be underrated. Schiller's *Don Carlos* enthused German audiences for several years after Hitler's seizure of power, and Sartre's *Les Mouches* was shown on the French stage even during the occupation. All censorship is moderated by the stupidity of its practitioners.[2] None the less that story of the donkey is just too transparent.

Yet it was apparently allowed to circulate among slaves, just as nowadays few would mind it circulating among slum-dwellers; while then as now dire consequences

[1] See *Civil Disobedience in Antiquity*, pp. 130 f.

[2] Or aggravated. In 1941 Buckland wrote to Roscoe Pound thanking him for some cans of tinned milk and adding—in his typical style—'But why did you not send a cow?'. The letter came back, with a note by the censor in the margin: 'The import of livestock into this country is prohibited.' I saw it.

might be in store for one who advocated its conclusion in forthright terms. A practical consideration making veiled opposition more acceptable than an outspoken one is that it is less likely to be the signal for action. Psychologically, the transfer to an imaginary world renders any hostility or criticism less personal. There is also the attractiveness of the skill and phantasy displayed. All this, in appropriate conditions, *entschärft*, de-sharpens, mitigates.

This brings us to the second function of the genre—as an aid when pleading with authority. Since a fable does possess this mediating potential, it may actually be composed with a view to influencing, being listened to by, those holding sway. When a cockerel finds a pearl amidst dung but, interested solely in food, has no use for it,[1] that may initially have been designed to spur a master to take note of an extraordinary slave. At a pinch, if he reacted the wrong way, he might perhaps still be told that no reference to his conduct was intended. But really, the disguise is flimsy, and the hope is that the grievance will be heard. After all, Phaedrus, like Aesop, did obtain release: he had an appreciative addressee in Augustus. Certainly, the tale of the lion and the mouse cited at the beginning of this lecture[2] would remind the powerful that it might profit him far more to earn the gratitude of one of no account than to crush him. Who knows?—even in our time, the president of a foundation, while resenting a direct challenge, may be troubled by the fable of the groom[3] who sold his horse's food for drink, trying to make up for it by plenty of rubbing down, but who was told by the horse that no amount of dolling up would produce genuinely healthy looks so long as the starvation diet continued.

[1] Phaedrus 3. 12.
[2] Babrius 107.
[3] Babrius 83.

Once again, there are any number of nuances. When Menenius Agrippa, in order to get the plebeians to return to the city, recalled to them what happened to the members of the body that denounced allegiance to the stomach, that constituted an ironical reversal of roles: the fable, commonly employed by the lower ranks to gain the ear of the higher ones, was on this occasion employed the other way round. Menenius, though an emissary of the senate, was indeed of plebeian descent, and Livy specifically remarks on the uncouth nature of the genre with the help of which he succeeded in his negotiations.[1] Similarly, Hadrian, recently ascended to the throne, got Jewish insurrectionists to lay down their arms in return for the guarantee that the Temple would be restored. He then went back on his word and a fresh outbreak threatened. The Sages sent R. Joshua ben Hananiah, of lowly background, to pacify the populace and he did so by recounting a tale of which quite a few variants are preserved in the ancient sources.[2] A lion promised a huge reward to whoever would rid him of a bone that stuck in his throat. A long-beaked bird did so but when he asked for his payment the lion retorted that he should be well satisfied at having escaped from his jaws unharmed[3]. This fable, it is obvious, at its inception enshrined a moral uncompromisingly hostile to those high up: it would be foolish for us, at the bottom, to pay attention to any assurance of theirs when they need help in a crisis. R. Joshua transposed it into a different key, expressing a mood of resignation.

[1] 2. 32. 8. See *Civil Disobedience in Antiquity*, pp. 130 ff.

[2] e.g. Babrius 94, Phaedrus 1. 8.

[3] Genesis Rabba 64 on 26. 29. See *Civil Disobedience in Antiquity*, pp. 131 f.

3

Let us inspect the material from the Old Testament and the Rabbis.

