

THE POWER OF THE STORYTELLER: JESUS AND AESOP

C.M. Alvarez on Tales That Changed the
World

“Tell me a story.” This is a phrase every parent hears at one time or another. From our earliest days of understanding, before we learn to read or write, to reason or persuade, we want to hear a story. This innate desire is a foundational element of the way we interact as human beings, as societies, and in the cultures we create.¹ The stories we tell are not only about the tales themselves, but show us who we are and our understanding of the nature of reality. A story crafts an image of what is not, but yet what could or should be. Stories may have fantastical or mundane elements, but they have power to capture

¹ Donald T. Williams, “Matrix of Meaning: Five Theses on Christianity and Culture,” *An Unexpected Journal: Image Bearers* 4, no. 1. (Spring 2021), 27. In his theses on culture, Williams illustrates that culture itself “flows from the dynamic influence of human creativity.

the imagination, make inroads to the heart, and turn the rudder of reason and behavior. In this way, an effective storyteller can spark movements, overturn governments, and change the world. We will look at two great storytellers, Aesop the Greek slave and Jesus the Jewish Messiah, and the way their stories impacted the cultures around them and changed the world.

Fables vs Parables

Aesop was a Greek slave from Samos who lived in the sixth century before Christ.² He is known as the author of a wide range of fables, but as British author G.K. Chesterton, who wrote an introduction to a collection of Aesop's fables, noted, it is more likely that Aesop himself was a collector of these tales, such as the Brothers Grimm who later collected fairy tales, rather than the originator of the stories himself.³ Regardless of the origins of the stories that Aesop told, there is no question that he told them in a way that these tales became his own.

² Mary Ann Beavis, "Parable and Fable," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 52, no. 3 (1990) 476.

³ Aesop, *Aesop's Fables: A New Translation*, trans. V.S. Vernon Jones (New York, NY: Avenel Books, 1912).
<https://gutenberg.org/files/11339/11339-h/11339-h.htm>

A fable is a short story that illustrates a truth, a virtue, or an object lesson in some way. The other distinguishing characteristic of this type of story is that a fable involves animals. A human being may play a role in the fable, as we will see in “The Fisherman Piping,” but the fable centers around the animal. The defining characteristic of the animal in the story is key to the object lesson. For example, in Aesop’s fable, “The Crab and His Mother,” the sideways skittering of the crab makes the point.

An Old Crab said to her son, "Why do you walk sideways like that, my son? You ought to walk straight." The Young Crab replied, "Show me how, dear mother, and I'll follow your example." The Old Crab tried, but tried in vain, and then saw how foolish she had been to find fault with her child.

Example is better than precept.⁴

In this short sketch, Aesop highlights that as we might say today, a person cannot “rise above their raising” unless they are shown how it is done.

In contrast, a parable is also a short story with an object lesson, but while both forms are about objective truth, the fable is impersonal and

⁴ Aesop, Aesop’s Fables.

dispassionate while the parable, even when using an inanimate object as an illustration, goes to the heart of the connection of God and man. As Chesterton observed, Aesop understood that

[In a fable,] all the persons must be impersonal. They must be like abstractions in algebra, or like pieces in chess. The lion must always be stronger than the wolf, just as four is always double of two. The fox in a fable must move crooked, as the knight in chess must move crooked. The sheep in a fable must march on, as the pawn in chess must march on. The fable must not allow for the crooked captures of the pawn; it must not allow for what Balzac called "the revolt of a sheep."⁵

In contrast, Jesus's parables are not just about truth but about showing the way of salvation. The parables recorded in Matthew's Gospel are often introduced with the phrase "the kingdom of heaven is like . . ." Some of Jesus's parables do have fabulist features, for example, in the parables about the sheep and the shepherd, and the wolves among the sheep; the sheep are the faithful who follow the master and the wolves are understood to be

⁵ G.K. Chesterton, "Preface" in *Aesop's Fables: A New Translation*, trans. V.S. Vernon Jones (New York, NY: Avenel Books, 1912).
<https://gutenberg.org/files/11339/11339-h/11339-h.htm>

ravenous and destructive. It would make no sense at all to use a dog or a goat in the role of the wolfish believers who should be sheep but aren't.

Another difference between Aesop's fables and Jesus's parables is that the first are observations of what is while the latter are more myth, and as a result, an image of not only what *could* be but ultimately what *will* be.⁶ For example, Aesop's "The Wolf and the Lamb" is a commentary on the rich and powerful justifying their oppression and exploitation of the weak.

