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Beyond the Parable-Fable Dichotomy

An Introduction to the Volume

ALBERTINA OEGEMA AND MARTIJN STOUTJESDIJK

A. A Problem in Need of an Interdisciplinary Approach

In 1990 Mary Ann Beavis wrote: “In view of the recent revival of interest in the Greco-Roman rhetorical character of early Christian literature, a reexamination of the relevance of the fable for parable interpretation is due.”¹ Thirty years later, Beavis’s words still hold truth. While some progress has been made in this field,² a thorough examination of the parable in light of the related Graeco-Roman literary genres of fables and similes – all genres that make use of narrative analogy – is still lacking. More specifically, a truly interdisciplinary investigation of these genres in relation to each other is missing. Too often, New Testament and rabbinic scholars write about sources outside their own fields, without bringing scholars of these fields themselves into the conversation. Similarly, classical scholars writing on fables hardly engage with the parables and fables found in early Jewish, New Testament, and rabbinic sources, despite the interesting questions this would raise about the circulation and reception of fables among peoples with different ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds.

The editors of this volume, all of whom are involved in a research project on the comparative study of rabbinic and Synoptic parables,³ sought to repair this shortcoming by organizing a symposium on parables and fables in Graeco-Roman antiquity in Utrecht, The Netherlands, on the 13th of March 2018. During this one-day symposium a selection of respected scholars from different, but neighbouring fields – Classics, New Testament studies, rabbinic studies – exchanged examples of (and questions about) fables, parables, and similes in

¹ M. A. Beavis, “Parable and Fable,” *CBQ* 52 (1990): 475.

² See the article “Parables in the New Testament and Rabbinic Literature between Simile and Fable: A *status quaestionis*” by Jonathan Pater in this volume. Special mention should be made here of the recent monograph by Justin David Strong, *The Fables of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke: A New Foundation for the Study of Parables*, SCCB 5 (Paderborn: Brill | Schöningh, 2021).

³ All three editors were PhD candidates in the NWO-funded research project “Parables and the Partings of the Ways,” project no. 360-25-140, led by Eric Ottenheijm (Utrecht University), Marcel Poorthuis (Tilburg University), and Annette Merz (Protestant Theological University Amsterdam/Groningen), and with Lieve Teugels (Protestant Theological University Amsterdam/Groningen) as postdoctoral researcher.

various ancient sources. Over the course of the day, the following questions were addressed: With which texts from Greek and Roman literature can early Christian and rabbinic parables be compared? How does the composition of fables and similes and their rhetorical use in Graeco-Roman philosophical, oratory, and literary sources relate to parable-telling in ancient Jewish and early Christian contexts? What similarities and differences can be found? How did the Graeco-Roman tradition of fables and similes influence the development of the genre of parable in the Jewish context? And, finally, how can the understanding of these groups of texts be improved by comparing them with one another? If anything, the tentative answers to these questions made clear that there is much to gain from a more systematic and comprehensive approach towards parables and fables within their shared ancient Mediterranean context. Moreover, it convincingly showed that the boundaries between these and other genres are rather fluid and should be considered from a transcultural perspective.

The present volume aims to address the questions described above in greater depth. In this volume, sixteen articles are jointly presented in which a plethora of genres, methods, sources, and fields of study appear. Four themes persistently (re)surface in these contributions. The first of those themes is the *genre* of the parables and fables, for which the authors in the present volume often consult Greek and Roman rhetorical sources, but also base themselves on modern theories of folklore studies and metaphor theory. The second theme is the *content* of parables and fables; many scholars have exhausted themselves in showing that elements (characters, motifs, and narrative patterns) from the parables also occur in the fables and vice versa. Thirdly, the *function and social setting* of parables and fables are recurrently the subject of debate, often – but not always – with the assumption that these genres are examples of *Vulgärethik*, popular moral story telling. The fourth and final theme is the *transmission and textualization* of the parables and fables, which addresses, for example, the embedding of these short stories in larger textual wholes and the question of whether parables and fables also existed independently, perhaps in collections. In the final part of this introduction, these four themes will be used to analyze and categorize the contributions to the present volume. Before this, however, we offer a short introduction to the articles.

