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Approaching the Bible Through Fables. A Commemoration of the 25th Anniversary of the Publication of *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*

Introduction

The document *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* was published approximately 25 years ago on April 23, 1993. One of the main reasons for its publication was to defend the historical critical method of the study of Sacred Scripture.² This publication also “canonized” new directions of biblical interpretation known as the New Methods of Literary Analysis and various approaches to Sacred Scripture.³ The latter are divided into three categories: 1) Approaches Based on Tradition, 2) Approaches that Use Human Science, and 3) Contextual Approaches. Undoubtedly, all of these approaches enrich exegetes’ hermeneutic work⁴, but do not exhaust it as many more approaches to understanding the sacred texts can still be used.⁵

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² Cf. G. Ghiberti, *Il metodo storico-critico* [in:] *L'interpretazione della Bibbia nella Chiesa. Commento*, ed. by G. Ghiberti, F. Masetto, Pontificia Commissione Biblica, (Percorsi e traguardi biblici), Leumann 1998, pp. 106–109.

³ Cf. W. Egger, *Una Chiesa alla ricerca del senso delle Scritture* [in:] *L'interpretazione della Bibbia nella Chiesa. Commento*, ed. by G. Ghiberti, F. Masetto, Pontificia Commissione Biblica, (Percorsi e traguardi biblici), Leumann 1998, pp. 9–11.

⁴ Cf. D. Dzikiewicz, *Zasady czytania Pisma Świętego* [in:] *Józef Obrebski — kapłan według serca Bozego*, red. D. Dzikiewicz, J. Witkowski, (Wielcy Ludzie Wileńszczyzny 1), Wilno 2010, p. 111.

⁵ D. Dzikiewicz, *The theme of God's violence in the Bible in the light of the approach through belles-lettres: An example from Fyodor Dostoyevsky's literary anthropology* [in:] *Bible Caught in*

The following article proposes an approach that analyzes the Bible through fables. This is not a completely original idea; for, scholarly comparative studies of biblical texts and folklore, of which fables are undoubtedly a part, date back at least to the writings of James Edwin Thorold Rogers (*Bible Folk-Lore: A Study in Comparative Mythology*, 1884) and James George Frazer (*Folk-Lore in the Old Testament*, 1918).⁶ Admittedly, such comparisons were not always fruitful. Some accused saintly writers of plagiarism, while others simply reduced the Bible (or some of its pericopes) to pure fantasy, meaning something that has nothing to do with historical reality and is, therefore, historically unreliable.⁷ Nevertheless, it is worth continuing the already undertaken research. It is important, however, not to limit this research only to fables or folktales from the ancient Near East as it has been the case thus far.⁸ The scope of the proposed approach is limited to neither time nor place.

This article will demonstrate the hermeneutic value of fables in studying Sacred Scriptures in two steps. The first part will present arguments justifying the proposed approach. The second part will use specific examples to demonstrate the usefulness of this approach. The article will conclude by summarizing the advantages of this method.

Arguments in favor of approaching the Bible through fables

Arguments in favor of approaching Scripture through fables can be broken down into three categories: a) scriptural, b) patristic, and c) fabulous.

I. The scriptural argument

Scripture itself justifies approaching the Bible through fables. After all, fables and fairytale motifs are part of the Bible. While the first of these — fables — are, admittedly, not common in Scripture, they are, nevertheless, present.⁹ This literary genre includes such biblical pericopes as Judg 9:7–15; 2 Kings 14:9 and

Violence, ed. by C. Korzec, (European Studies in Theology, Philosophy and History of Religions 22), Berlin 2019, p. 195.

⁶ Cf. D. Ben-Amos, *Folklore in the Ancient Near East* [in:] *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, vol. 2, ed. by D.N. Freedman et al., Yale–New Haven–London 2008, pp. 818–819; S.A. Tokarev, *Predislovie* [in:] J.G. Frazer, *Folklor w Vethom Zavete*, per. D. Wolpin, (Biblioteka ateističeskoj literatury), Moskva 1989, pp. 56.

⁷ Cf. D. Ben-Amos, *Folklore...*, pp. 818–819.

⁸ Cf. *Ibidem*, pp. 819.

