

DePauw University  
**Scholarly and Creative Work from DePauw University**

---

Classical Studies Faculty publications

Classical Studies

---

2018

# The Puzzle in Babrius's Prologue

Kristin Mann

DePauw University, [kristinmann@depauw.edu](mailto:kristinmann@depauw.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarship.depauw.edu/classical\\_facpubs](https://scholarship.depauw.edu/classical_facpubs)

 Part of the [Classical Literature and Philology Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Originally published in: *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 58.2: 253-278. <https://grbs.library.duke.edu/article/view/16086>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Classical Studies at Scholarly and Creative Work from DePauw University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Classical Studies Faculty publications by an authorized administrator of Scholarly and Creative Work from DePauw University. For more information, please contact [bcox@depauw.edu](mailto:bcox@depauw.edu).

## The Puzzle in Babrius's Prologue

Babrius, a fable-writer of the first century CE, opens his first book of fables with a description of the Golden Age.<sup>1</sup> Babrius's Golden Age is a time of justice and peace, in which the earth freely provides food and the gods are friends with humankind. During this time, shared speech exists among all levels of beings: trees, animals, humans, and gods can all communicate with each other. As Deborah Gera points out, the range of beings endowed with speech is unique in Babrius; Sue Blundell adds that Babrius makes humans and animals more friendly than do most ancient authors who describe the Golden Age.<sup>2</sup> All of this seems to imply that Babrius creates a Golden Age that is largely traditional, except that he makes it even happier. Babrius closes the prologue by promising that despite his iambic meter, his fables will not be harsh or ungentle, for he has “softened the harsh limbs of the bitter iambs” (19 πικρῶν ἰάμβων σκληρὰ κῶλα θηλύνας). All of this – the Golden Age, the softening of the iambs – seems to suggest that Babrius will be solely concerned with the happiest and gentlest of fables.

The first fable immediately shatters this expectation.<sup>3</sup> In this fable, a human hunter comes to a mountain. He drives all the animals before him, before finally wounding a lion. Not even the lion dares remain, and the fable ends as the bloody lion flees before the violence of the hunter. Speech is shared in this fable, yes, but it is speech used to express violence, mistrust, and fear.

---

<sup>1</sup> For the date, cf. B. E. Perry, *Babrius and Phaedrus* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1965) xlvii-xlviii. We know very little about Babrius's life; Perry speculates that Babrius was a Hellenized Italian living in Syria or Asia Minor. For this reconstruction, cf. pp. xlvii-lv. Babrius claims to work for a King Alexander, although this is likely a fictional name rather than a real person; cf. T. Hawkins, *Iambic Poetics in the Roman Empire* (Cambridge 2014) 88 n. 3. T. Morgan, *Popular Morality in the Early Roman Empire* (Cambridge 2007) 326-330 provides the most exhaustive attempt to locate a historical King Alexander.

<sup>2</sup> D. Gera, *Ancient Greek Ideas on Speech, Language, and Civilization* (Oxford 2003) 20; S. Blundell, *The Origins of Civilization in Greek and Roman Thought* (London 1986) 146.

<sup>3</sup> The contrast between the prologue and the first fable is discussed by Hawkins, *Iambic Poetics* 134-136. His arguments will be considered in detail below.

There is no peace or friendship, no whisper of the Golden Age. Nor is this fable an exception.

Babrius's fables as a whole are filled with bloodshed and lies, and the promises he makes in the prologue are never fulfilled.

It would be easy enough to dismiss the stark contrast between the prologue and the fables as an accident, or perhaps a simple lack of artistry on Babrius's part. Tom Hawkins, however, has demonstrated that this would be a mistake. Hawkins devotes a chapter to Babrius in his book *Iambic Poetics in the Roman Empire*, and he demonstrates that Babrius's first prologue is deeply disingenuous.<sup>4</sup> As Hawkins shows, Babrius's promise to soften his iambs is insincere, and its main purpose is to underline the extent to which Babrius is not softening them. Post-Hawkins, it is impossible to read Babrius's prologue in a straightforward manner. If Babrius is openly lying about the "gentle" nature of his iambs, then it is not surprising that the Golden Age too turns out to be a lie.

In what follows, I will situate Babrius's first prologue in his wider educational program. Babrius's authorial pose is that of an educator writing fables for his young pupil(s).<sup>5</sup> I will argue that Babrius's fables have a unique pedagogical bent: rather than simply teaching moral lessons, Babrius's fables aim to teach his students how to think and how to interpret evidence. Against this backdrop, it is less surprising that he would create a prologue that is a puzzle. As we will see, the reader who correctly interprets the prologue realizes that it represents a false or unrealistic version of the world, whereas the fables show the truth: human nature is too violent for an ideal Golden Age to have ever existed.

---

<sup>4</sup> Babrius is discussed in the second chapter (87-141).

<sup>5</sup> The first prologue is addressed to the child Branchus, the second to the son of King Alexander. The two addressees may or may not be the same person. Perry, *Babrius and Phaedrus* lvi-lvii assumes that there are two separate boys being addressed. W. G. Rutherford, *Babrius, edited with Introductory Dissertations, Critical Notes, Commentary and Lexicon* (London 1883) xi-xii calls the debate "trivial," and W. H. Oldaker, "Greek Fables and Babrius" *GaR* 3 (1934) 85-93 at 87 pleads uncertainty. The most convincing explanation is that of Hawkins: both boys are fictional (Hawkins, *Iambic Poetics* 88 n. 3 and 97).

