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Gods, Religion and Its Criticism in the Greek Aesopic Fables

[Bogowie, religia i jej krytyki w greckich bajkach Ezopowych]

Streszczenie: Około stu bajek greckich z tradycji Ezopowej zawiera bezpośrednie lub alegoryczne nawiązania do religii. Te nawiązania nie zostały należycie przebadane. W całości reprezentują one anonimowe, popularne podejście do religii z okresu hellenistycznego, ze źródłami w czasach wcześniejszych. Mają one pewne znaczenie dla historii religii greckiej. Bajki te można podzielić na dwie grupy. Pierwsze przedstawiają bogów i mitologię, z dominującą rolą Zeusa, bliską henoteizmowi. Druga grupa zawiera krytykę religii, idolatrii i chybionych modlitw (z Hermesem jako przedmiotem drwin).

Summary: About a hundred Greek fables from the Aesopic tradition contain direct or allegorical references to religion. These references were not sufficiently studied. As a whole, they represent an anonymous, popular approach to religion from the Hellenistic period, with some sources in the earlier times. They have some importance for the history of Greek religion. These fables may be divided into two groups. The first group presents gods and mythology, with the dominant role of Zeus, near to henotheism; other gods are not really important. The second group contains criticisms of religion, idolatry and misguided prayer (with Hermes as the butt of jokes).

Słowa kluczowe: Ezop; religia starożytna; bogowie greccy; krytyka religii; mitologia grecka.

Keywords: Aesop; ancient religion; Greek gods; criticism of religion; Greek mythology.

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Introduction

In her article on the religious elements of the Greek Aesopic fables, published in the *Journal of Ancient History*, Teresa Morgan stressed the relations between human beings and gods, as presented in the Aesopic fables (Morgan T., 2013, p. 3–26; the enormous literature on ancient history and religion may sometimes contain remarks on this topic, but they are infrequent; a review of such references can be found in Morgan, p. 4–6). To quote from her summary: "Divine-human relations typically take place informally and/or in private, rather than in public and/or through the cult acts. Fables present the gods as spontaneously interested in human beings and as having a tendency to interfere uninvited in their affairs; one can sometimes even detect development in a divine-human relationship in the course of a story. A few fables play with the tensions endemic in divine--human relations, such as unequal value of what each party brings to the other."

Her contribution is interesting and important, but it could and should be completed. Some points can be shown in a different light. How the world of gods is presented in these fables? We should not assume in advance it reflects the textbook mythology – its influence is frequent, but the fables go far beyond illustrating it. What are the features of gods and relations between them, apart from their relations with humans? Next point is the criticism of religion, often found in the fables and going further than we could expect in the antiquity – this aspect, absent in the article of Morgan, throws some light of the Aesopic 'theology' (Morgan T. refers briefly to this aspect of Aesopic fables in her book *Popular Morality...,* 2007, p. 160–163). Moreover, the fables sometimes manifest the Greek faith in the fate, but strictly speaking it is not an element of the Greek religion or theology as such, but it rather belongs to the dominant worldview; therefore I shall only mention the problem and some fables influenced by this faith.

Therefore, referring to her valuable work I would like to concentrate neither on the divine-human relations, nor on interest of deities in human affairs, as already explained by her, but on the ideas about gods themselves contained in the fables and, on the other hand, on the critical, antireligious aspects of some among them. Our observations will sometimes overlap, but I intend to comment on the fables from a different point of view. Next difference is that I take into account all the fables from the Perry edition (see below, footnote 6), whereas Morgan has limited herself to the older Chambry edition, omitting poetic paraphrases from Babrius and many dispersed fables; fables not from the Chambry edition will be referred to about 20 times.

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The study of Teresa Morgan remains an exception in the field. The collection of fables ascribed to the name of Aesop is rarely considered research material for the study of religion of classical and Hellenistic Greece. Aesop is not even indexed in many books referring to this subject matter. Earlier papers dealing with the question directly are rare (Dumont, J., 1989, p. 7–24, unknown to Morgan; the author focuses on the supposed religiosity of Aesop himself and therefore his work of lesser value for the subject of this paper; similar approach can be found in Jedrkiewicz S., 1989). That could suggest the religious content of the narratives were sparse. Neither did scholars dealing with ancient atheism take interest in Aesop, although there was much they could find there. Fables are considered in studies on the related field of Greek ethics, but there the references to religion are only sporadic. However, the fables can throw some new light on the history of religion in the ancient Greece.

In fact, references to religion, theological opinions, and critiques of religion are quite commonly found in Greek Aesopic fables. Gods feature in dozens of them. As I announced above, material of this kind can be divided into two groups: mentions of gods, including of myths and cult, i.e. the contents of Greek religion; and fables containing elements critical of religion and religiosity. Such is the division adopted in the present paper. A given fable may, of course, contain more motifs than one. On the margins of this subject, we find a number of fables dealing with the problem of evil, i.e. concerned with fate, retribution and theodicy.

How can so little interest in this aspect of Aesop's fables be explained? They are, after all, relatively well-known, and constitute an important element of Greek heritage. However, the research of Aesopica has given precedence to the literary-historical, and moralising aspects of the fables. Analyses of their doctrine are far rarer.

Of the two main newer monographs on Greek Aesopic fables, one (Van Dijk J.-G., 1997) is limited to historical and literary aspects, and the other (Rodríguez Adrados F., 1999–2000), while discussing fables in the Hellenistic period (p. 604–644), does not address religious matters at all. In Kurke L., 2011, we encounter chapters on Aesopic wisdom, but not on the religious content of the fables; the author offers some original and controversial interpretations of the Aesopic thinking, but avoids separating the religious factor (except of relations to Delphi). Zafiropulos C., 2001, mentions the religious questions in the fables (p. 133–139), but briefly, without many quotes, and concentrates on the ethical aspects and on the criticisms towards religion, concluding, falsely, that the religion was not important in the Aesopic worldview.

A significant difficulty for history of religion studies is the practical impossibility of determining the authorship, date, and background of individual fables, and their diversity in those terms. The semi-legendary Aesop, living in the 6th century BC, can be credited with only a small portion of the fables, and those are mostly political or refer to the human character. Others originated from the 8th century even until the end of the Hellenistic period, which makes them difficult to confront with other sources.

These difficulties, however, should not cause us to abandon the fables as an insight into the religious mind-set of antiquity. They seem to be an important source of information about popular religious disposition (or, as the case may be, hostile attitude towards religion). Historical and epigraphic sources inform us rather of the official and social aspects of religion, and literature tells us of the perspectives of illustrious authors. An anonymous anecdote, on the other hand, shows us how that same religion was commonly perceived.

