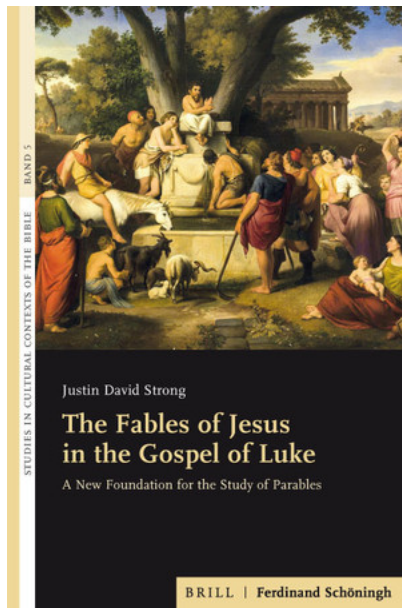


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Justin David Strong

The Fables of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke: A New Foundation for the Study of Parables

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With this PhD thesis (Notre Dame, 2019) handsomely adapted for publication, Justin Strong has put on our tables not only a solid and richly documented study but also the ambitious claim, as bold as it is simple, to provide “a new foundation” for the study of parables, in particular those of Jesus. We want to know whether this claim holds water. The volume is in two “books” whose headings, with similar simplicity, reiterate the two-fold book title in reverse order. Thus book 1, “A New Foundation for the Study of Parables,” offers a wide-ranging presentation of the appropriate ancient genre—not of parables, but of fables. The book’s claim is that proper study of parables is possible only if we recognize that they are nothing but fables. This is demonstrated in book 2, “The Fables in the Gospel of Luke.” Luke’s Gospel is long known and beloved for its “parables” (quotation marks are inevitable at times), and Strong maintains that this quality is most convincingly felt once we read them as what they are, fables. I avow that, working my way through the volume, a real sense of discovery arose when reaching chapters 10 and 11 and witnessing how samples of Luke’s “parables” are convincingly read the way ancient fables want to be read. At least at that anecdotic level, the book’s claim stands.

All along, though, the question keeps lingering whether such an anthology of Jesus’s didactic narratives read as fables would smell as sweet if we just kept calling them “parables.” The

subtle wordplay in the book's title suggests Strong's awareness that the name is subsidiary to the matter, but his book's overall rhetoric bears out that the actual *status questionis* in parable study absolutely requires that we call them "fables" and study them as such. As chapter 1 (introduction) states, parables are generally thought to be characteristic of Jesus, having come out of the blue without any contemporaneous analogies. Even if the numerous parables in rabbinic literature are seen as closely related, their much later date does not help to explain those of Jesus. While seemingly taking this assessment for granted, Strong stresses that, once we recognize Jesus's parables and especially those in Luke as fables, the analogies are overwhelming. To put it simply—which is, once again, what this voluminous study basically aims at—the Lukan "parables" are perfectly understood alongside the ancient fable collections.

Chapter 1 continues with a quick review of the thriving trade of modern parable study. Its pioneer, Adolf Jülicher, did present Jesus's parables as being closely related to fables, thus steering clear of their traditional allegorizing interpretation and stressing that they have just one point of comparison. However, he considered Jesus's "fables" noble and superior as compared with the vulgarity and burlesque of many fables. His approach was further developed by C. H. Dodd, who stressed the eschatological edge of the "single point of comparison," and by Joachim Jeremias, who approached the parables as the *ipsissima vox* of the historical Jesus. As in the meantime modern fable study got under way, only two parable scholars kept drawing analogies with fables. Mary Ann Beavis's article (*CBQ* 52 [1990]: 473–98) is "the most significant treatment" of this relationship but offers little elaboration, while David Flusser's *Die rabbinischen Gleichnisse und der Gleichniserzähler Jesus* (1981) presents "the most significant interaction with the ancient fable." Flusser presupposed that Jesus's parables are fundamentally related to those of the rabbis and even was "defensive" about this (15 n. 40). Furthermore, basing himself on Lessing's narrow fable theory, Flusser did little in terms of actual comparison with fables. Thus time was ripe for "a monograph-length study comparing the parable to the fable" (19).

The subsequent chapters of book 1 fill the reader in about fable study (the table of contents plus some chapters appear at www.schoeningh.de). Some demythologization is needed: fables are not merely children's literature; they were also told by Jews; and their characters include not just talking animals but also humans and gods. Furthermore, scholars such as Perry, Adrados, and Chambry have made the preserved collections available (ch. 2). Also, the fable originated in the ancient Near East; it arrived in the Greek world during the archaic period; and, having earned its place in rhetoric and education in the classical period, it began to be collected in Hellenistic times. As to these origins, more could have been made of the little-known Aramaic fables and the story of Ahikar; the reader only gets lengthy quotes of well-known Old Testament fables (ch. 3). Nevertheless, Strong's genealogical sketch underlines what Perry called the "Greco-Semitic" background of the

genre (31, 535). Chapter 4 carries on with an instructive description of the fable collections from “the days of Jesus and the Gospels,” Babrius (possibly of Semitic background), Phaedrus, and the Augustana, as well as the Life of Aesop.

The important chapter 5 describes the place of fables in Greco-Roman education. Following the ancient handbooks, we are informed about the available school systems and the role of fables at the various levels, especially the highest, the *progymnasmata* that prepared for public offices. Among the learning aims was the ability to deal with the *chreia*, a briefly narrated personal event, using it to introduce a fable, as well as with *promythium* and *epimythium*, the “title” and “moral” of fables. Another lesson was how to expand or contract a fable by adding or removing details or direct speech and soliloquy. By acquiring familiarity with these literary techniques, pupils learned to incorporate fables into their narrative or oratory—a technique a later chapter detects in Luke’s Gospel. The *promythium*, and even more so the *epimythium*, are dynamic elements, and fables can never be said to have “only one point of comparison.” The chapter also discusses definitions of fable (“a fictitious story picturing truth,” a definition that easily holds for Jesus’s parables) and terminology such as Greek *ainos*, *logos*, and *mythos*, which equal Latin *fabula* and *fabella* and mean—fable.

