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Martin Luther and Aesop: Fables as tales of morality for today?

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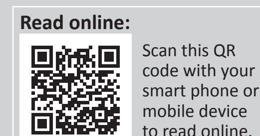

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Ancient Aesopian fables continued to capture the imagination, reaching even into Lutheran Wittenberg. Luther, concerned to address morality within the church and community, sanctioned the use of fables with some caution. Ever cautious not to obscure the gospel, he referred to fables as a tool in his preaching and his table-talks. This is a neglected tool, the rediscovery of which may prove useful to pastoral ministry for its ability to stimulate visualising and excite verbal communication in illustrating something of the complexity of Christian and daily living. While fables never gained much popularity in Reformed circles, it is worth revisiting for insights in how Martin Luther put it to use.

Contribution: As in Reformation Wittenberg, a fable today has the latent promise to be a useful instrument in promoting gospel morality not only among children, but also among adults. To successfully reach that end, the church needs to be creative, even to the extent of fashioning contemporary fables to address daily tensions within its community and beyond.

Keywords: Aesop; fable; Luther; table-talk; sermons; reformed.

Vox audita perit littera manet[1]

Introduction

Stories that endure the passing on by word-of-mouth continue to entertain as they did generations past to the present. They come, among others,[2] in the form of a variety of stories, mystic myths depicting ancient cultures, stirring legends and epics with their spurious historical origins, and ancient wisdom captured in fable.[3] It is this latter form of story that will be explored in this article, especially as it was endorsed by the great reformer Martin Luther (1483–1546). It was in the castle of Koburg that Luther planned his literary production[4] and sought to purify the fables for clear moral instruction (Clark 1914:51–52; cf. Daly 1961). The original manuscript of 13 fables of Aesop lies in the Vatican. In the same archive as Leo X's bull *Decet Romanum Pontificem* of 03 January 1521 (Leo X 1521 cf. para. III), excommunicating Martin Luther and 'Lutherans'.

Classical scholars are aware of Plato's disdain of poets[5] and the neo-Platonists attempts to associate fable to hidden meaning(s), revealing some philosophical or religious truth.[6] Inherited classical scholarship pertaining to the processes of Hellenisation in Greco-Roman East, identified tendencies inherent in the dynamics of 'speech acts and literary texts' (Larash 2008:235), which shaped its socio-historical acculturation. Most of these insights depended on literary records. More recently, this corpus has been enriched through the study of coins, inscriptions and other data. New insights and understandings have significantly added to that former modelling (Chaniotis 2004). This study is, however, only concerned with the term *fable,* and merely wishes to gauge its historical importance for Martin Luther and, by implication, to reintroduce a neglected

1.'The voice heard disappears, the letter waits.'

2.See, for instance, sagas, epics, folklore, fantasy tales and more.

3.Aesop is not the only one to have left an epigrammatic legacy. See also Martial (1920); Babrius' compendium; the social iambic use of epigrams (Jones 1997). See Holzberg ed. (1992) for the historical origins of fable and use.

4.(Enders: Luthers Briefwechsel VII pp. 302to Philip Melachthon April 22, 1530) Luther would raise three tabernacles '*Psalterio unum, Prophetis unum et Aesopo unum*'. Luther's actual collection seemed to follow topical labelling: '*Torheit (vom Han und Perlen)*' and so on (Carnes 1984:188 fn. 27; Springer 2011:197).

5.Plato, in fact, 'advised mother and nurses to repeat selected fables to their children, to mould and give direction to their young and tender minds' and in the prologue to his fables in Phaedrus: 'Tis but a play to form the youth by fiction in the cause of truth' (Newbiggin 2018:24). Plato, influenced by Aesop, shaped the Socratic dialogues, and so dealt with the transition of mythos to logos (Kurke 2006:7–8, 37).

6.See the superb analysis by Chevrolet (2007) and the historical use of 'fable' during the Renaissance to the present (cf. Carnes 1984).

instrument to the church, and to suggest consideration for present pastoral use.[7]

Reformation: A new communal perspective

Luther, the pastor and theologian, reformed the church through his biblical theological approach which impacted society. The Christian church remains socially and religiously engaged with community of which it is inextricably part. But there is more to be considered. Luther's interest in the classics has not been fully appreciated and 'is no doubt a casualty of the way in which Reformation and Renaissance studies[8] are still so often distinguished from each other' (Springer 2011:9).

