

THE PARABLE OF THE FOOLISH SCHOLARS (Matt. xxv 1-13)¹⁾

BY

J. MASSINGBERD FORD

Indiana

The Parable of the Foolish Virgins is eminent for its peculiarities²⁾. It presents a picture of a very strange wedding. Firstly, it appears that the central figure, the bride, is absent³⁾; secondly, the bridegroom arrives at a most unusual hour, namely, midnight, and finds waiting for him, not his male escorts, the bridegroom's friends, but a solitary group of maidens who seem to be well aware of the probable unpunctuality of the bridegroom for they have equipped themselves with lamps and settled down to sleep. Thirdly, there is no sign of celebrations, guests, parents of bride or groom, master of ceremonies, indeed, the only words which suggest that the parable concerns a wedding are *νυμφίου* and *γάμος*. When the bridegroom does appear those who had the forethought to bring oil for their lamps refuse to share it with their companions who are sent out to a store which is expected to give day and night service. Finally, the selfish maidens mysteriously disappear behind a closed door with the bridegroom. The other maidens are rudely refused entry.

Yet there is one more remarkable feature in this parable, namely, it is the only place in the Gospels where Jesus utters any criticism either direct or in metaphorical language against women. This is emphasized by the fact the characters in the other 'watching' parables are all male. One is obliged to ask what necessitated

¹⁾ A paper read at a staff seminar in the Department of Religious Studies, Makerere University College, University of East Africa on July 7th, 1965.

²⁾ A previous attempt to explain the parable is found in "Zum Verständnis von Mt xxv 1-13", F. A. STROBEL, *Novum Testamentum* vol. 11, fasc. 3/4 pp. 199-227, in which the author finds the setting of the parable to be that of Passover night. One would, however, question whether Passover night was regarded as a nuptial night. However, the Canticle may have been recited about the time of the Passover. See J. E. Vol. 8 pp. 429-431.

³⁾ The bride is not mentioned according to the best manuscript authority.

female *personae dramatis* and what kind of wedding did Jesus mean to depict?

There is one situation in which the Jews were obliged to play a feminine role and one theme in which they allowed the use of erotic symbolism normally prohibited for profane use ¹⁾. This situation and theme was the nuptial relationship between Yahweh and his bride Israel. This erotic imagery finds its most fervent and uninhibited expression ²⁾ in the Canticle of Canticles, traditionally regarded as the great love song between Yahweh and his people Israel: the love romance around which this Song is woven is the story of the Exodus, the wooing, courting and final union between the two. It is a theme consonant with the *Heilsgeschichte* according to St. Matthew, who from the beginning of his Gospel depicts Jesus as the second Moses and redemption as the fulfillment of the Exodus ³⁾. It would not be surprising therefore if the second to the last parable ⁴⁾ in his Gospel dealt with this theme. Let us first, however, trace the Exodus motif underlying the Canticle in Canticles Rabbah ⁵⁾.

We can illustrate it in the following texts:

a) 'R. Berekiah and R. Helbo in the name of R. Samuel b. Nahman said: In ten places in Scripture Israel are called "*bride*", six here [in the Song of Songs], and four in the prophets . . .', (*Cant. R. IV. 10 p. 212 f*).

b) the courtship begins in the land of Egypt. Commenting on '*I adjure you, O Daughters of Jerusalem . . . what will ye tell Him?*' 'That I am love-sick'. 'As a sick person yearns for healing, so the generation in Egypt yearned for deliverance'. (*Cant. R. V. 8 para. 1 p. 238*).

c) In *Cant. R. IV. 8 para. 1 p. 205* Yahweh calls his prospective bride from Egypt: '*Come with Me from Lebanon, My Bride, with Me from Lebanon. . . .* We have learnt elsewhere: 'A virgin is allowed

¹⁾ It was prohibited to sing the Song of Songs as a drinking song.

²⁾ Cf. for example, Y. YADIN, *The War Scroll of the Sons of Darkness against the Sons of Light*, in which he suggests that Cant. ii. 4 should read 'his leg over me in love' rather than 'banner over me in love', p. 62.

³⁾ Cf. for example, the work of Prof. W. E. DAVIES, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount*, 1963.

⁴⁾ One notes that these parables in chapters xxi-xxv are separated from the block of parables in chapter xiii. It would seem, therefore, that they have a particular *Sitz im Leben* as Our Lord draws to the close of his ministry.