My argument will progress through four stages. First, I will discuss Babrius's unique didactic program. Then I will analyze the first prologue, demonstrating that it contains clues to the implausibility of its own Golden Age. After this, I will look at the first fable in some detail, for its implicit "moral" is to not trust messengers sent on ahead (i.e., the prologue itself). Finally, I will situate that first fable in its wider context by discussing Babrius's fables as a whole. In the end, it will be seen that the puzzle of the prologue is merely one in a series of puzzles: Babrius writes fables that must be solved, and which teach thinking as much as they teach moral lessons.

*Babrius the Educator*

When I claim that Babrius's fables have a "unique" didactic function, I must be clear as to what I mean. Most fables may be considered didactic by the very nature of the genre: they teach moral lessons. Thus the famous fable of the lion and the mouse, in which a lion who spares a mouse's life later has his own life saved by that same mouse, advises the strong to be merciful toward the weak.<sup>6</sup> As so often in fables, the lesson is not abstractly moral ("Be merciful because mercy is good") but rather practical ("Be merciful because it may benefit you later").<sup>7</sup>

Fables may also be considered didactic because they were used as school texts. This is true of Babrius, as Maria Becker has shown.<sup>8</sup> In schools, fables were used for reading and dictation practice, and as the raw material for various kinds of writing exercises: the translation of verse into prose, the shortening or expansion of a story, the application of the fable to a historical event, the addition of various morals, and so forth.<sup>9</sup> One of the more charming pieces

---

<sup>6</sup> Bab. 107; *Aesopica* 150. For the *Aesopica*, I use the numbering system of B.E. Perry, *Aesopica: A Series of Texts relating to Aesop or Ascribed to Him or Closely Connected to the Literary Tradition That Bears His Name*, Vol. 1 (Urbana [Ill.] 1952).

<sup>7</sup> On the practical ethics of fables, cf. C. A. Zafiroopoulos, *Ethics in Aesop's Fables: The Augustana Collection* (Leiden 2001).

<sup>8</sup> For fables used in education generally, cf. M. Becker, "Gefälschtes Fabula Docet in der Fabeldichtung des Babrios" *RhM* 149 (2006) 168–184, at 168–169. On Babrius specifically, cf. pp. 169–171.

<sup>9</sup> Becker, *RhM* 149 (2006) 168–169. M. Luzzatto, "La cultura letteraria di Babrio" *AnnPisa* 3 (1975) 17–97, at 68–69 argues that several of Babrius's fables are in fact modeled on common rhetorical exercises.

of evidence for Babrius's use in schools are certain wax tablets of Babrius that appear to be written by a student, based on their errors.<sup>10</sup>

Both of those didactic functions are true not just of Babrius, but of the fable genre more generally. Rather than focus on them, then, I will in this section address aspects of Babrius's educational program that are unique to his fables: (1) their focus on inner thoughts rather than external actions, (2) the lack of explicit morals, and (3) the need for reader interpretation. It is these aspects of Babrius that will help explain how and why his first prologue is a puzzle.

Niklas Holzberg observes that Babrius, more than any other fabulist, privileges internal conflict over external conflict.<sup>11</sup> Holzberg demonstrates this with reference to Babrius 129, in which a donkey tries to imitate a puppy in the hopes of being accepted as a pet. As Holzberg shows, this fable concentrates more on the donkey's experience and thoughts than on the action of the fable. A similar trend can be observed in Fable 62:

Ἡμίονος ἀργῆς χιλῶν ἐσθίων φάτνης  
καὶ κριθιήσας ἐτρόχαζε κάφώνει  
τένοντα σείων “ἵππος ἐστὶ μοι μήτηρ,  
ἐγὼ δ' ἐκείνης οὐδὲν ἐν δρόμοις ἦττων.”  
ἄφνω δ' ἔπαυσε τὸν δρόμον κατηφήσας:  
ὄνου γὰρ εὐθὺς πατρὸς ὦν ἀνεμνήσθη.<sup>12</sup>

A half-ass, while eating fodder from an indolent manger,  
became overfull of oats. He raced about and tossed his  
neck and cried, “A horse is my mother,  
and I am no less than her in running!”  
But suddenly he stopped his run and fell silent.  
For at once he remembered that his father was an ass.

<sup>10</sup> On these, cf. D. C. Hesselring, “On Waxen Tablets with Fables of Babrius (Tabulae Ceratae Assendelftianaee)” *JHS* (1892-1893) 293-314.

<sup>11</sup> N. Holzberg, *The Ancient Fable: An Introduction*, Trans. C. Jackson (Bloomington 2002) 57-58. Cf. also Zafiroopoulos, *Ethics in Aesop's Fables* 35 and M. Nøjgaard, “The Moralisation of the Fable: From Aesop to Romulus,” in H. Bekker-Nielson (ed.), *Medieval Narrative: A Symposium. Proceedings of the Third International Symposium Organized by the Centre for the Study of Vernacular Literature in the Middle Ages* (Odense 1979) 31-43, at 35.