The fables' authors did not lack intelligence or knowledge of the world, but as a whole, the narratives certainly do not present the perspective of the elite. They may, on the other hand, be associated with the equivalent of the present-day middle class – a stratum of mobile, materially independent, literate inhabitants of the Greek cities. This class grew during the colonisation of the East in the Hellenistic period. It was then (in the 4th–3rd century BC) that the large collection of fables ascribed to Aesop was committed to writing. Although they usually seem to originate earlier, the texts known today date to that period. As a collection, the fables can therefore illustrate the approach to religion typical for the beginnings of the Hellenistic period, and, to some degree, also the earlier period. In turn, they may have influenced subsequent religiosity.

The collection of Babrius, who probably lived in the 1st century CE, represents a later form, rewritten in verse, as do the Latin collections, which are not included herein. Morals, which accompany most fables in manuscripts, are usually derivative and added later, and will therefore not be taken under consideration in most cases. In fact, they often obscure religious motifs contained in the fables.

How do the fables relate to the philosophies of the age? Their closest ties are probably to Cynicism, due to their common background: it was the Cynics who represented a bottom-up critique of the existing order. Some elements of the fables can also be interpreted as Stoic. However, because the writings of the Cynics quote Aesopic fables very rarely, those fables cannot be considered significantly connected with that school (against Rodríguez Adrados F., 1999–2000).

The Greek text of the fables can be found in three 20th century critical editions, differing considerably in terms of selection and structure. They

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are known by the names of their editors (Chambry; Hausrath – completed by others; Perry; respectively, Chambry E., 1927, Hausrath A., 1940–59; B.E. Perry, 1952). Accordingly, in this article fables have three numbers, which respectively refer to the editions of Chambry/Hausrath/Perry.

Editors draw from manuscripts in an ancient collection of Aesopic fables, dispersed fables quoted by various authors, the fictional *Vita Aesopi*, and the verse adaptation of Babrius. There are many translations of Aesopic fables, but they are not always complete. Among the English translations, I prefer the one by Daly, usually quoted below (*Aesop without Morals*, transl. L.W. Daly, 1961; if a prose fable is absent in Daly translation, I quote from: *Aesop's Fables*, transl. L. Gibbs, 2002; however, she frequently prefers secondary versions of the text). The poetic fables were edited and translated by Perry (*Babrius and Phaedrus*, ed. B.E. Perry, 1965). There are many translations of Aesopic fables, but they are not always complete. The present paper makes use of the author's own commented translation of the complete Aesop's fables into Polish (Wojciechowski M.. 2006a) and of his earlier paper on the religion in Aesop in the Polish language (Wojciechowski M., 2006b).

1. Religious content

1.1. The position of Zeus

The importance of Zeus in the Aesopic fables is illustrated by the fact that the number of times he is mentioned approaches the number of mentions of all other deities combined. The name of Zeus is used 79 times (including the manuscript titles of fables), next goes Hermes (29 times), Aphrodite (14 times), Apollo (13 times), Prometheus (11 times), Heracles (9 times) and Athena (8 times). This world of gods is called 'oligotheon' by T. Morgan (Morgan, 2013, p. 7–8). Anyway, the role of gods seems quite substantial. Their selection results perhaps from the concentration on divine helpers and omission of 'cosmic' deities, not so important for the everyday life, and can be to some extent accidental. As suggested by T. Morgan, the focus on particular divinities resulted from the interest in fields of interactions between the human beings and the divine forces (social order, justice and commerce, wisdom, love and sex) (Morgan, 2013, p. 12).

Single mentions refer to several other gods, Earth (twice), Hera, Hades, Demeter, as well as personifications of phenomena, such as Eros, Tyche (destiny, prosperity, luck), Momus (mockery), Horkos (oath), Plutus (wealth), Boreas, Helios, and also Truth, Poverty, War (Polemos) and Insolence (Hybris). Ares and Poseidon are absent, although war and sea appear in many fables.

Zeus is presented very clearly as the main deity, the overlord of the world (Morgan, 2013, p. 9–11; in comparison, I will stress the inferior position of other gods in relation to Zeus). His name can, in most cases, be simply translated as "God", which etymology would also allow. Unlike other deities, only few mentions of Zeus have a disparaging or ambiguous character, or present him in a bad light (side-threads in fables 4/3/3; 125/108/106; 262/196/185; 273/190/179). On the contrary, he shows his power, wisdom and justice.

In the typical fables about animals, the divine force is usually represented by Zeus (while the animals represent people!). He regulates this world: names kings and recalls them, be it for animals (119/109/107 about the fox), frogs (66/44/44 about a stick), or birds (162/103/101 about the jackdaw in borrowed feathers). Zeus solves example situations. He informs the oaks that they can only blame themselves (99/-/302). He advises the downtrodden snake to defend itself (291/213/198). He judges the animals: the snake, whose gift he rejects (122/248/221), the vicious bees (234/172/163), the arrogant tortoise (125/108/106) and the greedy camel (146/119/117). He may function as a judge in a contest (for the prettiest baby: 419/-/364). He is also explicitly shown as the judge of human misdeeds (126/-/313) such as theft (240/175/166).

In confrontations with other gods, Zeus has a great advantage. This shall be discussed in more detail. Hermes is not his companion, but a helper and envoy, whom he commands like a master would a servant (109/104/102; 111/105/103; 120/110/108, 126/-/313). Zeus also determines the place for Eros (-/-/444). The confrontation between Zeus and Apollo is especially telling (121/106/104): "Zeus and Apollo were disputing over their prowess as archers. When Apollo had stretched his bow and shot his arrow, Zeus covered as much ground with one stride as Apollo had with his shot". The two gods are thus on different levels. We have not a pantheon, but Zeus and subordinate deities.

Another confrontation between Zeus and Apollo is described in *Vita Aesopi* 33 (only in the G tradition; -/-/385). Zeus grants him the gift of oracle, and then indirectly negates it, by sending prophetic dreams to humans. Once humans no longer need an oracle, he bolsters the dwindling importance of the god by sending humans false dreams, directing them back to the oracles given by Apollo. However, Apollo always remains dependent on Zeus. These situation is put in more general terms in the fable about grief, according to which it was Zeus who granted prerogatives to the gods (-/-/462); this fable was supposedly told by an anonymous philosopher to the Egyptian queen Arsinoe (Pseudo-Plutarch, *Moralia* 112a). It is, therefore, a relatively late story, rather an imitation of a fable than an original one.

