

from *La Corona*

John Donne (1572–1631)

By miracles exceeding power of man,  
 He faith in some, envy in some begat,  
 For, what weak spirits admire, ambitious hate:  
 In both affections many to Him ran.  
 But O! the worst are most, they will and can,  
 Alas! and do, unto th' Immaculate,  
 Whose creature Fate is, now prescribe a fate,  
 Measuring self-life's infinity to'a span,  
 Nay to an inch. Lo! where condemned He  
 Bears His own cross, with pain, yet by and by  
 When it bears him, He must bear more and die.  
 Now Thou art lifted up, draw me to Thee,  
 And at Thy death giving such liberal dole,  
*Moist with one drop of Thy blood my dry soul.*

## ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

### *In the Nick of Time*

#### The Christian and Fantastic Literature, Part 6: Fantasy and Fable

Kevin T. Bauder

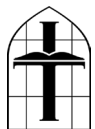
As we have seen, the writers of Scripture had good reason for employing fantastic elements in their prophetic writing. The Bible also includes another kind of literature that uses fantastic elements. This kind of literature is called *fable*. To be clear, the biblical writers do not *tell* fables, but they do *record* fables that are told by characters within the text. In what follows I would like to examine two of these fables.

Before I do, however, I want to distinguish fables from parables. One mark of a fable is that it depicts animals, plants, or even objects that think, speak, and act as if they were persons. In some cases, these creatures possess some other marvelous property, such as the goose that laid the golden eggs. Fables also usually have some moral or allegorical meaning behind them. Thus, the fable of the goose is a warning against greed. The fable of the city mouse and the country mouse teaches that safety is better than extravagance. The fable of the tortoise and the hare teaches that persistence is better than brilliance.

Parables also teach lessons, but they teach these lessons without resorting to fantastic elements. A sower who goes out to sow is nothing special. We are not surprised by the action of leaven in a lump of dough. Even when parables contain unusual or even astonishing elements (a treasure in a field, for example, or a pearl of great price), these elements are the kind of things that might and sometimes do occur in real life. Biblical parables may contain exaggerations or improbabilities, but they do not contain outright impossibilities.

What about the story of Lazarus and the rich man? Should it be classified as fable, parable, a satire, an actual history, or something else? Students of the Bible have debated this question. The story, which Jesus tells in Luke 16:19–31, follows a string of parables. The last of those parables even begins with the same language: “There was a certain rich man...” (Luke 16:1). These factors could indicate that the story is a parable.

Other considerations, however, suggest that it might not be. Before beginning the story of the rich man and Lazarus, the string of parables is broken



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when Jesus summarizes His application from the last parable and then engages in a bit of dialogue with the Pharisees (Luke 16:14–18). During this section, Jesus rebukes the Pharisees. The story of Lazarus and the rich man underscores an aspect of Jesus’ rebuke and constitutes a warning against greed. Importantly, Jesus names a character in this story—Lazarus—which is something that He does in no acknowledged parable.

The most likely understanding of the story is that both Lazarus and the rich man were real people, and that Jesus is narrating a part of their story. This story includes elements that occur both before and after their deaths. The postmortem elements should not be viewed as any more fantastic than the antemortem elements. In other words, this story qualifies as occult literature in the sense in which I have used that expression. It grants a glimpse into the otherwise hidden world of souls during the intermediate state (the state between death and resurrection) for both saved and lost individuals. Most likely, the story is not a fable, fantasy, or parable. It is a straightforward narrative, parts of which ought to horrify us.

The account of Lazarus and the rich man is not a fable, but the Bible does record fables. These biblical fables are examples of how the Bible uses fantastic literature. Two examples of biblical fables are the fable of the thistle and the cedar (2 Kgs 14:9–10) and the fable of the trees electing a king (Judg 9:7–20).

2 Kings 14 opens with Amaziah becoming king of Judah. Upon ascending to the throne, he first brings order to his own kingdom. Next, Amaziah defeats Edom in battle. Flush with victory he sends messengers to Jehoash, king of Israel, challenging him to battle. Jehoash replies with a fable in which a thistle asks a cedar of Lebanon to give its daughter as wife for the thistle’s son. Instead, a wild animal tramples the thistle. Jehoash then makes the lesson clear: Amaziah is not nearly as important as he thinks he is and he should remember his place.

The contrast in size between the thistle and the mighty cedar is what makes this fable work. The effrontery of the thistle is comical, and the thistle’s weakness is emphasized by the fact that it is destroyed when an animal steps on it. No animal would ever trample a cedar of Lebanon. If Jehoash intended to get people to laugh at Amaziah, then he went about it the right way.

The other fable is found in Judges 9:8-15. As the story opens, the judge Gideon has died. His illegitimate son Abimelech treacherously murders all of Gideon’s legitimate sons (sixty-nine of them) except Jotham, the youngest. Abimelech is then proclaimed king of Shechem by his half-brothers on his mother’s side.

In the face of this travesty, the surviving son Jotham stands atop Mount Gerizim and tells a fable in which the trees meet to choose a king. The olive tree, fig tree, and grape vine all decline on the grounds that they already

have important tasks to perform. Finally, the bramble bush invites the trees to shelter under its shade, threatening any who reject it with fire. Jotham then applies this fable to the regency of Abimelech, forecasting the betrayal and destruction that would follow.

These two biblical fables are instructive, not only for what they teach, but also for how they teach it. Both Jotham and Jehoash wanted to make a point. Both chose a fable as the ideal literary form for the point they wanted to make. By examining how these two biblical characters used their fables we can learn important lessons, not only about fables, but about the legitimate uses of fantastic writing in general. We shall examine those matters in greater detail in the next essay.



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This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

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