A Wolf came upon a Lamb straying from the flock, and felt some compunction about taking the life of so helpless a creature without some plausible excuse; so he cast about for a grievance and said at last,

"Last year, sirrah, you grossly insulted me."

⁶ C.S. Lewis, "Myth Became Fact," in *God in the Dock*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970), 56-58. In his essay, "Myth Became Fact," Lewis describes 'myth' as more than a story or even idea, but a portrayal of truth and beyond that reality. Myth is that which "abides" when all other ideas and fads fade away. "It is the myth that gives life," it is the "substance." The appeal of the mythic is that "[i]n the enjoyment of a great myth we come nearest to experiencing as a concrete what can otherwise be understood only as an abstraction." (57) Myths allow us to go beyond "knowing, but tasting; but what you were tasting turns out to be a universal principle." (58)

"That is impossible, sir," bleated the Lamb,
"for I wasn't born then."

"Well," retorted the Wolf, "you feed in my
pastures."

"That cannot be," replied the Lamb, "for I
have never yet tasted grass."

"You drink from my spring, then,"
continued the Wolf.

"Indeed, sir," said the poor Lamb, "I have
never yet drunk anything but my
mother's milk."

"Well, anyhow," said the Wolf, "I'm not
going without my dinner": and he sprang
upon the Lamb and devoured it without
more ado.⁷

There is no conviction in the story, no redemption or justice for the lamb. It is simply an observation of the way of the world . . . a wolf's got to do what a wolf's got to do. Edward Clayton commenting on Aesop's fables notes that the powerful doing as they will is a common theme among the fables

. . . collectively they seem to convey clearly
the lesson that the strong rule and the

⁷ Aesop, Aesop's Fables.

weak must obey or suffer, and that ultimately it is strength that matters more than anything else. The weak risk defiance or opposition at their own peril, and no matter how well they might argue or how beautifully they might sing, their lack of power means that they ultimately have very little chance of successfully resisting a stronger adversary—and in the fables strength almost always means physical power.⁸

In contrast, the parables of Jesus set a standard, give a word of warning, and promise a day of judgment. While Aesop's fables may point out flaws and failings, they leave the reader where they are. Jesus's parables provoke a response and prompt action. Jesus gives a warning to those in authority who misuse their position in the Parable of the Unjust Steward.⁹ Those who mistreat the poor and needy are promised eternal judgment in the Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man, and he speaks to all who turn a blind eye to the needs and welfare of others in the Parable of the Good Samaritan.¹⁰ Jesus's thoughts are not ideas or abstractions. They are not

⁸ Edward Clayton, "Aesop, Aristotle, and Animals: The Role of Fables in Human Life," *Humanitas* 21 (2008) 181.

⁹ Luke 16:1-13

¹⁰ Luke 10:25-37

impersonal stories with truth shielded in impersonal portrayals by anthropomorphic animals. Samaritans were a people Jews collectively reviled.¹¹ The tax collectors and religious leaders very often misused their positions to exploit those they had in their charge.¹² More to the point, the man with five brothers who called out to Lazarus from Hell is believed to represent Caiaphas, son-in-law of Annas who had a racket in their control of the Temple sacrificial system.¹³ Jesus got personal.

Jesus's parables give an answer to Cain's question in Genesis 4:9 "Am I my brother's keeper?" Yes, you are. Society may be broken and people cruel, but in the end all will be called to account and there will be justice. Jesus's stories are not just about abstract truth, but Truth Incarnate, about restoring the man to the One whom he images as well as fellowship with his fellow imagers. As C.S. Lewis points out in his essay, "Myth Made Fact," "truth is

¹¹ "Samaritan," *Britannica*, accessed July 10, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Samaritan>.

¹² Joel Allen Troxler, Jr., "Doing Justice to the Unjust Steward: An Exegetical Examination of Luke 16:1-13 and Its Context," 2003, (Doctoral dissertation) accessed July 27, 2020, <https://digital.library.sbts.edu/bitstream/handle/10392/258/3118679.pdf>.

¹³ Julian Spriggs, "Annas Caiaphas," *Julian Spriggs*, accessed July 20, 2020, <https://www.julianspriggs.co.uk/Pages/AnnasCaiaphas>.

always *about* something, but reality is that *about which* truth is.”¹⁴ Aesop’s fables are about truth. Jesus’s parables are about reality.