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Zeus rules over the world, but he does not change the dictates of fate, as shown in the fables about the asses. They are addressed to slaves unhappy with their masters (273/190/179): one ass complained about working for a gardener, and then a potter, so he ended up with a tanner to be made into leather. The same message is carried by a shorter fable, in which Zeus ironically refuses to ease the asses' toil (262/196/185).

Misfortune seems to have the upper hand in this world. The fable about good and evil events expresses this concept (1/-/274): "The good things were being chased by the evil because they were weaker, and they went up to heaven. There they asked Zeus how they should behave toward men. He replied that they shouldn't come to men all together but one at time. That is why evils come to men one after another, since they are close at hand, but good things slowly, since they must descend from heaven".

The fable teaches that although the deity has a limited influence over the course of events, directed by the natural rules, he is nevertheless friendly towards people. Another explanation for the hardships of life is the obstinacy of Earth to the will of Zeus (109/104/102, quoted below). Special interventions by the deity to rescue the worshipper are virtually absent (It is found only in a legend about a priest of Cybele who scared off a lion by beating a sacred drum (-/-/436); Perry's inclusion of this narrative into the Aesopic tradition seems not founded; its author is Simonides, *Anthologia Palatina* 6.217).

Evil is the consequence of fate, but also of misdeeds. Aesopic tradition has preserved the following version of the myth of Pandora's box (mentioned already in Hesiod, *Theogonia* 572ff; cf. 513f; *Opera* 81f), which nevertheless does not blame the woman: "Zeus gathered all the useful things together in a jar and put a lid on it. He then left the jar in human hands. But man had no self-control and he wanted to know what was in that jar, so he pushed the lid aside, letting those things go back to the abode of the gods. So all the good things flew away, soaring high above the earth, and Hope was the only thing left. When the lid was put back on the jar, Hope was kept inside. That is why Hope alone is still found among the people, promising that she will bestow on each of us the good things that have gone away" (123/-/312; Gibbs). The good things in the fable, given by Zeus, mean felicitous circumstances, not moral goods.

The responsibility of people for their own suffering is allegorically presented in the fable about Zeus and the oaks (99/-/302; Gibbs): "Once upon a time, the oak trees came to Zeus and lodged a complaint, 'O Zeus, founder of our species and father of all plant life, if it is our destiny to be chopped down, why did you even cause us to grow?' Zeus smiled and replied, 'It is you yourselves who supply the means of your destruction: if you didn't create all the handles, no farmer would have an axe in his house!' ".

The fable is accompanied by an ancient moral, which captures its intention well: people are the makers of their own misfortunes, but they reproach the gods. The fable tries to justify gods, even if its theodicy is rather weak.

There are also fables which note the discrepancy between faith in divine justice and the presence of evil in the world, and try to reconcile it somehow. This reconciliation is rather religious than philosophical. The following fable illustrates the saying "God's mill grinds slow but sure"; the impunity of evil is only temporary (126/-/313): "Zeus ordered Hermes to write down people's sins and wicked deeds on potsherds and to pile them in a designated box, so that Zeus could then peruse them and exact a penalty from each person as appropriate. Given that the potsherds are all piled up one on top of the other until the moment that Zeus examines them, he gets to some of them quite soon while others have to wait. It is therefore no surprise that there are wicked people who commit a crime in haste but who are not punished until much later".

Only rarely does Zeus appear among other gods, as he does in the fable about Momus (124/102/100) who was tasked with judging the creations of Zeus (a bull), Prometheus (a human), and Athena (a house). The characters of the gods are somewhat tokenistic, and the final decision is made by Zeus after all, when he expels spiteful Momus from Olympus. He is, after all, its rightful host (cf. 130/113/111). Prayers are directed at various deities, including Zeus (364/303/381; misguided prayers in 262/196/185; 273/190/179).

In fact, only Zeus seems to possess all divine attributes compared to other gods. This brings to mind the concept of henotheism (or 'megatheism'; Chaniotis A., 2010, p. 112–140) which was actually coined in the context of study of Hellenistic religion and the dominant position that Zeus takes in its pantheon, close to the monotheism (as noted e.g. by Morgan 2013, p. 16). The image of Zeus in Aesopic fables confirms that the primacy of Zeus as a god *par excellence*, known from prominent works of later literature, such as the Hymn of Cleanthes, or the *Oratio olympica (Or. 12)* by Dio Chrysostome, was also present in earlier popular religiosity, even at the beginning of the Hellenistic period.

1.2. Genesis of the world and humankind: Zeus and Prometheus

Cosmogonic myths left little trace in the Aesopic collection. The notion of the age of Cronos preceding the age of Zeus is present in only one fable, in which it plays no significant part (-/-/431); this fable is poorly preserved and needs to be reconstructed from traces (Callimachus, Oxyrhynchus papyri 1011; a discussion by Philo, *De Confusione Linguarum* 6–8). Only one fable shows the beginning of the world; Zeus takes the leading role in it (19/8/8). Aristotle (*Meteorologia* 356b) in his criticism of Democritus'

opinion on the disappearance of the waters adduces this fable in its more mythological version, where sea waters are swallowed by Charybdis (Martínez Vázquez R., 1984, p. 35–40). It is biographically linked to Aesop, which may be justified, since it contains a world origin story related to the Ionian natural philosophy:

"Once Aesop, the fable writer, had nothing better to do and went to a shipyard. The shipwrights made fun of him and provoked him to reply. Aesop told the old story of how chaos and water came into being and Zeus, wishing to make the element of earth appear, told the earth to drink off the sea at three gulps. The earth started, and the first time the mountains appeared; at the second gulp she laid the plains bare, too. 'And', said Aesop, 'if she decides to drink up all the water the third time, you will be out of business'."

The origin of humankind is much more often mentioned in Aesop's fables (The words 'creation' and 'created' are deliberately avoided to avoid confusion with creation *ex nihilo* which is proper to Christian thought). The context is usually aetiological, since these fables explain the contemporary state of humanity, which is typical for this kind of myth (e.g. the first chapters of *Genesis* explain the present situation of the world and people by referring to their beginnings). As evidenced by this, the interest of the Aesopic collection turns towards anthropology, rather than cosmology. Nevertheless, it is an anthropology with a religious tinge. Two main variants of the myth about the origin of humans exist: either they were made by Zeus, or Prometheus.

Thus, Zeus functions as the maker of humankind in the myth of the conflict between humans and the earth (109/104/102). The background to this story is probably the common ancient view that in their natural state, in the Golden Age, humans drew sustenance directly from the earth (Dio Chrysostome, *Oratio* 12.29-30; the reason for the existence of suffering in the world is given as resistance from Earth, who is an independent primeval deity):

"When Zeus had fashioned a man and a woman, he ordered Hermes to take them to the earth and show them where they should dig to make a cave. He did as he was ordered, but at first Mother Earth interfered. When Hermes exerted his authority and told her that this was Zeus' command, she said, 'Well, let them dig as much as they like then, for they'll pay for it in groans and tears'."