B. Presenting the Volume

The present volume consists of sixteen contributions. It begins with an introductory article in which Jonathan Pater, on the basis of selected studies within the fields of New Testament and rabbinic studies, outlines the state of scholarship on the relationship between the genres of parables and fables. While New Testament scholarship often dismisses Graeco-Roman fables as material for comparison

with parables, scholars of rabbinic literature do relate the occurrence of fables to their study of parables. Pater argues that relevant approaches in rabbinic studies, such as folklore studies, may be helpful to open up the discussion in New Testament scholarship. Introducing the common focus on genre, contents, function and social setting, and transmission and textualization in the parable-fable discussion, Pater's article provides a valuable overview of the topic at hand.

The remaining fifteen contributions are divided into four sections: Greek and Roman Literature, Early Jewish and Rabbinic Literature, New Testament and Early Christian Literature, and Diachronic Perspectives. They will be discussed successively.

The section "Greek and Roman Literature" opens with an article on the place and function of fables and fable composition in the progymnasmata. In antiquity, these progymnasmata consisted of a sequence of exercises constituting the earliest formal phase within the Greek system of teaching rhetoric. In this contribution, Jeremy Lefkowitz challenges the common scholarly assumption that the fables had a central place in these progymnasmata because of their putative moral content. Rather, on the basis of texts describing the progymnasmata, Lefkowitz argues that the fables were valued because of their simplicity of style and their status as fiction claiming to represent truth. Connecting the simplicity of fable style to the discourse of *apheleia* ("plain style") in post-Aristotelian rhetorical theory and during the Second Sophistic, Lefkowitz argues that the progymnasmatic exercises in fable composition helped the student to develop skills relevant for mastering the art of "simple" expression.

In the next contribution, Gerard Boter focuses on the contents of Epictetus's examples and similes in relation to their function within his philosophical teaching. In light of David Flusser's comparative discussion of New Testament and rabbinic parables and Epictetus's similes, Boter raises the important question of how Epictetus, in his philosophical lectures, made use of similes and related strategies. In his study, Boter follows the categorization of exempla and similes in ancient literary theory on rhetoric and discusses Epictetus's use of similes and exempla (both historical and mythological) extensively. This detailed discussion leads to his conclusion that, despite the considerable differences between rabbinic and New Testament parables and Epictetus's similes and examples with regard to form and content, the function of both groups of sources is comparable: "they serve to illustrate the issue at stake and at the same time they want to persuade."

Subsequently, Annemarie Ambühl examines a fascinating group of animal similes in Roman imperial epic. These similes with mute animals are recognized by Quintilian as a specific category of similes in distinction from animal fables. Focusing on similes featuring lionesses, tigresses, and their cubs in Statius's *Thebais*, Ambühl thoroughly explores these similes on intra-, inter-, and contextual levels. She demonstrates how these similes represent the troubled re-

relationships within Oedipus's family at Thebes and establish a meta-narrative of parental love. Ambühl also positions these similes in the context of ancient discourses on lionesses and tigresses and of cultural practices of tiger hunting in the Roman amphitheater. Yet, with regard to the political context in which emperor Domitian was compared to a beast, Ambühl is careful not to superimpose modern subversive readings on Statius's animal similes.

Ambühl's contribution on epic similes with mute animals creates a bridge with the final contribution on the neglected fable tradition of Babrius. Ruben Zimmermann embarks upon an intertextual reading of the Babrian fables and the New Testament parables. Looking at the aspects of genre, the role of animals, and the role of the divine in these texts, Zimmermann questions the common black-and-white distinction between parables and fables. First, he shows that parables and fables were closely related in ancient rhetorical reflections. They also share various literary criteria, even if realism and contextuality are more distinguishing of parables than of fables. Secondly, he makes clear that the presence or anthropomorphization of animals cannot be regarded as an exclusive characteristic of the Babrian fables over against New Testament parables. The same is true for the presence or absence of religion in both groups of sources. In his conclusion, Zimmermann argues that the "former black-and-white picture must be replaced with the art of more colorful readings of fables and parables when read in light of one another."