⁵⁾ Text, *Midrashim Rabbah*, translated under the editorship of Rabbi Dr. H. FREEDMAN and MAURICE SIMON, Soncino Press, 1951.

twelve months from the time the bridegroom claims her to prepare herself for the wedding.' I, however, did not observe this rule, but while you were still busy with bricks and mortar I hastened to redeem you' ¹⁾. This interpretation is possible because there is a play on the word 'Lebanon' read as *lebenim* (bricks) ²⁾.

d) The coming forth from Egypt is read into Cant. vi. 8 (*Cant. R.* VI. 9 para. 4 p. 267) 'The Rabbis applied the verse to the Israelites who went forth from Egypt. There *are threescore queens*: these are the sixty myriads who went forth from twenty years old and upwards. *And fourscore concubines*: these are the eighty myriads who went forth twenty years old and under. *And maidens without number*: there is no end and no number to the proselytes.'

e) In *Cant. R.* IV. 9 p. 212 Israel is described as ravishing Yahweh's heart by the Red Sea—"Thou hast ravished my heart . . . 'Ye had one heart by the Red Sea and ye gave Me two hearts' . . . when ye stood before Me at Mount Sinai and said, 'All that the Lord hath said will we do, and obey' (Ex. xxiv 7)."

f) Cant. i 2 'O that you would kiss me with the kisses of your mouth' is the subject of various interpretation by Rabbis of different generations. It is, however, in general interpreted of the consent which Israel gave to obey Yahweh's commandments, hence he kissed her on the mouth, (*Cant. R.* I. 2 para. 1 pp. 20-30).

g) Israel is depicted as sleeping while Moses the best man delayed with God on the mountain ³⁾. Commenting on Cant. v. 3 R. Johanan said in the name of Resh Lakish: . . . 'I have put off my coat, how shall I put it on. But why in fact is this said? Because sleep at Pentecost time' (when the Law was given on Mount Sinai) 'is sweet and the night is short. R. Judan said: They were not bitten by fleas either'. *Cant. R.* p. 234 n. 6 comments 'Yet Israel awoke to receive the Law' ⁴⁾.

Yahweh comes down like a bridegroom and meets his bride Israel and the consummation of their union is affected by the setting up of the Tent of Meeting in which Yahweh communes

¹⁾ Cf. also *Cant. R.* IV. 12 para. 2 p. 221 f. here the bride Israel is said to present thirteen presents to Yahweh but He presented her with twenty-six, 'as it is the custom of the bridegroom, to double the wedding-gift of the bride'.

²⁾ Cf. *Exod. R.* xxiii. 5 p. 282 f. and also the play on Lebanon and stones in *Git.* 56b where Lebanon is used as name for Temple.

³⁾ Cf. STRACK-BILLERBECK, Vol. I. p. 970 quoting P.R.E. 41.

⁴⁾ *Cant. R.* I. 12 para. 2 pp. 79 f.

directly with his people and in which His Shekinah rested. Hence the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai was known as the 'Day of Espousals', '*In the day of his espousals*: this was the day of Sinai, when Israel were like bridegrooms. *And in the day of the gladness of his heart*: this refers to [when they received] the Torah, as it says, . . . Another explanation: *On the day of his espousals*: this refers to [the consecration of] the Tent of Meeting . . . ' ¹). (*Cant. R.* III. 11, 2 pp. 174 f.).

Yet the Rabbis do not overlook that the children of Israel sinned on the very day of their espousals: 'R. Simeon b. Halafta said: Shame on the bride who misconducts herself in her very bridal chamber!' (That is, made the Golden Calf at Sinai itself). ' . . . they lost the good counsel which was given at Sinai . . . ', (*Cant. R.* VIII. 5, 1 p. 305).

Thus the Song of Songs according to the many sections of the Midrash ²) is accommodated to Israel as a whole. Yet it was the Jewish scholars who were attracted above all to the Canticle, in fact so much so that they prohibited men to study it until they had reached a certain stage in their academic course: 'undergraduates' were not permitted to be introduced into the mysteries of the Song or the Chariot. The popularity of the Canticle by the time of R. Akiba is shown by his own exclamation:

' . . . no man in Israel ever disputed about the Song of Songs [that he should say] that it does not render the hands unclean, for all the ages are not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies ' ³)

With unparalleled audacity the scholars appear to have appropriated almost every phrase of the Canticle either to the details of the Torah or to descriptions of themselves ⁴).

¹) The connection between the Covenant on Sinai and the nuptial imagery probably depends on *chathan*

²) Most of the quotations above are not attached to the names of Rabbis, hence one might be assumed (although there is no certainty) that they are early material. In all quotations I have named the Rabbi where possible as an indication of dating. These Rabbis are, of course, after the New Testament but some of the sentiments they express may antedate their tradent or author. If, however, a rabbinic saying casts light on the New Testament, this might suggest that the idea, although not necessarily the form in which it is expressed, may have been known in New Testament times.

³) Mishna, *Yadim* III 5 (trans. H. DANBY, Oxford, 1933).