The fable about human nature has a philosophical character (57/-/311): "They say that creatures were first fashioned and that gifts were bestowed on them by god: strength to one, speed to another, wings to another; but man stood there naked and said, 'I am the only one you have left without

a gift'. Zeus said, 'You are ungrateful although you have been granted the greatest gift of all, for you have received reason, which prevails among gods as it does among men, is more powerful than the powerful, and swifter than the swiftest'. Then, recognizing his gift, man went his way in reverence and gratitude." God (*theos*) is evidently a synonym for Zeus. Reason (and also speech, *logos*) is the hallmark of humankind. The fable seems to be a didactic narrative composed by a philosopher.

Another gift of Zeus, passion, and its consequence – fertility, is mentioned in the myth of Eros (-/-/444) (preserved in a later source: Himerius, *Eclogae* 10.6; Perry, however, includes this fragment into Aesopic tradition): "When Zeus created man, he endowed him with all the other attributes he now has, but Eros had not yet taken up his dwelling in man's soul, for although he had his wings, he was living in heaven and aimed his arrows only at the gods. But Zeus, fearing that the fairest of his creations might disappear, sent Eros to be a guardian of the human race."

Three other fables mention Zeus as the maker of humankind, but they seem to concentrate on other subjects. Thus, Zeus fashioned man to have a short life, but man bought additional years of life from various animals – along with their characters (139/107/105). Humans were also given voices after other creatures (-/-/431); this fable also implies that Zeus is the giver of immortality, which the animals requested. In an anecdote aimed against homoeroticism, Shame agrees to enter humans through the anus, as long as Eros does not (118/111/109).

In several other fables humans are fashioned by the titan Prometheus (the role of Prometheus in the fables was not sufficiently shown by Morgan). These are not as developed on the doctrinal level, so perhaps they represent earlier strata of the myth. One of them remarks that "at the direction of Zeus, Prometheus fashioned men and beasts" (322/228/240), which probably reflects a later attempt to reconcile contradictory legends. The remainder is again satire: some humans were made from animals, and kept their characteristics. Satirical and psychological features are also found in the fable about two bags (303/229/266): When making humans, Prometheus hanged the bag for other people's flaws in the front, and one for their own – in the back. They can thus not see their own flaws. The fable about Momus was discussed above (124/102/100).

Generally, the role of maker in Greece was ascribed to Zeus. Other variants of this fable reflect this (Babrius 59). Ascribing the fashioning of man to Prometheus is much rarer (Pausanias, *Descriptio* 10.4.4; Ovidius, *Metamorphoses* 1.82ff); Aeschylus (*Prometeus* 436–506) credits him with the invention of culture. Aesopic fables prove that in popular belief, Prometheus was quite often credited with the making of mankind.

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An existential reflection is offered by another fable, one of the most moving sentences of ancient literature (-/-/430): "When Prometheus fashioned man, he did not mould the clay with water but with tears." This little-known text was passed on by a later author (Themistius, *Oratio* 32; Perry was right including it).

Prometheus is also shown as the maker of animals (210/292/259, but in this fable the point is quite different: the lion is afraid of a rooster's crowing, and the elephant of a gnat's buzzing). The tradition of the theft of fire from Olympus is mentioned only marginally, and in dispersed texts (-/-/458: Claudius Aelianus, *On the Nature of Animals* 6.51; -/-/467: Plutarchus, *Moralia* 86ef).

1.3. Other deities

a) Hermes. Fifteen fables name Hermes, indicating his relative popularity. However, only two show him working in an independent way. In the fable about trampling ants he admonishes a man for wrongly reproaching gods for smiting humans (48/-/306; Gibbs): "There was once a ship that sank with all hands on board. A man who saw what had happened said that the gods' judgment was unfair: because of just one sinner who was on board the ship, many men had died together with him, even though they were innocent. While the man was speaking, a swarm of ants started crawling over him as they rushed in their usual frenzy to feed on some bits of wheat chaff. When one of the ants bit the man, he proceeded to trample a considerable number of them underfoot. Hermes then appeared and struck the man with his wand as he said, 'So, are you going to let the gods pass judgment on you humans just as you have passed judgment on the ants?'." This narrative partly dodges the problem by forbidding fallible humans from questioning the gods (it must be noted, however, that the *Book of Job* contains a similar idea). This implies an assumption that gods are similar to humans and are subject to more general laws of the world. Man should therefore not take offence at the functioning of the cosmos he is part of.

The second fable tells of Hermes helping a woodcutter (253/183/173). When the man lost his axe in the river, the god offered him a gold and silver axe in return. When the woodcutter admitted they were not his, the god gave him his old iron axe and the two others as a reward. Later, another woodcutter tried the same thing, but angered the god by pretending to own the golden axe.

However, unlike Zeus, Hermes appears in the fables on earth, entering direct dialogue with individual people. Thus, he does not act as a main deity. If an angel replaced Hermes in these fables, we would not see a difference. The same can be said about other secondary deities.

In some fables Hermes is an assistant of Zeus, fulfilling his orders, sometimes imperfectly. Zeus judges people, while Hermes as a secretary writes down their misdeeds on potsherds (126/-/313, quoted above). Zeus made human beings, Hermes showed them where to look for sustenance (109/104/102, quoted above). Zeus made humans and directed Hermes to pour reason into them – which he did in equal measure, and as a result reason didn't reach the heads of tall people (120/110/108). Zeus ordered Hermes to pour deceit into artisans, and the cobbler got the most (111/105/103).

The patronage of Hermes over deceit and theft is the topic of other fables. When Hermes was driving a wagon full of lies and dishonesty meant for all nations, it broke in the land of the Arabs, where the cargo was robbed (112/-/309). Hermes stole the oxen of the seer Tiresias, and afterwards came to test his abilities, but was tactfully exposed (110/91/89).

When a snared raven called to Hermes for help, the god was petty in refusal, since the raven had once begged for rescue from Apollo, but failed to give offering once released (166/-/323). The gift from Hermes, which in Greek means a found item, did not bring luck to another raven, which tried to devour a sleeping snake, but died from the venom (167/130/128). On the other hand, a traveller who found a bag full of dates and almonds cheated Hermes by offering nothing but pits and shells (260/188/178). This narrative may be a parody of the myth, according to which Prometheus tricked Zeus by offering him one of two parts of an animal as offering, and Zeus chose the inferior part, which were bones masked by fat (Hesiod, *Theogonia* 535–557).