The section "Early Jewish and Rabbinic Literature" combines contributions on rabbinic literature with two studies that bring neglected early Jewish material to the fore. It starts with an article on Philo's use of parables and fables. Adopting the definition of fable offered by Theon ("α μῦθος is a fictitious story imaging truth"), Sean Adams discusses Philo's use of ancient fable/parable terminology in depth. In this discussion, Adams pays explicit attention to Philo's educational background, arguing that the place of fables in the progymnasmata will have familiarized Philo with Greek fables. A few possible echoes of fables and his explicit engagement with two Greek fables in *Conf.* 4–14 are reflective of this background. Adams's detailed examination of the latter passage highlights Philo's attempt to differentiate biblical stories from Greek fables and myths and their associated idea of fiction.

In the next contribution, Stephen Llewelyn and Lydia Gore-Jones take as their starting point the parable of the Forest and the Sea in 4 Ezra (4:13–17). Aiming to demonstrate the added value of Cognitive Blending Theory (CBT) in providing a better understanding of how parables work as narrated metaphors, the two authors meticulously describe how 4 Ezra's parable offers a human-scale analogy to the far more abstract and diffuse concept of divine incomprehensibility. Plato's famous Allegory of the Cave (*Resp.* 514a–520a) is adduced for comparative purposes. While it has several points in common with 4 Ezra's

parable, Llewelyn and Gore-Jones point to a challenging difference in function: Plato needs to take recourse to myth and allegory because it is impossible, in his view, to express what the intelligible realm *is*. In 4 Ezra, the parable casts serious doubt upon the human worthiness to access divine knowledge and the human capability to comprehend it.

The subsequent contribution, written by Lieve Teugels, problematizes the scholarly distinction between the genres of Greek fables and rabbinic parables. Her focus is on a story pattern that she encounters in both classical Greek fables, in their Christian reception, and in the rabbinic parables: “a character encounters an obstacle, often an animal, overcomes it, and ends up with the next obstacle.” Challenging the common distinction between parables and fables along the lines of “no animals” or “only animals,” Teugels shows that animals do appear in a number of rabbinic parables, even as main characters, while many Aesopic fables feature humans instead of animals. In addition, Teugels emphasizes that the fable’s epimythium is “remarkably similar” in form and function to the *nimshal* of rabbinic parables. She concludes her article with a praise of the rabbinic genius, which often succeeded in producing an “exquisite blend and twist of classical content and rabbinic application.”

Galit Hasan-Rokem’s rich study brings in the point of view of folk narrative scholarship. Characteristic of this approach is its sensibility for the interaction between oral and written modes of texts, as well as between performance and text. Criticizing a too static division of genres, Hasan-Rokem proposes to use Wittgenstein’s concept of family resemblance to address the fluid boundaries between the neighbouring genres of proverb, fable, and parable. The term *ecotype* (von Sydow/Honko) is deemed helpful by Hasan-Rokem to understand how international tale types are locally, culturally, and ethnically adapted – especially by minorities and marginalized groups. Finally, Hasan-Rokem draws attention to the way parables may have brought aesthetic pleasure to the rabbis and may sometimes have provided a movement towards the unattainable.

The final contribution to this section, written by Lorena Miralles Maciá, continues to study rabbinic parables from a folklore studies perspective. She uncovers four folktale motifs within the parables, similes, and stories in Lev. Rab. 4 and diligently traces them back to fables and other folktale narratives: (1) the cooperation between a lame man and a blind man guarding a king’s orchard; (2) the bodily members and the soul; (3) the sheep with a hurt limb; and (4) the man on a ship boring a hole beneath his place. Understanding “fable” as one of the categories of “folktale” genres in rabbinic literature, Miralles Maciá argues that these folktale motifs underwent a process of judaization, before becoming “*mashalized fables*” (Johnston) in the rabbinic corpus. While she argues that, in distinction from rabbinic parables, narrative fables can exist free from context or epimythium, Miralles Maciá also emphasizes that in the concrete construction of a text, the margins between both genres are blurred. Her conclusion states

that “for the rabbis, the plasticity of the fable motifs was an anchor point to retell, recreate and echo the stories by means of different narratological devices (parable, comparison or even a simple narrative), and to inspire new stories introducing unexpected features.”