⁹ Cf. A. Baum, *Bajka* [in:] *Praktyczny słownik biblijny*, red. A. Grabner-Haider, tłum. T. Mieszowski, P. Pachciarek, Warszawa 1995, p. 85.

2 Chr 25:18. These two politically involved fables involve trees.¹⁰ With regard to fairytale motifs, they occur much more frequently in the Bible as, for example: talking animals (Gen 3:1–5; Num 22:28–30), vessels containing an inexhaustible amount of food (1 Kings 17:14–16), travelling in the belly of a great fish (Jon 2:1–2,11), a confrontation with a dragon (Rev 12:1–9), a disagreement between brothers (Gen 27:1–45; Lk 15:11–32)¹¹, etc. In this argument, however, it is not only important to show the presence of fables or their motifs in the Bible, but also the statement of the fact of the use of this material as a means to communicate revealed truths. If this is the case, then the opposite is also possible: the very elements used to record Revelation can also help to decode its message.

II. The patristic argument

One of the most important Catholic hermeneutic principles maintains that the Holy Bible must be interpreted in the light of the living Tradition of the Church (*Dei Verbum*, 12).¹² Obviously, this principle does not apply strictly to the topic of this article. However, based on the above, it is clear what an important role patristic tradition plays in the interpretation of Scripture.¹³ Still the merits of patristic exegesis are not based solely on *the contents of the comments itself* (what), but also on *its form* (how).¹⁴ With regard to the latter, patristic exegesis has a relatively diverse interpretative methodology.¹⁵ Ancient authors also were familiar with folklore, which is even evident from a cursory review of the indices of works

¹⁰ Cf. H. Schüngel, *Baśń* [in:] *Praktyczny słownik biblijny*, red. A. Grabner-Haider, tłum. T. Mieszkowski, P. Pachciarek, Warszawa 1995, p. 91; D.R. Bratcher, *Bajka* [in:] *Encyklopedia biblijna*, red. P.J. Achtemeier, tłum. G. Berny, (Prymasowska Seria Biblijna), Warszawa 1999, p. 80; G. Hasan-Rockem, *Fable* [in:] *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 6, ed. by F. Skolnik, M. Berenbaum, Jerusalem 1974², pp. 666–667; D. Dikevičius, *Biblinė hermeneutika: Biblija ir pasakos*, “Magnificat. Kasdieniai skaitymai” 10 (2018), p. 12; W.R.F. Browning, *Oxford Dictionary of the Bible*, Oxford 2004, p. 133.

¹¹ Cf. H. Gunkel, *Das Märchen im Alten Testament*, Tübingen 1917, pp. 8–55; A. Baum, *Bajka...*, p. 85; H. Schüngel, *Baśń...*, p. 91.

¹² Cf. Ch. Dohen, *Exegese: Begriff, Geschichte, Methoden* [in:] *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, ed. by W. Kasper et al., vol. 3, Freiburg–Basel–Rom–Wien 1995³, p. 1090; M. Starowieyski, *Z historii wczesnego chrześcijaństwa. Biblia, męczennicy, poganie i inni*, Kraków 2015, p. 28; W. Egger, *Una Chiesa...*, p. 11.

¹³ Cf. M. Starowieyski, *Z historii...*, p. 33; D. Dzikiewicz, *Zasady...*, p. 109.

¹⁴ “Nel patrimonio ecclesiale ci sono anche le indicazioni di metodi di lettura...” W. Egger, *Una Chiesa...*, p. 11.

¹⁵ Cf. Ch. Dohen, *Exegese...*, pp. 1088–1090; K. Froehlich, *Historia interpretacji. Interpretacja wczesnochrześcijańska* [in:] *Słownik wiedzy biblijnej*, red. B.M. Metzger, M.D. Coogan, W. Chrostowski, tłum. A. Karpowicz et al., (Prymasowska Seria Biblijna), Warszawa 1999³, pp. 220–226; M. Starowieyski, *Z historii...*, pp. 27–36.

written by the Fathers and early writers of the Church.¹⁶ In these indices, motifs and names from mythology obviously dominate. However, if we consider that the Greek word *μῦθος* means both “myth” and “fable”¹⁷, then it is clear that fables were used by patristic exegetes as an alternative means to explain Sacred Scripture. The legendary phoenix is a classic illustration of this. His image is evoked in the First Letter to the Corinthians, ascribed to St. Clement of Rome (1st–2nd c.), to explain the mystery of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.¹⁸ As this approach has been used to explain the Bible since the beginning of the Church, there is no reason why scholars should cease taking advantage of it today.

