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“And Jesus Told Them a Fable”: On Methods and Motivations for Embedding Fables in the Gospels

Abstract: More fables are embedded into the gospels than perhaps any other ancient corpus. These texts are seldom engaged in the study of ancient fables by classicists. This article introduces reading the texts that biblical scholars have traditionally called “parables” as fables. Using a few illustrative examples, I show that these texts are valuable for current scholarly conversations motivating classical research into ancient fables. They offer windows into the adaptation of the fable genre in different cultural contexts and insights into the characterization of fable tellers and their audiences. Embedded into narratives, fables in the gospels offer examples of the genre’s many useful applications, from communicating insider language and subversive speech to education and forensic rhetoric. This article serves as an introduction and invitation to future work on the fables in the gospels.

1 Introduction

With more fables embedded into the gospels than perhaps any other ancient corpus, they represent a premier inroad for understanding the function of fables in broader narrative contents. This article begins by introducing how reading the group of texts traditionally called “narrative parables” as fables has much to offer to current scholarly conversations on ancient fables. Using a few illustrative examples from the gospels of Mark and Luke, I then provide a survey of the rhetorical functions that fables serve for their user within the story and at the author-audience level by their inclusion — such as insider speech

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and education. Along the way, I describe the compositional techniques used to embed fables into their intradiegetic narrative contexts.[1]

Collectively, the fables embedded into the gospel metanarratives accomplish the diverse objectives known elsewhere in the ancient fable tradition. We will explore examples of 1) fables used to educate and edify narrative characters and implied readers; 2) fables used as a means to convey a hidden transcript and subversive speech of the subaltern; and 3) fables used as a rhetorical tool to persuade in forensic settings. Embedded into a metanarrative, these uses support the authors' sometimes disparate characterizations of the fable teller and his audiences, which include characters within the narrative and implied readers. The fable thus has a multifaceted utility in the gospels, from something as key as capturing the quintessential message of Jesus to less weighty objectives like holding a reader's attention through the long gospel plot. We will also examine the embedding strategies used by these authors to incorporate fables that were taken from source materials. We will see examples of embedding strategies that include 1) introducing a fable by a chreia, 2) narrativizing pro- and epimythia to convey that they are read by the protagonist to his audience, and 3) fables and epimythia that are merely spliced into the text without narrativizing techniques or regard for narrative continuity.

Like many working on the fable, I use the definition from the *progymnasmata*, or "preliminary exercises" in rhetoric, as my starting point: Μῦθός ἐστι λόγος ψευδὴς εἰκονίζων ἀλήθειαν [...] οἷς μετὰ τὴν ἔκθεσιν ἐπιλέγομεν τὸν λόγον ὅτου εἰκών ἐστιν ("Fable is a fictitious story giving an image of truth [...] after (or before) which we state the meaning for which it is an image", Theon *Prog.* 4 [72 Spengel]).[2]

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1 We have a complex narratological situation that requires describing several narrative levels involved with embedded fables. I refer to three levels, the level of gospel authors and readers (extradiegetic), the level of the characters at the gospel story level (intradiegetic), and the level of fable storyworlds embedded within the gospels (hypodiegetic). Thus, the gospel authors (extradiegetic narrators), tell a story about a story-telling protagonist (an intradiegetic narrator), whose fables are still one level deeper (a hypodiegetic narration).

2 E.g. Perry 1965, xx; Holzberg 2002, 19–20: "There have been many attempts to find a definition of the genre that takes cognizance of this diversity, but the most convincing one is still the description found in the rhetors Theon and Aphthonius." Nearly every word of Theon's definition carries polyvalence that is difficult to capture in translation and the precise meaning of some terms are debated. Nevertheless, it is a useful starting point (not endpoint) particularly because defining the fable has a complex history. The most comprehensive study of the ancient and modern definitions is van Dijk 1997, with more recent work cited in Gärtner 2015, 13–14. Granting that any such criteria can be problematized, for simplicity sake, I restrict myself in this article to a definition that includes the qualities identified by Perry 1952, ix: "a fable must combine three features: (1) unlike the chr[e]ia or the historical example it must be obviously and deliberately

Since (1) these texts were the standard curriculum in Graeco-Roman education for prose composition, (2) the origin of the "parables" in the gospels has been a fundamental mystery,[3] (3) genres are governed by reading conventions and expectations, and (4) especially since what theologians call "parables" match the fable definition, investigating them from the fable context is a worthwhile pursuit. While scholars of the New Testament are no strangers to engaging in studies of its contemporary literary world generally or ancient rhetoric specifically, engagement with the fable has been rather limited.[4] Among the many obstacles for this limited engagement have been naïve ideas about ancient fables and the red herring that the gospels do not record talking animal fables.[5] Recent years have wit-

fictitious, whether possible or not; (2) like the proverb expressed in a gnomic aorist (e.g. 'the fool found out after the event'), which is essentially the same thing in embryo, but unlike the *Physiologus*-lore and unlike the Homeric simile, both of which are framed in general terms, it must purport to be a particular action, series of actions, or an utterance that took place once in past time through the agency of particular characters; and (3) it must be told, at least ostensibly, not for its own sake as a story (like many animal stories in Aelian, including the etiological variety with a purely scientific point), but for the sake of a point that is moral, paraenetic or personal."

3 Because scholars focusing on parables have not had the fable in view, the scholarly consensus has been the most implausible notion that Jesus was the first person in recorded history to use the parable with any regularity (see Strong 2021, 3–4).

4 With rare exceptions, such as Beavis 1990, the recognition of the synonymity between "parable" and "fable" has been made by scholars outside of New Testament scholarship who have perhaps not realized the implications for this field. Kennedy, a preeminent scholar of ancient rhetoric, writes during a discussion of the *progymnasmata*, "The parables of Jesus correspond to what was taught in the schools as mythos, for which the fables of Aesop were the standard classical models; this was regarded as the simplest and easiest of exercises" (1984, 22–23). Similarly, van Dijk, in his comprehensive study of ancient fable terminology and theory, states matter-of-factly, "A fundamental difference between fable and parable does not exist" (1997, 36). For a history of scholarship since circa 1900 and from circa 1900 back to the Renaissance, see Strong 2021, 8–22 and 231–241, respectively.

5 Equating "fable" with "talking animal fable" cannot be sustained after opening an ancient fable collection and in light of the *progymnasmata* discussions. In Theon, this notion is rejected already implicitly when the first fable that he cites as an example of the genre contains no talking animals, Ἡροδότῳ τοῦ αὐλητοῦ "the flute player in Herodotus" (Theon *Prog*. 2 [= 66 Spengel]; see Hdt. 1.141 and cf. e.g. Aesop. 11 P. [= Hsr.; 24 Ch.]). Although he rejects the view, Theon also observes that some contemporaries believe there is a correlation between the geographic locations associated with fables and whether or not they are about humans or animals, possible or impossible (*Prog*. 4; for the opposing view, cf. Nicolaus *Prog*. 2). Aphthonius likewise makes the point when he writes: τοῦ δὲ μύθου τὸ μὲν ἐστι λογικόν, τὸ δὲ ἠθικόν, τὸ δὲ μικτόν· καὶ λογικὸν μὲν ἐν ᾧ τι ποιῶν ἄνθρωπος πέπλασται, ἠθικόν δὲ τὸ τῶν ἀλόγων ἦθος ἀπομιμούμενον, μικτόν δὲ τὸ ἐξ ἀμφοτέρων, ἀλόγου καὶ λογικοῦ (*Prog*. 10.1 Rabe [= 21 Spengel]; "Some fables are rational, some ethical, some mixed; rational when a human being is imagined as doing something, ethical when

nessed a push past these obstacles, and a growing number of New Testament scholars coming to a realization: "It is clear that the parables of Jesus belong to the fable genre."[6] I thus employ the term "fable" here consistent with this understanding.[7]

