

AESOPIC TRADITION IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

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It must be admitted that relations between the Aesopic fables and the New Testament are not particularly close. Nevertheless such relations do exist. They have not been fully researched, although these fables could be placed among the most famous Greek writings.¹ Because they belong to popular literature, they seem nearer to the New Testament environment than writings from the classical period.

Half-legendary Aesop was acknowledged as the father of the Greek fable. Not much is known about his life. Presumably he originated from Phrygia, lived in slavery on the island of Samos in the sixth century BCE, and died in Delphi, killed by the local population. He created animal fables and other short anecdotes, transmitted orally. Nearly five hundred such fables in Greek, more or less related to Aesop, have been preserved.²

1. Therefore their translations and secondary literature abound. For the richest bibliography cf. J.-G. Van Dijk, ΑΙΝΟΙ, ΛΟΓΟΙ, ΜΥΘΟΙ: *Fables in Archaic, Classical and Hellenistic Greek Literature, with a Study of the Theory and Terminology of the Genre* (Mnemosyne Supplements, 166; Leiden: Brill, 1997).

2. The main editions of Aesopic fables in Greek are E. Chambry, *Ésope: Fables* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1927; for the Greek text cf. also <http://www.mythfolklore.net/aesopica/>); A. Hausrath and H. Hunger, *Corpus fabularum Aesopicarum* (Bibliotheca Scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana, 1.1; Leipzig: Teubner, 4th edn, 1940; repr. 1970; 1.2, completed by H. Haas; ed. H. Hunger; Leipzig: Teubner, 2nd edn, 1959); B.E. Perry, *Aesopica: Greek and Latin Texts* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1952; included in the *TLG*). I quote for reference the numbers of fables from all three editions in this order: Chambry, Hausrath, and Perry. I have taken prose fables in English from L.W. Daly (trans.), *Aesop without Morals* (New York and London: Thomas Yoseloff, 1961), and poetic fables in the Babrius version from B.E. Perry, *Babrius et Phaedrus* (LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965). The recent full translation in L. Gibbs, *Aesop's Fables* (Oxford World's Classics; Oxford: Oxford University Press,

Only a fraction of this legacy could stem directly from Aesop, perhaps some dozens of fables. Aesop became a father of the genre; fables were attributed to him on the same principle as psalms to David and proverbs to Solomon. Some fables were attested before the time of Aesop, but in their majority they seem later. More than three hundred are preserved in the manuscripts of the ancient Aesopic collection created in the fourth and third centuries BCE and known in three main recensions. Other sources contain verse adaptation by Babrius (first century CE?), minor collections, the *Life of Aesop* (a Greek novel from the third century BCE with only fourteen fables) and many dispersed quotations.

What analogies between Aesop and the New Testament are possible? First, Aesopic fables are an element of ancient culture and therefore can be treated as an interesting part of New Testament background, illustrating the way of thinking, customs and habits of the Greek world in the field of human nature, morals, politics and religion.

More detailed points of contact between the fables of Aesop and the New Testament³ can be divided into general and specific ones. I shall

2002), tends to follow secondary Greek and Latin versions, and is therefore less fit for quoting in the context of this article (cf. <http://www.mythfolklore.net/aesopica/oxford/index.htm>). I do not treat here fables preserved only in Latin (nearly three hundred). Many observations are taken from my Polish annotated translation of Aesopic fables: *Ezop i inni: Wielka księga bajek greckich* (Krakow: Wydawnictwo WAM, 2006).