Finally, as many as four fables contain ridicule at images of Hermes. We will have to return to this question when discussing the critique of idolatry. A sculptor unsuccessfully advertises his works in the market square, while a passer-by mocks the god (2/101/99). Another merchant is ready to throw in a Hermes as a bonus to a buyer of Zeus and Hera (108/90/88). Two other fables are known only from Babrius: the same statue can be sold as a figure of the god and as a tombstone (-/-/307; Babrius 30). A dog wants to anoint a roadside statue of Hermes (-/-/308, Babrius 48).

All these examples point to Hermes not as a venerable Olympian, but as a subordinate deity, who is not treated too seriously. This positions him as an inviting target for a critique of religion and religiosity. Even if we see him as a 'trickster', his presentation remains unfavourable.

b) Other characters. The presentation of other deities is more conventional. In the example above, Apollo is named as well as Hermes (166/-/323). A narrative which is on the border of the fable genre is the story about Apollo and the Muses on Mount Helicon, to whose harmony the

unruly dryads of the forests and mountains would not adjust (-/-/432). It is known from a secondary rhetorical compilation (Himerius, *Oratio* 22). The story is related to the tradition of Aesop's veneration for Heliconian Muses, although not for Apollo (*Vita Aesopi* 7; see Dillery J., 1999, p. 268–280).

The low status of Apollo in relation to Zeus has already been mentioned (121/106/104; -/-/385). This might have been a sign of polemic with the Delphic sanctuary. It is tied to the tradition, according to which Aesop died at the hands of Delphians, who accused him of sacrilege in revenge for his criticism (Herodotus, *Historiae* 1, 134; Aristophanes, *Vespae* 1446–1448, as well as many other later sources, including *Vita Aesopi*). Aesop supposedly enraged them by saying that they were descended from slaves sent to Apollo as a gift (-/-/382; *Vita Aesopi* 126).

Aphrodite features in five fables, none of which carry a deeper religious message. The goddess seems well known and popular, but subordinate. In two fables she is, predictably, the patron of romance. However, she refuses to make an ugly female slave beautiful, when her master falls in love with her (18/-/301). The goddess says: "I am furious that this man would even think you were worth looking at." The logic of this anecdote positions gods as personifications of phenomena. He who does not appreciate beauty, thereby gives no reverence to Aphrodite, its personification, and is not worthy of the goddess's favour. The importance of love and passion is also indicated in fables on Eros as loving passion, although only once he is called a god (-/-/444; cf. 118/111/109). His role is more pronounced in the allegorical Platonic fable, where at the feast of the gods Poverty begot Eros with Plenty (-/-/466; Plato, *Symposium*, 203b–e). This is meant to illustrate the traits of Eros. This 'erotic' aspect is more prominent in the secondary Babrius versions (nos. 32; 98).

In a fable about a weasel who fell in love with a young man, Aphrodite changes her into an attractive young woman. She returns her original shape, though, when the lass chases a mouse (76/50/50). The anecdote about a pig swearing to Aphrodite, although the goddess is disgusted by the animal, is also whimsical (329/250/222).

Here is a confrontation between Aphrodite and Momus (-/-/455; Aristides, *Oratio* 28.136). "They say that Aphrodite was enthroned in all her glory, and Momus was fit to burst because he couldn't find anything in her to criticize. Finally he gave up on her and made fun of her sandal. So they came to terms; Aphrodite got no criticism, and Momus didn't have to speak well of anything". Perry's edition includes also a short story, which is not a fable, but a local Cyprus cult tradition (-/-/433).

Athena cuts a more serious figure. In the fable about Momus cited above, she functions as the originator of the house (124/102/100). In

a confrontation with Heracles (129/-/316), she successfully persuades him out of impetuousness; this, however, is a didactic story, in which deities are merely devices. In other stories, a shipwrecked man begs Athena for rescue (53/30/30), and a crow wants to gain her favour with an offering (171/129/127). In spite of the irony present in these narratives, they testify to some authentic devotion.

Heracles is also mentioned with some frequency. As in the case of Athena, some fables suggest the existence of a cult towards him, although they are critical of it. We are told about a quarrel between the adherents of Heracles and Theseus (44/-/278), and about prayers to Heracles on trivial matters (72/-/291; 356/260/231). Furthermore, he appears as a character in a didactic short story. In the fable mentioned above, he is a quick-tempered hero (129/-/316). He may also function as a critic of wealth, like a Cynic philosopher (130/113/111). Cf. the famous allegorical story of Heracles who at the crossroads met women symbolising virtue and vice (e.g. Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 2.1.21–34; this version refers to the speech of Prodicus); the story is of a related genre to the cited fables.

c) Personifications. Momus, the personification of mockery, was mentioned above (124/102/100; -/-/445). The fables with Eros as personified loving passion too. The mentions of Tyche (Destiny, Prosperity, "Lady Luck") are more interesting: "A farmer found gold as he was digging in the earth, and after that he began putting a wreath on the statue of Mother Earth every day to show his gratitude for her kindness. When Lady Luck saw this, she said: 'You simpleton, why do you ascribe to Mother Earth the gifts I gave you because I wanted you to be rich? If your circumstances change and your wealth is spent upon evil purposes, then you won't blame Mother Earth but Lady Luck'." (84/61/61).

The farmer worshipped Mother Earth by placing wreaths of flowers on her. The cult of Earth (Gaia) was ancient, whereas the idea of divine Tyche as a personification of luck is a later development (therefore there are no myths about her). The fable criticises the traditional cult, and proposes a new religiosity, one with a philosophical tint (in Plato Zimmermann, A., 1966; in a broader perspective Nussbaum M.C., 1986). The later religious role of Tyche, which is absent here, links her to astrological divination (where Tyche is an invisible planet, whose motions change the effects of others).

The fable about Tyche and the traveller is a satire of people who ascribe to divine forces that which has natural causes (261/184/174): "A wayfarer who had walked a long distance and was exhausted sank down beside a well and fell asleep. Luck appeared at his side, wakened him and said, 'My good man, if you have fallen in, you would have blamed me instead of

your own foolishness'." Nevertheless, here also the importance of Luck is not questioned.

A good example of gods being reduced to didactic roles is the fable about Boreas and Helios (the North Wind and the Sun), who represent, respectively, the governance by force and by consent (73/46/46): "The North Wind and the Sun were arguing over their power. They decided to give a prize to the one of them who could make a man who was walking along the road take off his clothes. The North Wind went first and blew hard. When the man held tight to his clothes, the North Wind blew all the harder. But the man felt the cold and only pulled his clothes tighter around him until the North Wind surrendered him to the Sun. The Sun, at first, shone gently on him. When the man took off his unnecessary robes, the Sun increased the intensity of his warmth until the man, no longer able to stand the heat, undressed and went for a swim in the nearby river."