Before the brief excursions into the gospels below, I would like to offer conclusions already by way of a promythium. For scholars of the ancient fable, there are many new and significant insights to be gleaned by bringing the fables in the gospels into conversation with the others. The early Christian gospels represent a largely untapped resource that is chronologically contemporary with our major fable sources — Phaedrus, Babrius, the *collectio Augustana*, and *The Life of Aesop*. Fables in the gospels are relevant to many subjects of interest to fable scholars today beyond simply new parallels to fables in other corpora. They grant insights into the trajectories and development of the genre through history and its adaptation to different cultural contexts, especially its Graeco-Semitic status. They offer important evidence for the perennial debates about when and whether social class associations accompanied the fable genre. The gospels provide a host of new examples to study alongside characterizations of the fable narrators and their

representing the character of irrational animals, mixed when made up of both, irrational and rational"; transl. Kennedy). As to why Jesus never overtly deploys talking animal fables in the gospels, this is actually a greater problem for the old paradigm of defining and dividing "parables" and "fables." In the prior consensus, it was accepted that fables were told by Jews, especially by rabbis in the centuries after Jesus who were famous for making fictional narrative comparisons (see Strong 2021, 173–199; 2023). It was also accepted that the gospel authors utilize the same rhetorical categories as other Greek authors and that they depict Jesus employing a robust repertoire of simple metaphorical figures with great frequency — proverbs, maxims, similes, etcetera. If "fables" and "parables" were neighbors in the cornucopia of simple metaphorical genres, and if other Jewish storytellers were telling both "parables" and "fables", and if Jesus was a master of utilizing these metaphorical figures, how can it be that he never once landed on a "fable?" A couple of speculative explanations are the same in any circumstance: that Jesus did tell animal fables but the gospels omit or substantially suppress them for one reason or another (e.g. Flusser 1981, 51–52, 153–154), or that Jesus, unlike other Jews, considered granting speech to non-humans as something too near polytheism. A better grasp of the ancient fable tradition may shed light on the question, as the *progymnasmata* authors attest to (and disagree over) sub-classifications of fables and the phenomenon of some fable tellers and some locations being associated with using only certain kinds of fables. Jesus using only one category is thus not particularly surprising. Indeed, the first modern scholar to note the explanatory power of the fable for Jesus's "parables" concluded they were "rational fables", following the categories used by Aphthonius (Storr 1779).

6 Parsons/Martin 2018, 62. See further, Teugels 2019; Strong 2021; 2022; 2023; Brobst-Renaud 2021; Pater et al. 2022.

7 For certain theology argot, I will also employ vocabulary consistent with translations of classical literature, thus παραβολή is not "(narrative) parable" but "comparison" or "illustration" and μαθητής is not "disciple" but "student."

audiences. Particularly when the editing of fable source materials into the metanarrative is crudely performed, the Gospels offer a glimpse at some possible strategies that would have been used elsewhere. Taken together, gospels represent a corpus of particular relevance to the present volume, aiming to understand the uses of fables in various other macro-genre settings.

The gospels offer not just a single new source for fables but rather many. Although the fables are attributed to one protagonist, Jesus, each gospel provides a unique representation of the tradition. Just like the relationship between Phaedrus, Babrius, and the *collectio Augustana*, the fable material of each gospel overlaps to a degree with the others, however, each gospel also has many fables unique to it that form an individual profile and indicate the author's broader tendencies.[8] The gospel authors have individual styles of composition, redaction, techniques by which they weave fables into their narrations, and strategies for placing and organizing fable material within their metanarrative. Each author has a preference for the fable characters they employ, the kinds of plots the fables contain, and the purpose for which the protagonist, Jesus, tells fables.[9] The gospels also vary in how fables are used to support a particular characterization of Jesus and those who hear his fables — both within the narrative and its implied readers/hearers.

In contrast to the relatively new interest in fables beyond text-critical reconstructions, there is a gargantuan bibliography devoted to approaching the "parables" of Jesus from a host of methods,[10] from socio-rhetorical perspectives,[11] literary theories,[12] to feminist criticism,[13] and ancient economic evidence from documentary papyri.[14] All these, in addition to commentaries from diverse approaches on the individual gospels in which these texts are embedded. While fable specialists may

8 The standard view among New Testament scholars is that Mark is the first narrative gospel and that Matthew and Luke independently had the text of Mark's gospel at hand (Markan Priority). These three interconnected texts — Matthew, Mark, and Luke — are called the Synoptic Gospels. The origin of the substantial overlaps between Matthew and Luke that are not explicable by their common source in Mark is explained by two prevailing theories. The Two Document Hypothesis proposes a second independent source apart from Mark that was used independently by Matthew and Luke. This hypothetical source (no copy of it survives) is called Q. The alternative theory supposes that Matthew and Luke are not independent, but rather that Luke had before him copies of both the Markan and Matthean gospel (Farrer Hypothesis).

9 For helpful surveys of the differences in the fable traditions of the individual gospel authors, see Goulder 1968; Anderson 2008.

10 For a history and survey of these methods, see Zimmermann 2015.

11 E.g. Eck 2016.

12 E.g. Via 1967.

13 E.g. Beavis 2002.

14 E.g. Kloppenborg 2006.

quickly wonder why these impressive studies on "parables" seldom show awareness of other fable corpora, they offer many templates that may inspire future work on other fables.

2 Fable Embedding, Weaving, Painting, and Fluidity

Insights into the compositional strategies of the gospel authors come from the literary training in Greek composition that they would have undergone.[15] As Theon says in the preface to his *Progymnasmata*:

> ὅ τε γὰρ καλῶς καὶ πολυτρόπως διήγησιν καὶ μῦθον ἀπαγγείλας καλῶς καὶ ἱστορίαν συνθήσει, καὶ τὸ ἰδίως ἐν ταῖς ὑποθέσεσι καλούμενον [ἴδιον] διήγημα (οὐδὲ γὰρ ἄλλο τί ἐστιν ἱστορία καὶ σύστημα διηγήσεως)
>
> (Theon *Prog*. 1 [60 Spengel])

> One who has expressed a διήγησις (narration) and a μῦθος (fable) in a fine and varied way will also compose a history (ἱστορία) well and what is specifically called "narrative" (διήγησις) in hypotheses — historical writing is nothing other than a combination of narrations."
>
> (Transl. Kennedy)

Theon later explains how to weave a fable into a narrative, though he says nothing profound here — first state the fable and then how it applies to the situation, or do the reverse (*Prog*. 4 [65 Spengel]). The fable, the narrative, and the chreia form the building blocks with which the gospel authors weave in their fables.[16]

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15 Although education varied across the Roman Empire, the exercises in *progymnasmata* appear consistently as the means to learn composition. Although the momentum is certainly behind the view that the gospel authors trained in the *progymnasmata*, with evidence for some (Luke) better than others (Mark), it is not entirely settled. That said, even the skeptics concur that the authors encountered the fable and the chreia (see Strong 2021, 131–172; Adams 2016).

16 A chreia, occasionally translated as "anecdote", is a simple, brief, self-contained narrative about how someone (e.g. Diogenes, Aesop, Jesus) responded on a particular occasion to a situation, whether by statement or action (see also Theon's definition and examples in *Prog.* 3 [Spengel 96]). It is not difficult to imagine how a fable could be joined as the chreia response or how a chreia could be added to the beginning of a fable. Indeed, as Perry 1965, xcii, observes: "It is characteristic of Phaedrus, as of no other ancient fabulist whose book has survived, to represent a fable now and then as something that Aesop said or related in appropriate circumstances on a particular occasion in his life in conversation with others." Examples of fables introduced by a chreia are Phaed. 1.2 Z. [= G.], 1.6 Z. [= G.], 5.17 Z. [= 4.18 G.], *app*. 10 Z. [= *app*. 12 G.], and *Vit. Aesop.* 132–133 G. Examples in the gospels are discussed below.

Like a painter who does not smooth out his strokes or blend his paints on the canvas, the characteristic Greek of the gospels and their often awkward editing leave clues to the strategies used to incorporate fables into their intradiegetic narrative settings.[17] Indeed, the visible brush strokes and rough edges of the gospel writings offer clues about how other authors with more refined techniques and smoother end results would have gone about their task.