Imagination Precedes Reason

Aesop the storyteller preceded Socrates, who was considered one of the most influential philosophers of all time. Aesop’s fables presented truth and a standard of virtue outside of human influence or agency. However, as Christos Zafiroopoulos notes in a comparison of Socrates and Aesop, “Aesop is no philosopher. He has no theory, no teaching or method, no propositions to offer to his audience on what the good life consists of. He does not seek to improve his listeners and lead them to the philosophical life or to any higher truth.”¹⁵ In Aesop’s fables, he highlights the corrupt and the weak, but he does not offer, or even imagine, any solution to human failings. People just are who they are. What is unique about Aesop’s fables is that rather than presenting the powerful as a different sort of people that operate by their own set of rules, Aesop holds them to the same standard as everyone

¹⁴ Lewis, “Myth Became Fact,” in *God in the Dock*, 58.

¹⁵ Christos A. Zafiroopoulos, “Socrates and Aesop: A Few Notes on Plato’s Portrait of the Arch-Philosopher,” *Graeco-Latina Brunensia* 16, no. 2 (2011): 203–216.

else. The powerful do not set the rules nor are they exempt from them; there is one objective truth -- what Lewis refers to as the “Tao” and which James tells us is a unitary whole -- and all are subject to it.¹⁶ This idea of transcendent truth moved from illustration in Aesop’s fables to Plato’s theory of Forms mediated through Plato’s account of Socrates’s dialogue in *Phaedo* where Socrates spends his final imprisonment putting Aesop’s fables to verse in honor of Apollo.¹⁷ Socrates’s *Apology* had failed to save him from an unjust judgment, so he is spending the end of his life focusing on beauty and imaginative verse.¹⁸

The idea of truth and virtue outside of human decree, these absolute Forms, can be seen in Aesop’s fables illustrating truth. Aesop’s stories illustrate what he believed: that oppression exists and there was no hope of life being otherwise. However, when

¹⁶ C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2001) 18.

James 2:10

¹⁷ Plato, *Phaedo*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, n.d., <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1658/1658-h/1658-h.htm>.

¹⁸ Leslie Kurke, “Plato, Aesop, and the Beginnings of Mimetic Prose,” *Representations* 94, no. 1 (2006): 7. Kurke notes that the form Plato uses to present the Socratic dialogues in mimetic prose was a “radical” innovation for his time and can be traced back to the influence of Aesop.

the thing is identified, that idea continues to be explored. Plato did not accept the idea of injustice, but reasoned that

Justice is . . . at once a part of human virtue and the bond, which joins man together in society. It is the identical quality that makes good and social. Justice is an order and duty of the parts of the soul, it is to the soul as health is to the body. Plato says [it] is not mere strength, but it is a harmonious strength. Justice is not the right of the stronger but the effective harmony of the whole. All moral conceptions revolve about the good of the whole-individual as well as social.¹⁹

Virtue as a desired and necessary part of human life, both individually and as a society, continued in the work of later philosophers, such as Aristotle who believed that “blessedness,” the fulfillment of human life was not grounded in power or wealth, but in thinking and doing rightly.²⁰

As Chesterton notes, Aesop handed down in a viral way the “plainest truths,” the “tremendous

¹⁹ D.R. Bhandari, “Plato’s Concept Of Justice: An Analysis” (Presented at the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy, Boston University, August 10, 1998), accessed July 10, 2021, <https://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Anci/AnciBhan.htm>.

²⁰ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle*, trans. William David Ross (Pacific Publishing Studio, 2011) 115.

truths that are called truisms.”²¹ These truisms were later developed and incorporated into the framework of Greco-Roman values and society. However, truth and knowledge alone do not provide a solution. Plato did not think a truly virtuous life was possible for embodied humans. Aristotle believed it was possible for only a very few. It was not until the advent of a Jewish storyteller that turned Plato’s Forms and Aesop’s fables on their heads that an example and a way appeared.

Jew vs Greek

The accounts of Jesus’s life in the Gospels and the recording of his teachings are peppered with parables. In fact, Matthew wrote that Jesus “never spoke to them without using such parables.”²² Teaching truth through illustration has a long history throughout the Old Testament; however, Jesus’s method of using his parables is distinctive in the Hebrew form of allegorical stories called *mashal*.²³

²¹ Aesop, Aesop’s Fables.

²² Matthew 13:34.

²³ Carla Alvarez, "What was Tolkien thinking? Live with the author of *Tolkien’s Modern Reading*" *YouTube*, July 20, 2021, interview with Dr. Holly Ordway, 31:02 to 34:51 <https://youtu.be/c1Ow9hWGQko>. Much of the Old Testament, including entire books such as Psalms and Job, incorporates metaphorical imagery to communicate God’s message to his people.