A long fable presents the Oath as a god (*Horkos*) who tracks down and punishes an oath-breaker (298/214/239). It reflects the Hellenistic tendency to personify abstract notions and mental phenomena. The fable about the punishing of the oath-breaker concerns justified divine punishment and treats religious matters seriously. Portraying the god as lame and infrequent in his visits is to explain the delays in divine justice. Clever oath-breaking is also criticised in the fable about the thieves at the butcher's shop (246/67/66).

There is a religious undertone to the meeting with Truth, although there is also a satirical thought behind it (259/-/355): "A wayfarer found a woman standing all alone and disconsolate in the country and he said to her, 'Who are you?'. She said, 'Truth'. 'And why have you deserted the city to dwell here?'. And she replied, 'Because falsehood used to keep company with but few people, while now it is everywhere you speak or listen'" (Komornicka A.M., 1987, p. 401–406).

There are also divine personifications who are perceived negatively. Heracles spurns Plutos (Wealth), since he saw him in bad company on earth (130/113/111). The marriage between War (*Polemos*) and Insolence (*Hybris*) reveals the natures of both (319/-/367). They look like personifications created extemporaneously, perhaps inspired by the character of Victory (*Nike*). The female personification of divine Grief is also figurative, and s philosopher warns against worshipping her, since then she will be inclined to always accompany the worshipper (-/-/462; Pseudo-Plutarch, *Moralia* 112a, quoted above in the discussion on Zeus).

1.4. Worship

Relatively little attention in the Aesopic collection is paid to worship. Offerings are mentioned most frequently, being referenced, by different terms, about thirty times. These mentions are nevertheless marginal, the offerings are part of the background of the narratives, not their main topic. They are more like meals than like acts of worship. Festivals are only a sporadic background.

Temples are mentioned five times, and only in one fable with any consequence: a lamb declares it would rather be offered by a priest in a temple than be devoured by a wolf (222/168/261). Of the two mentions of priests of Cybele, one is critical (236/173/164), while the other is apologetic (-/-/436). Information about festivals is sparse and marginal. Of the 17 mentions of prayer, most are about misguided prayers, which is more in line with a critique of religiosity in Aesopic fables. Some fables assume the possibility of divination (294/171/162; -/-/385; 50/36/36), while others criticise superstition (cf. following section).

Nevertheless, offerings are owed to the gods. In a fable about the man who failed to give the promised offering, gods punish the shortcoming (55/28/28): "A poor man who was sick and in a bad way made a vow to the gods that he would make a sacrifice of a hundred oxen if they would make him well. The gods decided to test him and brought about his speedy recovery. When he got out of bed, since he had no actual oxen, he modelled a hundred oxen of dough and burned them on an altar, saying, ".here, my gods, is the fulfilment of my vow.. The gods, wishing to repay him in kind for his cheap trick, sent him a dream urging him to go to the beach, for there he would find a thousand Attic drachmas. He was delighted and went running to the beach. There he fell into the hands of pirates. He was sold by them and brought a thousand drachmas." The idea of gods as greedy, vengeful, and duplicitous is a reflection of a relatively early religious thought, with its anthropomorphism. The narrative unequivocally puts religion in a bad light, although it was probably intended as an admonishment to keep one's vows to the gods. A similar fable brings a different conclusion (46/34/34).

Generally though, fate and justice are presented in the fables as forces that are basically impersonal. Divine interventions function as ancillary in dispensing of justice, and in addition do not bring the gods much glory. On the other hand, fate and retribution are treated seriously, and inspire fear and respect. This is far from the disdain accorded in Aesop's fables to minor gods and superstitious religiosity.

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2. Critique of religion

2.1. Critique of religious beliefs

More could be said about the Hellenistic critics of religion (Attridge H.W., 1978, p. 45–77; Whitmarsh T., 2016, with no material from Aesop; also: Nowicki A., 1986; bibliography: Winiarczyk M., 1994). Most criticisms of this kind in the fables are related to Hermes, and have been discussed above on that account. These can, however, be seen as criticisms of minor gods in general. Hermes is portrayed as stealing Tiresias's oxen, whose clairvoyance he later tests – and fails (110/91/89). Hermes is responsible for lies being widespread in the world (fables about the wagon broken down in the land of the Arabs, 112/-/309, and about pouring deceit into artisans, 111/105/103). It was also he who dispensed intelligence among people, but failed to give a sufficient amount to everyone. This god appears in the fables as a literary figure, and with mockery, being also blamed for the presence of evil in the world.

In several fables, the gods show their ugly side. In particular, they turn out to be greedy for offerings, although the authors did not necessarily wish to make that point, Unaware of his implied criticism. It is exemplified in the fable discussed above, about the man who did not make the promised offering (55/28/28). There is another ambiguous fable about a broken vow (166/-/323): "A crow that was caught in a snare prayed to Apollo and promised to offer frankincense to him. But when he was rescued from this danger, he forgot his vow. Again he found himself caught in another trap. And, giving up Apollo, he promised sacrifice to Hermes. But Hermes said to him, 'How am I to trust you, you ingrate, since you wronged and denied your former master?'."

From time to time, Zeus also appears in this role. In the fable about the tortoise (125/108/106) who responded to the god's feast invitation "there's no place like home", Zeus condemned him to carry his house on his back. Zeus also dismissed the plea of the asses to relieve their toil (262/196/185; 273/190/179).

Both gods and worshippers are criticised in the anecdote about rivalry between gods (44/-/278; longer Babrius 15). "One man sang the praises of Heracles, the other one preferred Theseus. As a result, Theseus vented his anger on the worshippers of Heracles, and Heracles on the worshippers of Theseus." Theseus and Heracles, to be precise, were heroes, demigods. Since Theseus was the patron of Athens, and Heracles that of Thebes and Sparta, the story makes an allusion to the quarrels and destructive wars between these Greek states.

Another fable, parallel to the one quoted above, completely disregards promises made to gods (46/34/34): "A poor man who was sick and in a bad way, when given up by the doctors, prayed to the gods and promised that he would sacrifice a hundred oxen and dedicate offerings if he recovered. His wife, who was at his side, asked him, 'And how will you keep these promises?' He replied, 'do you think then that I'm going to get well so that the gods will require these things of me?'." Such a stance of agnosticism and scepticism towards prayer will be discussed in the final section.