Since the gospels are fluid and "open texts", when a fable is shared among multiple gospels, it commonly appears in a different intradiegetic narrative context where it also may be told for a different purpose.[18] Similarly, the text of the fable itself is never identical but varies from one gospel to the next, whether minor differences or to such an extent that it strains the boundary of being one rather than two fables. To offer one example, the fable of "The Sower" in the Markan and Matthean gospels is spoken from a boat to a crowd on the shore (*Ev.Marc.* 4.1; *Ev.Matt*. 13.2), follows a chreia about Jesus' "true family" (*Ev.Marc.* 3.31–35; *Ev.Matt*. 12.46–50), and precedes "The Mustard Seed" by about twenty verses (*Ev.Marc.* 4.30–32; *Ev.Matt*. 13.31–32). In Luke, meanwhile, "The Sower" is simply spoken to a crowd with no body of water in view (*Ev.Luc.* 8.4), the chreia about his true family takes place afterward rather than beforehand (*Ev.Luc.* 8.19–21), and "The Mustard Seed" only makes its debut five chapters later (*Ev.Luc.* 13.18–19). In Thomas, a *logoi* collection without a meta-narrative, there is neither narrative context for "The Sower" (*Ev.Thom.* 9) nor allegorical interpretation afterward, it follows a different fable ("The Fish Net" [cf. Babr. 4]), and "The Mustard Seed" follows eleven *logoi* later.

Due to space limitations, it is not possible to do justice to the richness of the gospel fable tradition, and I offer here just a few illustrative snapshots of the preceding observations. The characteristically Semitic fables in the Gospel of Matthew and the fables of Jesus in the *logoi* collection known as the Gospel of Thomas will be treated elsewhere.[19] Here, I will address the Gospel of Mark, the first narra-

17 The Greek of Mark is colloquial rather than literary and precisely at the fable material in Mark 4, he has undertaken "clumsy editing of previous tradition" (Marcus 2000, 289). The Gospel of Luke, while composed in a comparatively higher literary register, has also left many noticeable signs of where he inserts fable source materials. The painter analogy also translates to the reason behind this particular quality of the Greek prose. Such techniques can reflect the limited training of an amateur author/painter or they may be a deliberate artistic choice of a master. Mark's style may reflect the former and Luke's the latter. Luke opens his version of the gospel with a single ornate sentence (*Ev.Luc.* 1.1–4) before transitioning to different styles, as if the author wishes to signal that he is capable of composing at a high level but is making a stylistic decision not to.

18 E.g. "The Lost Sheep" (*Ev.Luc.* 15.4–7; *Ev.Matt*. 18.12–14).

19 For initial observations, see Strong 2021, 245–247, 524–225, 530–531.

tive gospel to be written, and the Gospel according to Luke, which contains both the greatest density of fables and the most famous examples.[20]

3 Mark: sowing seeds of dissent

Composed sometime around the year 70 CE, Mark offers a text that has motivated several to draw comparisons with *The Life of Aesop*.[21] Despite the Aesopic resemblance in many other ways, Mark possesses the most modest fable tradition of the Synoptic gospels, with the primary examples in "The Sower" (*Ev.Marc.* 4.3–8), found in the block of comparisons in *Ev.Marc.* 4.1–34 and "The Wicked Tenants" (*Ev.Marc.* 12.1–12). In chapter 4, "The Sower" appears in a discourse that intertwines several threads picked up by later gospel authors. The first thread is the direct reference to teaching with this material, which is established in the introductory narrative:

> Καὶ πάλιν ἤρξατο διδάσκειν παρὰ τὴν θάλασσαν· καὶ συνάγεται πρὸς αὐτὸν ὄχλος πλεῖστος, ὥστε αὐτὸν εἰς πλοῖον ἐμβάντα καθῆσθαι ἐν τῇ θαλάσσῃ, καὶ πᾶς ὁ ὄχλος πρὸς τὴν θάλασσαν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἦσαν. καὶ ἐδίδασκεν αὐτοὺς ἐν παραβολαῖς πολλὰ καὶ ἔλεγεν αὐτοῖς ἐν τῇ διδαχῇ αὐτοῦ· Ἀκούετε. ἰδοὺ ἐξῆλθεν ὁ σπείρων σπεῖραι. καὶ ἐγένετο ἐν τῷ σπείρειν ὃ μὲν ἔπεσεν παρὰ τὴν ὁδόν, καὶ ἦλθεν τὰ πετεινὰ καὶ κατέφαγεν αὐτό. καὶ ἄλλο ἔπεσεν ἐπὶ τὸ πετρῶδες ὅπου οὐκ εἶχεν γῆν πολλήν, καὶ εὐθὺς ἐξανέτειλεν διὰ τὸ μὴ ἔχειν βάθος γῆς· καὶ ὅτε ἀνέτειλεν ὁ ἥλιος ἐκαυματίσθη καὶ διὰ τὸ μὴ ἔχειν ῥίζαν ἐξηράνθη. καὶ ἄλλο ἔπεσεν εἰς τὰς ἀκάνθας, καὶ ἀνέβησαν αἱ ἄκανθαι καὶ συνέπνιξαν αὐτό, καὶ καρπὸν οὐκ ἔδωκεν. καὶ ἄλλα ἔπεσεν εἰς τὴν γῆν τὴν καλὴν καὶ ἐδίδου καρπὸν ἀναβαίνοντα καὶ αὐξανόμενα καὶ ἔφερεν ἓν τριάκοντα καὶ ἓν ἑξήκοντα καὶ ἓν ἑκατόν. καὶ ἔλεγεν· ὃς ἔχει ὦτα ἀκούειν ἀκουέτω.
>
> (*Ev.Marc.* 4.1–9)

> Again he began to teach beside the sea. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the sea and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. He began to teach them many things in comparisons, and in his teaching he said to them: "Listen and behold! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among

20 Tallying together all of Luke's immense corpus of comparisons, there are as many as around 50 total similes, proverbs, maxims, and fables. Using the narrow definition outlined above, there are around 20 fables in Luke, around 15 of which are unique to his gospel and which comprise around 40% of the word count in his "Travel Narrative" (9.52–19.10).

21 This is a tale for a different day. See Wills 1997; Shiner 1998; Elliot 2005; Watson 2010; Strong 2021 and most recently acknowledged from the classics side by Holzberg 2021, 13.

> thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold." And he said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."
>
> (Transl. New Revised Standard Version adapted)

Transitioning from the intradiegetic narrative to the hypodiegetic fable with this opening exclamation, ἀκούετε ἰδοὺ ("Listen and behold!", 4.3), we find a close analogy in *The Life of Aesop.* In *Vit. Aesop.* 37 G, Aesop tells the fable of "The Gardener" to explain why weeds grow easily but it is difficult for the good seeds you want to grow. This fable he introduces in the different recensions by ἄκουε καὶ πρόσεχε or ἄκουον.[22] Following the fable, we return to the intradiegetic level of narration with an epimythium delivered to the public, ὃς ἔχει ὦτα ἀκούειν ἀκουέτω ("He who has ears to hear, let him hear", 4.9).[23] This opaque quality of the epimythium — an anti-explanation — has analogies elsewhere in the first-century fable tradition that we will return to momentarily. Immediately following this epimythium, the plot advances to a different setting: Καὶ ὅτε ἐγένετο κατὰ μόνας, ἠρώτων αὐτὸν οἱ περὶ αὐτὸν σὺν τοῖς δώδεκα τὰς παραβολάς ("When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the comparisons", *Ev.Marc.* 4.10). What follows is an explanation of the clandestine function of fables for the Markan Jesus:

> καὶ ἔλεγεν αὐτοῖς· ὑμῖν τὸ μυστήριον δέδοται τῆς βασιλείας τοῦ θεοῦ· ἐκείνοις δὲ τοῖς ἔξω ἐν παραβολαῖς τὰ πάντα γίνεται, ἵνα βλέποντες βλέπωσιν καὶ μὴ ἴδωσιν, καὶ ἀκούοντες ἀκούωσιν καὶ μὴ συνιῶσιν, μήποτε ἐπιστρέψωσιν καὶ ἀφεθῇ αὐτοῖς.
>
> (*Ev.Marc.* 4.11–12)

> And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of God's kingdom, but for those outside, everything comes in comparisons; in order that looking, they may look, but not see, and hearing, they may hear, but not comprehend; lest they turn and be forgiven."
>
> (Transl. J.S.)

Jesus then offers a fairly detailed allegorical explanation for "The Sower" to the students, followed by more comparisons for them to digest, which he specifies are

22 Recension MORN and BPthA, respectively, edited by Karla 2024 and 2001. In the G recension, the folio preserving this introduction and subsequent fable has been lost; however, σπείρω (the operative verb in *Ev.Marc.* 4) is mentioned in a sententia based on it (see Perry 1952, 249). The versions of the fable in the *collectio Augustana* (Aesop. 119 P. [= 121 Hsr.; 155 Ch.]), naturally, does not have this transition.