⁴) The present article should be compared with Mr. RAPHAEL LOEWE's article, "Apologetic Motifs in the Targum to the Song of Songs," (forth-

'The daughters of Jerusalem' served to denote the Sanhedrin, 'O ye daughters of Jerusalem. The Rabbis say: Read not *benoth* (daughters) but *bonoth* - ye that build Jerusalem: by this is meant the great Sanhedrin of Israel who sit and instruct them in every difficulty and point of law' (*Cant. R. I. 5 para. 3 p. 53 et cetera*). The ornaments of the beloved in the Canticle are accommodated to the leaders of Judaism:

'Thy neck with beads'. 'These are the seventy members of the Sanhedrin who were strung after them (Moses and Aaron) together like pearls on a string.' (*Cant. R. I. 10 para. 2 p. 73*):

'Thy cheeks are comely with circlets (*torim*): when the words of Torah are recited on their due occasions (*torim*)¹, the laws of Passover on Passover, the laws of Pentecost on Pentecost, the laws of Tabernacles on Tabernacles, [the word *tor* being used as in] *Now when the turn (tor) of every maiden was come* (Est. ii 12). *Thy neck in pearls*: R. Levi said in the name of R. Hama b. R. Hanina: This refers to the various sections of the Torah, which are linked with one another, or lead on to one another . . .'. (*Cant. R. I. 10 para. 3 p. 75*).

'Thy cheeks are comely with circlets: these are the Rabbis. Thy neck with pearls (*haruzim*): these are the disciples who strain (*hozrim*) their necks to hear the words of Torah . . . when they link the words of the Pentateuch with those of the prophets . . .'. (*Cant. R. I. 10 para. 2 p. 74*).

'Thine eyes are as doves: Thine eyes: these refer to the Sanhedrin who are the eyes of the congregation, as it is written. *If it be hid from the eyes of the congregation* (Num. xv 24). There are two hundred and forty-eight limbs in the human body, and they move only by the direction of the eyes. So Israel can do nothing without their Sanhedrin.' (*Cant. R. I. 15 para. 2 p. 86 cf. IV. 1 para. 2*)².

coming in *Biblical Motifs: Origins of Transformations* ed. A. ALTMANN, Brandeis University, Judaic Studies 3), in which he summarizes the Targum of the Canticle the *redaction* of which dates in the seventh century. The whole article is germane to the present study. Particularly relevant to this theme are: section B I-V which deals with the Sinaitic Revelation to the significance and the oral Torah and section C I-II which deals with the 'office-holders and sundry classes' in Israel.

¹ Mr. RAPHAEL LOEWE pointed out to me the pun on תור and תורה.

² Cf. Matt. vi 22, 23. This may be a reference to the Sanhedrin. Mr. RAPHAEL LOEWE drew my attention to the play on עין (eye) = number seventy ע = Sanhedrin.

The scholars were not content to be but jewels round the neck of the bride of Israel but they compared themselves to the bride herself:

'R. Huna and R. Halafta of Caesarea said in the name of R. Simeon b. Lakish: Just as a bride is adorned with twenty four ornaments (see Is. iii 18-24) and if one is missing she cannot pass muster, so a Rabbinical scholar should be conversant with the twenty four books of the Scripture, and if he is not conversant with one of them he cannot pass muster. R. Huna said in the name of R. Simeon b. Lakish: Just as a bride must be modest, so a Rabbinical scholar should be modest. R. Halafta said in the name of Resh Lakish: Just as the bride sits on the couch and says, 'See for yourselves that I am pure, and here is my proof that testifies for me,' so a Rabbinical student should be liable to no reproach . . . ' (*Cant. R.* IV. 11, para. 1 p. 214).

'R. Johanan said: If one discourses on the Torah in public and his words do not give as much pleasure to his hearers as a bride gives pleasure to the beholders when sitting in her bridal chamber, it were better that he had not delivered them. Resh Lakish said: If one discourses on the Torah and his words do not give as much pleasure to his hearers as a *bride to her husband when she enters the bridal chamber, it were better that he had not delivered them.*' (The italics are mine. *Cant. R.* IV. 11, para. 1 p. 215).

For the scholars the Tent of Meeting became 'the chamber of my teaching' (deriving *horathi* from *hora'ah*, teaching, *Cant. R.* II. 3 para. 5 and note 4 *ibid.* (p. 101) and they appropriated to their own merits the inmost portion of the Tent: '*The inside thereof being inlaid with love*: R. Judan said: This refers to the merit of the Torah and the merit of the righteous who study and practise it . . . *The inside thereof being inlaid with love from the daughters of Jerusalem*' (*ibid.* p. 167). The commentator adds in note 1 (*ibid.*) 'The addition *from the daughters*, etc., hardly seems relevant, and it is not quoted at this stage in the preceding section. Perhaps, however, the Midrash desires to draw attention to the scholars in Jerusalem.'

Further *Cant.* vi 8 formerly referred to the whole people of Israel leaving Egypt (*vide supra* p. 3) is transferred to the scholars themselves:

'R. Isaac applied the verse to the sections of the Torah. *There*

are threescore queens: these are sixty tractates of *halachoth* ¹⁾. *And fourscore concubines*: these are the eighty sections in Leviticus. *And maidens without number*: There is no end of additional *halachoth*. *She is one*: the students argue with one another, but all base themselves on one principle . . . R. Judan b. Il'pai applied the verse to the Tree of Life and the Garden of Eden. *There are threescore queens*: these are the sixty companies of the righteous who sit in the Garden of Eden under the Tree of Life and study the Torah . . . *And fourscore concubines*: these are the eighty companies of the fairly good who sit and study the Torah outside the Tree of Life. *And maidens without number*: there is no end of the disciples.' (*Cant. R.* VI. 9 para. 2-3 pp. 265 f.).