Chapter 6 confronts the readers with “the fables of the rabbis,” amazingly so for those who thought those ancient sages only told parables. Although few actual fables are preserved in rabbinic literature, Strong manages to mention prominent rabbis in five generations of Tannaim who were reputed as fable tellers: Yohanan ben Zakkai, YOSHUA ben Hananiah, Meir, Akiva and Bar Kappara. Especially the stories about this last rabbi strike one for the “Aesopic” persona he enacts while outwitting the pompous Rabbi Yehuda the Patriarch (ca. 200 CE) by telling his subversive fables. Strong discerns similar Aesopic features in the fable teller Jesus, especially seen in the “fable” of the wicked tenants (283–89, Luke 20:9–19). Recalling his evaluation of Flusser’s theory, this revives one’s curiosity about the possible relationship between Jesus and the rabbis and their fables or parables. Here, however, the reader is kept in the dark: “To say from the outset, my goal is not to offer any reconstruction of the historical Jesus.” There is also a milder version. Given such earlier reconstructions as Jesus the miracle worker, the Cynic, or the marginal Jew and the availability of “compelling vignettes of historical figures using the fable genre,” “We have yet to see a portrait of the historical Jesus as a fable teller” (256, 534).

Chapter 7 winds up book 1 and discusses the main terminological problem. Aristotle defined *parabolē* in the narrow sense of “comparison,” but the word is used in the Synoptics to mean anything from proverb, maxim, simile, or riddle to, indeed, “parable” or fable, paralleling the latitude of Hebrew *mashal* and its Septuagint rendering *parabolē*. Starting from Aristototele, Jülicher and those following him concluded that Jesus’s didactic narratives

are not *parabolai* but, reverting to the other category Aristotle mentioned, *logoi*, that is, fables. We already have questioned what particularly “is in” those names. Also, one wonders what would be the most adequate terminology for this Greco-Semitic genre. Indeed, citing Perry, Strong concludes, “the Semitic context is useful,” given the fuzzy boundaries and the ability of *mashal/matla* to fold from a fable into a proverb and vice versa. This recalls the *progymnasmata*’s lessons in contracting and expanding fables. Indeed, the genre seems to require an elastic approach in terms of terminology, whether we opt for fable, parable, or *mashal* as the chief concept. As already observed, given the argument of Strong’s study, it is fable.

Book 2 then immerses the reader in the study of “parables” as fables, starting with another glimpse of research history. “Before We Forgot Our Fables” (the heading of chapter 8), the remarkable fact is that pre-Jülicher scholars were well aware of the close relationship between parables and fables. Some nevertheless, like Jülicher, insisted on the superior spiritual value of “parables,” but still earlier scholars (whose academic Latin is no impediment for Strong any more than Jülicher’s German or Nøjgaard’s French) did fully recognize them as fables. Especially Hugo Grotius, aware of the elasticity of Hebrew *mashal* as contrasted with the fixity of Greek terminology, observed that the evangelists were less punctilious, calling Christ’s *ainous* (fables) either *paroimias* (proverbs, John) or *parabolas* (the Synoptics). Interesting are still earlier authors writing in languages that use the same word for fable and parable, such as Icelandic (the *daemisogur* of Jesus and Aesop) or Hebrew (the *meshalim* of Aesop, Berekhia ha-Nakdan, ca. 1300 CE).

I am running out of space and must break off this résumé. The book is very well written, brimming with exhilarating *Entdeckerfreude* and featuring such imaginative phrases as “gerrymandering the parable around the fable.” From chapter 9 on, the reader is progressively introduced to the world of Luke’s fables, as I said a potentially revelatory experience that I gladly leave for other readers to make. In the joy of discovery, meanwhile, sometimes tensions or contradictions remain unresolved. Strong, aware of Luke’s stylistic versatility, also emphasizes his familiarity with fables and proficiency in handling their literary attributes. One striking exhibit is the iambic trimeter he put in the mouth of the resurrected Jesus that is otherwise known only from two Aesopic fables, with verbal similarities: “O foolish ones and slow in heart” (Luke 24:25, 248–49 and elsewhere). Conversely, Strong launches the interesting thesis that Luke disposed of a collection of Jesus’s fables and inserted them most densely in the central section (9:51–19:27), which stand out from other Synoptic fables, for example, by the use of direct speech and soliloquy. However, a range of other literary features is taken to show that Luke did not create them but copied them wholesale from his fable collection. One is left wondering why Luke, who avows owning other gospel accounts, could not in fact have composed also those fables or

stylized them to stand out from their narrative context. Can we gerrymander the “Lukan fable collection” around Ockham’s razor?

Other unanswered questions concern the historical Jesus and the “historical rabbis.” Parables, to use the term naively for a bit, are attributed to Jesus from Mark’s Gospel on without Luke’s literary subtlety interfering, which begs the question as to the relation between Greco-Roman educational culture and the Jewish milieu of Jesus as represented by the Synoptic tradition. Furthermore, given that the Jewish Jesus used parables in his teaching just as did the rabbis, historical links seem obvious and deserve ongoing investigation—certainly so in view of the “fabulous” dossier Justin Strong has deposited on our tables. Among further questions that need to be addressed is the one about the allusions to the Jewish scriptures in the parables of Jesus and the rabbis, respectively. Such questions were raised by Flusser and are now ripe for more pervasive investigation on the basis of Strong’s impressive work.