Three Old Testament cases deserve mention. Balaam's she-ass notices an angel in the road ready to slay her master. The latter notices nothing, and when the faithful beast refuses to proceed he is infuriated and beats her. Indeed, he is minded to put her to death, despite her remonstrances that he should know her constancy from long experience. In the end, his eyes are opened and he realizes that she saved his life.[1]

In its earliest setting, no doubt Moabite or Mesopotamian, this was a fable addressed to the king in defence of a prophet who, seeing farther, resisted him and thereby preserved him from disaster. Balak the Moabite ruler, it will be recalled, planning to attack the Israelites, hired the Mesopotamian diviner Balaam to curse them in order to ensure their defeat; as Balaam declined to do the bidding, Balak was frustrated in his warlike designs[2] but, in consequence, continued to reign instead of rushing to his ruin. The fable introduces an ass with the proverbial contradictory traits: submissiveness and loyalty on the one hand, obstinacy on the other. In exceptional circumstances, the latter may be no less in the rider's interest than the former. Just so, the king was to infer, the prophet

[1] Numbers 22. 21 ff. See *Civil Disobedience in Antiquity*, pp. 65 ff.

[2] With this account in Numbers, that in Joshua is not (as is sometimes held) in conflict. The first half of Joshua 24. 9 should be rendered, not 'Then Balak . . . arose and warred against Israel', but 'Then Balak . . . arose and he was going to war against Israel'. The second half of the verse and verse 10 go on to tell us how God made Balaam bless the Israelites instead of cursing them and thereby prevented Balak from carrying out the intended assault.

served him even when disobedient. The parallel extends to minute details: three times Balak in vain asked Balaam to curse Israel, three times the ass defies her master for his sake.[1]

Whether there is significance in the choice of a female animal to represent the prophet bringing unwanted salvation may be left open. Probably not—though here and there in ancient literature we do hear of women in a comparable role: Rebekkah making Isaac give the best blessing to Jacob,[2] Lysistrata resolving 'Whether you like it or not, we'll deliver you.'[3] At any rate, the fable as first designed spoke on behalf of one superior in higher insight but totally lacking in secular power. It was a supplication to the wielder of the latter, using an easy analogy; and he was expected to spot and be moved by the moral thus captivatingly presented.

In the Pentateuch, the fable has become a historical episode: as Balaam was on his way to meet Balak near the Israelite encampment, those strange events did actually happen. For the Bible, the prophet's apology to the king is of no interest. In fact, it is not the latter's deliverance but that of the Israelites which forms the climax of the interlude. Accordingly, the ass's conduct is turned into a prefigurement of Balaam's, God through her shows him, while he is journeying to the scene of action, where his duty lies: he will have to execute God's orders regardless of any others, thereby supporting the aims God has for his people. Such a restructuring usually produces a measure of unevenness. The ass by her selflessness rescues her master while, in the Biblical narrative, as just noted, the emphasis

[1] Numbers 22. 28, 33, 24. 10.

[2] Genesis chapter 27.

[3] Aristophanes, *Lysistrata* 499. See *Civil Disobedience in Antiquity*, p. 17.

lies on what Balaam does for Israel—his service to the king being treated as quite irrelevant. It is this discrepancy which largely explains why the parallel between the ass and the prophet has never so far been seen.

Altogether this tale of the talking she-ass is an erratic block in the Pentateuch. Strictly, we should hardly discuss it here since, when it started out as a fable, it was not Hebrew but Moabite or Mesopotamian. It is of considerable relevance, however, to an assessment of the rise of Hebrew prophecy. That both in substance and diction the latter was not totally unaffected by foreign seers one may deduce from the magnificent poems the Bible assigns to Balaam.[1] The fable suggests, beyond that, that it was Moab or Mesopotamia which furnished a mature, subtly thought-out model of one critical facet at least of the prophet-king relation.

The Rabbis accept the miracle. There are, however, substantive attempts to bring it and other miracles into harmony with a universe in which nothing occurs but what is built into the creation from the very beginning: the mouth of Balaam's ass, we are informed,[2] the rainbow appearing from after the flood,[3] Moses' rod,[4] the manna[5] and so on, were all made by God just before the commencement of the first Sabbath.

Next Jotham's fable.[6] Gideon, offered hereditary rule, declined for himself, his sons and his grandsons but, tragically, not for his half-Canaanite bastard Abimelech,

[1] Numbers 23. 7 ff., 23. 18 ff., 24. 3 ff., 24. 15 ff.