III. The fabulous argument

The previous arguments in favor of approaching the Bible through fables arise from the *outside*, while the present one comes from the *inside*, i.e. from certain features of fables as a literary genre. Fables are frequently treated as fiction (1 Tim 4:7; 1 Pet 1:16)¹⁹ and children’s literature.²⁰ Unquestionably, fables share much in common with fiction and children, which is confirmed by the title of the book published by the brothers Grimm: *Kinder- und Hausmärchen — Children’s and Household Tales*.²¹ Fables are, however, more than pure fantasy and are also intended for adults.²² This is due primarily to the fact that fables are derived from

¹⁶ Cf. *Bažnyčios Tėvai. Nuo Apaštališkųjų Tėvų iki Nikėjos Susirinkimo. Antologija*, vert. D. Alekna, V. Ališauskas, Vilnius 2003, pp. 552–573.

¹⁷ Cf. *Greco antico. Vocabolario greco italiano etimologico e ragionato*, a cura di R. Romizi, M. Negri, Bologna 2001, p. 803; H. Cancik, *Mythus* [in:] *Bibel-Lexikon*, hrsg. v. H. Haag et al., Leipzig 1970, pp. 1195–1197; *Der Brockhaus in fünfzehn Bänden*, hrsg. v. M. Strzysch, J. Weiß, Bd. 9, Leipzig–Mannheim 1998, p. 97.

¹⁸ Cf. Klemensas Romietis, *Laiškas Korintiečiams* [in:] *Bažnyčios Tėvai. Nuo Apaštališkųjų Tėvų iki Nikėjos Susirinkimo. Antologija*, vert. D. Alekna, V. Ališauskas Vilnius 2003, p. 34; K. Froehlich, *Historia...*, p. 221.

¹⁹ Cf. W.R.F. Browning, *Oxford...*, p. 133; E.M. Meletinskij, *Skazki i mify* [in:] *Mify narodov mira. Encyklopediâ*, red. S.A. Tokarev, t. 2, Moskva 1997², p. 441; *Der Brockhaus...*, pp. 97–98; K. Beth, *Märchen* [in:] *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, hrsg. v. H. Bächtold-Stäubli, E. Hoffmann-Krayer, Bd. 5, Berlin–New York 1987, pp. 1597–1598, 1600.

²⁰ “A traditional folktale adapted and written down for the entertainment of children...”, C. Baldick, *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Oxford 2008³, p. 124; cf. *ibidem*, p. 195; H. Gunzel, *Das Märchen...*, p. 7.

²¹ Cf. H. Rölleke, F. Betz, *Märchen* [in:] *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, hrsg. v. W. Kasper et al., Bd. 6, Freiburg–Basel–Rom–Wien 1997³, p. 1306; *Der Brockhaus...*, p. 97; K. Beth, *Märchen...*, p. 1605; E. Pieciul-Karmińska, A. Wieczorkiewicz, *Wielcy nieznanomi*, “Czas Literatury” 5 (2019), p. 10.

²² “Nur einige von ihnen sind ursprünglich für Kinder speziell erzählt, die meisten für Erwachsene...”, K. Beth, *Märchen...*, p. 1599; cf. E. Pieciul-Karmińska, A. Wieczorkiewicz, *Wielcy...*, p. 10.

mythology²³, which is, above all, an archaic attempt to explain realities, such as the origin of a man, the meaning of life, the phenomenon of death²⁴, etc.

Something similar happens in fables, however, in a more simplified way than in myths. One of many examples of this is the widely known Russian fable *The Speckled Hen*. This fable tells about a grandfather and a grandmother who had a hen that laid a golden egg. Both grandparents try to break the egg but without success. In the end, only a mouse is miraculously able to break the golden egg with one swipe of its tail. This causes the grandfather and grandmother to cry. The speckled hen, however, promises to lay a normal egg for them the next time, and the fable ends.