Despite the various opinions of Luther's immediate interest and engagement outside the church per se (cf. Springer 2007:27–28 and footnotes), he was in humanist tradition, conversant with the classics in Latin (2007:31–34). Evidently, he retained a high regard for the wisdom and usefulness of Aesop's fables to which he assigned 'a status second only to the Bible' (Springer 2007:32, fn 21). It might well be reasonable to ask with Tertullian: *Quid Athenae Hierosolymis*?[9] In other words: Is a fable a Trojan horse in Luther's theology, suspect of advocating a kind of freedom of faith to express an exterior and interior theological liberty?

His *Bekanntschaft* [familiarity] with the fables and classics was well-known, by making use of it as an instrument to promote morality, and to do so in the vernacular. One of the reasons was probably that Luther was aware that fable was equally popular in both folklore and literature (Carnes 1984:176) which, in the hands of a thoughtful reformer, could become a useful instrument, not least in the present. With its foot in both the literature and folklore camps, its 'secular scripture' (Carnes 1984:186) served the Reformation. For that reason, it may be held that Aesopic fables were contextualised in their employment within a Lutheran framework, although not, on the one hand, as overtly within a reformed or, for that matter, a humanist framework. Nevertheless, it is my opinion that fables as a thoughtful and illustrative ministerial tool, may once again be considered for its ministerial usefulness.

Luther's concerns for the common populace caused him to strive to channel those perceptions into a more biblical manner of thinking about society to bring about a new perspective on morality. Schilling (2017) associates this thinking in terms of *Knechtschaft*[10] that associated thinking about society with the consciousness of Christian norms firmly established. An example of the Protestantism and Lutheran fable package shipped to Sweden is worth mentioning. 'The Swedish history of fable de facto takes on a fresh and increasing role in the era of Reformation and as a direct result of the Reformation agenda', further developed by the decisions of the Uppsala Assembly in 1593 (Zillén 2008/2009:203, 216–217).

Zillén's study contends that Luther was conscious that he had been formed by his own context, but also that he was responsibly formative within the context of community.[11] To that end, Springer (2007) shows that the reformer's appreciation for the classics of the Greco-Roman world was much the same as the Renaissance humanists had. But it is also clear that Luther valued the inheritance of the historical Aesopic tradition,[12] which found its origins some 600 BC. A tradition that survived its place of origin on the Island of Samos, and 2000 years later its potential to serve as a vehicle of communicating morality, intrigued Martin Luther.

What may be said of the jesting fabulist and didactician, and far from handsome[13] former slave Aesop (c. 620–560 BC) from Amorion in Phrygia and a non-Greek?[14] Tales associated with his name, survive to this very day. The Aesop Romance,[15] reputedly a questionable biography of Aesop, is regarded to be largely fictional, although ancient referential sources that include Aristotle[16] (384–322 BC), Herodotus (c. 484–425 BC) and Plutarch (46–119 AD), make mention of Aesop. Whatever romantic claims surround the figure and life of Aesop, there can be no serious doubt with regards to the essence of his fables. Although these may have been embellished, decried for their moral prodding, their presence continues within the public arena. It must also be mentioned that not all the fables originate with Aesop; some stories are not even Greek (Cooper 1955:144). Pérez Perozo (1946:364) is of the opinion that Aesop served as the master of the fabula[17] and all others such as Babrius, Phaedrus[18] and LaFontaine merely versified similar themes bearing 'the unmistakable trade-mark of the old master'.

Whatever the origin of the fable or the history of Aesop, this article will not consider these matters, but rather accept the traditional compendium of fables attributed to Aesop.

7. It is for that reason of obscurity in Reformed circles that I introduce the subject, giving an overview of its Aesopic origins and subsequent development and uses.

8. The view was that the Reformation was primarily a religious movement and the Renaissance a secular movement, engaging pagan arts and literature (Springer 2012:9).

9. Literally, 'What is Athens in Jerusalem?', or more interpretatively put, 'What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?'

10. Bondage.

11. 'During the last centuries of the Middle Ages, Aesopic fables were, most probably, read in Swedish cathedral and town schools,' (Zillén 2008/2009:202).

12. Springer (2007:23) shows Luther's familiarity with the classics and his accompanying creative thinking in that regard.

13. Could there be significance in the meaning of Aesop which translates as 'burnt face'?

14. Regarding Aesop and his present acceptance, see the essay by Baker (1969). The Aesop Romance claimed to be mostly fictional (Holzberg ed. 1992).