<sup>12</sup> The Greek is from Perry, *Babrius and Phaedrus*; all translations are my own.

This is a fable about a low character who puts on airs and then is shamed for it. This is not an uncommon fable plot, but normally such fables focus on the punishment suffered by the unworthy character. For example, the jackdaw of Phaedrus 1.3 puts on peacock feathers and tries to join the peacock tribe, only to be violently driven away first by the peacocks and then by his fellow jackdaws. If the prideful jackdaw learns anything from this, the fable does not say; instead, the moral is spoken by one of the other jackdaws who berates the one that put on airs.

Babrius 62 has a different focus: the mule goes on an inner journey. He eats too much and becomes overexcited, he runs about and speaks with pride, and then he himself realizes his mistake and is ashamed. The conflict between his two halves – proud horse and humble donkey – structures the fable. Holzberg argues that Babrius's focus on inner thought makes Babrius a good storyteller, but that the moral import of his fables can get lost.<sup>13</sup> Here I disagree; not only is the moral meaning apparent, but I would suggest that Babrius's focus on inner thoughts has a didactic function. He is demonstrating good and bad ways of thinking. What matters in Fable 62 is not just that a humble person should not *act* proud, but also that such an individual should personally realize the truth of his low identity. His behavior then changes not because of external punishment, but because of this internal realization.

A second key feature of Babrius is also illustrated by Fable 62: the lack of a moral. Most of Babrius's fables do not contain explicit morals, or at least, not in their original form.<sup>14</sup> Most of the morals that appear in the manuscript tradition were added by later editors, who, as Becker has shown, were motivated by the desire to clarify the more obscure or complicated fables of

---

<sup>13</sup> Holzberg, *The Ancient Fable* 55 and 57.

<sup>14</sup> Becker, *RhM* 149 (2006) discusses this at length. She points out that even in Codex A (in which morals were added by later editors), only 61 of the 144 fables contain morals, and many of those morals are considered spurious (171).

Babrius.<sup>15</sup> Yet this lack of morals does not mean that Babrius's fables are without authoritative meaning. Becker argues that for the most part, Babrius's fables do not need morals: Babrius makes the meaning of the fable clear through pointed vocabulary and by telescoping the fable's end, so that putting a moral on the fable becomes superfluous.<sup>16</sup>

This is certainly true of Fable 62. The reader knows from the first two lines that this mule is a contemptible character: he is idle, lazy, and eats so much that he is affected by κριθήσας, a disease that (according to Xenophon) attacks horses.<sup>17</sup> Rather than inheriting nobility from his horse mother, this mule has inherited her weakness. Hence, it is all the more ironic when the mule begins to put on airs; the reader knows already that the mule will not be allowed to continue in this prideful state. For such a fable, a moral would be superfluous. It is obvious that this fable derides those who put on airs that are unmerited, and the reader can deduce the lesson for himself. This, I argue, is one of Babrius's major educational projects. By forcing his readers to interpret the fables for themselves, Babrius places less emphasis on the lesson of the fable and more emphasis on the reader's ability to derive that lesson for themselves. The fable of the proud mule is a warning against unmerited pride, yes, but it is also an opportunity for the readers to come to this conclusion for themselves.<sup>18</sup>

Babrius's fables could thus be considered puzzles that require reader interpretation. Importantly, these are puzzles that can be solved (and often easily!). There is evidence in the second prologue that Babrius prides himself on the clarity of his fables, something lost on his imitators (2 *prol.* 9-12):

---

<sup>15</sup> Becker, *RhM* 149 (2006) 173-184.

<sup>16</sup> Becker, *RhM* 149 (2006) 174.

<sup>17</sup> *Xen Eq.* 4.2.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. L. Kurke, *Aesopic Conversations: Popular Tradition, Cultural Dialogue, and the Invention of Greek Prose* (Princeton [N.J.] 2011) 201, where she argues that an audience will be more willing to accept the message of a fable if they reach the conclusion for themselves.

ὕπ' ἐμοῦ δὲ πρώτου τῆς θύρης ἀνοιχθείσης  
εἰσῆλθον ἄλλοι, καὶ σοφωτέρης μούσης  
γρίφοις ὁμοίας ἐκφέρουσι ποιήσεις,  
μαθόντες οὐδὲν πλεῖον ἢ 'μὲ γινώσκειν.

After the door had been opened by me first,  
others came in, and with a more learned muse  
they publish poems similar to riddles,  
having learned nothing more than to know me.

These imitators are, according to Babrius's own description, people who have read Babrius and want to be like him. Yet they fail to do so, because they are not able to truly recreate Babrius's style. The imitators write fables that are like γρίφοις, or riddles, whereas Babrius writes in a "clear style," λευκῆ ῥήσει. In other words, while Babrius may write fables without morals, the moral meaning of his fables is still clear to anyone who thinks about them. Babrius's imitators, not understanding this, write fables that are genuinely impossible to understand and hence are more like riddles. Presumably these fables lacked morals, like Babrius's, but did not provide the readers with enough information to determine the meaning of the fables.<sup>19</sup>

Having looked at Babrius's particular educational program, it is apparent that Babrius encourages active thought in his readers. Good readers must pay attention to clues within the fables in order to understand the implied moral, and they should learn from the good and bad ways of thinking illustrated in the fables. In what follows, I will argue that Babrius's first prologue is itself a puzzle. Like the fables themselves, this prologue telescopes its own "moral," although more subtly than do the fables.