The third section “New Testament and Early Christian Literature” focuses not only on New Testament parables, but also on parables and parable-like stories in later early Christian sources. The section opens with Catherine Hezser’s in-depth study of the motif of finding a treasure. Hezser explores this motif in some parables in the Gospels of Matthew and Thomas, in several rabbinic parables and stories, and in ancient fables. She connects her discussion of these texts to a study of social reality. Archaeological records prove that the hiding and burial of valuables in the ground was a common practice in antiquity, while legal debates on the rightful owner of forgotten and/or lost property are widely attested. While Christian, rabbinic, and Graeco-Roman texts all take up the motif of finding a treasure, Hezser shows that they do so in a myriad of ways, expressing different theological and ethical ideas. As Hezser concludes, whatever their application, all these stories play with a hope that “[e]specially members of the lower strata of society” would have had, namely to find valuables from unidentifiable owners.

Subsequently, Justin David Strong addresses the relationship between parables and fables on the level of genre. He advances the challenging proposition that parables were recognized as fables by the ancient Gospel audience. With the parables of the Judge and the Widow (Luke 18:1–8) and the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9–14) as his case studies, Strong demonstrates that the Gospel authors employed the framing devices of fables: the promythium and the epimythium. Strong provides a detailed overview of the types of these promythia and epimythia, including their stylistic forms. On the basis of these overviews, Strong argues that the aforementioned parables are preceded by a narrativized form of the promythium, while the applications of these and other parables agree with the forms and subject matter of epimythia of fables.

The third contribution turns to the social setting of New Testament parables. In a thought-provoking comparative study of New Testament parables, Aesopic fables, and Epictetus’s writings, Mary Ann Beavis studies these sources from a servile point of view and compares them to North American slave biographies. If (former) slaves were involved as authors, collectors, or (target) audiences of these texts, is it then – Beavis wonders – possible to unearth “traces of servile experience” in them? She shows that, while neither the freedman Epictetus nor the supposed slave Aesop (and the freedman Phaedrus, his anthologist) call for the end of slavery, they may have shown sympathy for and have included insights of slave experiences in their writings. Jesus’s slave parables, in contrast, “consistently take the perspective of the *kyrios*” as their starting point. Even if a number of Jesus’s parables do contain slaves, they uncritically reflect, according

to Beavis, the perspective of slaveholders to the detriment of slaves, at least as they are crystallized in the Gospels.

In the next article, Konrad Schwarz contextualizes the Gospel of Thomas within ancient literature, especially the Aesopic fable tradition. Observing the diverse ways in which terms like fable and parable were used in antiquity, Schwarz follows Rüdiger Zymner in delineating a spectrum of parabolic or parable-like genres (similitude, parable, fable, and allegory). After showing that important textual witnesses of both Babrius's fables and the Gospel of Thomas shared the same Egyptian provenance (Oxyrhynchus) and possibly similar reading practices, Schwarz discusses the parable of the Sensible Fisherman (Gos. Thom. 8) and the similitude of the Dog in the Cattle Trough (Gos. Thom. 102) in depth. He carefully traces shared motifs and diction in these parables and in the Gospel of Matthew, the Aesopic tradition, Graeco-Roman sources, and early Christian literature. Given the great and growing popularity of the Aesopic tradition in Roman education, Schwarz posits that the Gospel of Thomas might have been influenced by this tradition. However, this influence did not extend to the explanations of the parables in the Gospel of Thomas, which are, contrary to the fables, often missing. Schwarz explains this phenomenon with reference to the Gospel's prologue, which urges its readers to "find the meaning of these words" so that they "will not taste death."

The final article in this section, written by Ingvild Gilhus, takes as its point of departure the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. The *Apophthegmata Patrum* are collections of sayings on the ascetic and monastic life that are attributed to Christian monastics who lived in fourth and fifth-century Egypt. These collections contain a number of animal stories, of which some are called parables (*παραβολή*). Gilhus divides those stories into two types: example stories and similes. In the example stories animals behave in anthropomorphized ways, while the similes show (mostly) normal behavior of animals. While the stories have their own particular focus and are adapted to their particular Egyptian zoological and cultural context, similar tales can be found in the Aesopic fables and the Babylonian Talmud. In her analysis of animal stories and similes, Gilhus states that these texts serve to illustrate the monks' control over their environment, as well as an idealization of the ascetic life.