The rabbis introduced themselves into the bridal chamber by interpreting the verse, '*Let my beloved come into his garden*' (*Cant.* iv 16) and '*I come to my garden . . .*' (*Cant.* v. 1) as *ginnuni* (bridal chamber) not *ganni* (garden) 'R. Menahem, . . . in the name of R. Simeon b. Jusna: It does not say here, 'I am come into the garden,' but *I am come into my garden (ganni)*: as if to say, to my bridal chamber (*ginnuni*): to the place which was my real home originally; for it was not the original home of the Shechinah in the lower realm . . . (i.e. on earth)' (*Cant. R.* IV. i, para. 1 p. 228 cf. *ibid.* I, 4 para. 2 p. 43). Four Rabbis are supposed to have entered the chamber (*Cant. R.* I. 4 para. 1 p. 46 f.).

We may suggest that it is against this background that the Parable of the Foolish Virgins is told ²⁾. Jesus may have thought that the scholars monopolised the nuptial imagery of the covenant on Sinai and tended to exclude the less learned from an intimate relationship to God. The parable's *Sitz im Leben* appears to fit this interpretation. Jesus tells the parable against the hypocrisy of the Jewish teachers.

The *Sitz im Leben* seems to arise from the dispute over Jesus' authority in Matt. xxi 23. In the controversy Jesus illustrates his points with parables which contain symbols obviously known to the chief priests and scribes for they realise that the parables are told directly against them (v. 45). The symbols are carefully chosen.

¹⁾ Mr. RAPHAEL LOEWE informs me that sixty tractates is a comparatively late arrangement. Originally it was sixty-three.

²⁾ *Cant. R.* I. 3, 3 p. 39 f. gives various interpretations of '*alamoth*' (maidens) e.g. 'with youthful energy'; 'penitents'; 'proselytes'; the 'generation of destruction' etc.

The *vineyard* (Matt *xxi* 28, 33 ff) may apply to Israel generally but more particularly it was applied to the Sanhedrin, 'A *vineyard* this is the Sanhedrin, as we have learnt elsewhere' (*Ed* *ii* 4) 'R Ishmael testified to three things before the Sages in the vineyard in Jabneh, and they accepted his statements Now were they sitting in a vineyard? The fact is that the Sanhedrin is so called because it was arranged in rows like a vineyard' (*Cant R VIII* *ii*, para 2 p 315)

The marriage feast (Matt *xxii* 1-15) may be a symbol of the completion of the study of Torah, compare, for example, R Eleazar who supposed that Solomon made a feast to celebrate the completed study of the Torah (*Cant R I* *i*, 9 and note 2 p 13) Further in the Midrash (*Cant R VIII*, *ii*, 2) still commenting on the 'vineyard' God is compared to a king who gave his daughter (Torah) in marriage The mingling of the themes of vineyard (*Cant viii* *ii*, 12) and marriage would not be unfamiliar to the scholars It is, for example, found at the end of *Taanith* (iv 8) where "day of espousals" is interpreted as the giving of the Law

The wedding garment may be a scholars' cloak to which Strack-Billerbeck draw attention (vol I p 882) One may compare also the fascinating study "*The Divine Garment and Shi'ur Qomah*" by Raphael LOEWE Mr Loewe comments that the wrapping of the Deity in the garment of light or radiance seems to be 'explicitly connected with God's own biblical scholarship, it is to be noted that the targumist's formulation seems to hint that the wrapping on of the garment is an invariable (and indeed indispensable?) preliminary to the study of the Bible—almost a 'scholar's gown' '1)

This section culminates in the two great precepts of charity which is Jesus' epitomy of Torah and in the forced admission of the Pharisees that Christ must be Lord

This theme is expanded in Matt *xxiii* which contains the woes directed, not against the teaching of the leaders of Israel, but against their lack of good deeds which fail to accompany their teaching The climax of these is reached in the lament over Jerusalem which is possibly a direct address to those who were known both as the 'daughters of Jerusalem', that is, the Sanhedrin, with the play on 'daughters' and 'builders' (*vide supra* p 5) The irony

¹⁾ R LOEWE, *H T R* vol 58 no 1 January 1965 p 157

of the passage lies in the fact that they are destroyers rather than builders.

Matt. xxiv. treats of false teaching, false Christs and the cosmic upheavals preceding the coming of the Son of Man. There is a fairly close parallel to this section in the same Midrash *Cant. R. II. 13*, 4 pp. 126-7. It speaks of the Torah being forgotten in Israel ¹⁾. The *locus classicus*, however, of the Little Apocalypse is *Sotah ix. 15*.

Hence one sees that the whole section from Matt. xxi 23 to xxiv preceding the watching parables centres round teaching, good teaching, bad teaching, deceptive teaching but above all teaching unaccompanied by good deeds. This sets the stage for the watching parables of which the most poignant is the parable of the virgins.