At first glance, this may seem to be just a story for children. However, when considered more closely, it is clear that this fable conveys timeless and universal messages like those e.g. in the poem *The Epic of Gilgamesh*.²⁵ Just like Gilgamesh, the protagonists of *The Speckled Hen* must come face-to-face with the problem of death due primarily to their age: they are elderly grandparents who are approaching the end of life. The egg is also a symbol of death because it is golden, which is frequently connected to the underworld (i.e., land of the dead) in fables. Thus, the grandparents' attempt to break the golden egg signifies their attempt to overcome death and ensure their immortality. Their efforts, however, are a complete failure: the broken egg is empty and offers no means of immortality. Eternal life on earth is impossible. Death is written into human existence; therefore, the only wise solution is to come to terms with this reality.²⁶

Given the deep metaphysical and existential meaning of fables, it is worthwhile to refer to them in biblical studies. This is especially so because, as experts would argue, a certain affinity between the basic message of fables (e.g., the existence of a supernatural world and the victory of good over evil) and the Bible exists.²⁷ Both moral and ethical messages are commonly found in fables²⁸, but

²³ Cf. H. Gunkel, *Das Märchen...*, p. 1; C. Baldick, *Oxford...*, p. 124; E.M. Meletinskij, *Skazki...*, pp. 441–444; H. Rölleke, F. Betz, *Märchen...*, p. 1306; *Der Brockhaus...*, p. 97; K. Beth, *Märchen...*, pp. 1598, 1606–1607; L. Röhrich, „und weil sie nicht gestorben sind...“. *Anthropologie, Kulturgeschichte und Deutung von Märchen*, Köln–Weimar–Wien 2002, p. 185.

²⁴ Cf. A. Smitmans, *Mit [in:] Praktyczny słownik biblijny*, red. A. Grabner-Haider, tłum. T. Mieszkowski, P. Pachciarek, Warszawa 1995, pp. 747–748.

²⁵ “Das M. bedarf im allgemeinen keiner zeitlichen und örtlichen Bestimmung, sondern ist in seiner Idee und Tendenz allgemeingültig, wie es denn überhaupt eine «übevölkische Erscheinung» ist”, K. Beth, *Märchen...*, p. 1599; cf. D. Dikevičius, I. Gudauskienė, *Gilgamešo epas: praeitis ir nūdiena [in:] Gilgamešo epas. Tekstas, biblinės paralelės ir komentaras*, vert. ir komen. D. Dikevičius, I. Gudauskienė, (Bibliotheca Sancti Josephi Subsidia 2), Vilnius 2017, pp. 14–17.

²⁶ Cf. D. Dikevičius, *Biblinė...*, pp. 13–15.

²⁷ “Die Botschaften v. M. sind also entfernt der Bibel verwand u. zudem in Europa chr. Vorstellungen angenähert worden”, H. Rölleke, F. Betz, *Märchen...*, p. 1306.

²⁸ Cf. C. Baldick, *Oxford...*, p. 123; cf. E.M. Meletinskij, *Skazki...*, p. 442.

these messages are not always compatible with biblical ideas. Nevertheless, by contrasting fables with the Bible, scholars can come to a better understanding of the meaning of Scripture.²⁹

Examples of the hermeneutical value of approaching the Bible through fables

Having substantiated approaching the Bible through fables in several ways, let us now proceed to the second part of this study, which provides some examples that illustrate the hermeneutic value of this approach. While one can approach the Bible through fables in several ways, the most apropos means is through fable motifs. Since the range of motifs is extensive, this paper will focus on only two: *fish and laughter*.

Both of the aforementioned motifs are present in fables and Scripture. At first glance, there is nothing in common between fish and laughter; fish belong to the animal kingdom and laughter is an exclusively human attribute (Aristotle, *De partibus animalium*, 673 a 8.28).³⁰ Yet, on closer inspection, fish and laughter are closely related. Life itself is the basis for combining these two motifs. For the fisherman — every catch of fish — and for the farmer — an abundant harvest — are always a source of joy (Ps 4:8) and, to some extent, laughter.³¹ But life is not the only thing that connects these two themes in fables. Fertility plays a particularly important role in this respect; in some ancient cultures, fish were a symbol of fertility³² because they are fecund and, depending on the species, lay anywhere from a dozen to several hundred eggs during the spawning season. Laughter is also connected with fertility, so much that laughter was even thought to cause conception³³ because, as already noted, laughter is exclusive to human beings

²⁹ “...die M.-Moral ist nicht durch ‘gut — böse’, sondern durch ‘richtig — falsch’ (hinsichtlich des Wohls des Helden) definiert”, H. Rölleke, F. Betz, *Märchen...*, p. 1306; cf. ibidem, pp. 1306–1307.