15. The manuscript probably dates between 30 BC and 100 AD (Jeffreys & Jeffreys eds. 2005:47).

16. The philosopher who taught a passive God and the self-sufficiency of man (Springer 2011:25).

17. 'Fabula' may include superstitions on the one hand, but also that literature which avoids the same relaying on reason and speech, impacting the imagination (Newbigging 2018:6).

18. Compare Perry (1990)

Luther's delight in fables[19]

It is evidently the matter of how to effectively address community morality that intrigued Luther, evident in the excess of a 100 references to Aesop scattered throughout his writings (Springer 2007:32). In fact, Luther considered Aesop's fables and Cato writings to claim a status just less than that of the Bible. While he also began to prepare some select fables for publication in German,[20] it may be said with confidence that, with its illustrative use, here was no classical synthesis with biblical scripture. Nevertheless, Luther's engagement and regard with Aesop remains of interest.

But firstly, some general comments may be appropriate. To illustrate Luther's command of his grasping of the classics, I now refer to the first publication of his translation of the Psalms in 1523–1524. This included Psalm 128 '*Wohl dem der ynn Gottes furcht steht*'. Then, 20 years later in 1543, he again revisited Psalm 128 to rephrase it in the epigrammatic style of Martial (1920:10.47; Springer 2007:24 cf. fn. 1). Why? Springer (2007:42) advances the idea that Luther wrote this in the first instance to delight his friends Melanchthon and Spalatin, and secondly, that it was also to the followers of Epicurus who met with the reformer's two kingdom thesis (2007:42 fn. 58). Clearly, Luther's agenda was ever to promote the Reformation within the Christian church, and without any hint of the aberrant theology of the scholastics.[21] The same applies to his approach to fables as will now be explained.

A Renaissance Aesopic collection was available to Luther in 1530, that is, that of Steinhöwel's Esopus[22] in Latin German (Carnes 1986). But Luther regarded this collection as too explicit, containing several vulgar stories spun into fables. For that reason, he embarked on the project of revising the fables. Sadly, the project was never completed, apart from a preface and 13 fables. He wanted to address morality among men and women, comprising everyday society, but in such a manner that it would also be edifying. While the engagement of translating the Old Testament into German vernacular occupied him at Fort Koburg in 1530, Luther also began to make some headway with his Aesopic compilation.

Melanchthon usefully employed Aesop's fables[23] in Latin and Greek form,[24] teaching familiarity of classical languages (Zillén 2008/2009:204), thus continuing its pedagogical use of the early Middle Ages. Carnes (1984:185) maintains that Luther viewed fables favourably for their moral effect on reader and listener in that both are '"beguiled" or "deceived" into the truth'. Springer (2011:72) suggests that this interest in fables also came about when Luther had children of his own.[25] Boothby (1809:viii, ix, xiii) affirms this interest, remarking that Quintilian thought Aesop's fables aim at a societal level, for its 'instruction of the simple and inexperienced'; Rousseau held that while amusing to adults 'the truth must be told to children … [*who*] must, after all be brought up for the world they are to live in'.[26]

Burkard Waldis (c. 1490–1556), former monk, then student of theology at Wittenberg and Protestant pastor, collected German fables of the 16th century published as the Esopus[27] (1548). The impact of fables as didactic instrument in the cause of the Reformation was adopted by Luther's pupil. Erasmus Alberus (c. 1500–1553) employed literary satire as a weapon in his *Der Barfusser Monce Eulenspiegel und Alkoran* in 1542, prefaced by Luther. In 1550, this was followed by his collection of 49 fables, *Buch von der Tugend und Weisheit* which followed a didactic and satirical style.[28]

Aesop's fables enjoyed enormous standing in Wittenberg and Reformation Germany, not least due to Luther's translations and rather Alberus' versified fables (Regier 2019:267).

To conclude this section, it would seem appropriate to quote Martin Luther:

> 'So Aesop speaks and does not just prattle. He sets forth the reality of the truth in the guise of a stupid fool. And still has to be persecuted for that' (cf. Springer 2011:158 and fn. 6).

Reminiscent of juxtaposing the worldly-wise man and the fool, both profane. Proverbs 26:12 'Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him.'

Reformers and fables

There existed an ambiguity among reformers when it came to the use of fables. For them the tension lay in the reading of 2 Peter 1:16 and 2 Timothy 4:3-4.[29] Reformers were of course aware of the inclusion of fables in the Bible narrative itself, for instance in 2 Samuel 12:1–7 and Matthew 7:15.