Mashal can be defined, according to David B. Gowler, in regards to the Old Testament as "whatever is 'proverb-like,' with hidden or allusive truth, which means that the response of the reader or hearer is essential to the process of creating understanding."²⁴ Jesus's parables were very Hebraic in the way that they require a response on the part of the hearer, as opposed to Aesop's which are simply observational. However, as Gowler also notes, that while Jesus's parables can be considered a subset of the earlier examples, the *meshalim* of the Old Testament with its symbolic illustrations do not approach the narrative parables that Jesus used.

While the gloss may be Hebraic, the foundational form has more in common with the Greek fables of Aesop. In fact, Jesus incorporates Aesop's stories in a number of his parables. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus draws directly from one of Aesop's fables to make his own point. The phrase, "a

As Dr. Holly Ordway notes in this interview, if one doesn't know how to read literature and understand the message in imagery, the Bible will be next to unintelligible.

²⁴ David B. Gowler, "The Contexts of Jesus' Parables" (Center for Christian Ethics, Taylor University, 2006), 12. accessed July 10, 2021, <https://www.baylor.edu/ifl/christianreflection/ParablesArticleGowler.pdf>.

wolf in sheep's clothing" comes from Aesop's fable of the same name.

A Wolf resolved to disguise himself in order that he might prey upon a flock of sheep without fear of detection. So he clothed himself in a sheepskin, and slipped among the sheep when they were out at pasture. He completely deceived the shepherd, and when the flock was penned for the night he was shut in with the rest. But that very night as it happened, the shepherd, requiring a supply of mutton for the table, laid hands on the Wolf in mistake for a Sheep, and killed him with his knife on the spot.²⁵

The wolf is sly and sneaks in where he does not belong, with the intent to destroy the sheep. The shepherd is fooled, but unwittingly kills the interloper in spite of the wolf's deviousness. The shepherd prevails, but through luck alone. In a series of warnings in Matthew 7, Jesus uses the imagery of Aesop's fable to warn his followers of deceivers who will come, "Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves."²⁶ However, unlike the bemused

²⁵ Aesop, Aesop's Fables.

²⁶ Matthew 7:15.

shepherd in Aesop's tale, those wolves can be identified "by their fruits."²⁷

That the influence of Greek stories found their way into Jesus's parables should not come as a surprise. After all, Jesus was a Jewish man born to a people who had been under Greek rule for over two hundred years.²⁸ Even though the land of his people was then under the power of the Roman Empire during his lifetime, the Hellenistic influence was so strong that Koine Greek was the common language of communication, the Greek Septuagint was widely read and frequently quoted by New Testament authors, and philosophy of the Greeks was so predominant that John opens his Gospel with a reframing of Philo's idea of the *logos* as Christ himself as its Incarnation.

Even in the turning of a fable to a particular purpose, Jesus followed a long tradition. Jesus as God may be beyond time, but as man, he was a man of his time and fully immersed in his culture. Without an understanding of these cultural references, often the point of his parables can be missed. For example,

²⁷ Matthew 7:16.

²⁸ "The Ancient Greeks," *Jewish Virtual Library*, accessed June 30, 2021, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-ancient-greeks-and-the-jews-jewish-virtual-library>.

The Parable of the Dragnet is a retelling of Aesop's fable "The Fisherman Piping."

A Fisherman who could play the flute went down one day to the sea-shore with his nets and his flute; and, taking his stand on a projecting rock, began to play a tune, thinking that the music would bring the fish jumping out of the sea. He went on playing for some time, but not a fish appeared: so at last he threw down his flute and cast his net into the sea, and made a great haul of fish. When they were landed and he saw them leaping about on the shore, he cried, "You rascals! you wouldn't dance when I piped: but now I've stopped, you can do nothing else!"²⁹

However, it is not just Aesop's fable that Jesus draws on in his own parable, but the use of the same fable by Cyrus the Younger. In *The History of Herodotus*, we are told

The Ionians and Aiolians, as soon as the Lydians had been subdued by the Persians, sent messengers to Cyrus at Sardis, desiring to be his subjects on the same terms as they had been subjects of Croesus. And when he heard that which they proposed to him, he spoke to them a fable, saying that a certain player on the

²⁹ Aesop, Aesop's Fables.