### *The First Prologue*

The first prologue runs as follows:

---

<sup>19</sup> Insofar as Babrius's fables do not spell out their moral, but only hint at it, they are also similar to riddles. But there is a difference between riddles that can be solved with thought, and riddles which are simply too obscure to be meaningful. Babrius's imitators wrote the latter kind.



Γενεὴ δικαίων ἦν τὸ πρῶτον ἀνθρώπων,  
 ὧν Βράγχε τέκνον, ἦν καλοῦσι χρυσεῖην,  
 μεθ' ἣν γενέσθαι φασὶν ἀργυρῆν ἄλλην·  
 τρίτη δ' ἀπ' αὐτῶν ἔσμεν ἡ σιδηρεΐη.  
 ἐπὶ τῆς δὲ χρυσεῖς καὶ τὰ λοιπὰ τῶν ζῴων  
 φωνὴν ἔναρθρον εἶχε καὶ λόγους ἦδει  
 οἴους περ ἡμεῖς μυθέομεν πρὸς ἀλλήλους,  
 ἀγοραὶ δὲ τούτων ἦσαν ἐν μέσαις ὕλαις,  
 ἐλάλει δὲ πεύκη καὶ τὰ φύλλα τῆς δάφνης,  
 καὶ πλωτὸς ἰχθὺς συνελάλει φίλῳ ναύτῃ,  
 στρουθοὶ δὲ συνετὰ πρὸς γεωργὸν ὠμίλουν.  
 ἐφύετ' ἐκ γῆς πάντα μηδὲν αἰτούσης,  
 θνητῶν δ' ὑπῆρχε καὶ θεῶν ἔταιρειή.  
 μάθοις ἂν οὕτω ταῦτ' ἔχοντα καὶ γνοίης  
 ἐκ τοῦ σοφοῦ γέροντος ἧμιν Αἰσώπου  
 μύθους φράσαντος τῆς ἐλευθέρης μούσης·  
 ὧν νῦν ἕκαστον ἀνθίσας ἐμῇ μνήμῃ  
 μελισταγῆς σοὶ λωτοκηρίον θήσω,  
 πικρῶν ἰάμβων σκληρὰ κῶλα θηλύνας.<sup>20</sup>

The race of just men existed first,  
 Branchus my child, which they call golden,  
 after which they say another race, silver, came to be;  
 and we are third after them, the iron generation.  
 In the Golden Age, the other living creatures also  
 possessed an articulate voice and knew words  
 such as we speak to one another,  
 and they had meetings in the middle of the woods.  
 The pine chatted and the leaves of the laurel,  
 and the swimming fish chatted with the friendly sailor,  
 and sparrows spoke intelligent things to the farmer.  
 Everything grew from the earth without it asking anything in return,  
 and friendship existed between mortals and gods.  
 You can learn and judge that these things were so  
 from wise old Aesop,  
 who spoke fables to us with the free muse.<sup>21</sup>  
 Now, having embroidered each of these with my own memory,  
 I will give them to you, a honeycomb dripping honey,  
 after softening the harsh limbs of the bitter iambs.

<sup>20</sup> This is the prologue as Perry reconstructs it. There are variant readings of the prologue offered by various manuscripts. B. E. Perry, "Babriana" *CP* 52 (1957) 16-23 at 17 explains that the prologue text in the principal manuscript, A, is affected by interpolations, and must be restored through papyrus P (cf. also Perry, *Babrius and Phaedrus* lxix and 2-3).

<sup>21</sup> For Babrius's "free muse," see especially Hawkins, *Iambic Poetics* 100, 108-109, and 114. The most direct meaning seems to be that Aesop wrote in prose, rather than verse, but there is clearly also a denial of Aesop's slave status here. Luzzatto emends the text to avoid this denial in her 1986 edition of Babrius and has οὐκ ἐλευθέρης instead (M. J. Luzzatto and A. La Penna [eds.], *Babrius: Mythiambi Aesopei* [Leipzig 1986]).

This prologue begins in a deliberately Hesiodic vein.<sup>22</sup> It describes the metallic ages of man in a way that recalls but does not precisely imitate Hesiod's version. In Babrius there are three ages, rather than five, and there is no careful description of each age. Instead, Babrius describes only the Golden Age. Furthermore, whereas Hesiod does not make communal speech a feature of the Golden Age, Babrius foregrounds that quality above all. As Richard Hunter discusses, there are many reasons for Babrius to allude to Hesiod, above all the fact that Hesiod could rightly be seen as the first fabulist.<sup>23</sup> In addition, Babrius, like Hesiod, is writing a didactic text, as the address to Βράγχε τέκνον makes clear. Babrius opens as though mid-lecture, telling his young pupil the history of the Ages of Man.