[2] Mekhilta on Exodus 16. 32.

[3] Genesis 9. 12 ff.

[4] Exodus 4. 2 ff.

[5] Exodus 16. 14 ff.

[6] Judges 9. 7 ff. See David Daube, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 90, 1971, pp. 480 f.

then of no account. On Gideon's death, Abimelech had himself proclaimed king, after slaughtering all the legitimate sons with the exception of Jotham whom he could not find. The latter, before escaping to neighbouring territory, managed to address a gathering.

The trees, he said, decided to have a monarch. But the fertile ones that were approached to take the office—olive, fig, vine—one after the other disdained to give up their useful occupation for barren rule. Finally, the bramble was invited. It did accept, but on ominous terms. If those electing it, it declared, were acting honourably—as, manifestly, they were not, overthrowing the ancestral constitution with no earthly sovereign, and also being disloyal to the house of Gideon—they would find protection in its shade—which, manifestly, did not exist; otherwise the noblest of them would perish in a fire emanating from it. It is as if Hitler in 1933 had said to Röhm: 'If you are a peaceable, respectable citizen, I shall make you a present of the United States of America, if not, I shall destroy you.'

This piece goes back to the good old days. The wine still cheers God and men;[1] in the psalter, it cheers only the latter.[2] The anti-monarchic thrust is obvious. No happily settled person contributing to the welfare of the community would care to sit on a throne, exalted but remote. That prospect will only attract someone without roots, without possessions, without use. Worse: once elevated, he will obliterate the best of the valuable, established part of the nation.

The argument, in so far as it opposes city culture, has affinity with the warnings against kingship found in

[1] Judges 9. 13.
[2] Psalms 104. 15.

Deuteronomy and Samuel.[1] But the latter do not include the particular attack on the despicable background and character of the tyrants (though, conceivably, the distinction between fruitbearing and sterile trees made in Deuteronomic laws of war[2] contains a faint echo); nor is this aspect taken up by talmudic or mediaeval enemies of monarchy. It should be remembered, however, that Abimelech is not the only free-wheeling adventurer in the Bible to become king: David himself is here and there depicted in this light.[3] The choice of *na'*, 'to shake', 'to roam', as the happy trees decline the promotion—'Should I forsake my fatness, sweetness, wine, to shake, roam, above the trees?'—at first sight so puzzling, is explicable from this angle. It alludes both to the movement of a tree—'to shake'—and to those worthless fellows—'to roam'. The verb is often used of have-nots wandering about in search of booty or other relief.[4] More specifically it refers to fugitives, persons exiled arbitrarily or for a crime.[5] Cain is condemned 'to be roaming and wandering', and let us recall that he became the builder of a city.[6] Olive, fig and vine will have none of this.

Very likely the fable was current before being incorporated in the story of Jotham: it could be read as a

[1] Deuteronomy 17. 14 ff., I Samuel 8. 5 ff. See David Daube, *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 10, 1959, pp. 2 f.

[2] Deuteronomy 20. 19 f.

[3] I Samuel 22. 2, 25. 4 ff.

[4] Jeremiah 14. 10, Amos 4. 8, 8. 12, Psalms 59. 16, 109. 10.

[5] Genesis 4. 12, 14, II Samuel 15. 20. In a wider sense, Numbers 32. 13, II Kings 23. 18, and Psalms 59. 12 also belong here.

[6] Genesis 4. 12, 14, 17. For Sirach (36. 30), a man without a wife shares the lot of Cain; and while the homeless criminal threatens city after city, the unmarried man rushes from woman to woman. One has the impression that, in Sirach's view, a husband lives in constant dread of the Don Juan.

general condemnation of kingship, without any specific allusion to Gideon. Be this as it may, it definitely represents a die-hard minority's standpoint which, in a period when the other side is gaining ascendancy, it would not be healthy to propagate without a wrapping. The latter may be far from watertight; still, it does provide some protection. Jotham, having declaimed and expounded the fable, ran away.