Calvin[30] deplored substituting the nature for God such as the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers. Contending that instead

19. Luther also had a high regard for other forms of prose such as, for instance, Cato's Distichs (Springer 2007:32, fn. 21).

20. A number of scholars refer to an edition of Luther's corrected versions of Aesop's fables, deposited in the Vatican Archives, catalogue number Codex Ottobanius/Ottobanianus lat. 3029. As thorough an internet search as I could do, I could not confirm these claims as of 17–06–2–2022 beyond mere catalogue number.

21. Which Luther termed *theologia gloriae*, as opposed to the Lutheran Reformation's theologia crucis.

22. Clark (1914:58) shows that Luther's third fable *Frosch und Maus*, reveals not only familiarity with Steinhöwel's collection printed in Ulm (1476–1480), but also with the song of Hans Sachs (1494–1576) written in 1520 and revised two years before Luther's Coburg version.

23. Melanchthon also recommended Avianus' fables in Latin, most of which found their origin in Brabius' collection in Greek (cf. Carnes 1984). He also published a Latin translation of Euripides tragedies.

24. Its essential value was in the sense of a trope or extended metaphor (Garrod 2013:267 fn. 33).

25. Extending the principle of *Docendi sunt Christiani* [Christians must be taught] to the kitchen table.

26. Thomas Newbigging (2018:24) says: 'to condemn fables in general on this account is surely the height of unreason'.

27. 22 000 verses comprising of 400 fables of Aesop, as well as other topics common to social conversation. See also Luther's influence on Hans Sachs, 'the most prolific poet of the Reformation period' (Springer 2011:189).

28. Compare 1911 Encyclopaedia Britannica/Alberus, Erasmuis.

29. μύθος is generally translated as *myth* or *tale*, but with the undertone of *fable* or the fabulous so common of *invented stories*. See Luther (1905:68, vol. 8) and 1 Timothy 1:4; 4:7.

30. Calvin's commentary on Seneca's *De clementia* must also be remembered when judging comments about his view of the classics.

of obscuring God's glory, it should illuminate it (Calvin 1961:56 Book I.V.4). Fables essentially were empty of doctrine, as there was no criterion for establishing truth other than an interpretation of nature (Garrod 2013:380).

Springer (2011:190) mentions that, by 1663, despite Lübeck's opposition, the Lutheran precedents for the continued use of fables were set up in pastoral ministry by both Luther and his son, John, as well as Melanchthon.

Another famous but later generation reformation preacher was Theodore Beza's protégé, Simon Goulart (1543–1628). His idea of fable was that 'the problem of idolatry lay primarily in the making of fables, this messy concealment of truth' (Garrod 2013:365). Nevertheless, he did attempt to present hidden natural-philosophical knowledge latent in fables, seeking to apply 'this invention of ancient times to the true labyrinth of the human mind, that is, the enquiry into things which are infinitely beyond its ken' (Garrod 2013:366, 380 cf., fn. 82).

Althaus (1966) insightfully juxtaposes the theological environments of both the Wittenberg theology and the reformed theology of a Calvinistic nature. He contends that Calvinistic theology was more inclined towards establishing a theocratic environment for its religion. Lutheran theology, on the other hand, emphasised the gospel per se and not the Law. For that reason, it brought about a positive response in that there was room to evidence the fruit of the gospel's faith. This was a praxis not exclusive to the church. The obvious differences between the two theologies related to degrees of emphasis without slipping into a form of antinomianism[31] (Althaus 1966:43–45, cf. 9, 27). It seems fair to surmise that the Wittenberg approach to theology allowed for latitude when it came to gospel concerns beyond immediate believers through expressing concerns for the community at large. In the words of Althaus (1966:40), 'It is not the case that we simply live and act as new creatures, rather, we are constantly called anew into this newness'. This is evidenced in Luther's concern to minister an awareness of the benefits of the gospel into community, without encroaching into social and secular or worldly ideals (Springer 2011:113).

It was within these opposing environments that Luther embarked on his favourable employment of Aesop's fables. A fable is more than its prose, or the concluding transition from common oral discourse (including poetry) to written form in the philosophic tradition[32] (Kurke 2006:6). It became a tradition that seeped its way into all levels of society. Aesop dealt with pre-philosophical Sophia epigrammatic wisdom tradition, which eventually took the form of an imaginative mimetic,[33] popularly expressed in the form of impersonation.