The key feature of the Golden Age for Babrius is the existence of communal speech. Lines 5-7 state that τὰ λοιπὰ τῶν ζώων ("the other living creatures") know the same language as men and line 8 describes the assemblies, ἀγοραί, that take place amid the trees. This suggests a meeting of the minds, in which various species can come together to exchange ideas. Line 9 establishes that trees can speak, line 10 that fish can speak, line 11 that birds can speak. Lines 12-13 play with the formula a bit: the earth does not speak, for she provides livelihood without asking anything in return (μηδὲν αἰτούσης), and the gods share not speech but friendship, ἐταιρεία, with mortals. These lines are merely a variation on a theme, however; it is clear that the earth could ask for something if she wished to, and that the friendship between gods and mortals is part and parcel with the shared communication that characterizes this universe.

There is nothing unusual about fables being introduced as belonging to a fantastical past in which animals could speak. Both Socrates in Xenophon's *Memorabilia* and Aesop in the *Life*

---

<sup>22</sup> For an excellent discussion of the Hesiodic allusions in the first prologue, cf. R. Hunter, *Hesiodic Voices: Studies in the Ancient Reception of Hesiod's Works and Days* (Cambridge 2014) 227-233.

<sup>23</sup> Hunter, *Hesiodic Voices* 229.

of *Aesop* set their fables in an unspecified past during which animals could talk with humans.<sup>24</sup>

What is unusual is for this fantastical past to be explicitly labeled as the Golden Age. The name “Golden Age” brings with it certain implications, above all the expectation that life in the Golden Age will be easy and violence-free.<sup>25</sup> Traditional fables could not be set in such an age because fables turn on conflict: most fables either involve a stronger animal killing a weaker one, or the weaker one deceiving the stronger. In fact, scholars who attempt to characterize the world of fable generally emphasize its overwhelming pessimism.<sup>26</sup> There is a reason that authors tend to set their fables in an unspecified past: the name “Golden Age” brings with it implications that are incompatible with traditional fables.<sup>27</sup> Hence, for Babrius to explicitly set his fables in the

---

<sup>24</sup> Xen. *Mem.* 2.7.13: ‘For they say, that once when animals could speak...’ (φασὶ γάρ, ὅτε φωνήεντα ἦν τὰ ζῷα...); *Life of Aesop* G99, ‘During the time when animals spoke the same language as humans...’ (καθ’ ὃν καιρὸν ἦν ὁμόφωνα τὰ ζῷα τοῖς ἀνθρώποις...); *Life of Aesop* G133, ‘When animals spoke the same language...’ (ὅτε ἦν τὰ ζῷα ὁμόφωνα...).

<sup>25</sup> Many studies of the Golden Age tradition exist. See in particular Blundell, *The Origins of Civilization* 135-64; J. Dillon, “Plato and the Golden Age,” *Hermathena* 153 (1992) 21-36, at 24-33; B. Gatz, *Weltalter, goldene Zeit und sinnverwandte Vorstellungen* (Hildesheim 1967); Gera, *Ancient Greek Ideas* 18-67; and W. K. C. Guthrie, *In The Beginning: Some Greek Views on the Origins of Life and the Early State of Man* (Ithaca 1957) 63-79.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, P. duBois, *Slaves and Other Objects* (Chicago 2003) 170-88 and Holzberg, *The Ancient Fable* 48-49 and 61-62. Cf. also K. Rothwell, “Aristophanes’ *Wasps* and the Sociopolitics of Aesop’s Fables,” *CJ* 93 (1995) 233–254, at 234-236; Rothwell argues that fables may express an optimistic perspective, but that these are fewer in number than the pessimistic ones. Also useful is Zafiroopoulos, *Ethics in Aesop’s Fables*. Zafiroopoulos discusses the ethical perspective of the *Fables of Aesop*, which are resolutely practical in nature: how to deal with the world as it is. The idea that fables express a sense of resignation toward an unfair world is especially prevalent in scholarship on the fabulist Phaedrus. For a few examples, see F. R. Adrados, *History of the Graeco-Latin Fable*, Vol. 2, *The Fable during the Roman Empire and in the Middle Ages*, Trans. Leslie A. Ray (Leiden 2000) 154; W. M. Bloomer, *Latinity and Literary Society at Rome* (Philadelphia 1997) 73-75; and E. Champlin, “Phaedrus the Fabulous,” *JRS* 95 (2005) 97–123, at 115-116.

<sup>27</sup> I thus take issue with scholars who state in passing that fables traditionally take place in the “Golden Age,” without making a distinction between an *ideal* fantastical past (a Golden Age) and an unspecified, imperfect fantastical past (the “once upon a time” world of fables). Scholars who refer to the Golden Age as the setting for fables include Gera, *Ancient Greek Ideas* 20; duBois, *Slaves and Other Objects* 172; and G. Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry* (Baltimore 1979) 314. That fables take place in the Golden Age seems also to be the perspective of J. Heath, *The Talking Greeks: Speech, Animals, and the Other in Homer, Aeschylus, and Plato* (Cambridge 2005) 12-14; or at least, Heath makes no distinction between the Golden Age and other fantastical pasts that contain talking animals. Hawkins *Iambic Poetics* 136 suggests that earlier fables took place in the Golden Age although Babrius’s do not. I must emphasize that Babrius is unusual for using the title “Golden Age” for his fantastical past, and that matters.