These watching parables, the watchful householder and the faithful and wise servant, strike the initial note according to which the scholars accommodated to themselves the whole of the Song of Songs. They quoted the text '*Seest thou a man diligent in his business? He shall stand before kings, he shall not stand before mean men*'; (Prov. xxii 29): this applies to the righteous who labour in the work of the Holy One, blessed be He. Therefore, *he shall stand before kings*, which means that they stand firm through adherence to the Torah, as it says . . .'. A lengthy discourse (*Cant. R. I. i 1-6* pp. 1-5) on Prov. xxii 29 forms the prelude to the Midrash on the text of the Canticle, similarly St. Matthew's two parables of the men 'diligent in their business' serves as an introduction to the more startling parable of the Foolish Virgins.

In this parable Our Lord appears to depict, not an ordinary marriage but men who apply themselves to the study of Torah hoping to be led into the bridal chamber, the chamber of instruction.

The symbols are apt. The number of the virgins is ten. Ten is the required number to make up a quorum for the synagogue; ten for

¹⁾ One might suggest, too, that Matt. xxiv 32-35 may be inspired by the following sections of *Cant. R.*

a) *Cant. R. II. 13 para. 1* *The fig tree putteth forth her green figs*: this refers to the sinners of Israel who died in the three days of darkness . . .

b) '*... winter is past ...*'; this refers to the forty years which Israel spent in the wilderness . . .

c) '*the rain is over and gone*': this refers to the thirty-eight years during which Israel were as under a ban (therefore could not speak to their teacher cf. Ta' an 30b) in the wilderness, as God did not speak with Moses until that generation had passed away . . .

d) *Lev. R. XIX 2 p. 238* on the indestructability of the words of the Torah.

the courts of ten in Temple law (*Sanh.* i. 3); but, most important of all, ten for the circles of study, for example, in the Qumran community (C.D. x. 4).

The time is night. Day and night study was highly recommended. In the Qumran community one finds the members taking it in turns to study one third of the night ¹). But references to night study are frequent, for example, R. Johana said: 'The full crop of the Torah is garnered only at night, for so it says, *'She riseth also while it is yet night'* (Prov. xxxi 15) and it is also written, *'Arise, cry out in the night'* (Lam. ii 19) ²). Both these verses were understood to refer to study of Torah at night, (*Cant. R.* V. 11, para. 1 pp. 239 f.).

The passage from Lamentations R. is particularly interesting. Here David is said to sleep until midnight and then rise to study Torah (*Lam. R.* II. 18-19, para. 22). Thus midnight is deemed the special hour of revelation at which time the scholars should be at their scrolls. Thus the *'cry at midnight'* in the parable has a wealth of biblical exegesis behind it.

The virgins hold lamps. KRAUSS ³) comments that it is only from Matt. xxv. that we learn of the custom of holding lamps at a wedding. The detail seems deliberately introduced as a necessary feature of this spiritual marriage theme. The lamp is symbolic of the Torah, *'Thy word is a lamp to my feet'* (Ps. cxix 105) and according to *Ex. R.* xxxvi. 3 p. 439 'The man who does not occupy himself with Torah stumbles and all because he has no lamp in his hand' . . . God said, 'Let My lamp be in thy hand and thy lamp in my hand' (i.e. Do Thou keep my Torah and I will keep thy soul).

Now the virgin-scholars are not reprimanded for sleeping during the night for they follow the example of David who rose at the cry of midnight. Neither are they reprimanded because they do not hold lamps (the Torah). Indeed, the crux of the parable lies in the fact that they even go as far as trimming their lamps. The trimming of the lamps is an essential part of the parable for there is probably a play on 'trimming' (t-b literally, 'improving') and '[speaking] well'. In *Cant. R.* II. 14 (para. 4 p. 131) commenting on *'For Sweet is thy voice'* the following passage occurs:

'This refers to what they said after the Commandments were given, as it says, *And the Lord heard the voice of your words . . . and*

¹) C.D. x. 4. Cf. also Lev R. xix. 1-2 pp. 236 f.

²) Cf. *Cant. R.* V. 11 para. 1 f. pp. 239 f.

³) KRAUSS, S., *Talmudische Archaeologie* 1910-12.

said . . . *they have well said all that they have spoken* (Deut. v 25). What is meant by '*they have well (hetibu) said all that they have spoken*'? Hiyya b. Adda and Bar Kappara gave different explanations [of the word 'well']. One compared it to the trimming (*hataboth*) of the lamps . . .'. The same comment is made in *Cant. R.* IV. 4 para. 1 p. 183.

Up to this point in the parable the scholars have fulfilled their duties. One last thing they lacked, that is, oil.

The lamp is the symbol of Torah but the oil is symbolic of good deeds, for example, in Num. R. xiii 15, 16 p. 535 commenting on the phrase '*mingled with oil*' the Midrash reads, 'the study of Torah must be mingled with good deeds' ¹⁾.

The oil is the good deeds for the deficiency of which Jesus reprimands the scribes and Pharisees even though they have trimmed their lamps, that is, have spoken and taught well. But why did the five wise virgins-scholars with good deeds to their credit refuse to give to those who had none? The reason it appears is because one's good deeds cannot benefit another person, not even one's sons or daughters for 'no amount of good deeds *are sufficient* for oneself' ²⁾.