31. Althaus (1966:45) explores these tensions and rejects the *tertius usus legis* as a third function of the law.

32. Grey and Paige (2016:1) show that popular tales may be variously employed. For instance, 'Since the twelfth century, the owl and the nightingale have debated the merits of high and low art, religious themes, social forms, poetic diction and more.' Employed by them to Wagner's *Die Meistersinger*.

33. Newigging (2018:11 f.) develops this observation suggesting 'that nothing is truer than a good fable'.

More recently, the concept of fable as literary instrument has been widened to include most literary genres. The reason being that a fable is often included for associative illustrative and didactic purposes.

While this article deals mainly with fables, it is noteworthy that the Cato was also an important tool during the medieval period and was adopted by the Wittenberg reformers. The *Catonis Disticha*[34] was probably composed or complied in 300–400 AD. Erasmus edited the text, and his *scholia perbrevia* and other medieval engagements Christianised the text.

A selection of Luther's use of fables

Fables are 'born of human understanding and reason … the devil's bride' (Luther 1905:70, vol. 8). From Luther's preface, he viewed the reformation not only impacting the church and higher levels of society and universities, but also the common people (Springer 2011:96). For that reason, he carefully selected fables. Even though they needed to be used with caution, did not deny their usefulness as will be evident in the following:

- Sample references in the *Colloquia Mensalia*/*Tischreden*/ Table Talk 1997/Martin Luther's 'Divine Discourses'.[35]

Of God's Word (Luther 1997:34, VII): Erroneous theology categorised: Luther is equally disparaging of the value of Bonaventure's relation of the will and understanding as he is of the *Mystica Theologia Dionysii* and of the valueless of Plato's fables. The former Luther calls 'idle fantasy' and the latter 'mere fable and a lie'. Conversely those who, for instance, reject the doctrine of the Trinity, classify it as 'fiction and fable'. On the other hand, Luther calls papal claims to riches and lands as having originated from Constantine the Emperor to the church, 'a mere fable'. Wealth was indeed entrusted to the bishops, but for distribution to the poor, and history has no record of land endowments (Luther 1997:268, CCCCL). He similarly derides papal claims of pardons for remission of sins as 'mere fables and fictions' (1997:276, CCCCLXIX).

Of God's Word (Luther 2014:39, XVII): The use of a fable is to demonstrate an Epicurean life view held to by a wealthy Misnian, disparaging of the benefits of spiritual gains compared to those he enjoys from his wealth. Luther illustrates this relating the fable of the Lion, who invites all the beasts to his fine feast. Notwithstanding the delicacies on offer, the swine asks for grain. He uses the fable to bring across a reaction to the gospel by those who reject the gospel.

Of the patriarchs and prophets (Luther 1997:312–313, DXLVII): The biblical account of Jonah would have stretched even the credibility of fable 'if it were not in the Bible'. This account of

34. Let me give one example of a distich: Book 1, 34: *Vincere cum possis, interdum cede sodali*; *Obsequio quoniam dulces retinentur amici*. [When you can win, sometimes yield to a member. You will reap benefit.].

35. Compare Luther (1997; 2014). I refer as follows to enable a reader keen to follow up on the references, a quick and straightforward way to immediately have access to the quote(s).

Jonah supersedes the passage through the Red Sea. It is nothing but a miracle illustrative of mystery.

Of the devil and his works (Luther 1997:323, DLXXI): A mark of the devil, among others, is holding that God's Word is a fable.

Of offences (Luther 1997:374, DCLXXXIX): In dealing with the armour of God and the application of the shield of faith, Luther is not loathe to illustrate the shield's use to the fable of the Gorgon's head held up by Perseus facing his enemies.

Of astronomy and astrology (Luther 1997:450–452, DCCXCVIII): Rejecting reliance upon astrology and its so-called influences, held to even by Philip Melanchthon, Luther challenges the fabulist nature of such assertions by tasking them to explain the diversities of the twins, Esau and Jacob, 'born together, of one father and one mother, at one time, and under equal planets, yet they were wholly of contrary natures, kinds, and minds'.

Of the Jews (Luther 1997:480-481, DCCCXIX): While Jewish stories about the stone around King Og's neck is equated to a fable, the story must not be dismissed. It may contain a hidden moral because of the high regard Luther had for Jewish scholars.