3. As for the Old Testament, such contact points are very rare. I shall summarize them in four points: (1) Some fables contain criticism of idols, but they are independent of the Bible (2/101/99, 108/90/88, -/307, -/308). Greek criticism of religion could, however, have influenced Daniel 14 and Baruch 6. (2) Amos 5.19: 'As if a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him; or went into the house and leaned with his hand against the wall, and a serpent bit him' [RSV], seems to have a common Egyptian source with the fable 45/32/32, 'The Homicide': 'A man who had committed murder was being pursued by the relatives of his victim. When he came to the river Nile and encountered a wolf, in his fright he climbed a tree that stood beside the river and hid in it. There he saw a snake opening its jaws at him and flung himself into the river. A crocodile in the river caught him and ate him.' (3) Sirach 13.2b: 'How can a clay pot associate with the iron kettle? The pot will strike against it, and will itself be broken', is based on the fable 354-/378, 'The Pots': 'A clay pot said to the copper one: "Do your bouncing away from me, for if you so much as touch me, I'll break even though I touch you unintentionally".' (4) The manuscripts of Aesopic collections contain a shortened version of Judg. 9.8-15 (252/293/262), added in the Byzantine period. Christian copyists added biblical

begin with some general features of both traditions and pass next to the analogies between some New Testament texts and certain fables.

General Features

Scholars examining the parables of Jesus have observed that there is some broad similarity between their genre and the classical fable.⁴ They belong together to a common category of didactic short stories.⁵ Both parables and fables are minor literary forms rooted in the oral tradition. They often take examples from the natural world and give them a metaphorical meaning. Comparing parables with fables underlines this metaphorical or even allegorical meaning of parables, although their allegorical features are less pronounced. They both portray human life and lead to some popularly presented moral conclusions, even if the exact content of their messages is not the same. They apply fixed literary schemes and often use surprise and irony.

There are important differences as well: in the parables animals do not represent humans; parables are usually based on possible situations; the divinity does not appear directly, although parables carry an intentional religious message absent from most of the Aesopic fables.

Less fruitful is the comparison between the genre of the ancient *Life of Aesop* and of the Gospels, especially Mark. The proponents of such comparison⁶ fail to be convincing, because this *Life* is a Hellenistic

glosses to these manuscripts; e.g. Jas 4.6 was used as a moral in the fable 20/266/281; Mt. 7.2 in -/332/414. These secondary additions do not contribute to the main subject of this article.

4. First mentioned by A. Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, rev. edn, 1919), p. 98; recently developed by M.A. Beavis, 'Parable and Fable', *CBQ* 52 (1990), pp. 473-98; and F. Vouga, 'Die Parabeln Jesu und die Fabeln Äsops: Ein Beitrag zur Gleichnisforschung und zur Problematik der Literarisierung der Erzählungen der Jesus-Tradition', *Wort und Dienst* 26 (2001), pp. 149-64.

5. R. Dithmar (ed.), *Fabeln, Parabeln und Gleichnisse: Beispiele didaktischer Literatur* (Nördlingen: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2nd edn, 1972).

6. W. Shiner, 'Creating Plot in Episodic Narratives: The *Life of Aesop* and the Gospel of Mark', in R.E. Hock, J.B. Chance and J. Perkins (eds.), *Ancient Fiction and Early Christian Narrative* (SBLSymS, 6; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), pp. 155-76; L.M. Wills, *The Quest of the Historical Gospel: Mark, John, and the Origins of the Gospel Genre* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), esp. pp. 180-83.

novel with satirical elements. Some similarity of literary techniques is to be explained by the narrative style of both works, their biographic genre, and the general Hellenistic milieu. Most ancient biographies, both historical and fictional, tend to glorify their heroes. And even if the Gospels as literary works did contain some further echoes of this work, it would not be a decisive factor in their interpretation.

An interesting analogy to the redactional aspects of the Synoptic Gospels can be found in the process of transmission of the Aesopic tradition.⁷ Both reveal a clear tendency towards literary reworking of the primitive stories transmitted orally. All the preserved variants of the fables and their collections do not manifest this tendency to the same degree. The same could be said about the editorial work on the teaching of Jesus in the Gospels, although in this case the transmission was much shorter and the elaboration less far-reaching.