We go on to Jehoash, King of Israel, who, when rashly challenged to battle by Amaziah, King of Judah, attempted to restrain him, reminding him of the thistle who asked the cedar to give his daughter in marriage to his son but was trampled down by the beasts of the field.[1] Amaziah disregarded his counsel and suffered defeat. Do not bite off more than you can—or, considering your lack of worth, you ought to—chew, otherwise you will come to an ignominious end.

Doubtless Jehoash made use of a fable already in existence. Amaziah's presumption consists in defying his better, the thistle's in seeking an alliance above his station. While we must not expect overmuch precision in an ancient simile,[2] the discrepancy is striking. It is easily explained, however, if the fable at first envisaged an outsider trying to push his way inside and was then, because of its warning against arrogance, judged applicable to a reckless aggressor.

There are quite a few upstarts in the Old Testament aspiring to an advantageous union. Jacob and David come to mind.[3] These, however, were successful. The ill-success of the thistle, coupled with the little detail that he

[1] II Kings 14. 8 ff., II Chronicles 25. 17 ff.

[2] See H. Fränkel, *Die homerischen Gleichnisse*, 1921.

[3] Genesis chapters 29 ff., I Samuel 18. 18, 23; cp. also II Samuel 3. 7 ff.

approaches the cedar not on his own behalf but on his son's, provides the clue to the particular incident which, more than any other, must be responsible for the coming into being of this piece: the prince of Shechem asked Jacob to give his daughter in marriage to his son, and he with all his fellow-citizens perished in the most miserably abject mode, much like a negligible shrub being crushed under the heavy feet of animals walking over it.[1] The 'beasts of the field' may be a pregnant expression, a trace of the fact that the avengers, Jacob's sons, 'were in the field' as the prince approached their father and 'came from the field' as they heard of it.[2] After all, it is a fable of the Northern Kingdom, where Shechemite reminiscences would be cultivated. It should also be observed that the thistle (*ḥoaḥ*) which here represents Schechem is not too different from the bramble (*'aṭadh*) representing the half-Shechemite Abimelech in Jotham's address.

In the phase when the fable was directed against unwanted intruders, we can readily conceive why it might be advisable to refrain from open insult and be content with allegory, indicating to one's sympathizers the contempt one felt for the outsider and the end he deserved. Jacob, after the terrible events at Shechem, was greatly afraid of what other Canaanite tribes that heard of it might do to him.[3] Laban in turn was afraid of Jacob and Saul of David.[4] Coded communication certainly has a place in this area.

[1] Genesis chapter 34.
[2] Genesis 34. 5, 7.
[3] Genesis 34. 30.
[4] Genesis 31. 24 ff., I Samuel 18. 12 ff.

4

Before passing on to the Rabbis, it should perhaps be explained why a certain chapter from Genesis[1] and one from Ezekiel[2] do not fall within the theme of this lecture. In the so-called story of the Fall, the serpent plays a prominent part; none the less it is not a fable. It does not try to illumine our affairs by transposing them into affairs of animals, plants or objects. The serpent is not meant to portray a human type—as Balaam's ass stands for the prophet, the useful trees in Jotham's fable for the satisfied farmers, the bramble for the good-for-nothing, the thistle in Jehoash's fable for the fellow who does not know his place, the cedar for the man of distinction. He is a being in his own right, half-way between God and man, aiding the latter to win knowledge in defiance of the former. What we have before us is not a fable but a myth, relating how civilization began.

Then there is a riddle of Ezekiel's. One of two eagles (Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon) deports the top of the cedar (Jehoiachim, King of Judah) but plants in its stead a vine thriving if lowly (Jehoiachim's uncle Zedekiah). The vine, however, bends its roots towards the other eagle (Hophra, King of Egypt), for which disloyalty it will be pulled up.

This can hardly be called a fable because what the eagle and vine do is not in character at all, does not remind us in the least of their prototypes in nature. Nor does anything in nature prepare us for the doom awaiting a vine which turns in the direction of one bird rather than

[1] Genesis 2. 15 ff. See *Civil Disobedience in Antiquity*, p. 61.
[2] Ezekiel 17. 1 ff.

another. Ezekiel no less than the other prophets avoids entering into the world of beasts and trees in a fashion which would connect up, however remotely, with pagan worship.