Some sample references in Luther's sermons

Use of the term: *fable*

The following will show that Luther did not have some idealistic views regarding fabula. In his opinion, this did not influence their usefulness. On the other hand, resort by preachers and teachers of theology to imaginative construction of scriptural interpretations, was firmly rejected and, in turn, often termed *fable*. Sometimes he would emphasise the deviation by adding '… and dreams/lies/human doctrines/old women's tales/and fiction, etc.' (Luther 1905:53, 321, vol. 1:113, vol. 6:131, vol. 7:10, vol. 8).

Luther (1905:13, vol. 1), writing to Frederick, the elector (03 March 1521), admits his engagement with 'quarrelsome, sharp, and entangled writings', but taking the elector's counsel will occupy himself with translating the Psalter. Cleary establishing his priority, because people must have access to the true gospel and not in the first instance to fables and dreams, human filth (Luther 1905:15 vol. 1; cf. Smith 1913:480). Similarly, in his sermon (Mt 21:1–9) he regards spurious interpretations of whether Jesus' rode upon both the colt and ass into Jerusalem (v. 7), as 'fables and dreams' (Luther 1905:53, vol. 1). He considers any importation of adding to the interpretation of the Scripture as fable and seeks to 'abide by the simple teaching and meaning of Christ' (Luther 1905:85, vol. 2). This is clearly illustrated by his dealing with concerns about the rosary of Mary (Luther 1905:46, vol. 3). These are indicative of the additions made by the pope, bishop, priest and monk of fables and human doctrines. But Luther was not the only one to caution others. Erasmus in a conciliatory letter to Justus Jonas after the incident at Worms, on 10 May 1521, suggests that Luther 'should have foreseen what would happen … lest he should have the same fate as the goat in the fable'[36] (Smith 1913:566; Rummel 2008).

The basic context of using the term *fable* seems to be determined by its understanding from 2 Timothy 4:4, viz.: 'They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths/fables'. Luther understood the term to mean 'the teachings of men, that rule in our hearts', which cause believing a lie and result in being disobedient to the truth (Luther 1905:93 vol. 2; cf. 214, 231, 334 etc., vol. 4).

Some of Luther's references to fables in sermons

To illustrate the coldness and heartlessness of those who wish misfortune on others and enjoy its evidence, Luther resorts to referring to the salamander.[37] Pliny the Elder (1938: Book xxix: 232– 233) reputedly cast one into the fire to see if it would survive, and he supports Aristotle's claims that it could survive fire. Despite its succumbing to the flames, it was mythologised and traditionally portrayed as being so cold it can survive fire and is used illustratively to reflect a cold heart. Luther (1905:83; vol. 3) similarly used the salamander to illustrate those who benefit from the misfortune of others. Clearly the audience was familiar with stories associated with the salamander.

Luther (1905:334; vol. 4) also counsels his congregation regarding various fables. At times he encourages them to be discerning in the light of 2 Timothy 4:3. To discern preachers and teachers who cunningly use fables in their teaching to please guilty ears, and who in fact 'are rogues and apostles of the devil' and lead into sectarianism. As early as 1519 in a letter to Spalatin, Luther writes: 'I believe that I could succour the priests and monks, so that they might cut off and reject those dirty fables of sermon-writers, which rather proscribe than describe Christ' (Smith 1913:228). At times, Luther was aware that the Bible claims the certainty of truths so lofty and beyond the fabula. This is illustrated in his preaching on the 20th Sunday after Trinity, Matthew 22:1–14. In this preaching, the text suggests 'that God becomes man's bridegroom', a concept which begs full comprehension by a sinful man, except 'that God desires it to be so' (Luther 1905:214, vol. 5). No fable or philosophical reasoning can twist the Scripture to claim that a sinner is justified before God (Luther 1905:68, vol. 8). Whereas fables take people's minds captive and cloud them so that they are unable to discern truth from falsehood (Luther 1905:69, vol. 8).

Luther also saw the reason for false worship and fables when the clergy (Neh 13:10) were forced to return to the land from captivity to eke out an existence but found that false worship based on fables was lucrative enough to secure a comfortable

36. Probably insinuating the moral, to look before you leap. Erasmus had already engaged with 'fool's literature', the Moriae Encomium 1509 (Potgieter 2015).