I would add that confronting the different versions of Aesopic fables leads to something similar to Gospel synopsis. The Aesopic collection exists today in three main manuscript traditions.⁸ The best one, *Collectio Augustana* (dated between the first and the fifth century CE) is the shortest one. Two others, *Vindobonensis* and *Accursiana* have reached us in an early Byzantine form. They can be further compared with many quotations of Aesop contained in the Greek and Latin literature.⁹

Such comparisons allow us to conclude that the editors of different versions usually abstained from changing the thrust of the story, and only improved the style, added rhetorical developments, made the plot more logical or modified the message in minor matters. They took some liberty on the level of form, but cared for the adequate preservation of contents. Only on the level of interpretation, in the morals and applications of fables, do we meet more freedom and significant changes of the primitive message.¹⁰ This resulted, to some extent, from the intentionally symbolic character of fables, inviting the reader to his or her own interpretation. This fidelity of the ancient authors and editors to the content of the sources, although not to their form, may be attributed

7. Vouga, 'Parabeln Jesu'.

8. They are presented in a systematic manner in the Hausrath edition, but without poetic versions.

9. Cf. Dijk, *Fables*, esp. pp. 385-568.

10. E.g. the fable -/463, 'The Dancing Apes', presumably caricatured politicians, but Lucian (*Pisc.* 36) applied it to philosophers.

also to the four Evangelists. It illustrates their attitude towards the Jesus tradition.

Parables

Despite a general analogy between the parables and the fables, the fables of Aesop offer only secondary illustrations of the details of the parables of Jesus. Take the following as an example:

A miser sold his property, bought a lump of gold, and, once he had taken this out and buried it, kept coming back to look at it. One of the men at work nearby saw him coming and going and, guessing what he was up to, removed the gold after he had left. When the miser came back again and found the hole empty, he began to weep and tear his hair. Someone saw him in this excess of grief, and when he found out what the reason was, he said to him, 'Don't grieve, my friend; just take a stone and put it in the hole and then pretend that's your gold. You didn't use it when you had it, anyhow.'¹¹

The above story inspired ancient satirical writings about misers. The loss of the buried treasure makes it similar to the Parable of Talents (Mt. 25.14-30). As in this parable, the fable condemns keeping hidden treasures without use, and punishes the guilty by the loss of money. It could therefore inspire the parable to some extent. A version of this fable known from a tradition on Antiphon the sophist (fifth century BCE)¹² adds an unwillingness to deposit money in the bank for interest, mentioned also in the parable.

Another example is offered by the fable 'The Fisherman and the Fish' (25/-/282):

A fisherman was pulling in the net which he had just cast and, as luck would have it, the net was filled with all kinds of sea creatures. The little fish escaped to the bottom of the net and slipped out through its many holes, but the big fish was caught and lay stretched out flat aboard the boat.

11. 'The Miser' (fable 344/253/225). D. Flusser, 'Aesop's Miser and the Parable of the Talents', in C. Thoma and M. Wyschogrod (eds.), *Parable and Story in Judaism and Christianity* (Studies in Judaism and Christianity; New York and Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1989), pp. 9-25; cf. Beavis, 'Parable and Fable'.

12. H. Diels and W. Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1971), II, pp. 361-63.

In a (secondary?) prose version, the net was placed on the land. A similar situation occurs in the Parable of the Net (Mt. 13.47-48), where after the net is drawn up, the good fish are gathered. There, the other ones are thrown away, whereas in the fable they escape. Accordingly the meaning is different. The fable proclaims the survival of the less fit (ordinary people), and the parable is about the future judgment.

Fables can also illustrate some elements of parables. The fable ‘The Bird-catcher and the Partridge’ (285/205/-) features a night visit of a friend to the bird-catcher’s home. The bird-catcher, having nothing to serve him, decides to kill his domesticated partridge, used to lure other birds. This pressing situation (a sudden visit and an obligation towards the guest), offers an analogy to the Parable of the Importunate Friend (Lk. 11.5-8).