It is worth noting, however, that he is here opposing a pro-Egyptian policy which had a strong following both in Judah and among his fellow-exiles in Babylon. His stance is one which, traditionally, would often lead to prudently enigmatic speech—though, on this occasion, he (like, say, Nathan when he confronted David about his adultery) courageously proceeds to an immediate, full disclosure.

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Of the rabbinic fables it may be best to pick those six which so far seem to have no known precursors in other literatures.[1]

Genesis 36 lists Esau's descendants. Midrash Rabba on this chapter ends[2] with an anonymous story concerning the relation of Israel and the other nations. The chaff, the straw and the stubble quarrelled, each contending that it was for its sake that the field had been sown. The corn intervened: 'Let us wait till we come to the threshing-floor, then we shall see.' When they got there, the wind carried off the chaff, and the owner threw the straw on the ground and burned the stubble—but he lovingly heaped up the grain.[3] Just so, however boastful the others may now be,

[1] See Schirmann, *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 6, 1930, p. 891. On the far from uniquely rabbinic encounter of the lion and the Egyptian partridge, see above, p. 13.

[2] 85, on 36. 43.

[3] The Rabbis find scriptural support in Psalms 2. 12, 'Kiss the son'. In Hebrew, 'son' and 'grain' are homonymous: *bar*. So the Midrash extracts the secondary meaning, 'Kiss the grain'.

on the last day they will be discomfited and the world will turn out to have been created for Israel's sake.[1]

Suppose a sermon was likely to be attended by agents of an anti-Jewish government. It would have been foolhardy to give them a handle by flaunting these convictions. (How easily a derogatory utterance might come to the knowledge of the authorities and cause trouble is shown by the trials of R. Simon ben Yohai.[2]) On the other hand, they were far too important an aid to morale in difficult times to be allowed to recede into the background. The fable, told without its explanation, made it possible to keep them alive.

A piece from Esther Rabba, attached to Haman's elevation,[3] is comparable. A lion banqueted his friends among the animals under a canopy consisting of skins of evil beasts he had killed. After dinner the guests asked the fox to sing them a song, and he consented on condition that they would all join in. His song was: 'What he (the lion) showed us in respect of those above (the evil beasts killed) he will show us in respect of those below (the evil beasts still around)'. The Midrash goes on to draw a parallel with the story of Esther: as he (God or Mordecai) overthrew the conspirators Bigthan and Teresh,[4] so he will overthrow Haman. There follows a more general assurance: 'He (God) who exacted retribution on our behalf from the former ones

[1] Scriptural support is drawn from Malachi 3. 19, 'The day comes that shall burn as an oven, and all the proud shall be stubble and the day that comes shall burn them up', and Isaiah 41. 14 ff., 'Fear not, you worm Jacob and you men of Israel, I will make you a sharp threshing instrument, you shall thresh the mountains and make the hills as chaff, you shall fan them and the wind shall carry them away, and you shall glory in the Holy One of Israel'.

[2] Babylonian Shabbath 33b.

[3] 3. 1.

[4] Esther 2. 21 ff.

(past oppressors) will exact retribution on our behalf from the latter ones (present and future oppressors).'

The author or transmitter of the fable is R. Phinehas of the fourth century A.D., who lived through grievous persecutions. The exact contemporary application is not easy to establish;[1] but whatever it may have been, it needs little imagination to realize that restraint in propagating it was imperative—a jolly tale with a message for the insiders was appropriate.

The central pronouncement was apparently intended as a ditty for communal singing: a particularly effective means of triumphing in secret over a tyrant capable of smashing all open resistence. A comparable jingle in English might be 'High up today we saw him play, but soon the show will be below'. This little song, which could be and no doubt was often used by itself, unaccompanied by any explanation, indeed gave nothing away, unlike many allegories where determined scrutiny might at least get the drift. It is the clever fox who hits on the device. Actually, there is significance in his stipulation that everybody will participate in the chorus: he makes sure that there can be no traitor. One is reminded of the test portions in the Eighteen Benedictions.[2]

That the fable came to be taken up by commentators on Esther is not surprising. Nor that it was associated with ultimate hopes: the final, general reference to God as avenger—'He who exacted retribution' etc.—has an eschatological sound.