³⁰ Cf. S. Wienker-Piepho, *Lachen* [in:] *Enzyklopädie des Märchens. Handwörterbuch zur historischen und vergleichenden Erzählforschung*, hrsg. v. K. Ranke et al., Bd. 8, Berlin–New York 1996, p. 695; L. Röhrich, „und...“, p. 192.

³¹ Cf. *Bajki, baśnie i bajdy ludu greckiego. Antologia*, red. M. Borowska, (Arcydzieła Literatury Nowogreckiej IV/I), Warszawa 2006, p. 66.

³² Cf. V.N. Toporov, M.N. Sokolov, *Ryba* [in:] *Mify narodov mira. Encyklopediâ*, red. S.A. Tokarev, t. 2, Moskva 1997², p. 393; E. Hoffmann-Krayer, *Fisch* [in:] *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, hrsg. v. H. Bächtold-Stäubli, E. Hoffmann-Krayer, Bd. 2, Berlin–New York 1987, pp. 1528–1529; R. Schenda, *Fisch, Fischen, Fischer* [in:] *Enzyklopädie des Märchens. Handwörterbuch zur historischen und vergleichenden Erzählforschung*, hrsg. v. K. Ranke et al., Bd. 4, Berlin–New York 1984, p. 1204.

³³ “Mörikes «Schöne Lau» [...] ist immer traurig, weil sie keine Kinder bekommen kann. Ihr war geweissagt worden, sie könne erst dann ein Kind zur Welt bringen, wenn sie fünfmal von Her-

and distinguishes people from animals.³⁴ Fish dishes were also thought to cause immediate pregnancy.³⁵ It is for this reason that often, in fables, the protagonist with a barren wife searches for a fish that will cause her to become pregnant. In addition, according to some folkloric customs, the husband of woman in labor should bring a “clown” (shaman) to her in order to make her laugh by using a fish as well. Moreover, in fables *fish* often signify that the protagonist or hero is going to experience a new beginning in life. For example, when the central character catches and releases a fish, then his desires will be fulfilled or he will be granted supernatural powers; so, an ordinary peasant could even become the king’s son-in-law by marrying the princess.³⁶ The aforementioned examples demonstrate that, according to fables, the motifs of *fish* and *laughter* essentially signify a *novum* that takes place in the life of the main character and/or his family: the poor man becomes rich, the weak man gains power, the childless have many children, and so on.

Let us now try, in the light of the above concepts, to look at those biblical texts in which there are also motifs of *fish* and *laughter*. In fact, there are many passages that contain these motifs in the Bible because there are multiple words that describe fish and laughter and there are also related motifs, such as *fishing* or *wedding*.³⁷ For this reason, only a few pertinent pericopes will be considered below.

I. Gen 1:20.26.28

The motif of the *fish* appears in the Bible for the first time in the Book of Genesis. Genesis 1:20 refers to fish generally as *living creatures*, while verses 26 and 28, use the precise word “fish”. Fish were the first animals that God created and, therefore, the first creatures over which God granted man dominion. Is this the result of chance? If one reads Genesis in the light of symbolic meaning of *fish* in fables, then the answer is clearly “No”. Thus, at this point in Genesis, the biblical author wanted (either deliberately or unconsciously) to demonstrate that a new

zen gelacht haben würde”, L. Röhrich, „und...”, p. 193; cf. Ch.S. Kawan, *Lachen: Zum L. bringen* [in:] *Enzyklopädie des Märchens. Handwörterbuch zur historischen und vergleichenden Erzählforschung*, hrsg. v. K. Ranke et al., Bd. 8, Berlin–New York 1996, p. 702; L. Röhrich, „und...”, pp. 193–194.

³⁴ Although animals can also laugh in some fairy tales, this is because they represent human characters; cf. S. Wienker-Piepho, *Lachen...*, pp. 697–698; L. Röhrich, „und...”, p. 188. For more on the theme of laughter in fairy tales, see, for example: L. Röhrich, „und...”, pp. 185–205.