23 For detailed discussions of the rich and complex use of the promythium and epimythium in the gospel fables, see Strong 2021 and 2022.

analogies for the abstract concept of God's kingdom. The passage concludes with the notice:

> Καὶ τοιαύταις παραβολαῖς πολλαῖς ἐλάλει αὐτοῖς τὸν λόγον καθὼς ἠδύναντο ἀκούειν· χωρὶς δὲ παραβολῆς οὐκ ἐλάλει αὐτοῖς, κατ᾽ ἰδίαν δὲ τοῖς ἰδίοις μαθηταῖς ἐπέλυεν πάντα.
>
> (*Ev.Marc.* 4.33–34)

> And with many such comparisons he spoke the *logos* to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in comparisons, but he explained everything in private to his students.
>
> (Transl. J.S.)

Much like the author of *The Life of Aesop*, the Markan author has not historically been the recipient of praise for his literary talents. Major commentaries on Mark point out several apparent blunders in the author's composition of this passage. Guelich writes, "This passage sits awkwardly in its present context. It introduces a change of setting and audience from 4:1–2 that appears to have been forgotten in the concluding summary of 4:33–34 and the opening scene in 4:35–36. Although Jesus has just completed one parable (4:3–9), the disciples question him about 'parables' (4:10) and thus interrupt the sequence of parable (4:3–8) and interpretation (4:14–20)."[24] So bad are the infelicities that Collins, among others, concludes there must be two sources stitched together.[25] Like more recent scholarship discerning structure and greater finesse in *The Life of Aesop*,[26] others have attempted to show something more deliberate in Mark than a rhetorical jumble of traditions that were awkwardly patched together.[27] In what is perhaps the most detailed analysis of "The Sower" from an ancient rhetorical point of view, Strickland and Young discern a deliberate argument structure, including chiasms.[28] After the opening scene (*Ev.Marc.* 4.1–2), they discern a prelude (4.3a), exordium (the fable)

24 Guelich 1989, 199, and, e.g. Collins 2007, 239–240. At least concerning the plural παραβολάς, it seems to me that Mark may not refer to the narrative as a whole with the term, rather the παραβολαί are the individual allegorical correspondences. In other words, σπείρειν ("to sow") is a παραβολή for "spreading the 'word'", ὃ μὲν ἔπεσεν παρὰ τὴν ὁδόν ("the seed sown on the path") is a παραβολή for ὅταν ἀκούσωσιν, εὐθὺς ἔρχεται ὁ σατανᾶς καὶ αἴρει τὸν λόγον τὸν ἐσπαρμένον εἰς αὐτούς ("those who when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them."), and so on. This would also explain the plural for the single fable at *Ev.Marc.* 12.1, which is likewise highly allegorical.

25 Collins 2007, 239–240.

26 E.g. Holzberg 1992; Shiner 1998.

27 Mack argues for a deliberate structure following the chreia exercise of the *progymnasmata* (Mack/Robbins 1989, 143–161); see also Beavis 1989.

28 Strickland/Young 2017, 119–183.

(4.3–9), a *propositio* (4.11–12) that insiders see and hear but outsiders do not, and then a transition that the fable is key for understanding all of Jesus's comparisons (4.13). The next scene is made up then of three headings and an epilogue containing the allegorical interpretation and further comparisons that, taken together, mirror "The Sower", before concluding the unit at verse 34.[29] As some have argued, "The Sower" may express the message of the Markan Jesus as *mise en abyme* — a lesson about his lessons, an opaque fable about his opaque message.[30]

Whether communicated as a clumsy patchwork or a well-structured argument, the rhetorical goal of the fable at the intradiegetic story level and reader-audience level stand in tension. It serves two seemingly antithetical goals that have been no small puzzle to the relevant scholarship — to teach and to conceal.[31] The setting offers direct characterization of Jesus as a teacher, while it also claims that he employs the genre as coded speech intended for insiders. In this case, the two are combined so that Jesus's inner circle at the intradiegetic level and the implied readers at the extradiegetic level gain access to the clandestine lessons of the teaching. This clandestine aspect of Jesus's teaching in fables supports broader concerns in the gospel for mystery and a strong esoteric undercurrent, which include the characterization of the protagonist himself.[32] Untangling the two strands,[33] both find strong analogies in the fable tradition. Teaching with fables is a tradition discussed already by Socrates (Pl. *Resp*. 2.376e–377a) and one presumed to occur in any household (Quint. *Inst*. 1.9.2). The potential for covert communication via fable was another well-known path to take, both in history and for communicating in literature between the fable teller and reader. Like Mark's "anti-explanation" epimythium mentioned above, we have several fable epimythia from Phaedrus reflecting insider-outsider language and a goal of obfuscating the application, e.g. *Hoc quo pertineat, dicet qui me nouerit.* ("Anyone who knows me will tell you what this [fable] refers to", 3.1.7 Z. [= G.]), *Hoc cur, Philete, scripserim, pulchre uides*. ("Why I have written this [fable], Philetus, you can see very well", 5.30 Z. [= 5.10 G.]), *Consulto inuoluit ueritatem antiquitas, | ut sapiens intellegeret, erraret rudis*. ("It was by design that antiquity wrapped up truth in symbols, that the wise might understand, the ignorant go astray", *app*. 6.17–18 Z. [= *app*. 7.17–18 G.]).

29 Strickland/Young 2017, 135.

30 Tolbert 1989; Strickland/Young 2017, 181: "the discourse is, as we have seen, actually a discourse about Jesus's discourses and how they are received."

31 See Lischer 2014, 43–68.

32 See the famous study of Wrede 1901.

33 Accepting for the moment that the passage reflects two independent traditions that were poorly integrated.

Linked to this mode of fable telling is the fable as subversive speech, which is found throughout *The Life of Aesop* and is tied to the very origin of the fable according to the (historically disputed) tradition conveyed by Phaedrus:[34]

> Nunc, fabularum cur sit inuentum genus,
> breui docebo. Seruitus obnoxia,
> quia quae uolebat non audebat dicere,
> affectus proprios in fabellas transtulit
> calumniamque fictis elusit iocis.
> (Phaed. 3 *prol.* 33–37 Z. [= G.])
>
> Now I will explain briefly why the type of thing called fable was invented. The slave, being liable to punishment for any offence, since he dared not say outright what he wished to say, projected his personal sentiments into fables and eluded censure under the guise of jesting with made-up stories.
>
> (Transl. Perry)

We find an analogous example of Aesop before a crowd, wishing to avoid being punished for telling the truth: οἱ δὲ ὄχλοι ἀνεκραύγασαν· "γνώμην δός." ὁ δὲ Αἴσωπος ἔφη· "γνώμην μὲν οὐ δώσω, λόγῳ δέ τινι λέξω ὑμῖν [...]." ("But the crowd shouted, 'Give us your opinion.' Aesop said, 'I will not give you advice but will speak in fable [...].'", *Vit. Aesop*. 93 G). The other prime example of the fable in the Gospel of Mark provides a stunning example of its use for subversive speech: "The Wicked Tenants".[35]

In the Synoptic Gospels, "The Wicked Tenants" occurs toward the end of the narrative once Jesus reaches Jerusalem and begins to engage in agonistic encounters with various authorities.[36] In *The Life of Aesop*, a similar situation is described. After telling a fable to sharply criticize the Delphians, ταῦτα εἰπὼν περὶ ἀποδημίαν ἐστέλλετο. οἱ δὲ ἄρχοντες ἰδόντες αὐτοῦ τὸ κακολόγον ἐλογίζοντο· "ἐὰν αὐτὸν ἀφῶμεν ἀποδημῆσαι, περιελθὼν εἰς τὰς ἑτέρας πόλεις πλεῖον ἀτιμοτέρους ἡμᾶς ποιήσει." ἐβουλεύσαντο οὖν ἀνελεῖν δόλῳ ("So saying, Aesop made preparations for his departure. But the officials, seeing how abusive he was, reasoned to themselves, 'If we let him get away, he will go around to other cities and damage our reputation. So they plotted to kill him by a trick'", *Vit. Aesop.* 126–127 G).