pipe saw fishes in the sea and played on his pipe, supposing that they would come out to land; but being deceived in his expectation, he took a casting-net and enclosed a great multitude of the fishes and drew them forth from the water: and when he saw them leaping about, he said to the fishes: "Stop dancing I pray you now, seeing that ye would not come out and dance before when I piped." Cyrus spoke this fable to the Ionians and Aiolians for this reason, because the Ionians had refused to comply before, when Cyrus himself by a messenger requested them to revolt from Croesus, while now when the conquest had been made they were ready to submit to Cyrus. Thus he said to them in anger, and the Ionians, when they heard this answer brought back to their cities, put walls round about them severally, and gathered together to the Panionion, all except the men of Miletos, for with these alone Cyrus had sworn an agreement on the same terms as the Lydians had granted. The rest of the Ionians resolved by common consent to send messengers to Sparta, to ask the Spartans to help the Ionians.³⁰

³⁰ Herodotus, *The History of Herodotus*, trans. G.C. Macaulay (New York, NY: MacMillan and Co., 1890) 1.1.141, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2707/2707-h/2707-h.htm>.

It is this political application that provides the key to understanding Jesus's Parable of the Dragnet.

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a net, that was cast into the sea, and gathered of every kind:

Which, when it was full, they drew to shore, and sat down, and gathered the good into vessels, but cast the bad away.

So shall it be at the end of the world: the angels shall come forth, and sever the wicked from among the just,

And shall cast them into the furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth.³¹

Aesop's fable and the acts of Cyrus represent an illustration and an actuality of persuasion, the ability to choose freely, but in the end all will come. The choice determines if the coming will end in joy or grief. This is the message of the kingdom of heaven. In the parables preceding the Parable of the Dragnet in Matthew 13, Jesus illustrates the great lengths God goes to bring all into the kingdom. In the Parable of the Growing Seed, the message of the Gospel is spread far and wide, but not everyone will

³¹ Matthew 13:47-50 KJV

receive it. In the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares, Jesus warns that some who posture as believers aren't true followers, but that they will be sorted out in the end. The Parable of the Mustard seed is an illustration that the kingdom of God is not like the kingdom of the world and those who seem insignificant in the natural world are the greatest in the spiritual. The Parable of the Yeast illustrates that a little bit can affect the whole. The Parable of the Pearl of Great Price is an illustration of how very precious the individual is to God that he will go to great lengths to redeem us, and the Parable of the Hidden Treasure reminds the Jews that though they are God's "treasured nation," there is also a "hidden treasure," the people that were not formerly called his own that he is seeking out.

Matthew ends his series of parables about the kingdom of heaven with the Parable of the Dragnet as a word of warning, followed by an account of Jesus's rejection by the people at Nazareth. He is calling, playing to the music of our hearts. Will you choose to come?

Jesus vs Aesop

Both Aesop and Jesus were skilled and influential storytellers. Both were believed to be inspired by the gods/God. Both men shaped the

imagination of the people of their time, shifted views, and changed culture for generations following.

However, a story is just a story unless it illustrates a truth that proves. While Aesop highlighted the flaws and missteps of the society around him clearly, presenting the idea that truth and virtue are the same for all rather than a different set of standards for some, he offered no solution and no hope for change. In fact, when his own circumstances changed, he acted in the same way of those that he had condemned while a slave.³² This is why the truth of his stories have remained, but his impact as a person is largely forgotten.

In contrast, Jesus not only told stories that were truth, he was truth in action. He not only lived a life of example that his followers could pattern themselves after, but provided a remedy for the brokenness Aesop bemoaned.

³² Christos A. Zafiroopoulos, "Socrates and Aesop: A Few Notes on Plato's Portrait of the Arch-Philosopher," *Graeco-Latina Brunensia* 16, no. 2 (2011): 207-209. Christos Zafiroopoulos provides a summary of the *Life of Aesop*, Aesop is said to have been a mute blessed by Isis with the gift of speech and ability to compose fables. Aesop uses this gift to speak out against injustice and wickedness; however, his superior ability makes him proud and vicious. His offensiveness causes the Delphians to falsely accuse him and Aesop is unjustly condemned. Aesop commits suicide by throwing himself off a cliff.

A man really ought to say, "The Resurrection happened two thousand years ago in the same spirit in which he says, 'I saw a crocus yesterday.' Because we know what is coming behind the crocus. The spring comes slowly down this way; but the great thing is that the corner has been turned. There is, of course, this difference, that in the natural spring the crocus cannot choose whether it will respond or not. We can. We have the power of either withstanding the spring, and sinking back into the cosmic winter, or of going on into those 'high mid-summer pomps' in which our Leader, the Son of man, already dwells, and to which He is calling us. It remains with us to follow or not, to die in this winter, or to go on into that spring and that summer."³³

Be the fish that comes to the song your Savior sings.

³³ C.S. Lewis, "The Grand Miracle," in *God in the Dock*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970), 85.

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