Thus the wise scholars with their good deeds hasten to the nuptial chamber, the Tent of Meeting, when they are roused from sleep at midnight even as Moses roused Israel from 'gazelle-sleep' on Mount Sinai when God came as bridegroom to meet and claim his bride Israel ³⁾. The foolish scholars without their good deeds, like the Israelites, who followed up their well-spoken words with the making of the Golden Calf, are shut out from the nuptial chamber. The Lord says, 'I know thee not'. This seems to bear a threefold meaning:

- a) I know thee not (in the nuptial sense);
- b) I do not recognise thee;
- c) I know thee not, i.e. Jesus proclaims in Rabbinical language the refusal of a Rabbi to admit a disciple ⁴⁾.

Thus Matt. xxvi fits admirably into the theme of the parable because it shows the sheep and the goats divided according to their performance of good deeds.

¹⁾ Cf. also BACHER W., *Ag. Pal. Amor.* vol. i p. 223 and vol. ii. p. 466 where students are called 'sons of oil'. See also J.E. under 'oil'.

²⁾ Lev. R. iv. 1-2 p. 50.

³⁾ STRACK-BILLERBECK, Vol. I. pp. 969-70.

⁴⁾ One notes that St. Luke says 'I do not know *whence* thou comest' (Lk. xiii 25).

To sum up, at the end of Jesus' fifth discourse St. Matthew records a parable which reflects a theme common to all three evangelists, namely, Jesus as bridegroom¹). In Matthew the parable comes as the climax of the Exodus motif. Jesus comes like God on Mount Sinai on the 'day of espousals', He comes to draw Israel to Himself in the New Covenant and to the virgin-scholars says, as God said on Sinai, '... when you take the Torah, you are taking Me, as it were' (Ex. R. xxxiii. 6-7). According to *Lev. R.* xi. 9 those who receive him will dance as maidens pointing their finger and saying, 'This, this is our God and we will rejoice in Him'.

Our Lord, like Solomon referred to in the Canticle, is able to 'take in large numbers' (i.e. of 'wives') and 'yet sin not' (*Cant. R.* I. 1, 1 p. 17) for when 'Solomon did cleave unto them in love' (*Cant. R.* I. 1, 10 p. 16) it meant (according to R. Jose b. Halafta) to 'make them beloved (to God), to bring them near (to God), to convert them and to bring them under the wings of the Shekinah'.

The rather unusual exegesis of this parable outlined above will raise various questions in the minds of readers. Firstly, they will question the dating of the rabbinic material controlling the exegesis and, secondly, they will not wish to admit such allegorical interpretation of parables in face of the classical books on the subject²). These are certainly just criticisms. Most of the material which has been used in the exegesis is undated (unnamed) or comes from a period later than the New Testament, some of it is post-tannaitic. Added to this, even though some of it may antedate its tradent or author, this does not prove that it ascends in substantially its present form to New Testament times³). However, given the retentive and precise memory of the rabbinic schools and the methodology of their learning⁴), one cannot rule out the possibility that ideas such as those under discussion above may well have been in circulation in apostolic days. If, for example, tannaitic thought throws light on the New Testament then this is one argument

¹) Mt ix 14-15; Mk ii 18-22, Lk v 33-39

²) C. H. DODD, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, revised edition 1961 and J. JEREMIAS, *The Parables of Jesus*, 1963 (translated by S. H. HOOKE from the German *Die Gleichnisse Jesu* 6th edition, 1962)

³) Cf. KRISTER STENDAHL, *The School of St. Matthew and its use of the Old Testament*, Uppsala, 1954, pp. 11-12 Cf. P. CARRINGTON, *The Primitive Christian Catechism*, (1940) p. 69 who also refers to the Matthaean school and compares the teachers to the *tannaim* of contemporary Judaism

⁴) GERHARDSSON, *Memory and Manuscript*, Uppsala, 1963

towards finding in it earlier thought. It is unlikely that Judaism borrowed from Christianity.

RAPHAEL LOEWE ¹⁾ after stating that there survive some examples of exegetical treatment of the Canticum by named Tannaitic figures, including R. Aqibha, 'in which the reading of the Song as a dialogue between God the lover and Israel the beloved maiden is taken for granted,' also notes that there is a trace of the 'same exegetical approach' in 2 Esdras (IV) v. 24-26 (100 B.C.). He points out that Aqibha's defence of the canonicity of the Song presupposes the allegorical interpretation ²⁾. LOEWE ³⁾ also comments that Jewish circumspectness as recorded by Origen regarding the Canticum when combined with R. Aqibha's recorded dictum ⁴⁾ regarding it may suggest (but certainly does not prove) that this sort of exegesis of the Canticum was current in pharisaic-rabbinic circles in apostolic times.