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34 This account of the origin and purpose of fables has been understood by some not as a general account bu as a metonymic reference to the slavery of Aesop in particular as progenitor of the genre (on which, see Gärtner 2021, 102–104). The constraints of space do not permit here a discussion of how the Jesus tradition reflects an authentic instantiation of this subaltern use of fables, but see Strong 2021, 255–291.

35 See e.g. Herzog 1998; Patterson 1991.

36 *Ev.Marc.* 12.1–12; *Ev.Matt*. 21.33–46; *Ev.Luc.* 20.9–19.

In the gospels, the fable is likewise told between several riddle tests and verbal traps laid by οἱ ἀρχιερεῖς καὶ οἱ γραμματεῖς καὶ οἱ πρεσβύτεροι ("the chief priests, the experts in the law, and the elders", *Ev.Marc.* 11.27–33), and later by the Pharisees, Herodians, and Sadducees (*Ev.Marc.* 12.13–27), who wish to arrest Jesus. In between these riddle tests, Jesus responds with "The Wicked Tenants":

> Καὶ ἤρξατο αὐτοῖς ἐν παραβολαῖς λαλεῖν· ἀμπελῶνα ἄνθρωπος ἐφύτευσεν καὶ περιέθηκεν φραγμὸν καὶ ὤρυξεν ὑπολήνιον καὶ ᾠκοδόμησεν πύργον καὶ ἐξέδετο αὐτὸν γεωργοῖς καὶ ἀπεδήμησεν. καὶ ἀπέστειλεν πρὸς τοὺς γεωργοὺς τῷ καιρῷ δοῦλον ἵνα παρὰ τῶν γεωργῶν λάβῃ ἀπὸ τῶν καρπῶν τοῦ ἀμπελῶνος· καὶ λαβόντες αὐτὸν ἔδειραν καὶ ἀπέστειλαν κενόν. καὶ πάλιν ἀπέστειλεν πρὸς αὐτοὺς ἄλλον δοῦλον· κἀκεῖνον ἐκεφαλίωσαν καὶ ἠτίμασαν. καὶ ἄλλον ἀπέστειλεν· κἀκεῖνον ἀπέκτειναν, καὶ πολλοὺς ἄλλους, οὓς μὲν δέροντες, οὓς δὲ ἀποκτέννοντες. ἔτι ἕνα εἶχεν υἱὸν ἀγαπητόν· ἀπέστειλεν αὐτὸν ἔσχατον πρὸς αὐτοὺς λέγων ὅτι ἐντραπήσονται τὸν υἱόν μου. ἐκεῖνοι δὲ οἱ γεωργοὶ πρὸς ἑαυτοὺς εἶπαν ὅτι οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ κληρονόμος· δεῦτε ἀποκτείνωμεν αὐτόν, καὶ ἡμῶν ἔσται ἡ κληρονομία. καὶ λαβόντες ἀπέκτειναν αὐτὸν καὶ ἐξέβαλον αὐτὸν ἔξω τοῦ ἀμπελῶνος. τί [οὖν] ποιήσει ὁ κύριος τοῦ ἀμπελῶνος; ἐλεύσεται καὶ ἀπολέσει τοὺς γεωργοὺς καὶ δώσει τὸν ἀμπελῶνα ἄλλοις. Οὐδὲ τὴν γραφὴν ταύτην ἀνέγνωτε· λίθον ὃν ἀπεδοκίμασαν οἱ οἰκοδομοῦντες, οὗτος ἐγενήθη εἰς κεφαλὴν γωνίας· παρὰ κυρίου ἐγένετο αὕτη καὶ ἔστιν θαυμαστὴ ἐν ὀφθαλμοῖς ἡμῶν; Καὶ ἐζήτουν αὐτὸν κρατῆσαι, καὶ ἐφοβήθησαν τὸν ὄχλον, ἔγνωσαν γὰρ ὅτι πρὸς αὐτοὺς τὴν παραβολὴν εἶπεν. καὶ ἀφέντες αὐτὸν ἀπῆλθον.
>
> (*Ev.Marc.* 12.1–12)

> And he began speaking to them with comparisons, "A man planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a pit for the wine press, and built a watchtower; then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the season came, he sent a slave to the tenants to collect from them his share of the produce of the vineyard. But they seized him, and beat him, and sent him away empty-handed. And again he sent another slave to them; this one they beat over the head and insulted. Then he sent another, and that one they killed. And so it was with many others; some they beat, and others they killed. He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally, he sent him to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But those tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' So they seized him, killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others. Have you not read this scripture: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes'?" And they wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowd, for they realized he told the illustration about them. So they left him and went away.
>
> (Transl. New Revised Standard Version adapted)

The fable is imbued with allegorical elements — the characters, locations, and plot events finding equivalents in the intradiegetic narrative. Jesus allegorizes the chief priests, the experts in the law, and elders as tenant farmers on a vineyard

that represents Israel.[37] The deity is the vineyard owner, his slaves are the prophets of biblical times, and Jesus is the beloved son. This degree of allegorization is fairly uncommon in the fable collections and other fables of Jesus, but does find strong affinities with the function of fables at the conclusion of *The Life of Aesop*. Like Aesop, Jesus has used the fable as a rhetorical device to augur his death at the hands of the authorities, to claim his innocence, to lay the culpability on his social superiors, and to assert his nearness to the deity.[38] The fable serves this end not only at the intra- but also the extradiegetic level of the reader. If "The Sower" represented Jesus's preaching *in nuce*, as Van Eck argues, "The Wicked Tenants" conveys the plot of the gospel *in nuce*.[39] For the sake of space, we must move on, but I offer further discussion of "The Wicked Tenants" vis-à-vis the fable tradition elsewhere.[40]

4 Luke: for certainty, edification, and entertainment

With the fable tradition in the Gospel of Luke, we have a horse of a different color. Written sometime around the end of the first or early second century, the apocalyptic expectations found in earlier gospels are minimized and the tradition of Jesus's figurative illustrations has had time to develop. It is especially in Luke's gospel that the fables at the intra- and extradiegetic levels function in ways resembling those fable collections with moral didactic components like Babrius and the *collectio Augustana*.[41] It is also especially in Luke's Gospel that Jesus uses fa-

37 The narrative of the fable is often allusive to Isaiah 5 and concludes with a direct citation of *Ps*. 118.22–23 (LXX *Ps*. 117). In much the same way, the fables at the end of *The Life of Aesop* draw upon ancient intertexts, appealing to some of the earliest fables from the Archaic and Classical periods, e.g. "The Eagle and the Beetle" (Aesop. 3 P. [= Hsr.; 4 Ch.]), which is possibly attested already in Semonides (see van Dijk 1997, 149–150; Adrados 2003, III 6–8).

38 In *The Life of Aesop*, one notes that the fables begin in rapid succession once Aesop is named a prophet (*Vit. Aesop.* 93 G) and so also does the appeal to Zeus take center stage (*Vit. Aesop.* 133–139 G).

39 Van Eck/van Aarde 1989.

40 Strong 2021, 255–291.

41 In Spielhofer's 2023 landmark study of Babrius, he has problematized many traditional views about the fable collection, including that the author's primary goal is moral-didactic in nature, noting the absence of epimythia among other things (see e.g. 74–75). Spielhofer has persuasively demonstrated that the author has a more complex set of ambitions and influences than once thought — a richness that cannot be captured simply with "a moral-didactic collection." Nevertheless, I see this as a matter of emphasis, with didactic expectations signaled in the prologues (e.g.

bles as an orator character, whose rhetorical objectives include both deliberative and forensic persuasion. Unlike the other gospels, the author states his explicit purpose at the beginning of the book, that he ἀνατάξασθαι διήγησιν … ("compiles a narrative …", 1.1) for his addressee Theophilus, ἵνα ἐπιγνῷς περὶ ὧν κατηχήθης λόγων τὴν ἀσφάλειαν ("…so that you may have certainty concerning the things by which you were catechized", 1.4).[42]

At the intradiegetic story level, the protagonist is still portrayed with aspects of the subversive *picaro* outwitting social superiors as in the Markan gospel, but now the Lukan Jesus adopts elements of those social superiors to engage with them at eye level — he is now a literate, educated, wise man. The fables in Luke are inserted into appropriate narrative situations that support this elite characterization, on the one hand, and minimize the stigmas associated with fable telling that are a liability to this characterization on the other. Although the tradition is too important for Luke to omit, the covert aspect taken over from his predecessors in fables like "The Sower" is deemphasized and decentralized. The Lukan gospel omits, for example, the verse conveying that χωρὶς δὲ παραβολῆς οὐκ ἐλάλει αὐτοῖς, κατ᾽ ἰδίαν δὲ τοῖς ἰδίοις μαθηταῖς ἐπέλυεν πάντα ("he did not speak to them except in comparisons, but he explained everything in private to his students", *Ev.Marc.* 4.34; cf. *Ev.Matt*. 13.34–35). When the students ask Jesus for an explanation of "The Sower" (*Ev.Luc.* 8.9), rather than departing to share the hidden meaning in secret, Jesus simply delivers the epimythium while still standing amid the crowd, who are clearly within earshot. This kind of fable is also decentralized in its location in the plot. Once Jesus leaves the Galilee behind and begins his journey toward Jerusalem (9.51), he also leaves behind any trace of this coded speech mode of fable telling until he arrives at the destination ten chapters later (19.11).