The final section "Diachronic Perspectives" consists of one, almost encyclopedic article by Peter Tomson. Crossing several disciplinary boundaries, Tomson tries to reconstruct the origin of the fable and the parable and to sketch their developments through the centuries. First, on the basis of the popularity of the fables of Ahiqar (composed probably in the seventh or sixth century BCE in northern Syria), Tomson argues that the Greek fable was influenced by oriental elements. Ahiqar's Aramaic sayings and classical Greek fables, in turn, exerted influence on the Hebrew Bible, for example in the biblical proverbs. Whereas the He-

brew term *mashal* was initially used for fables, proverbs, and parables, Tomson demonstrates how it later became increasingly associated with one subtype, the midrashic parable. Because of its attachment to biblical texts and values, Tomson suggests, these midrashic parables were able to “travel less lightly” than fables, which were “shareware, everyone’s possession.” Despite the rise of the midrashic parable in Judaism, Tomson shows that fables were not forgotten; in rabbinic literature and the New Testament references to fables or sometimes complete fables can be retrieved. In the end, Tomson argues, fables were so popular as a form of “low” traditions, because they are caricatures of our human lives: “This is how common people survive and get along: thanks to humour and wisdom.”

C. Central Themes

The preceding overview of contributions demonstrates the extent to which ancient literary sources are replete with narrative analogy. If one casts one’s scholarly nets further than the conventional focus on New Testament parables, rabbinic parables, and Aesopic fables, interesting similes, exempla, and fable- and parable-like texts can be discovered in other early Jewish, early Christian, and classical sources as well. This wide dispersion of narrative analogy raises compelling questions about the mutual relationship between these literary forms. How should these genres be defined? How can the circulation of themes, motifs, or entire parables/fables be explained? In which social settings did these genres originate and how were they transmitted and textualized in particular sources? Despite the diversity of methods, sources, and disciplinary backgrounds, the contributions in the present volume continually circle around these themes and questions. The final section of this introduction brings the diverse threads of these articles together with the help of the four themes discerned by Jonathan Pater in the first contribution of this volume.

A first important observation pertains to the issue of genre. Instead of defining parables, fables, exempla, and similes as independent genres with distinguishing literary characteristics, the contributors of the present volume repeatedly point to the fluid boundaries between them. Thus, Boter takes his starting point in ancient literary theory on rhetoric in which exempla, similes, and fables were categorized as affiliated genres. He draws attention to the way Epictetus’s exempla and similes and New Testament and rabbinic parables functioned to persuade the audience of a particular idea, in agreement with the function of persuasion attributed to exempla and similes in ancient rhetoric. From a different perspective, Strong abandons the distinction between parables and fables altogether. On the basis of the shared use of pro- and epimythia, he argues that parables were regarded as fables in antiquity. This focus on form is supplemented by a focus on content in the contributions of Ambühl, Zimmermann, Teugels,

and Gilhus. They question, directly or indirectly, the presence of animals (anthropomorphized or non-anthropomorphized) as a distinguishing feature of fables over against parables and similes. Moreover, Zimmermann shows that religious themes occur in both parables and fables. Finally, modern theoretical perspectives can be adduced. Hasan-Rokem and Miralles Maciá employ a folklore studies perspective to highlight the fluid boundaries between parables and fables, while Llewelyn and Gore-Jones use Cognitive Blending Theory to explain the similar mental operations underlying the creation of new insights in a parable in 4 Ezra and Plato's Allegory of the Cave. Different approaches and perspectives are therefore used to arrive at a similar conclusion regarding the fluid boundaries of these genres.

In addition, the articles in the present volume make clear that there seems to have existed a shared pool of story motives, narrative patterns, and characters in antiquity from which composers of several genres could draw their inspiration. Multiple authors in the present volume discuss the shared use of similar themes and motifs in parables and fables. Some explore the circulation and adaptation of one specific motif in multiple sources in depth, as Teugels and Hezser respectively do with the motifs of "a character encounters an obstacle, often an animal, overcomes it, and ends up with the next obstacle" and of finding a treasure in a field. Other authors demonstrate how early Jewish authors (Adams), rabbinic sources (Hasan-Rokem and Miralles Maciá), and early Christian sources (Gilhus and Schwarz) take up multiple folk narrative elements, Aesopic motifs or entire fables, and mythic stories. Tomson, in turn, discusses how the fable as a genre crosses ethnic, cultural, and religious borders in the ancient Near Eastern context. The circulation of these shared motifs, narrative patterns, and entire fables across the ancient Mediterranean and the ancient Near East points to the necessity for present-day scholars to examine parables, fables, and similes across disciplinary boundaries.