The earliest Christian commentary seems to be one by Hippolytus ⁵⁾ and it is reported that his commentary was so popular that it was translated into Syriac ⁶⁾. It is possible that the Canticum was confined to a small circle of Christian exegetes, as it was confined to the more advanced Jewish students, and this may be the reason why it is not quoted in the New Testament. On the whole it seems that one cannot entirely rule out the possibility of the exegetical use of the Canticum by early Christians.

The second objection concerning the allegorical use of the Canticum is perhaps the more serious obstacle ⁷⁾. While it is important to be cautious about the allegorical interpretation of parables here again RAPHAEL LOEWE ⁸⁾ has much to contribute. He makes a clear distinction between the rabbinic use of allegory

¹⁾ RAPHAEL LOEWE, *op. cit.*, p. 161. Mr. LOEWE has kindly allowed me to see his manuscript before publication. I should add here that he is not entirely in agreement with my exegesis and I am indebted to him for his helpful criticism over several points.

²⁾ *Ibid.* (p. 161).

³⁾ By correspondence.

⁴⁾ *Vide supra* p. 4.

⁵⁾ Hippolytus MG 10 cols. 627-30.

⁶⁾ *Ibid.*

⁷⁾ Père LÉON DUFOUR has also discussed this question in an article forthcoming in *Biblische Zeitschrift*.

⁸⁾ *Op. cit.* p. 159-162. Cf. also his article, "The Jewish Midrashim and Patristic and Scholastic Exegesis of the Bible", *Studia Patristica* 63 vol. i. 1957 pp. 492-514 but especially pp. 494, 503-508.

and the patristic use. In rabbinical exegesis the literal sense is not opposed to the allegorical. RAPHAEL LOEWE states '... we ought not to expect rabbinic literalism to admit a distinction between the literal and allegorical senses as supposedly being mutually exclusive, precisely because it exploits the resources of the letter in order to reinforce its own variety of allegorical interpretation by adding thereto colourful verisimilitudes and these are sometimes discovered by a remorseless insistence upon one literal (or possible) meaning of a single word, in a sense paradoxical to the context as naturally understood. In discussing rabbinic exegesis, therefore, we ought perhaps to distinguish the idiosyncratic meaning of the term 'literal' here by putting it into quotation marks, for the letter is not, as in Christian exegesis, the potentially jealous stepmother of allegory, but rather her willing handmaid or research assistant.'

Indeed the importance of the 'word' has been exposed by M. GERTNER: ¹⁾ the passage is worth quoting *in extenso*: 'Yet a midrash is not only based on a biblical text, to which the author normally refers, but also relies on certain techniques in handling this text and on various methods of interpreting it. Of the various techniques applied in midrash mention will be made here only of those which are of interest in the discussion below. These are the following six techniques: '*al-tigrey*', that is, a changed or double reading of a word; '*tarety mashma*', that is a different or twofold meaning given to a word; enriching, that is, illuminating one passage of Scripture by another; '*muqdamme'whar*', that is, rearranging the chronological, or contextual, order of the chapters in a book or the parts in a passage; changing the grammatical or logical subject-object structure of a sentence; and, finally midrashim based on the homiletical interpretation of names.'

It is the 'covert midrash' behind the parable which this article has tried to trace.

It has been suggested that the midrash is from the Cantic and the most likely chapter seems to be chapter *v.* 1 'I come to my garden, my sister my bride' ... *v.* 2 'I slept, but my heart was awake. Hark my beloved is knocking ...' *v.* 5 'I rose to open to my beloved ...' or i 2-4 especially *v.* 4 '... The king has brought me into his chambers'. There may also be double meanings attached

¹⁾ M. GERTNER, "The Midrashim in the New Testament", *Journal of Semitic Studies*, vol 7 no 2 Autumn 1962 pp 267-292 The passage is quoted from p. 270

to 'rose up' i.e. be spiritually elevated (v. 7) ¹⁾ and 'lit their lamps' (v. 7), i.e. 'spoke well' ²⁾).

If one can find this methodology in St. Matthew's parable (or parables), this is not to say that the other evangelists used the same method or even understood Jesus' use of it. All three evangelists refer to Christ as the bridegroom ³⁾ but it is St. Matthew who appears to bring this theme to a climax. To him may belong a peculiarly rabbinical method of 'parabolic' exegesis. Prof. K. STENDAHL's thesis 'The School of St. Matthew' is compelling. He quotes E. VON DOBSCHUTZ ⁴⁾ that Matthew may have been Rabbi trained in the school of Johanan ben Zakkai but his own thesis that a school created Matthew presupposes a greater possibility of traditional Jewish influence from higher education in the *beth hamidrash*. If this were so then "St. Matthew" might have had access to teaching concerning the Canticle. Prof. STENDAHL also comments on the use of midrash ⁵⁾. He observes that the 'degree to which a quotation is exactly cited cannot be determined in a general statement consistent to the whole of the New Testament. We have already established that texts if apocalyptic in nature seldom contain quotations in the strict sense while at the same time, it is just these texts which are abounding in allusions which with supreme freedom and skill have been woven into the context. Revelation is itself a striking example of this. Without a single true quotation, nevertheless interwoven with O.T. material to a greater extent than any other writing in the New Testament. In the apocalypse of the gospels, as in their sayings of apocalyptic nature, we have found the same phenomenon. Consequently, there is no attempt to quote exactly in this form, and the citing is certainly freely given from memory. The prophet spirit creates, it does not quote in order to teach or argue'. This essay has attempted to discover the allusion which with supreme freedom and skill have been woven into the parable alone recorded by St. Matthew.