[1] See W. Bacher, *Die Agada der Palästinensischen Amoräer*, vol. 3, 1899, p. 344.

[2] e.g. Babylonian Berakoth 29a: in general, if a person slips in reciting a prayer he may just continue, but if he slips in reciting the imprecation against heretics, he must repeat it in order to prove that he is not one of them.

Another fable in Esther Rabba[1] is told in connection with a royal edict bidding all the world to do obeisance to Haman. Mordecai flouted it—according to the Rabbis, because compliance would have involved idolatry. (For some, the mere display of excessive reverence for a human is idolatry; others assume that Haman wore a heathen symbol.) He risked his life acting as he did, and the Midrash considers this a perennial dilemma. Israel tells God how the other nations seek to trap it by forcing it to participate in their worship: if it resists them, they will wipe it out, if it obeys, God will punish it.[2] It is in the position of a wolf in need of water, but knowing that a net is spread at the well. If I drink, he deliberates, I shall be caught, if I abstain, I shall die from thirst.

This fable does not predict the annihilation of the wicked. It goes under the name of Jose ben Hanina, of the middle of the third century A.D. His preaching seems generally moderate in tone. No doubt his feelings about the gentiles vexing the Jewish minority are far from friendly. But the particular grievance voiced in the fable concerns subjugation as such not so much as subjugation to two authorities making contradictory, absolute demands.

We do not know in what circumstances the fable was first made up: possibly, indeed, in the course of reflecting on the plight of Mordecai, but it could be inspired by any of the countless situations where an individual or a community is caught between Scylla and Charybdis. Both Philo and Josephus furnish illustrations fairly close to that in Esther. If Caligula insisted on erecting a statue of himself in the Temple, Philo argued, the only choice left to the

[1] 3. 2.

[2] Psalms 140. 6 affords scriptural support, 'The proud have hid a snare for me, they have spread a net.'

Jews was death: loyalty to the Emperor forbade them to resist his project, loyalty to their religion to tolerate it.[1] Josephus reports a speech by which King Agrippa attempted to dissuade his subjects from rebellion against Rome.[2] If they were going to abstain from fighting on a Sabbath, they would be defeated by man, if they were going to break the law, they would be abandoned by God.

In any case, the fable is an appeal for a way out addressed to one of the two authorities, the one more likely to show understanding; and the indirect formulation, the coating, by softening the tone, is to render the request more acceptable. In its present context, it is directed to God, he being one of the two powers at whose mercy Israel finds itself, and he is, of course, more understanding than the other power, the pagan world. Whether or not this is the original context, it is remarkable that the genre, in its function of *captatio benevolentiae*, the attainment of good-will, should be resorted to even when putting one's case to him. But, then, it is a fact (though one to which insufficient attention has hitherto been paid) that prayer in general from very early times makes use of stratagems initially thought up for petitions to authorities of flesh and blood.

The comparison of Israel with a wolf, incidentally, may owe something to Mordecai's provenance from the tribe of Benjamin which 'shall ravin as a wolf'.[3] If there was a stage when the fable was not connected with the exposition of Esther, a different animal—a gazelle, a bird—may have figured in it. However, even then it could have been a wolf.

The fate of an anonymous fable in Siphre[4] reflects a

[1] Philo, *Embassy to Gaius* 299 ff. See *Civil Disobedience in Antiquity*, pp. 92 ff.
[2] Josephus, *Jewish War* 2. 16. 4. 391 ff.
[3] Genesis 49. 27.
[4] 157, on Numbers 31. 2.

dramatic change in political climate. It introduces two sheep-dogs constantly at one another's throat. A wolf approached to seize a lamb, and one of the dogs challenged him. The other reflected that if he did not help, the wolf would win and then overcome him as well. So the two enemies buried the hatchet and unitedly fought the third party.