There is also a fable, known only from Babrius, which accuses the gods of impotence (402/-/295, Babrius 2; transl. Gibbs). The take is satirical, and at the same time didactic, since it refers to the experiences of ordinary people. A farmer loses his mattock, so he brings the suspects to the city to swear in the presence of the mightier city gods. Meanwhile: "Then they heard a herald shouting that a thousand drachmas was being offered as a reward for information about property which had been stolen from the god. When the farmer heard this, he said, 'I have come on a fool's errand! How can this god know anything about other thieves, when he can't even find the crooks who stole his own stuff. A god – but he has to offer a reward to find out if any human being knows what happened!'."

The cult of images attracts a vitriolic critique. Examples of that mostly concern statues of Hermes. Thereby, the fables cast doubt on the god's power, and ridicule him. The following is a story about the selling of Hermes (2/101/99): "A man made a Hermes of wood, took it to the market, and offered it for sale. When no customer appeared, he tried to attract attention by shouting that he had for sale a god who was a bestower of blessings and profit. When a passer-by said to him, 'My friend, why do you sell a god like that? You ought to avail yourself of his good services', he replied, 'Because I need my good services in a hurry, and he's usually slow in showing a profit'."

A similar meaning emerges from the anecdote about Hermes visiting a sculptor (108/90/88): "Once when Hermes wanted to know in what esteem he was held by men, he went in human likeness to the studio of a sculptor. He saw a statue of Zeus and asked, 'How much?'. When the sculptor said, 'A drachma', he smiled and asked, 'How much is the statue of Hera?'. When the man gave him an even higher price, seeing a statue of himself too, he assumed that men would value it very highly, since he was a messenger and favourable to profit. So he asked, 'How much is the Hermes?' And the sculptor said, 'Why, if you buy the other two, I'll throw it in'." Zeus and Hera are treated at least with a minimum of respect.

The fable about the man who broke a statue is not as unambiguous (61/284/285; Gibbs): "There was a craftsman who had a wooden statue of

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Hermes. Every day he poured libations and made sacrifices to it, but he still wasn't able to earn a living. The man got angry at the god so he grabbed the statue by the leg and threw it down on the ground. The head of the statue shattered and gold coins came pouring out from inside it. As he gathered the gold, the man remarked, 'Hermes, you are an unlucky god, since you take no thought for your friends. You didn't do me any good when I was treating you with devotion, but now that I have wronged you, you give me this immense reward. I do not understand this strange kind of worship!'." The owner of the statue thinks the god has granted his request once he was pressured, which the fable's author was probably trying to satirise. (Without this conclusion, the fable would speak of increased divine help for the doubter.)

The remaining two examples are known only from the verse collection of Babrius. In one of them, a sculptor considers whether to sell a bust of Hermes as a tombstone, or as a figure of the god. In his dream, Hermes speaks to him: "Well, my fate hangs in the balance: it is up to you whether I will become a dead man or a god!" (-/-/307, Babrius 30; Gibbs). There is even more punch to the story about the statue of Hermes, which a dog wanted to anoint, to which Hermes said: "If you can just leave the oil alone and not pee on me, I shall be grateful enough" (-/-/308, Babrius 48; Gibbs).

This invites the observation that although the critique of image worship is typical for Judaeo-Christian tradition, it was also present in the Greco--Roman world. We owe the knowledge of this fact in part to Christian authors. On this subject, they cited Sophocles (Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus* 74.1, etc.; the authenticity of this quote is uncertain); Heraclitus was to proclaim the irrationality of praying to statues (*Protrepticus* 50.4). Philosophers, especially Stoics, saw that the images of gods are far from divine (Zeno of Kition in Plutarchus, *Moralia* 1034b, and Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 5. 11 [5.76.1]; Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.5; Cicero, *De natura deorum* 1.27.77; 1.36.101; Seneca quoted by Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 6.10, and by Lactantius, *Divinae Institutiones* 2.2; Plutarchus, *Moralia* 382b; Celsus following Heraclitus and others – Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.5). A satirical approach can be found in Lucian (*Zeus confutatus* 8; *Zeus tragicus* 7; *Somnium* 24). The story about the impious Diagoras, who burned a statue of Heracles, was widely known (cf. Aristophanes, *Aves* 1071; *Ranae* 320; Cicero, *De natura deorum* 3.37.89-90; see Winiarczyk M. 1979–1980).

2.2. Critique of religious practices

The separate treatment of this question stems from the distinction between doctrine (and, more broadly, the normative aspect of religion), and the practice of religion. A critique of religion concerns the content of beliefs,

e.g. the existence and behaviour of gods; a critique of religiosity, although it may undermine the point of belief, attacks rather the misguided forms of religion, as well as the opinions and actions of the adherents. The distinction is not clear-cut, but seems useful nonetheless.

a) Superstition. Some Aesopic fables concern views which may be considered superstitious (although they weren't necessarily seen as such in antiquity). One satirical fable attacks divination (233/170/161): "A prophet used to sit in the market place and charge for his services. When someone suddenly came up and told him the doors of this house had been torn off their hinges and everything inside had been carried off, he jumped up in dismay and ran off to see what had happened. One of the bystanders who saw this remarked, 'Well, my good friend, why hadn't you, who profess to foresee other's people's troubles, foretold your own?'." One must remember, however, that other fables assume the possibility of fortune-telling (294/171/162,-/-/385, 50/36/36).

There are also fables critical of bird augury. Below is a fable based on the same concept as the previous one (255/227/236): "Some travellers who were going on business met a crow that was blind in one eye. As they turned to look at him, one of them urged that they turn back – for this, said he, was the meaning of the omen – another interrupted and said, 'And how can he foretell the future for us when he couldn't even foresee his blinding so as to prevent it?'." Two otherfables mock the idea that one can divine the future from the behaviour of a raven, but not from that of the very similar crow (170/127/125; 171/129/127). The fable about Tiresias mentioned above does, nevertheless, assume a real possibility of this kind of augury (110/91/89).

The story about the Delphic oracle presents an interesting problem (50/36/36): "An evil-minded man made a bet with another that he could prove the oracle at Delphi to be false. When the appointed day arrived, he took a bird in his hand and, hiding it under his robe, went into the temple. He stood there before the oracle and asked whether what he had in his hand was animate or inanimate. If the oracle said, 'inanimate', he intended to show the bird alive, and if it said 'animate', to throttle it first and then show it. But the god saw through his wicked scheme and said, 'Enough of this! It depends on you whether what you hold is alive or dead'." This is basically an anecdote about a clever answer to a crafty question, intended to praise the oracle of Apollo in Delphi. However, it is ambiguous, since the last sentence has man take responsibility for his own actions. It depends on you! I therefore consider it a masked critique of dependence on oracles.