Golden Age suggests that he will either be telling nontraditional fables with a happier tone, or that the Golden Age is not as perfect as tradition suggests.<sup>28</sup>

Nor is it fair to claim that Babrius sets his fables in the Golden Age merely to explain the speech of animals, without an awareness of the implications. For rather than downplaying the idealistic aspects of the Golden Age, Babrius leans into them. His prologue opens with the phrase Γενεῆ δικαίων, “the race of just ones,” establishing immediately that the humans of the Golden Age are characterized by their justice. The speech acts described are mutual (7 πρὸς ἀλλήλους; 10 συνελάλει.) and friendly (10 φίλω ναύτη).<sup>29</sup> The earth does not merely provide food, but does so without asking anything in return, turning the usual bountifulness of the Golden Age into a gift of the (personified, sentient) earth. To further cement the idyllic nature of this age, the final word of the opening thirteen lines is ἐταιρείη, friendship. The passage begins with justice and ends with friendship, and in between passes through many a (friendly) conversation. Again, this can be compared to the introductions to the fables found in Xenophon and the *Life of Aesop*: those fantastic pasts had only one attribute – speaking animals. Babrius embeds the speech of animals into an explicitly idyllic universe, one that runs contrary to the pessimistic tone that runs through traditional Aesopic fables.

---

<sup>28</sup> It is possible that Babrius gets the idea of a Golden Age setting from Callimachus. *Iamb 2* speaks of a time during which birds and sea creatures and four-legged creatures could talk (*Ia.* 2 fr. 192.1-3). There is testimony from Philo (*De Confusione Linguarum* 6-8) that suggests that Callimachus may have portrayed this fabular past as a utopian time; Philo describes a time when animals could talk and claims that it was a time full of good things, in language that seems to recall Callimachus and so may be based on him; cf. Gera, *Ancient Greek Ideas* 31-32 for an analysis of Philo and Callimachus. If this is true, then Babrius may be basing his account of the Golden Age on Callimachus. It is even possible that Babrius owes his “puzzle” to Callimachus, as Callimachus similarly undermines the idealism of the Golden Age in *Iamb 2* (fr. 92, lines 5-6 claim that Zeus is just, yet acted unjustly in depriving animals of speech). Babrius is, after all, highly indebted to Callimachus, as Hawkins, *Iambic Poetics* has shown.

<sup>29</sup> Lines 7 and 10 are found in manuscript P but not A.

Furthermore, the first thirteen lines of the prologue contain allusions to the traditional world of fable – except that the traditional aspects have been turned upside down.<sup>30</sup> Lines 10-11 each involve an animal / human pair: a fish who talks to the (friendly) sailor, and a sparrow who chats with the farmer. These pairings are traditional in the Aesopic corpus; fish often interact with humans in fables, and birds often interact with farmers. However, the interactions between these pairs of creatures are not traditionally friendly, as Babrius himself demonstrates. In Babrius's fables, interactions between fish and humans have but one outcome: the human kills the fish, who either does not speak at all (Fables 4, 9, 61) or who unsuccessfully pleads for his life (Fable 6). There are no positive interactions between humans and fish anywhere in Babrius except the prologue. In a similar vein, farmers in fables are not traditionally friendly toward birds. In Fable 13 cranes are the enemies, *πολεμίας*, of crops (2). In Fable 26, cranes overrun a wheat field. The farmer of Fable 33 must protect his fields from birds, whereas in Fable 88 a lark flees as soon as the farmer arrives. In Fable 138 the relationship turns deadly, as a farmer kills a partridge. As with the fish, there are no fables that feature a friendly relationship between farmers and any kind of bird – except in the prologue.

The point here is not that the fables of Babrius are especially violent; these fables have the same outcomes where they appear elsewhere. Instead, the point is that Babrius's prologue sanitizes these traditionally violent relationships and turns them friendly. In the Golden Age, humans do not need to kill fish. In a world without agriculture, birds do not harass farmers. This is a utopic vision of what happens when animals and humans share speech. Of course, in the paragraph above I used Babrius's own fables to show the normally violent relationship between fish and humans, between farmers and birds. This is because the fables of Babrius show a vastly

---

<sup>30</sup> The Golden Age, of course, is often structured around the inversion of present-day ills, for which see Blundell, *The Origins of Civilization*, 135-136.

different world, one in which shared speech does not alter man's relationship with the animal world, but merely allows him to pair violent speech with violent action.

But I am getting ahead of myself. There is one more aspect of Babrius's Golden Age that seems to directly rewrite the traditional world of the fable. Babrius's Golden Age contains both a farmer and a sailor, two occupations that are usually banned from the Golden Age but which are fairly standard in fables. The presence of the farmer may be an allusion to Hesiod's Golden Age, which also includes one. Hunter suggests, convincingly, that a "farmer" who lives in a Golden Age is a man who collects the produce that the earth freely offers, rather than a man who works the earth.<sup>31</sup> That interpretation could work for the farmer of Babrius's prologue, since he is merely shown chatting to birds, not doing farm labor. Similarly, the sailor in the prologue does not sail or fish, but rather spends his time talking. The mention of these occupations, followed quickly by an insistence that they do not work but merely converse, represents another revision of the traditional world of fable. In fables, farmers and sailors definitely work, and they do not usually have easy lives.<sup>32</sup> But here in the prologue, Babrius suggests that in his Golden Age, life will be easy even for these individuals.