³⁵ Cf. K. Beth, *Märchen...*, p. 1601; E. Hoffmann-Krayer, *Fisch...*, p. 1529; R. Schenda, *Fisch...*, p. 1204.

³⁶ Cf. D. Dikevičius, *Biblinė...*, pp. 15–16; *Bajki...*, pp. 64–67, 219–220.

³⁷ Cf. H. Frehen, *Fish* [in:] *Bibel-Lexikon*, hrsg. v. H. Haag et al., Leipzig 1970, p. 481; J. Valvekens, *Freude* [in:] *Bibel-Lexikon*, hrsg. v. H. Haag et al., Leipzig 1970, pp. 494–495; *Lexikon zur Bibel*, hrsg. v. F. Rienecker, G. Maier, Witten 2008⁷, pp. 474–476, 494–495.

stage of creation is beginning. In Gen 1:20, *living organisms* appear in the full sense of this word. Until then, only the various kinds of plants (Gen 1:11–12) and celestial bodies (Gen 1:14–18) were mentioned.³⁸ In turn, the creation of man in the image of God (Gen 1:26–27) raised the creature to an even greater level.³⁹ The motif of *fish* in the narrative of Genesis, therefore, emphasizes both these *novum*.

II. Gen 9:2

Gen 9:2 is part of the passage Gen 8:20–9:17, which tells about the covenant between God and Noah and his descendants. This covenant happened after the so-called “Great Flood” (Gen 7:1–8:18), which represented a caesura in the History of Salvation. After this event, changes occurred. For example, God became milder (Gen 8:20–22), animals began to fear men (Gen 9:2a), and people were permitted to eat meat (Gen 9:3–4). One of the signs of this *novum* is the reference to *the fish motif* in Gen 9:2.

III. Jon 2:1–2.11

The great fish in the Book of Jonah is perhaps the most famous sea creature in the Old Testament. Exegetes have argued about the identity of this *great fish* — whether it was a whale or a crocodile. From a historical perspective, skeptics do not believe that the story of Jonah could have ever taken place.⁴⁰ However, fish symbolism in fables relegate this discussion to the background and uncovers the true meaning of this pericope. Jonah opposed the will of God and was subsequently swallowed by a great fish, in whose belly he spent three days. Since fish are associated with the underworld in fables, this could be interpreted to mean that Jonah failed in his mission as a prophet and died.⁴¹ At the same time, however, *fish* indicate a new beginning, thereby signifying that the prophet Jonah is ready to enter on the path of conversion. Thus, again this *novum* is announced by introducing the motif of *fish*.⁴²

³⁸ Cf. G. von Rad, *Genesi. Traduzione e commento*, ed. it. a cura delle Benedettine di Civitella San Paolo, (Antico Testamento 2/4), Brescia 1978, pp. 65–66; J. Lemański, *Księga Rodzaju. Rozdziały 1–11. Wstęp, przekład z oryginału, komentarz*, (Nowy Komentarz Biblijny Stary Testament I/1), Częstochowa 2013, p. 160.

³⁹ Cf. G. von Rad, *Genesi...*, pp. 67–72; J. Lemański, *Księga...*, p. 170.

⁴⁰ Cf. J.A. Soggin, *Introduzione all'Antico Testamento. Dalle origini alla chiusura del Canone alessandrino*, (Biblioteca di cultura religiosa 14), Brescia 1987⁴, p. 441.

⁴¹ “L’orante è ormai defunto, è disceso allo še’ôl [...]”, J.A. Soggin, *Introduzione...*, p. 442; cf. J.S. Ackerman, *Jonah [in:] The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. by R. Alter, F. Kermodé, London 1997, pp. 236–237.

⁴² Cf. J.S. Ackerman, *Jonah...*, p. 234.

IV. Lk 5:1–11

The New Testament also contains passages with *the fish motif*, which indicates a new stage in the life of certain characters. These passages include Luke 5:1–11, which tells about Simon Peter's calling. After encountering Jesus Christ, the ordinary Galilean fisherman (Lk 5:1–3) enters on a new and radical beginning as he becomes a *fisher* of men (Lk 5:10). Could *the fish motif* (Lk 5, 6.9) be missing at such an important moment? No!