Now one must ask whether Jesus used this parable with the intention which we have suggested. It does not seem to the present writer to be beyond the bounds of possibility that Jesus did tell

¹⁾ Lev. R. xxxii. 2 p. 409. Eccles. R. x. 20 p. 281.

²⁾ *Vide supra* p. 12.

³⁾ Matt. ix 15; Mk. ii 19 and Luke v. 34.

⁴⁾ STENDAHL, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

⁵⁾ *Ibid.* p. 158-9 cf., also pp. 183 ff.

this parable to the Jewish leaders in approximately the form in which St. Matthew records it. St. Matthew realising its true import incorporated it into his gospel according to the purposeful structure of that gospel. The early church did not completely understand its message or indeed the full meaning of the preceding parables and thus the 'Foolish Virgins' became a watching parable instructing the people to be prepared for the coming of Christ (although, it is observed that in the other parables the servants do not sleep). Later the parable was appropriated by those who advocated male celibacy, for example, Aphraat who used it when speaking to the 'sons of the covenant' ¹⁾. Still later on it was used as a parable especially fitting for women virgins ²⁾. By this time it had probably lost all connection with the Canticle.

The brief 'allegorical' use of the Canticle which we suggest this parable formed and which was directed against Jewish teachers found a fuller allegorization first in Hippolytus and then in Origen. If RAPHAEL LOEWE's thesis is correct ³⁾ the next movement on the side of the Jews was the Targum as a polemic against the Christian use of the Canticle. RAPHAEL LOEWE remarks the prominence of the Torah, especially the Oral Torah, in the Targum and although the scholars themselves are not the central attraction yet scholarship itself is certainly stressed and praised. The following examples may be selected from RAPHAEL LOEWE's work:

1) p. 171 on vii 11 '... God's praise of Israel is prefaced by an appeal for her return to Him, to Jerusalem, to the house of study and to a receptivity towards true prophetic teaching and a rejection of the false prophets';

2) p. 172 (vii 12-viii 14) '... When eventually the Messiah is commissioned to take up his kingdom and reveals himself to Israel, he is welcomed by an invitation to join Israel in proceeding to Jerusalem to attend a Talmudic discourse the unnamed guest lecturer being presumably the Deity himself ...';

3) p. 176 on 'Your eyes are pools in Heshbon ...'. The Targum 'reads an eulogy on the scholars of the Sanhedrin who possess the

¹⁾ Aphraat, *Demonstatio Sexta, De Monachis* M. P. Syriaca, vol. 1. part I cols. 239-40 See especially note 1

²⁾ The present writer has discussed elsewhere the possibility that female celibacy was not practiced (or advocated) until about the third century. "St. Paul, the Philogamist, (1 Cor vii in Early Patristic Exegesis)" *New Testament Studies*, vol 11, July 1965 no 4 pp 326-348.

³⁾ *Op. cit* (Apologetic Motifs in the Targum to the Song of Songs)

near-esoteric knowledge of astronomy for calculating (*heshbon*) matters of intercalulations . . .';

4) p. 177 the 'kisses on the mouth (i. 2) have to do with the two tablets of the law, the six orders of the Mishnah and the Talmud. Finally commenting on the important verse i. 4. 'The king brought me to his chambers' the Targum reads 'Draw us after Thee . . . and draw us near to the base of Mount Sinai, and give us Thy Torah from Thy treasure house (*min ganzakh*) of heaven . . .'. LOEWE comments, 'I suspect that it is rather a deliberate counter assertion of the enduring validity of Torah, and of the adequacy of the Sinaitic revelation, against the claims here made by patristic exegetical tradition for a new and superior revelation through Christ: and that the Targumist subtly insinuates his apologia by himself adopting (or reclaiming) Paul's metaphorical reference to all treasures of wisdom and knowledge hidden in Christ. Conceivably, too, an additional motive for the Targumist's identification was provided by the well-known words of Jesus himself (Matt v. 19) regarding laying up for yourselves treasures in heaven . . .'.

Thus it would seem that even in the seventh century redaction of the Targum there still remained a certain polemical note against the Christian idea of wisdom and a certain defence of Rabbinic scholarship and the importance of the Oral Torah.

Therefore it might have been possible that this formed the original 'Sitz im Leben' of the parable¹⁾.

¹⁾ Since the completion of this article has appeared the Rev. C. H. CAVE's article, "The Parables and Scriptures", *New Testament Studies* vol. 11 July 1965 no. 4 pp. 374-387. In this study the Rev. CAVE exposes the scriptural readings behind some Marcan parables. This gives the parables a certain 'typological' interpretation.

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