The first thirteen lines, then, go much further than merely establishing that fables take place in a fantastical past in which animals can talk. This is an explicitly happy and ideal age in which shared speech leads to friendship, even between humans and the animals who, in fables, tend to be their enemies. Babrius has written a Golden Age that deliberately contrasts with the

---

<sup>31</sup> Hunter, *Hesiodic Voices* 231-233.

<sup>32</sup> For farmers involved with farm labor in Babrius, cf. Fables 2, 13, 26, 33, 37, 55, and 88. There are some farmers who are not shown working the land (although none who simply pick up produce that the earth produces). For farmers not working, cf. Fables 71 and 138. There are no fables that directly mention sailors in Babrius, but there are fables with fishermen: 4, 6, 9, 61. The one reference to sailing in Babrius involves a storm (117).

traditional world of fables. Then, in the last six lines of the prologue, Babrius invites the reader to compare the Golden Age of the prologue to the fables that follow (14-19):

μάθοις ἂν οὕτω ταῦτ' ἔχοντα καὶ γνοίης  
 ἐκ τοῦ σοφοῦ γέροντος ἡμῖν Αἰσώπου  
 μύθους φράσαντος τῆς ἐλευθέρης μούσης·  
 ὧν νῦν ἕκαστον ἀνθίσας ἐμῇ μνήμῃ  
 μελισταγές σοι λωτοκηρίον θήσω,  
 πικρῶν ἰάμβων σκληρὰ κῶλα θηλύνας.

You can learn and judge that these things were so  
 from wise old Aesop,  
 who spoke fables to us with the free muse.  
 Now, having embroidered each of these with my own memory,  
 I will give them to you, a honeycomb dripping honey,  
 after softening the harsh limbs of the bitter iambs.

In these lines, Babrius invites the reader to compare his description of the Golden Age to his fables. Or so I interpret the ταῦτα. Babrius tells the reader to learn and judge ταῦτα (“these things”) through Aesop’s fables. The ταῦτα is obscure, but it must refer to the description of the Golden Age that Babrius has just finished giving: not only the existence of talking animals (which Aesop’s fables will indeed confirm), but also the friendly nature of their communication. Fables, says Babrius, will establish how “these things” actually were. Babrius goes on to state that he will provide these fables to the reader (18), establishing that the comparison must happen within this very fable book: Babrius’s Golden Age versus Babrius’s fables.

We saw in the last section that Babrius’s fables aim not simply to teach moral lessons, but also to teach students how to think. With that in mind, it is worth noting that the two verbs Babrius uses, μαθηθῶ and γινώσκω, both refer to active types of thought: μαθηθῶ is to learn and γινώσκω is to come to know, to discern, to judge. Babrius instructs his readers to actively consider whether Aesop’s fables match the Golden Age picture that the prologue has painted. Here the puzzle of the prologue makes its first explicit appearance. For we see that Babrius is not

merely giving a “Once upon a time” opening, never to be critically considered. Babrius creates an explicitly nontraditional setting for fables, and then asks the reader to remember it while reading the fables that follow. The implication is that the fables will either confirm the happy picture painted thus far – or that the reader should wonder why it does not.

In the final three lines of the prologue, Babrius doubles down on the fiction that his fables will be happy. In claiming that he will “soften” the iamb, Babrius is promising to avoid or mitigate the harsh subject matter that is traditionally associated with the iambic meter.<sup>33</sup> We have seen already that Babrius's Golden Age represents a softening of fable: enemies become friends, speech is used for amity not for violence, and life is easy. In the final lines of his prologue, Babrius reassures the reader that just as they should not worry about the traditional content of fable, so they should not worry about the traditional sting of iambic. The fables that follow will be sweet and honeyed – or so Babrius promises.

Hawkins has shown that Babrius's disavowal here is disingenuous,<sup>34</sup> and that by reminding the reader of the traditional sting of iambic, Babrius is giving “a nod to his readers to kindle the latent iambic mode in his collection whenever the need or opportunity should arise.”<sup>35</sup> As Hawkins goes on to demonstrate, Babrius's actual use of iambic is varied. Babrius, like Callimachus, frequently uses iambs not to put the rich and powerful in their place, but to critique

---

<sup>33</sup> As is most exhaustively discussed by Hawkins, *Iambic Poetics* (see especially pp. 96-98). Cf. also Holzberg, *The Ancient Fable* 53 and Perry, *Babrius and Phaedrus* 4-5. All three authors argue that the “softening” refers to the content of Babrius's fables. For a different interpretation, cf. M. J. Luzzatto, “Fra poesia e retorica: La clausola del ‘Coliambo’ di Babrio,” *QUCC* 19 (1985) 97-127, especially pp. 108-113. She argues that when Babrius claims to “soften” his iambs, he is referring to his meter. As Luzzatto demonstrates at 111-113, the choliambic meter was traditionally felt to be harsh because it ended with the sequence  $\text{— — —}$ . Babrius fixes this by lengthening the final syllable, hence softening the harsh sound of the meter. While I agree with Hawkins that the meaning of “soften” is primarily ethical for Babrius, I do not discount the possibility that Babrius could also be referring to the metrical experimentation described by Luzzatto. It would be in character for a sophisticated writer like Babrius to make multiple allusions at once.