At first sight the wolf appears to be the villain and the dogs the heroes who know when it is time to sacrifice petty, divisive interests for a higher, common aim. Hence the former ought to stand for, say, Rome and the latter for different Jewish factions. (Too late, during the siege of Jerusalem by Titus, the defenders engaged in internecine struggles realized the consequences: 'Are we really to be brave against each other only? The Romans through our strife will make a bloodless capture of the city.'[1]) Surely something like this was indeed the original import of the fable which, at that stage, would have been very militant: an appeal to join ranks to repulse a vicious robber who would take away Temple, land and sovereignty.[2] It was to be fully intelligible only to the initiated. To be sure, anybody could see the point that strength lay in unity. But there were many tales and discourses dedicated to this truth,[3] without being in the service of a specific rising.

However, in its present context in the Midrash, it is a complaint about the surrounding ill-wishers rather than a summons to combat. In Siphre, it is Israel that is represented by the wolf and the Midianites and Moabites who are the dogs. The latter two, we are informed, had always been at war with one another, till it came to making

[1] Josephus, *Jewish War* 5. 2. 4. 74.

[2] See e.g. I Maccabees 1. 23 ff., Josephus, *Jewish War* 2. 14. 2. 278 ff., John 11. 48, Dio Cassius 69. 12.

[3] e.g. Babrius 47.

common cause against Israel.[1] The fable now conveys Jewish resentment of the various gentile nations agreeing in little but their cruelty to Jewry, or even a recommendation of adjustment since resistance will cause them to unite. But that this is not its native ambiance is confirmed by the fact that, in the biblical account, Israel gains a decisive victory over Midian: on this basis the wolf should be the stronger party.

The fable is also transmitted in Babylonian Sanhedrin.[2] Here the wolf's conduct is at least slightly improved: he does not come to carry off a lamb but he directly attacks one of the dogs. Manifestly, if Siphre had been acquainted with this version, it would not have added a detail increasing the bias against him—by then in the role of Israel. So it is Sanhedrin which must be secondary in this respect. Moreover, in Sanhedrin, R. Papa, of the middle of the fourth century A.D., cites a proverb which, he suggests, has the same meaning as the fable: 'The weasel and the cat prepare a feast with the fat of the ill-fated one.' By now, the character of the wolf is forgotten: the victim in the proverb is clearly the mouse, the message—the most selfish evildoers will combine to finish off a weak, innocent creature. This, too, is old folk wisdom—alas, sound enough. (An illustration is offered in Luke: 'And the same day Pilate and Herod were made friends together, for before they were at enmity between themselves.'[3]) Only it is by no means identical with that contained in the fable before its reinterpretation.

The latter, we may conclude, was undertaken when,

[1] Their combined action commences in Numbers 22. 1 ff. their previous discord the Rabbis find indicated by Genesis 36. 35.

[2] 105a.

[3] Luke 23. 12; see Strack and Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, vol. 2, 1924, p. 263.

after the collapse of some revolt, those eager for peace regarded the original secret as too inflammatory or at least as pointing in a wrong direction. It was the potential effect on the insiders, that is, rather than the outsiders, which necessitated a radical toning down. Previously the former had been exhorted to stand together against the latter. The new teaching was a sorrowful recognition of the latter's unanimity in hating the former, maybe even with the implication that submission was the only reasonable course. An amazing instance of a fable under the impact of political events being utterly diverted from its original purpose, indeed, being made to say pretty much the opposite.

Certainly, even reset, it remained hostile to and contemptuous of the outsiders; yet hardly to such a degree that a discreet shrouding of the feelings behind it would seem really necessary. As it now appears in Siphre, it not only does not fit the biblical episode to which it is attached but also has neither of the two normal functions of the genre: it operates neither as a code among the group nor as a means of preferring a request to a superior in agreeable style. That this exception to the rule should have the history it has—with an earlier phase when it did conform to the rule—is most significant.

The yin and yang advice, 'Rejoice, young man, in your youth and walk in the ways of your heart and in the sight of your eyes—and know that for all this God will bring you into judgment', is supplied with diverse explanations in Ecclesiastes Rabba.[1] A third-century Haggadist, R. Levi,

[1] 11. 9. The contradiction between the two halves of the verse is so marked that modern critics, rightly or wrongly, reject the second one as spurious; see Zimmerli in *Sprüche, Prediger* by Ringgren and Zimmerli, 1962, pp. 242 ff.

is reminded of the caged bird called happy by a free one because all his food is provided for him; but he bitterly points out that his visitor overlooks his helpless state—the very next day his gaolers may butcher him.