The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree (Lk. 13.6-9) has a loose counterpart in the fable about a peasant who wanted to cut down a barren tree, but he found a swarm of bees and honey: the tree did give unexpected fruit (85/-/299).¹³

Other Teachings

In some further cases, comparing sayings of Jesus with Aesopic fables seems fruitful for biblical exegesis. These references are, however, absent from commentaries. Let us begin with ‘The Piping Fisherman’ (24/11/11):

A fisherman who knew how to play the pipes took his pipes and his nets and went down to the sea. First he stood there on a jutting rock and played his pipes, thinking that the fish would be attracted by the sweet sound and come right out of the water of their own accord. When he had gone on playing for some time and nothing had happened, he put his pipes aside, took up his net, cast it into the water, and caught a large number of fish. He dumped them out of his net onto the shore, and when he saw them wriggling, he said, ‘Why you miserable creatures, when I piped, you wouldn’t dance, but now that I’ve stopped, you do!’

Herodotus (*Hist.* 1.141) put this story in the mouth of King Cyrus of Persia. Through such a fable Cyrus rebuked envoys of the Greek cities that were delaying their capitulation. The Aesopic allegory refers to any situation in which if people fail to do something at the right time they are forced to make up for the loss. Jesus alluded to this fable (Mt.

13. Beavis, ‘Parable and Fable’.

11.16; Lk. 7.31): ‘But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market places and calling to their playmates, “We piped to you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.”’ The fable furnishes a background and an explanation for this variously interpreted saying. Jesus warned his hearers that ignoring ‘the pipe player’ (John the Baptist and Jesus as prophets) would bring doom as it did to the fish in the fable.

The Aesopic collection has preserved the following drastic legend, ‘The Beaver’ (153/120/118):¹⁴

The beaver is a four-footed animal that lives in the water. Its testes are said to be useful in certain medical treatments. In fact if anyone sees a beaver and starts after him, the beaver knows why he is being chased and will run for a time as fast as his legs will carry him in the hope of getting away unscathed. But if he is about to be caught, he will cut off his own testes, throw them away, and so save his life.

The moral added to the fable interprets it as a counsel to leave riches behind in order to save one’s life. However, the primitive intent was probably that it would be better to be maimed than dead.

Two sayings of Jesus seem to reflect a knowledge of this tale, because they appeal to very similar images. Mark 9.43-47 says, ‘And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go to hell’ (cf. Mt. 5.29-30; 18.8-9). The common point is self-maiming to save one’s life.

In addition, Mt. 19.12 has: ‘There are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.’ To compare, the last word of the fable is σωτηρία, translated ‘salvation’ in the New Testament. In Matthew we meet the same motive of self-castration, metaphorically understood. Both the fable and the saying of Jesus declare with some rhetorical exaggeration that humans should radically get rid of things that endanger their salvation.

Let us consider now the saying of Jesus on the wolves in sheepskins (Mt. 7.15): ‘Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s

14. This story of the self-castration of beavers is quoted also by Aelian Claudius (*Nat. an.* 6.34) and Pliny the Elder (*Nat.* 8.109). Cf. M. Schumacher, ‘Der Biber—ein Asket? Zu einem metaphorischen Motiv aus Fabel und Physiologus’, *Euphorion* 86 (1992), pp. 347-53. At the beginning, this superstition referred perhaps to the scent-glands of muskrats. Epictetus, *Diatr.* 1.2, quotes with approval the case of a man who chose rather to die than to be castrated, because for a philosopher it is essential to remain oneself, even at the price of life.

clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.’ More than a dozen Greek fables mention wolves and sheep. One of them is called indeed ‘The Wolf Wearing the Sheepskin’ (-/346/451):

A wolf once decided to change his appearance in order to get plenty of food. He put a sheepskin around him and joined the flock as it grazed, deceiving the shepherd by his trick. As night came on, the beast was shut up in the fold along with the flock, the entrance was barred, and the whole enclosure secured. But when the shepherd was ready to eat, he killed the wolf with his knife.

This fable was transmitted by Nicephoros Basilakis, a later author,¹⁵ so it is possible that the fable was modeled after the Gospel and not the reverse. The fable is, however, not quite similar to the dominical saying: the situation is taken more literally, the motive of the wolf and the conclusion are different. Perhaps both had a common source in a short proverb.