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Faith in lycanthropes is treated as ridicule. A simple-minded innkeeper lets a thief steal from him, because he claims to be turning into a wolf (363/301/419). The fable about the sorceress is similarly mocking (91/56/56): "A sorceress who professed to carry out incantations and exorcisms had a record of many successes and made no small profit on her practice. As a result, certain persons indicted her of religious heresy, brought her to trial, accused her, and got her condemned to death. As they led her away from the court, someone said, 'My good woman, how is that, while you profess to be able to appease supernatural wrath, you can't even persuade your fellow men?'" (The background to this is perhaps a Roman law aimed against new religions).

b) Prayers and offerings. A larger series of fables criticises asking gods for favours. First of all, prayer should not replace necessary actions. An agnostic anecdote about the shipwrecked man expresses this sentiment (53/30/30): "A wealthy Athenian was sailing with some other men when a violent storm came up, and the ship capsized. The other men were all swimming away, but the Athenian kept constantly calling on Athena, offering her a thousand vows if he could be saved. One of the other victims of the wreck swam past him and said, 'Move your hands and help Athena'."

The same thought is expressed in a verse about an ox-driver and Heracles (72/-/291, Babrius 20; Gibbs): "An ox-driver was bringing his wagon from town and it fell into a steep ditch. The man should have pitched in and helped, but instead he stood there and did nothing, praying to Heracles, who was the only one of the gods whom he really honoured and revered. The god appeared to the man and said, 'Grab hold of the wheels and goad the oxen: pray to the gods only when you're making some effort on your own behalf; otherwise, your prayers are wasted!'."

Where natural causes (such as carelessness or accident) are sufficient explanation, misguided seeking of gods' agency is criticised, like in the two fables about Tyche, discussed before (84/61/61; 261/184/174). Nevertheless, prayer can occasionally be successful (Babrius 23). The fables can represent different attitudes.

Invoking gods in matters of daily life is met with irony (356/260/231): "A flea once jumped onto the foot of an athlete as he was running, and as he lit, she gave him a bite. He was annoyed and, catching her between his nails, was just ready to crush her. But she slipped away, gave a jump and was off, so escaping death. The athlete sighed and said, 'O Hercules, what kind of help are you going to be to me against my opponents when this all you do for me against a flea?'." The story implies that Heracles was the patron of athletes. On the one hand, it means a possibility of divine

help, on the other – it shows that gods should not be bothered with trivialities, since there was a proverb "to call gods for a flea bite" (Erasmus, *Adagia* 3.4.4).

Furthermore, there is no point in asking for the impossible. Apart from the fables about asses that were already discussed (262/196/185; 273/190/179), this also pertains to the story about the eunuch (113/-/310): "A eunuch went to a fortune-teller to find out whether he would ever have children. The fortune-teller sacrificed an animal and spread out its liver for examination. He then said, 'When I look into the liver, I see that you will be a father, but when I look upon your face, you do not even appear to be a man!'."

Much disdain is directed at prayer in the vulgar anecdote about a foolish girl, whose mother asked the gods for more sense for her. The girl, knowing about the prayer, let herself be sexually exploited on the pretence of having some sense put into her (366/305/386; preserved also in *Vita Aesopi* 131).

More complex is the critique of offering and supplication in the fable about the crow and the dog (171/129/127): "A rook who was offering sacrifice to Athena invited a dog to the banquet. The dog said to him: 'Why do you waste your sacrifices? The goddess hates you so much that she has even prevented anyone's believing the omens you give?'. The rook replied, 'but that's just why I do sacrifice to her, because I know she is so hostile to me, and I want to change her attitude'." The fable confronts two motivations for worshipping the gods: on the one hand, thanksgiving and praise, on the other – fear The fable is constructed to present this second motivation, widespread as it may be, as surprising and illogical.

In the fable about the hero, offerings are considered wasteful (131/112/110): "A man had a shrine of a hero on his property and made extravagant sacrifices at it. As he continued to make this outlay and was spending large amounts of money on the sacrifices, the hero appeared to him at night and said, 'My dear fellow, stop wasting your fortune, for if you use it all up and become a pauper, you'll blame me'." A moral appended to this fable explains: "So it is that many men who are suffering from their own poor judgement lay the blame on the gods".

People's prayers are sometimes contradictory, as they are in the anecdote about two daughters (299/96/94). They prayed for incompatible things, one for rain for the garden, the other for sun for drying clay pots. People also pray for things which could harm them (74/49/49).

* * *

The Aesopic tradition, as a whole, does in fact contain many references to religion. Nearly one hundred fables and anecdotes have been cited above,

some illustrating more than one point. In spite of minor inconsistencies, the tradition presents a view of religion which is quite uniform. Considering the time of the collection's origin, this view should be identified with the beginning of the Hellenistic period, but it contains earlier motifs and later additions.

The principal god, Zeus, is generally respected. He reigns over the world of gods, humans, and animals. He made this world and is its lord, although some fables ascribe the formation of people and animals to Prometheus. Other deities appear much more rarely, and their rank and role is subordinate. At the same time, religious reverence is directed at impersonal phenomena of fortune and retribution. The problem of theodicy is noted and there are (vain) attempts at solving it. These topics give rise to mythical narratives, although it is difficult to draw a line between those and animal fables with divine participants (all the more because both myths and fables are referred to as *mythos* in Greek).

Cult is mentioned in Aesopic fables, but does not play a larger role. The rich moral, psychological, and political reflection, so typical of fables, is not tied to religion. Often, they subscribe to the principle that "might makes right". Although the motif of retribution is sometimes present, like the role of Prometheus mentioned above, it seems to be a remnant of an earlier period. The topic of the afterlife is entirely absent.

Criticism of religion does not imply its negation. It is mostly tied with the figure of Hermes, who is put in a morally dubious situations. His example also serves to ridicule idolatry, which mars the perception of the god himself. Sometimes gods are accused of impotence and indifference. Some fables are aimed against superstition. The critique of religious practices pertains mostly to prayer for things which are impossible, harmful, trivial, or for what the petitioner should achieve himself.

Overall, the Aesopic collection's religious thought has characteristics of henotheism, since it strongly favours Zeus and credits him with the making of the world and humanity. At the same time, although it gives place to religion, it often seems to gravitate towards deism, as well as secularism and agnosticism, since it views fate as impersonal, does not consistently solve the problem of theodicy and does not offer a religious interpretation of physical and historical phenomena. In the everyday life religion is not particularly useful.

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