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the father-son relationship of author and reader established by τέκνον and παῖ in 1 *prol.* 2, 2 *prol.* 1; the vocabulary and perhaps mimetic syntax of μάθοις […] γνοίης in 1 *prol.* 14; and the adjectives in 1 *prol.* 15 appealing to σοφοῦ γέροντος Αἰσώπου rather than an equally fitting appellation such as φρονίμου κακοπινοῦς Αἰσώπου). As to the epimythium specifically, the fables of Jesus sometimes do not have them and those that do are often assumed to be secondary by gospel scholars (who, again, are unaware of ancient fables and thus also the conventions of using an epimythium). Nevertheless, parable scholars have seen a didactic goal in Jesus's fables of teasing the mind into active thought, even when not dictating a particular lesson. This might prove to be a fruitful paradigm to think about Babrius's epimythium-less fables. Indeed, in one of the fables shared between Babrius, the *collectio Augustana*, and the Gospel of Luke, it is the version with the epimythium that the explicit lesson works against moral-didactic goals (Babr. 131; Aesop. 169 P. [= 179 Hsr.; 248 Ch.]; *Ev.Luc.* 15.11–32; on which, see Strong 2021, 325–330).

42 Like Babrius's "Son of King Alexander" (see Spielhofer 2023), it is possible that Theophilus, "God lover", is a metonym.

It is in the Central Section or "Travel Narrative" of the Lukan gospel (9.52–19.10), and only here in the gospel tradition, that one encounters what later history has made the prototypical corpus of "parables" — around fifteen unique fables that include "The Good Samaritan", "The Prodigal Son", "The Crafty Steward", "The Persistent Widow", and so on.[43] Unlike the other gospels, not a single fable here refers to "God's/heaven's kingdom." Instead, these fables are brought in as fictional analogies to address legal problems and cover *topoi* well-known from other fable collections, addressing greed, impiety, boasting, pride, justice, friendship, and cleverness. In the intradiegetic narrative, these fables function to validate Jesus in the offices of teacher and rhetor. At the level of implied readers, these fables likewise present an argument for a particular moral outlook through their appeal to Jesus as the authority figure who teaches these lessons. At the same time, if a collection of Jesus's fables was their source[44] — one of the instruments of the addressee's catechesis — weaving them into plausible narrative events in the life of Jesus would be a powerful method to achieve the author's goal of giving certainty to this catechesis.

In support of this characterization of the Lukan Jesus as a rhetor, one can do no better than the first fable of the "Travel Narrative": "The Good Samaritan". The fable is introduced by means of a legal debate between Jesus and a lawyer:

> Καὶ ἰδοὺ νομικός τις ἀνέστη ἐκπειράζων αὐτὸν λέγων· διδάσκαλε, τί ποιήσας ζωὴν αἰώνιον κληρονομήσω; ὁ δὲ εἶπεν πρὸς αὐτόν· ἐν τῷ νόμῳ τί γέγραπται; πῶς ἀναγινώσκεις; ὁ δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν· ἀγαπήσεις κύριον τὸν θεόν σου ἐξ ὅλης [τῆς] καρδίας σου καὶ ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ ψυχῇ σου καὶ ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ ἰσχύϊ σου καὶ ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ διανοίᾳ σου, καὶ τὸν πλησίον σου ὡς σεαυτόν. εἶπεν δὲ αὐτῷ· ὀρθῶς ἀπεκρίθης· τοῦτο ποίει καὶ ζήσῃ. ὁ δὲ θέλων δικαιῶσαι ἑαυτὸν εἶπεν πρὸς τὸν Ἰησοῦν· καὶ τίς ἐστίν μου πλησίον; Ὑπολαβὼν ὁ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν· ἄνθρωπός τις κατέβαινεν ἀπὸ Ἰερουσαλὴμ.... τίς τούτων τῶν τριῶν πλησίον δοκεῖ σοι γεγονέναι τοῦ ἐμπεσόντος εἰς τοὺς λῃστάς; ὁ δὲ εἶπεν· ὁ ποιήσας τὸ ἔλεος μετ᾽ αὐτοῦ. εἶπεν δὲ αὐτῷ ὁ Ἰησοῦς· πορεύου καὶ σὺ ποίει ὁμοίως.
>
> (*Ev.Luc*. 10.25–30a, 36–37)

43 This group often bearing the παραβολή label in "The Travel Narrative" is made up of texts composed with clear aspirations to the form and artistry of the fable, many of which have parallels to other known fables. They are greater in number than those in *The Life of Aesop* and they are identical to the fables that we encounter in the collections and embedded in other narratives. That this group of *exceptional* παραβολαί evolved into the *norm* during their reception is one root of the subsequent befuddlement about all texts labeled παραβολή in the Synoptic Gospels and the Sisyphean effort to carve out a new genre for them disconnected from fable that is called the "parable."

44 That Luke drew these fables from a collection has been a common argument; see Strong 2021, 449–522.

> And behold, a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, saying, "A certain man was coming down from Jerusalem…[the Good Samaritan narrative]" "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."
>
> (Transl. New Revised Standard Version adapted)

By introducing the fable by way of a chreia, he has a natural way of weaving the fable into the intradiegetic narrative, situating it on a particular occasion that then governs the rhetorical force of the fable. In this case, after telling the fable, rather than delivering the epimythium himself, Jesus employs a clever rhetorical maneuver. He compels the opponent to render the verdict with his own lips in Jesus's favor. Jesus has outmaneuvered the lawyer with this short fictional narrative illustrating the truth and cemented his credentials in so doing.

Scholars generally recognize an effort to involve the implied readership in the gospel narratives. However, the question of degree, in what ways, and to what ends is debated and certainly differs from gospel to gospel.[45] In the case of Luke and his fables, it is transparently the case that the implied readers are also wrapped into the paraenesis of the epimythia. One illustrative example from Luke 14 will have to suffice. While Jesus reclines at a dinner, one of the other guests says to him: μακάριος ὅστις φάγεται ἄρτον ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ τοῦ θεοῦ ("blessed is he who will eat bread in God's kingdom", 14.15), to which Jesus responds with the fable of "The Great Banquet" (14.16–24). The fable narrative concludes with καὶ εἶπεν ὁ κύριος πρὸς τὸν δοῦλον· ἔξελθε εἰς τὰς ὁδοὺς καὶ φραγμοὺς καὶ ἀνάγκασον εἰσελθεῖν, ἵνα γεμισθῇ μου ὁ οἶκος· λέγω γὰρ ὑμῖν ὅτι οὐδεὶς τῶν ἀνδρῶν ἐκείνων τῶν κεκλημένων γεύσεταί μου τοῦ δείπνου (14.23–24). To whom κύριος and δοῦλον correspond depends on the narrative level(s) at which they occur, and so too does how one punctuates the sentence determine the narrative level. The question is whether the transition from hypo- back to intradiegetic occurs at the end of this text or already at λέγω γὰρ ὑμῖν. If the latter, who would that epimythium address, the fellow banqueter or the gospel readers at the extradiegetic level?