37. The ésian meaning of salamander is 'fire within'. It is also likened to the Phoenix. The amphibian is not an unfamiliar inclusion in present day firefighter logos.

living (Luther 1905:74, vol. 7). Not only does he warn of questionable sermonising, but also of 'foolish talking' (Luther 1905:131, vol. 7). Fables are not the only medium of twisting the truth of God's Word; so are popular tales, poems, and songs. Even within the congregation, before and after a sermon, people 'soon pass to frivolous, wanton, foolish talk, resulting in a waste of time and the neglect of better things'. More contemporary of the times, Luther states that the divine counsel of God reveals that, whatever knowledge of God exists among the Turks and the heathen, 'excepting what is manifestly fable and fiction – came from the Scriptures', in addition to be authenticated by divine miracles (Luther 1905:10).

In his sermon on the 20th Sunday after Trinity, Ephesians 5:15–21 explains the theme of the careful walking of the Christian. Developing the theme of redeeming the time, Luther illustrates the point he is driving home through recounting the fable of the cricket or grasshopper and the ants. The grasshopper's request to share in the ant's store of food', was met with the question:

> 'What did you [do] in the summertime that you gathered nothing?', asked the ants.
>
> 'We sang,' the grasshoppers replied.
>
> 'If you sang in the summer, you must dance for it in the winter,' was the response.
>
> 'Similarly, should fools unwilling to learn the will of God, be answered'[38] (Luther 1905:274).

The impact of fables within a reformational context

While Luther's endorsement of fables and Melachthon's development of its medieval pedagogical use pushed its use to the forefront of reformational expansion, this influence was significant in the Lutheran version of the Reformation in Sweden (Zillén 2008/2009:203).[39] Aesopic fabula[40] became Lutheranised, or put differently, became an acceptable tool in Sweden for teaching classical languages during the 16th and early 17th centuries. At the same time, the Aesopic in general served to instruct people in the vernacular, in terms of morality and religious education (Zillén 2008/2009:201). Zillén maintains that Aesop's fables, rather than taking on a central role in Lutheran confessionalisation in Sweden, would be more 'reasonable to maintain that Lutheran confessionalisation played a central role in a most formative phase of Swedish fable history' (Zillé 2008/2009:217).

But this history of Lutheranism in Sweden must be tempered when viewing the wider reformation, and the context of renaissance humanism and scholasticism. The latter had its established forms of orthodox argument, meeting the most popular questions. While the influence of the former waned many humanist scholars, became theologising humanists at the expense of Luther's demand that the Bible be prioritised over humanist agendas and scholarship.[41]

The impact of the fable in the present times

A colloquium at the Université Bordeaux Montaigne in 2015, extended the term *fable* to include 'from the animal fables of Aesop to myths, parables, emblems, apologues, fantasies, *somnia*, and fiction generally, with frequent slippage between them' (Regier 2019:266, [*italics in the original*]).

Cooper (1955:143) laments the fate that Aesop's fables had the misfortune to become a children's classic, and therefore are seldom read by adults. This is sad, because Cooper is very much in favour of a wider readership who, with maturity, can discern the consequences of fatalism[42] so often evident in the fables as opposed to optimistic social theorists, continually advocating change (1955:146–147). Baker (1969:558) is, however, of the opinion that it is not only the portrayal of Aesop as an ugly looking man, but also because the present readership 'is too snobbish to take much pleasure in the fables'. These result in the fact that the moral implications in modern publications of the fables are missing, possibly because the ancient favouring of dilemmas is now neglected in favour of a present favouring of immediate answers and tolerance (Baker 1969:590).

A contemporary scholar has tried to establish links associating Aesop's fable and Mark's Gospel. Watson (2010) tries to compare the approaches and treatments of values in upper societal classes. While Aesop's social commentary makes a parody of their values without the anticipation of real reform (Watson 2010:714), Mark demands revisiting the same social values in the light of Jesus' conversations. Mark's ethical thrust assumes 'to reject Jesus, … (is) to reject God' (Watson 2010:716).

A well-known fable, which is not exclusively viewed as children's literature, is for instance George Orwell's *Animal Farm* of 1945, allegorising Stalinist Russia.[43] But it is to Walt Disney that Pérez Perozo (1946:367) pays the highest tribute: 'Walt Disney is quite definitely a fabulist as Aesop.'

Brief observations in conclusion

Fable and reformed congregation

From a reformational perspective with the emphasis on doctrine and doctrinal documents such as the creeds, confessions of faith and catechisms, there is no doubt that fables, and elaborate illustrations, for that matter, feature

38. Luther quotes Proverbs 1:24, 26 to drive home the solemnity of the point made (Luther 1905:274, vol. 8).

39. Zillén does not mention the impact of distiches.

40. 'No collection of Aesop's fables in the Swedish vernacular appeared before 1600' (Zillén 2008/2009:211).

