

EARLY JEWISH PARABLES AND FABLES AS NON-RELIGIOUS NARRATIVES¹

LAURI THURÉN

Abstract. To understand the parables of Jesus, it is interesting to compare them with other early Jewish persuasive narratives, including parables but also fables. Recognizing their common features and functions yields a more reliable interpretation of each genre and individual story. To this end, I will scrutinize some examples of these narratives with modern argumentation analysis. I will argue that, in their original context, these stories function best as non-religious persuasive narratives. Each of them aims at enhancing the audience's acceptance of some general principle, which can then be applied to religious discussion. Within these stories, however, nothing requires an allegorical and directly religious interpretation. On the contrary, such axiomatic readings obscure their message and function.

Keywords: parables, fables, argumentation, rabbinic, Jesus.

The parables of Jesus were not unique religious innovations.² Rather, he utilized a widespread genre in a persuasive way. Similar narratives are found in the Hebrew Bible, in Hellenistic rhetoric, and especially among rabbinic parables and fables.³ Although the rabbinic narratives are somewhat younger, they may well reflect the same early Jewish storytelling tradition. Studying differences and similarities between the function and interpretation of the early Jewish persuasive stories will shed light on the way each of them was designed to be understood.

One of the most intriguing questions is whether these narratives should be read as religious allegories. To be sure, any story encouraging the listener to “look

¹ With this article I salute the EELC president, professor, and my friend Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr.

² This classical misconception was based on neglecting Jesus's parables' Early Jewish and Greco-Roman context; see M. A. BEAVIS, “Parable and Fable”, *CBQ* 52 (1990) 473–497 and E. OTTENHEIJM, “Waiting for the Harvest: Trajectories of Rabbinic and ‘Christian’ Parables”, in A. HOUTMAN et al. (ed.), *Religious Stories in Transformation: Conflict, Revision and Reception*, Brill, Leiden, 2016, 314–333 (314). See also J. JAROMIN, “A parable in Greek-Roman, Old Testament and rabbinic literature”, *Scriptura Sacra* 18 (2014), 103–111.

³ For a brief overview of the parables in the Hebrew Bible, early Jewish, and rabbinic writings, see K. R. SNODGRASS, *Stories with Intent – A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2008, 38–58.