45 The bibliography on such issues is legion, but see e.g. Malbon 2009; Dicken/Snyder 2016.

> [hypodiegetic fable:] "[…] The master said to the slave, 'Go out into the roads and hedges, and insist people come in, so that my house may be filled. [implicit endomythium:] For I [master] tell you [slave], none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.'"
> [hypodiegetic fable:] "[…] The master said to the slave, 'Go out into the roads and hedges, and insist people come in, so that my house may be filled.'" [intradiegetic epimythium:] For I [Jesus] tell you [fellow banqueter], none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.
> [hypodiegetic fable:] "[…] The master said to the slave, 'Go out into the roads and hedges, and insist people come in, so that my house may be filled."' [extradiegetic epimythium:] For I [Jesus] tell you [Christian audience], none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.[46]

While one would be justifiably skeptical of attributing authorial intentions like directly addressing the implied reader, the grammar requires it in this case. It is a master speaking to one slave at the hypodiegetic level, and Jesus addresses the fable and its epimythium to one dinner guest at the intradiegetic level. It is only at the extradiegetic level, addressing the early Christian audience, that the plural ὑμῖν ("you all") is grammatically correct.[47] The message thus functions at all three levels, each bearing its own meaning. While such complexity need not always be at play, the refrain λέγω ὑμῖν ("I tell you") and similar formulations spoken by the gospel Jesus when uttering epimythia aid the author in blending the narrative levels to include the implied readership among addressees. This reader orientation, perhaps absent from fables embedded into other narrative genres, reflects the function of fables in ancient education and resemble the epimythia in the fable collections with their regular authorial "I"s and direct addressee "you"s.

These fables of "The Travel Narrative", when compared with those embedded in other narratives, but especially those in the collections, show that the author and/or his source understood and aspired to the conventions of the fable genre as reflected in those texts and in the techniques described by rhetorical handbooks. The fables of Luke's "Travel Narrative" are characterized by beginning with the protagonist as an anarthrous noun with a *pronomen indefinitum*, a tripart structure, ornamental narrative details, promythia and epimythia that follow expected patterns, and direct speech events, which include dialogue, concluding summary remarks, and soliloquies that reflect character interiority on familiar fable topics like expressions of distress and inner deliberations.[48] The fable of "The Foolish Farmer" (*Ev.Luc.* 12.16–22) offers a superb example of all of the aforementioned

46 Since the original invitees within the fable were landowners who are now substituted for the poor and disabled, the social background of the audience is once again in view.

47 This address to the audience has been noted by gospel scholars, who, it is worth remembering, were unaware of the ancient fable and the epimythium (e.g. Linnemann 1967, 90; Nolland 1989, 758–59; Hultgren 2000, 338).

48 On the consistency of these features in fables, see Holzberg 2002, 20–21.

features working together. It appears following a request for Jesus to resolve another legal dispute, Εἶπεν δέ τις ἐκ τοῦ ὄχλου αὐτῷ· διδάσκαλε, εἰπὲ τῷ ἀδελφῷ μου μερίσασθαι μετ᾽ ἐμοῦ τὴν κληρονομίαν. ὁ δὲ εἶπεν αὐτῷ· ἄνθρωπε, τίς με κατέστησεν κριτὴν ἢ μεριστὴν ἐφ᾽ ὑμᾶς; ("Someone in the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, tell my brother to split the inheritance with me.' But he said to him, 'Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?'", *Ev.Luc.* 12.13–14). This chreia serves as a springboard for the protagonist to respond to the perceived greed of the inquirer, using a fable to illustrate the point:

> (15) Εἶπεν δὲ πρὸς αὐτούς· [promythium:] ὁρᾶτε καὶ φυλάσσεσθε ἀπὸ πάσης πλεονεξίας, ὅτι οὐκ ἐν τῷ περισσεύειν τινὶ ἡ ζωὴ αὐτοῦ ἐστιν ἐκ τῶν ὑπαρχόντων αὐτῷ. (16) Εἶπεν δὲ παραβολὴν πρὸς αὐτοὺς λέγων· [fable:] ἀνθρώπου τινὸς πλουσίου εὐφόρησεν ἡ χώρα. (17) καὶ διελογίζετο ἐν ἑαυτῷ λέγων· τί ποιήσω, ὅτι οὐκ ἔχω ποῦ συνάξω τοὺς καρπούς μου; (18) καὶ εἶπεν· τοῦτο ποιήσω, καθελῶ μου τὰς ἀποθήκας καὶ μείζονας οἰκοδομήσω καὶ συνάξω ἐκεῖ πάντα τὸν σῖτον καὶ τὰ ἀγαθά μου (19) καὶ ἐρῶ τῇ ψυχῇ μου· ψυχή, ἔχεις πολλὰ ἀγαθὰ κείμενα εἰς ἔτη πολλά· ἀναπαύου, φάγε, πίε, εὐφραίνου. (20) εἶπεν δὲ αὐτῷ ὁ θεός· ἄφρων, ταύτῃ τῇ νυκτὶ τὴν ψυχήν σου ἀπαιτοῦσιν ἀπὸ σοῦ· ἃ δὲ ἡτοίμασας, τίνι ἔσται; (21) [epimythium:] [οὕτως ὁ θησαυρίζων ἑαυτῷ καὶ μὴ εἰς θεὸν πλουτῶν.] (22) Εἶπεν δὲ πρὸς τοὺς μαθητὰς [αὐτοῦ]· διὰ τοῦτο λέγω ὑμῖν· [epimythium:] μὴ μεριμνᾶτε τῇ ψυχῇ τί φάγητε, μηδὲ τῷ σώματι τί ἐνδύσησθε. (23) ἡ γὰρ ψυχὴ πλεῖόν ἐστιν τῆς τροφῆς καὶ τὸ σῶμα τοῦ ἐνδύματος
>
> (*Ev.Luc.* 12.15–23)

> And he said to them, [promythium:] "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." Then he told them a fable, saying [fable:] "A certain rich man's land produced abundantly. And he deliberated with himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' And he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry."' But God said to him, 'Fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. The things you have prepared, whose will they be?' [epimythium:] [So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God."] He said to his disciples, "Therefore I tell you, [epimythium:] do not worry about your life/soul, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life/soul is more than food, and the body more than clothing.
>
> (Transl. J.S.)

One could not locate in the fable collections a better fable form, plot, and structure than this. It opens with an anarthrous noun + a *pronomen indefinitum*, describes a foolish character who enters into a soliloquy, and concludes with a reply from a supernatural *survenant* who censures the protagonist, all wrapped together in a comic plot. Following the fable, we arrive at an epimythium, which begins

with a typical form, οὕτως + maxim.[49] Then we have a second epimythium, this time with a narrative transition added to specify that Jesus delivers it to his students. Just as in the fable collection manuscripts, one even detects scribes in dispute over the interpretation of the fable, scribbling in (or scratching out) an epimythium in the middle of the narrative.[50]

At the level of the intradiegetic narrative, the fable is used to justify Jesus's rebuff of the man who appealed to him as adjudicator — the promythium stating that one should avoid any kind of greed. Between the chreia and the promythium, the number of addressees switches to the plural, enabling Jesus's exhortation to include the students and implied readers. As several scholars have argued, these verses form the springboard into a cohesive rhetorical argument that continues for much of the chapter and which is illuminated by ancient rhetorical strategies. Malherbe sees a discussion of the topos on greed (περί πλεονεχία).[51] Stigall observes parallels with the strategies recommended in *progymnasmata* handbooks for embedding fables and characterization through prosopopoiea.[52] Stegman also appeals to the *progymnasmata*, observing that Hermogenes's recommendations for chreia elaboration can serve as a template "in order to highlight and clarify the flow and logic of the Lukan Jesus' discourse in these verses:

1. 12.13 brief encomium (Jesus is the recipient of a request and given the honorific title 'Teacher')
2. 12.13–15a Jesus' chreia ('Who made me κριτής and μεριστής? Beware of all covetousness')
3. 12.15b rationale ('because life does not consist in abundance of possessions')
4. 12.16–20 statement of the contrary (parable of the rich fool)

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49 With dozens of examples, this formulation is one of the most frequently used in the epimythia of the *collectio Augustana* (e.g. Aesop. 2, 4, 7, 14 P. [= Hsr.; 5, 8, 14, 39 Ch.]). It also occasionally appears in fables embedded into other prose works, such as the following example from Plutarch, which expresses not only the same form but also offers a similar maxim on the topic of possessions: Οὕτω δή, ὦ φίλε Χερσία, καὶ πρὸς ἄνθρωπον ἀνόητον καὶ φαῦλον οὐδέν ἐστι μέτρον οὐσίας· ("My dear Chersias, so also indeed is there no amount of possessions that can be applied to a foolish and worthless person", *Sept. Sap. Conv*. 157b; transl. J.S.).