The fable could have its primary setting among a tyrant's favourites—slaves, freedmen, courtiers. There are, however, other possibilities, in fact, about as many as there are common varieties of the gilded cage. The agents handling the Watergate operation lived in one; and we need only think of them to appreciate the usefulness of veiled speech in this area and how dangerous it might be to set forth the implications in so many words.

The sixth fable occurs in the midst of messianic speculation in Sanhedrin,[1] as a comment on Amos,[2] 'Woe unto you who desire the day of the Lord, to what end is it for you? it is darkness and not light'. A cock and a bat (or owl) were sitting together at night, waiting for the dawn. The cock remarked that it made sense for him to look forward to the light, but what good would it do to the bat?

The comment is made by R. Simlai, who flourished in the middle of the third century A.D. The sources preserve quite a few of his refutations of Christians in debate.[3] The utterance under discussion is therefore widely considered to be specifically anti-Christian, though some scholars maintain that it is directed against the gentile world at large.[4] The former view is decisively supported by a point

[1] 98b.

[2] 5. 18.

[3] See Bacher, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, 1892, pp. 555 ff., Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism*, 1956, p. 142.

[4] Strack and Billerbeck, *op. cit.*, vol. 4, part 2, 1928, p. 854, declare it anti-Christian; *contra* Bacher, *loc. cit.* That Rashi interprets it as anti-heathen proves little: he is bound to be influenced, consciously and unconsciously, by consideration for the Christian world around him.

not so far, it seems, taken into account. R. Simlai was a subtle exegete, and there is a reason he attaches the fable to that particular passage from Amos. That passage speaks of people foolishly longing for the end of history. Who are they? Not ordinary pagans. No doubt they will fare ill in the last judgement, but at the moment they know nothing about it: they could not be said to 'desire the day of the Lord'—nor be portrayed in a simile as persevering in the same posture as the Jews. It is the Christians who are in this paradoxical state—to pray for that day, which will consign them to darkness.

If Simlai is thinking of the Christians, a question arises. Christianity was not yet the religion of the State. Does he, then, resort to a fable simply because this form was traditionally prominent in expositions designed to affirm Judaism's superiority? Or even for the ornamental value only? Either is conceivable. But surely, even in that period, the choice might have a realistic function. There would be situations even then where discretion was preferable to valour, and a cock's reflection on the strange behaviour of a bat to an unadorned communication of the Jewish estimate of the rival religion. The very fact that to this day it is being debated exactly who is meant by the bat suggests that the Rabbi sees a definite advantage in obscurity. It may be added that in several encounters he employs a mode of discourse to be characterized as public retort and private explanation: a Christian putting a question (say, how to account for the plural in 'Let us make man in our image') receives an answer good enough for him (the following verse puts matters right, 'So God created man in his image'), but the Rabbi's disciples demand a more substantial one and he complies (while the first couple were made by God alone, further procreation would involve

husband, wife and Divine Presence together).[1] In the cases preserved, the outsider is unworthy of the more elaborate truth; but, evidently, this division of instruction would be no less useful where to let him into it might mean to invite reprisals.

In conclusion, a modern Hebrew fable, of a little salamander in a little rockery, where he played with other little salamanders by day and slept peacefully by night. From travellers he heard about a distant place far bigger and full of wonders, he grew restless and in the end he decided to move there. Arrived after a long journey, the scene surpassed his expectations: instead of little salamanders there were tall alligators, instead of pebbles and brooks, huge boulders, rivers and waterfalls. The strangest happenings kept taking place at all hours, and he hardly ever dared to go to sleep for fear of missing any. He had the time of his life. Nevertheless, when his old comrades sent him word that they remembered him and he returned for a visit, he was very happy indeed. *Hoc quo pertineat dicet qui me noverit.*[2]

[1] Genesis Rabba 8 on 1. 26 f.

[2] I wish to thank Professors Kingsley Barrett and Reuven Yaron for valuable comments; and Professor S. Herbert Frankel for spotting (and remarking in his vote of thanks) that what I am mainly concerned about in this lecture is freedom.