In a long fable ‘Outwitting the Birds’, attested only in verse form (-/-/298, Babrius 33), we meet the following guile. Not to alarm the birds too early, a farmer instructs his boy:

‘So when they come I’ll ask for “bread”, but you will give me not bread but the sling.’ On came the starlings and settled in the field. The farmer called for ‘bread’ according to the plan, and the starlings did not flee. The boy gave him the sling full of stones.

A stone instead of bread in relation to a father and son is mentioned in the saying of Jesus in Mt. 7.9 (and par.): ‘Or what man of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone?’ The saying could therefore be inspired by this fable.

The saying that the last will be the first (Mt. 19.30; 20.16; Mk 10.31; Lk. 13.30) could serve as a moral for the fable ‘The Turtle and the Hare’ (rabbit? 352/254/226). If this fable was as popular then as it is nowadays, this saying perhaps supposed it:

A turtle and a rabbit were arguing about their speed. Before they parted, they settled a time and place for a race. Because he was naturally speedy, the rabbit didn’t take the race seriously, but lay down beside the road and went on to sleep. But the turtle knew how slow he was and kept right on running, so he outran the sleeping rabbit and won the bet.

15. C. Walz (ed.), *Rhetores Graeci* (Stuttgart, Tübingen and London: Cotta, Black, Young & Young, 1832–1836), I, p. 427.

The saying of Jesus on the Two Ways from Mt. 7.13 has plenty of ancient parallels. This popular motif appears also in the Aesopic tradition (-/-/383, *Life of Aesop*¹⁶). However, the two versions are not directly related:

Once, at the command of Zeus, Prometheus described to men two ways, one the way of freedom, and the other that of slavery. The way of freedom he pictured as rough at the beginning, narrow, steep, and waterless, full of brambles, and beset with perils everywhere, but finally a level plain amid parks, groves of fruit trees, and water courses where the struggle reaches its end in rest. The way of slavery he pictured as a level plain at the beginning, flowery and pleasant to look upon with much to delight but at its end narrow, hard and like a cliff.

The ancient proverb quoted by Jesus in Lk. 4.23, ‘Physician, heal yourself’, exists in a developed fable version, ‘The Fox and the Frog’ (69/287/289):

There was a frog who claimed to be trained in the physician’s art, acquainted with all the medicinal plants of the earth, the only creature who could cure the animals’ ailments. The fox listened to the frog’s announcement and exposed his lies by the colour of his skin. ‘How can it be’, said the fox, ‘that you are able to cure others of their illnesses, but the signs of sickness can still be seen in your own face?’¹⁷

A long fable, ‘The Owl and the Birds’ (-/-/437ab), presents birds that did not heed the owl’s warnings and were punished. Its far echo can be perhaps traced in the Gospels, where the words of Jesus are disregarded by his contemporaries (cf. Mk 3.21; Jn 10.20).

There is a collection of proverbs attributed to Aesop. Among them we find the following:¹⁸ ‘A dog in the manger neither eats himself nor lets the donkey eat.’ This saying, widely popular in English (‘a dog in the manger’), is quoted twice in Greek by Lucian, in *Adversus indoctum* 30, and *Timon* 14. It appears also in the mouth of Jesus in the Coptic *Gospel of Thomas* 102: ‘Woe to the Pharisees! For they are like a dog lying in the manger of oxen; for he neither eats nor lets the oxen eat.’

16. Recension G; a shorter version in W; translated by Daly, *Aesop without Morals*, p. 94.

17. Absent from Daly, *Aesop without Morals*. Translation by Gibbs, *Aesop’s Fables*.

18. Perry, ‘Aisopou logoi 74’, in *Aesopica*, p. 276; a Latin fable on this motive: Perry, *Aesopica*, p. 702. Cf. J.F. Priest, ‘The Dog in the Manger: In Quest of a Fable’, *Classical Journal* 81 (1985), pp. 49-58.