This shared oral and/or written repertoire of motifs, narrative patterns, and stories also raises questions about the transmission and textualization of these elements in specific sources. Hasan-Rokem employs the concept of "ecotype" to refer to a locally, culturally, and ethnically adapted form of an international tale type, which often has a function in expressing ethnic identities, especially of minorities and marginalized groups. Without using the term, many of the aforementioned contributions illustrate how a particular fable or folktale element is ecotypically adopted and adapted in particular Jewish or Christian sources, within their cultural, religious, ethnic, or even environmental contexts. Yet, Adams's contribution on Philo of Alexandria makes clear that this cultural negotiation may also consist in dissociation and detachment. When Philo refers to two Greek fables in *Conf.* 4–14, he distances them from biblical stories, arguing that the latter are both true *and* reveal deeper truth. Instead of ecotypically adapting a particular tale type, it seems that Philo uses the fable here as a means to express –

or even apologetically defend – his Jewish identity over against a cultural “other.” The present volume also contains various other impetuses for examining the textualization of parables, fables, and similes in literary works, notably Ambühl’s intratextual examination of similes as structural, integrated elements in Statius’s *Thebais* and Schwarz’ discussion of the shared reading practices of Babrius’s collection of fables and the Gospel of Thomas.

Finally, it is noteworthy that the contributions in the present volume presume various social-performative settings for these parables and fables. Lefkowitz and Adams attribute the use of fables to the progymnastic training students received in developing their rhetorical skills, while Boter considers the persuasive and didactic function of Epictetus’s exempla and similes in light of ancient literary theory on rhetoric. This is a very different context from the one assumed by Beavis, given that she attempts to unearth “traces of servile experience” in Epictetus’s similes, Aesopic fables, and New Testament parables. Her analysis takes as its starting point the fact (or, in the case of New Testament parables, assumption) that slaves and freedmen were involved in the production and reception of these texts as their authors, collectors, and audiences. While her contribution points to parables and fables as the product of “low” traditions, the context of ancient rhetoric and ancient rhetorical training makes clear that fables, exempla, and similes are also employed in “high” traditions. Taken together, the articles in the present volume call to rethink and to transcend the dichotomy between high and low traditions (see also Tomson). Such reconsideration of the “folk” is already taking place in folklore studies as well (see Hasan-Rokem). It seems that the power of parables and fables consisted in the fact that they appealed to multiple groups of people, of diverse socioeconomic, cultural, religious, and ethnic backgrounds.

D. Overcoming Dichotomies

We are confident that the present volume will contribute to the interdisciplinary study of parables, fables, exempla, similes, and other forms of narrative analogy in ancient sources of different social, cultural, religious, and ethnic backgrounds. By bringing together contributions from a range of scholarly fields and on a range of Graeco-Roman, Jewish, and Christian sources, the volume aims not only to overcome the dichotomy between parables and fables in New Testament and rabbinic parable research, but also the disciplinary divides among Classicists, New Testament scholars, and Jewish studies scholars in this field of research. The contributions in the present volume highlight the fluid boundaries between the different forms of narrative analogy on the level of genre, the circulation of themes and motifs, and social setting and function. Such fluidity warrants an inclusive study of parables, fables, exempla, and similes across a range of

sources in order to gain a better insight into the character and function of these genres. At the same time, as the present volume has shown with regard to the textualization of these sources, a broad comparative study may provide a clearer picture of the distinct identities that are expressed in the adoption and adaption of these genres in a given literary work. By overcoming traditional scholarly divides, knowledge and expertise on these sources can be shared across disciplines. The present volume contains the first fruits of such an interdisciplinary collaboration. Hopefully, more will follow in the future.

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