But why, in Levi's encounter with Jesus, which was also a life-changing event, the narrative makes no reference to the *fish* motif (Mt 9:9; Mk 2:13–14; Lk 5:27–28)? That is correct. However, immediately afterward Levi's encounter with Christ, he hosts a dinner at his house (Mt 9:10; Mk 2:15; Lk 5:29). Is it possible that fish could not have been served at this party? By all means no. Fish was a staple for those living in the Holy Land at the time of Jesus Christ (Mt 14:17–19; 15:34–36; Mk 6:38–43; Lk 9:13–16; Jn 9:11–13; 21:9–10).⁴³ Thus, *the fish motif* also makes an appearance—although indirectly—at this turning point of Levi's life.

The same can be said about the moments when Jesus calls the first disciples (Mt 4:18–22 and Mk 1:16–20). *The fish motif* is undoubtedly indirectly present in these passages because they contain such terms as *lake, net, boat, and fishermen*.

V. Gen 17:5, 18:12–15; Lk 1:28; Jn 8:56

While it is possible to add to the list more direct or indirect examples of the use of the *fish* motif in the biblical narratives as a symbol of a change or a new beginning (Mt 4:18–22, 14:13–21, 15:32–39; Mk 1:16–20, 6:34–44; Lk 9:12–17; Jn 6:1–15, 21:1–14)⁴⁴, this paper will now consider the motif of *laughter*.

In fables, as indicated above, laughter also signals *novum*, especially the birth of a child. With this in mind, Abraham and Sarah's laughter in Genesis 17:5 and 18:12–15 was not simply a light-hearted casual giggle or an expression of their disbelief or doubt: We are too old to have our own offspring! Their laughter here plays a stylistic role. At the narrative level, the laughter signals to the reader that a new stage of life is commencing for Abraham and Sarah; they will finally have a child — their own child.

This approach to laughter in Gen 17:5 and 18:12–15 also sheds light on Jn 8:56, in which Jesus speaks of Abraham's laughter as joy (ἡγαλλίασατο) and

⁴³ Cf. R. Gower, *Usi e costumi dei tempi della Bibbia*, Torino 2000, pp. 51–52; M.S. Miller, J.L. Miller, B.M. Bennett Jr., D.H. Scott, *Harper's Encyclopedia of Bible Life*, San Francisco 1996², p. 45.

⁴⁴ Cf. D. Dikevičius, *Biblinė...*, pp. 15–16.

gladness (ἑχάρα) based on the experience of *seeing the day* of Jesus Christ. In this instance, *seeing the day* can be interpreted to mean the mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God (Jn 1:14). Luke 1:28, which tells the Archangel Gabriel's words to Mary at the Annunciation (Lk 1:26–38), confirms this interpretation. The first word is precisely a call to joy: χαῖρε — *rejoice*. Unquestionably, this recalls the prophetic texts of the Old Testament that call the Daughter of Zion to rejoice (Zeph 3:14; Zech 2:14; 9:9). At the same time, interpreting the motif of *laughter* as a sign of a new beginning facilitates the combining of the passages Gen 17:5; 18:12–15; Lk 1:28; Jn 8:56 into one interpretation line: Abraham and Sarah's laughter was a sign not only of Isaac's conception, but also a foretelling of the Incarnation of the Second Person of the Holy Trinity in Nazareth (Lk 1:38).

VI. Ps 2:4

The verse above is one of many biblical passages that describe God's laughter, which many biblical commentators point out is anthropomorphic.⁴⁵ However, for the purpose of this study, the question arises: What kind of laughter is this? Usually exegetes understand laughter in Ps 2:4 as a manifestation of irony and derision.⁴⁶ On the one hand, they are correct. As one maxim says, "man plans and God laughs". Psalm 2:1–3 points out that God laughs derisively when people conspire against Him and His Anointed One, but, from God's perspective, their plans are ridiculous. Undoubtedly, the exegetes' interpretation of God's laughter in Ps 2:4 are quite justified. However, if one were to approach the same passage through fables, then another interpretation is possible. In this case, God's laughter in Ps 2:4 is not only derisive, but also foretells His intervention, which becomes apparent in verses 5–12. In these verses, God supports His Anointed One who, in turn, calls the rebels to convert. Although it is not clear how effective God's Anointed One was, there is nevertheless a clear caesura between Ps 1:1–3 and 1:5–12, which takes place in the passage when God *laughs*. Is this a coincidence? Probably no, it is rather a rhetorical figure referring to the motif of laughter meaning a new beginning.