41. Compare Rummel (1995; 2008) for a brief overview of how the Reformation negotiated between scholasticism and humanism, and the changing curricula. Humanism was the valid model proposed for all studies, as opposed to claims for biblical authority for the same.

42. This is not the only Aesopian view, as 'the fabulist was no maker of systems' (Cooper 1955:147).

43. See Pérez Perozo (1946) for a resume of fable and its application, and for more contemporary analysis, see Steiner (2012).

sparingly when it comes to reformed preaching and congregational teaching. A likely reason is possibly the centredness of pulpit teaching and liturgy, reaching mainly adult audiences. Children are catechised, confirmed in their faith in Jesus Christ, and expected to attend Sunday services with invitations to join peer groups during the week. While commendable, this format also suggests a measure of didactic poverty and insularity.

This, I interpret as basically ignoring Wittenberg's wholehearted attempts to reach the wider community with the claims of Christ. A fresh look at and appreciation of Luther's concerns for children and the community, should awaken or, at least, prod the church's gospel concerns. To that end, the Aesopic might well be considered as a useful rhetoric, but also with an eye on the experiential. This is an instrument,[44] thoughtfully employed, aiding to raise community into gospel awareness about moral matters. Not simply among members of the congregation, young and old, but allow for stimulating conversation beyond the church into community. Efforts of this nature allows for the possibility of creating new fables, beyond the scope of familiar urban legends,[45] most of which seem designed to tingle the spine, promote paranormal beliefs and behaviour of questionable morality.

It seems to me that the use of the fabula as instrument should consider Aesop's use, which served to influence Martin Luther to consider addressing community mores and values. To that end, I make two observations:

- Aesop's employment of fable: He deals with a complex situation by relating a fable without identifying and so embarrassing anyone present. The mimetic sense of the fable in its use of familiar characters, seems to be sufficient to engage the imagination of the audience, assumed intelligent enough to put two and two together. Luther's intended employment of fables in the community: Luther chose fables identified to address morality within the community.
- Aesop's employment of fable: After telling the fable, Aesop allows for its message to generate a response. That completes the fable. Reaching beyond the story or narrative is important. Luther's intended employment of fables in the community: Luther saw fables as reaching beyond immediate congregational influence, as it was a familiar topic of daily community conversation, and partly served as its subjective valuation of a matter. To that end, Luther valued fables for promoting clear biblical principles pertaining to morality.

While fully understanding that present-day fabula is basically absent from community conversation, within the church and without, nevertheless no lesser figure than the instigator of the Reformation, saw its usefulness. To that end, I would suggest that congregations seeking to reach beyond its own societal boundaries into the community, consider fables as a possible instrument to influence morality. This could be considered as one instrument, among others, by the congregation's missional committee and clergy. Such a workshop could also explore, creating its own fable to address an issue of morality within their own community context. Let me give an example from my own university context to show commitment to the task at hand and the deviousness of subtle temptation.

The owl and the pigeon[46]

An owl landed on a branch close to where a pigeon was nesting. Her chicks were protectively covered by her wings. The owl looked uninterested, minding its own business. After some time, the pigeon spoke. 'Where did you come from?', she asked. It took some time before the owl answered. 'I saw a feast but sadly not for me,' he replied, not looking at the pigeon. 'A feast,' the pigeon exclaimed. Again, the owl took some time before responding. 'The farmer tripped on the way to the coop and spilled a bucket of seeds. Much of it is still lying there. A feast indeed.' The Pigeon blinked firstly the one eye and then the other. 'Are you not hungry? Why do you not go and join the feast', asked the owl. 'But my chicks?' The owl considered her dilemma, then nodded wisely. 'Let me not outstay my welcome.' With that he flew off. Pigeon watched his departure with some pleasure. Ensuring that her chicks were well nestled in the safety of the nest, she then flew to enjoy the feast waiting for her. There was food indeed. But other birds had the same idea and there was very little seed left for her. When she returned to her tree and nest, she discovered her chicks had served the owl in her absence.

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44. Styles may vary, and whether it is prose or poem, usually is reflective of their context. 'In Phaedrus, you have the severity and elegance of Roman taste; in Lafontaine, the gaiety natural to French vivacity' (Boothby 1809:vi).

45. An internet search will reveal the extent of urban legends.

46. Copyright of this fable vests in Raymond Potgieter, author of this article.

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The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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