This saying could be authentic; Jesus would likely quote a popular example.

The deeds of Jesus have nearly no counterparts in the Aesopic tradition. However, there is one interesting analogy, in the fable ‘The Fisherman and the Tunny’ (22/21/21):

Some fishermen had put out to fish and, after struggling away for a long time without catching a thing, were just sitting dejectedly in their boat. At that point a tunny, swimming along in full flight with a great swish, leapt blindly into the boat. The fishermen pounced upon him, rowed back to the city, and sold their catch.

The order of events strongly resembles the Gospel story of the miraculous draught of fish (Lk. 5.1-11; Jn 21.1-11). It is quite possible that the Evangelists knew the scheme of this fable (efforts–failure–discouragement–unexpected success). However, the Greek author attributed success to an accident (the tunny apparently tried to escape a dolphin), whereas in the Gospels it resulted from the intervention of Jesus.

The foot-washing from Jn 13.1-20 can be illustrated with a scene from the *Life of Aesop* 61.¹⁹ The feet of a guest should be washed by a slave; if the host’s wife does it, it is a favour.

Paul

The epistles of Paul contain fewer analogies to Aesop. There is only one well-known example, the fable ‘The Belly and the Feet’ (159/132/130):

The belly and the feet were arguing about their importance, and when the feet kept saying that they were so much stronger that they even carried the stomach around, the stomach replied, ‘But, my good friends, if I didn’t take in food, you wouldn’t be able to carry anything.’

This fable represents the popular comparison of social life to a body, whose parts have different functions (Plato, *Resp.* 5.10). The theory of the organic connections in nature was developed later by the Stoics. The Greek fable seems to contain the oldest preserved form of this comparison. This fable is known also in later versions (Plutarch, *Cor.* 6; Livy, *Ab Urbe condita* 2.32.9-12); these references show that the fable was applied to political conflicts.

19. So M. Pesce and A. Destro, ‘La lavanda dei piedi di Gv 13,1-20, il Romanzo di Esopo e i Saturnalia di Macrobio’, *Bib* 80 (1999), pp. 240-49.

In 1 Cor. 12.12-30 Paul appealed to this popular comparison. He wrote, 'The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you", nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you"' (1 Cor. 12.21). He obviously knew the motif of the conflict of body parts (cf. also Rom. 12.4-8; Eph. 4.11-16; Col. 2.19).²⁰ The ancient background of these sayings confirms that Paul considered inner organization and hierarchy in the Christian communities necessary.

The widespread motif of wolves and sheep, mentioned above, can be found in the words of Paul from Acts 20.29: 'I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.' The nearest fable is 'Enemy Infiltration' (317/-/365; Babrius 113):

A man gathering his sheep into the fold at evening was about to enclose a tawny wolf along with the flock. His dog, seeing this, said to him: 'How can you be in earnest about saving the sheep when you bring this fellow in among us?'

Conclusion

Most analogies to Aesop that I have found concentrate in the teaching of Jesus. This may reflect to some extent the fact that Jesus' teaching contains many more images and is more popular in tone than the remaining sections of the New Testament. It is possible to state that Jesus was acquainted with some elements of the Aesopic tradition. They help to explain some New Testament texts. Moreover, the transmission of Aesopic traditions can shed some light on the redaction process of the Gospels.

The analogies presented in this article are interesting but not of primary importance. They illustrate the relation between the New Testament and Greek culture. At some points the Aesopic tradition is used or considered in the biblical books, but most often the similarities remain on the level of form. They are partial and do not reach deep.²¹

20. Cf. J.K. McVay, 'The Human Body as Social and Political Metaphor in Stoic Literature and Early Christian Writers', *Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists* 37 (2000), pp. 135-47.

21. I reached similar conclusions in M. Wojciechowski, 'Philosophical Vocabulary of Arius Didymus and the New Testament', *Roczniki Teologiczne* 53 (2006), pp. 25-34; and 'Paul and Plutarch on Boasting', *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism* 3 (2006), pp. 99-109.