⁴⁵ Cf. *Pismo Święte Starego i Nowego Testamentu. Najnowszy przekład z języków oryginalnych z komentarzem*, Częstochowa 2008, p. 1128.

⁴⁶ Cf. J.S. Kselmann, M.L. Barré, *Księga Psalmów* [in:] *Katolicki komentarz biblijny*, red. R.E. Brown, J.A. Fitzmyer, R.E. Murphy, W. Chrostowski, tłum. K. Bardski et al., (Prymasowska Seria Biblijna), Warszawa 2004², p. 487; *Pismo...*, p. 1128.

Conclusion

The following conclusions can be drawn from this study: *First*, the document *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* is very valuable. More than 25 years have passed since its publication, but the work is still relevant because it provides basic hermeneutic guidelines and inspires further exegetical work.⁴⁷ The approaches described in *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* are especially valuable because they broaden hermeneutic scope of approaches beyond those contained in the document itself. One such approach to the Bible that the document indirectly suggests is through fables. The efficacy of this approach can be justified biblically, patristically, and through fables themselves. *Secondly*, the second part of this article confirms the hypothesis that fable motifs can, in fact, provide a better understanding of the meaning of Sacred Scripture. The *fish* and *laughter* motifs illustrate this fact. By interpreting them through fables, the biblical texts take on a new hue, and what was initially perceived as a secondary detail becomes an important element within the narratives. Therefore, this approaching the Bible through fables continues to be worthwhile, particularly because so much has already been achieved in this field. *Thirdly*, the proposed approach to the Holy Scriptures is also particularly useful in pastoral work. Fables are widely known and commonly read by people of all ages. Thus, a person familiar with fables is better able to understand Scripture.⁴⁸ *Fourthly*, this approach can also facilitate discussion about the Bible with non-believers who know the fables of different peoples. The motifs that the Bible and fables contain serve as a common starting point in this dialogue.

Summary

Nowadays, Catholic exegetes interpret the Bible using a variety of methods and approaches. The most important of these are mentioned in the document entitled *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*. More than 25 years have passed since this act was published. This article wants to commemorate this event. It proposes an approach to the Bible through fables. The application of the proposed approach undoubtedly enriches the interpretation of the Scriptures. This thesis is demonstrated by the application of two fables motifs: *fish* and *laughter*. In fables, *fish* and *laughter* quite often mark the beginning of a new stage in the life of a certain protagonist or even become the causative agent of pregnancy, i.e. a new life. Paying attention to these ideas enables a better understanding of those biblical texts that also contain themes of *fish* and *laughter*.

⁴⁷ Cf. W. Egger, *Una Chiesa...*, p. 14.

⁴⁸ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 12.

Keywords

Bible, Pontifical Biblical Commission, hermeneutics, exegesis, interpretation, approach, folklore, mythology, fable, folktale, fish, laughter, new beginning

Podejście do Biblii przez bajki. Wkład w obchody 25-lecia ogłoszenia dokumentu *Interpretacja Biblii w Kościele*

Streszczenie

Dzisiaj egzegeci prowadzą badania biblijne za pomocą różnorodnych metod i podejść. Najważniejsze z nich zostały wymienione w dokumencie zatytułowanym *Interpretacja Biblii w Kościele*. Od ukazania się tej publikacji minęło ponad 25 lat. Artykuł jest formą upamiętnienia tego wydarzenia. Proponuje się w nim podejście do Biblii przez bajki, co wzbogaca interpretację Pisma Świętego. Opracowanie wykazuje to za pomocą aplikacji bajkowych motywów *ryby* i *śmiechu*. W bajkach *ryba* i *śmiech* oznaczają między innymi początek nowego etapu w życiu danego bohatera lub stają się nawet przyczyną sprawczą ciąży, czyli powstania nowego życia. Uwzględnienie owych idei umożliwia lepsze zrozumienie tych tekstów biblijnych, w których również występują wątki *ryby* i *śmiechu*.

Słowa kluczowe

Biblia, Papieska Komisja Biblijna, hermeneutyka, egzegeza, interpretacja, podejście, mitologia, bajka, ryba, śmiech, nowy początek

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