50 Verse 21 is absent from Codex Bezae and from the version at *Ev.Thom.* 63. With the newly published second-century Oxyrhynchus fragment also omitting this maxim while preserving the surrounding verses, my suspicion that verse 21 is an epimythium added later has still more support (Fish/Wallace/Holmes 2023).

51 Malherbe 1996 and see the contribution to his *Festschrift* continuing this argument (Hock 2003).

52 Taking note of Hermogenes's discussion of the nature of ethical speech, and the example οἷον τίνας ἂν εἴποι λόγους γεωργὸς πρῶτον ἰδὼν ναῦν ('What a farmer would say when first seeing a ship, *Prog.* 9.30), Stigall suggests, "The scene in Luke's parable could be categorized similarly as: 'What words a farmer might say when his fields produced a bountiful crop?'" (2012, 357).

5. 12.24–28 statement from analogy (ravens and lilies)
6. 12.30a; 12.27 example ('Gentiles'/'nations' — example; Solomon — positive example)
7. 12.30b–32 statement from authority (Jesus' knowledge of God's will and good pleasure)
8. 12.33 closing exhortations ('Sell your possessions and give alms; store up treasure in heaven')"[53]

Whatever the best way is to parse the rhetorical structure, many intertextual links join the fable with lexica and themes that appear in the subsequent verses.[54] By constructing the chapter this way, the extradiegetic author and his protagonist flex their rhetorical prowess, building an argument to convince the students within and outside the gospel narrative. Here, the fable provides a fitting fictional example to support the other illustrations and forms in the chapter, such as condemning greed, praising generosity, and promoting, perhaps, *enkrateia*. Ironically, Jesus rebuffs his role as judge and advocate by employing the fable precisely as someone well-trained in the art.[55]

For all of the Lukan author's evident literary talents, the roughness of the Greek when editing in fables leaves a strong impression of a source being worked in.[56] We saw this above when an awkward narrative transition from a fable to an epimythium results in repetition: Εἶπεν δὲ πρὸς τοὺς μαθητὰς [αὐτοῦ]· διὰ τοῦτο λέγω ὑμῖν· ("He said to the students, 'therefore I say to you'", 12.22). We find a similar repetition of addressees in chapter 18 when integrating a promythium, αὐτοῖς ("to them") and αὐτοὺς ("them"): Ἔλεγεν δὲ παραβολὴν αὐτοῖς πρὸς τὸ δεῖν πάντοτε προσεύχεσθαι αὐτοὺς καὶ μὴ ἐγκακεῖν. ("And he told a fable to them [promythium:] on the need for them always to pray and not to be remiss", 18.1). To

53 Stegman 2007, 335–336.

54 "Life/soul", which appears in the fable and the subsequent epimythia, returns in arguments from the inability to extend one's life by worrying (25–26). Sandwiched between these in verse 24 is a comparison with ravens that references sowing, reaping, storehouses, and barns. The deity from verse 20 reappears in verse 28 for Jesus to make an *a minori ad maius* point that God cares even for grass and animals, *ergo* humans much more. Eating and drinking from verse 19 reappear in 29, ὑπάρχοντα ("possessions") from verse 16 reappears in 33, and θησαυρὸν ἀνέκλειπτον ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς (storing up "unfailing treasure in heaven") rather than earthly goods in verses 33–34 picks up on the epimythium from verse 21.

55 This characterization of Jesus as lawyer extends to other framing narratives to uniquely Lukan examples such as "The Prodigal Son" in *Ev.Luc.* 15.1–2 (see e.g. Bovon 2013, 401).

56 Based on Demetr. *Eloc.* 240–301, Strickland/Young 2017, 173–174, argue that it is a deliberate style, but I am doubtful.

begin the next fable, he cleverly transforms the preposition πρὸς, the first word of a Greek promythium (meaning "on [the topic of]"),[57] into "to", the object marker for the verb of speaking: Εἶπεν δὲ καὶ πρός τινας τοὺς πεποιθότας ἐφ᾽ ἑαυτοῖς ὅτι εἰσὶν δίκαιοι καὶ ἐξουθενοῦντας τοὺς λοιποὺς τὴν παραβολὴν ταύτην· ("And he also said [promythium:] to those who are confident in themselves that they are just while treating others with contempt, this fable", 18.9). When multiple fables come one after another like this, the Lukan author often fails to divide them by any narrative event or supplies only the most superficial transitions. We see this also with "The Lost Sheep", "The Lost Coin", "The Prodigal Son", and "The Crafty Steward", which are simply divided by ἤ (15.8), εἶπεν δέ (15.11), and ἔλεγεν δὲ καὶ πρὸς τοὺς μαθητάς (16.1), respectively. Likewise, the transition points between a fable and its epimythium and between multiple epimythia are frequently asyndetic, as if one were looking at a fable collection manuscript rather than a running narrative.[58] At the level of the plot, before an opening chreia or after a fable, the scene can change as if the one adjacent to it never happened. When an epimythium finishes in 18.14, suddenly people are bringing infants to Jesus in 18.15. Within *The Life of Aesop*, by contrast, fables are normally well integrated into the plot, such that, if indeed the narrative was constructed in a similar way to the Gospels, the seams between a diegesis or chreia and the fables are not easily visible — well blended so to speak.[59] Even the shortest transition between two fables offers at least a modicum of narrative progress: μέλλων δὲ ἀπὸ τοῦ κρημνοῦ ῥίπτεσθαι ἔτι ἕτερον λόγον εἶπεν· ("As he was on the point of being thrown over the cliff he told still another fable", *Vit. Aesop.* 141 G).

For Luke, there does appear to be a broader strategy at play in integrating fables. Emanating outward from the central block of fables anchored in chapter 15, Luke then spaces his fables out. They appear at regular intervals from chapter 6 until 20. As Parsons argues, Luke inserts fables from his collection in this manner as an orienting framework in the "Travel Narrative", "landmarks for instructing the disciples along the way."[60] I would also attribute to the author a complementary rhetorical goal in this distribution strategy. As many of our first-century sources remind us, fables edified and entertained, like a sauce for a dish, used in

57 Insofar as we can reconstruct a normal Greek promythium; see Perry 1940; Strong 2022.

58 See, for example, the epimythia stacked behind "The Crafty Steward" (*Ev.Luc.* 16.8–13), many of which have no connecting words between them. See again the more detailed discussions in Strong 2021 and 2022.

59 See Shiner 1998; Elliott 2005.

60 Parsons 2007, 122; Parsons 1997. Naturally, the "disciples" include implied readers.

moderation they maintained the reader's interest while instructing them.[61] These instructions through fable are delivered by the master teacher, Jesus, whose characterization is reinforced by this fable *savoir-faire*.

5 Conclusion

Taken together, there are perhaps more fables embedded into the gospels than any other Greek work. With these few illustrative examples, one gets a sense of the purposes for weaving them into the gospels and the methods for doing so. The rhetorical function of fables in the gospels reflects their broad use elsewhere in antiquity, with observable tendencies from one gospel version to the next. Fables are used here to support a particular characterization of the fable teller and his hearers. They are used as a means to convey a hidden transcript and subversive speech, inviting readers in on the secret. They are used as a rhetorical tool to make arguments in favor of a point of view or legal position. They are used to teach in the sense of explaining abstract concepts like "God's kingdom" and to teach in the sense of paraenesis — cautionary or exhortatory illustrations that promote particular ethical norms or moral behaviors. For all of these goals, the fable is an ideal genre with universal appeal to mediate between audiences of all backgrounds.

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61 μεθ᾽ ἡδονῆς ἐνθουσιῶσι […] ὥσπερ ὄψῳ χρωμένους μετρίως τῷ τέρποντι ("they get inspired and pleasure … just as a sauce used in moderation brings pleasure", Plut. *Quomodo adul.* 14f). See also Quint. *Inst.* 5.11.19; Phaed. 1 *prol.* 1–4 Z. [= G.]; Dio Chrys. *Or*. 72.13.

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