<sup>34</sup> Hawkins, *Iambic Poetics* 96-98.

<sup>35</sup> Hawkins, *Iambic Poetics* 97.



those on the bottom. But these top-down fables coexist with bottom-up fables, and Babrius is also perfectly happy to use the iambic mode to put his rivals in their place. In other words, although Babrius does in fact mitigate the harsh iamb in the majority of his fables, he does not break completely with tradition, but instead actively engages with it. In promising to soften the iambs, Babrius is actually asking the reader to pay attention to when he does this, and when he does not.

The same is true of Babrius's Golden Age. Babrius acts as though he is breaking with tradition, that he will tell happy fables about friendly interactions. This prepares the reader to pay attention to how speech is actually used in the fables that follow, especially since Babrius invites the reader to judge "these things" based on the fables. But a reader who hopes to find the Golden Age in Babrius finds something entirely different when the fables begin.

### *The First Fable*

Babrius's first fable shatters the world of the prologue:<sup>36</sup>

Ἄνθρωπος ἦλθεν εἰς ὄρος κυνηγήσων,  
τόξου βολῆς ἔμπειρος· ἦν δὲ τῶν ζώων  
φυγή τε πάντων καὶ φόβου δρόμος πλήρης  
λέων δὲ μῦνος προῦκαλεῖτο θαρσῆσας  
αὐτῷ μάχεσθαι. "μεῖνον" εἶπε "μὴ σπεύσης"  
ἄνθρωπος αὐτῷ, "μήδ' ἐπελίσις νίκη·  
τῷ δ' ἀγγέλω μου πρῶτον ἐντυχῶν γνώση  
τί σοι ποιητόν ἐστιν." εἶτα τοξεύει  
μικρὸν διαστάς. χῶ μὲν οἰστός ἐκρύφθη  
λέοντος ὑγραῖς χολάσιν· ὁ δὲ λέων δείσας  
ῶρμησε φεύγειν ἐς νάπας ἐρημαίας.  
τούτου δ' ἀλώπηξ οὐκ ἄπωθεν εἰστήκει.  
ταύτης δὲ θαρσεῖν καὶ μένειν κελευούσης,  
"οὐ με πλανήσεις" φησίν, "οὐδ' ἐνεδρεύσεις·  
ὄπου γὰρ οὕτω πικρὸν ἄγγελον πέμπει,  
πῶς αὐτὸς ἤδη φοβερός ἐστι γινώσκω."

A man came to a mountain to hunt,

<sup>36</sup> The fable is unattested before Babrius, and so it is possible that this fable is his own composition. Cf. Luzzatto and La Penna, *Babrius* for the app. crit.

skilled in the shooting of a bow. A flight of all living creatures occurred, and their running was full of fear, and only a lion, taking courage, called for the man to fight. "Wait," the man said to him. "Don't be hasty. And do not hope for victory. Once you first encounter my messenger, you will know what you must do." Then he shot his bow, standing a short distance away. And the arrow was buried in the wet guts of the lion. And the lion, afraid, hastened to flee into the lonely glens. A fox stood not far from him. When she urged him to take courage and stand firm, he said, "You will not lead me astray, nor will you entrap me. For when he sends such a bitter messenger, I already discern how fearsome the man himself is."

The first line of this fable is emphatic and disturbing: a man, ἄνθρωπος, comes to the mountains to hunt. The word ἄνθρωπος links this fable closely to the prologue, which promised in its first line that the Golden Age was made entirely of ἄνθρωποι δίκαιοι. The prologue also depicted the Golden Age as a time when there was no need for hunting. Yet the very first line of this first fable ends with the word κυνηγήσων, "in order to hunt." This man is not only a hunter, but one "skilled in the shooting of the bow" (2). This is a world in which hunting has existed for a long time. The presence of the hunter causes a mass exodus of all living creatures (2-3 τῶν ζώων...πάντων). Again, this provides a link to the prologue, which used the phrase τὰ λοιπὰ τῶν ζώων to refer to the non-human creatures that possessed speech. By stating that all the animals fled, the fable posits a sharp divide between humans and animals; even the presence of a single human drives away all of the animals.

It is still, however, a world in which animals and humans can communicate. In the prologue, Babrius insisted that the speech shared among the various species led to friendly communication. Here, we see for the first time what that speech would actually be like. The lion challenges the man to a fight, and the man taunts the lion before wounding him with an arrow.

The speech between the animals is no less problematic. When the fox recommends that the lion stand firm and face the man, the lion retorts that the fox will not trick or trap him (14 “οὐ με πλανήσεις” φησὶν, “οὐδ’ ἐνεδρεύσεις.”). The lion assumes that the fox’s speech is meant as an act of deception and violence. For this to be his first assumption implies a world in which speech is not generally used for friendly ends.

This is a world that is far removed from the peaceful Golden Age promised in the prologue. The fact that so many problematic aspects occur in the first three lines – the man coming to hunt, the flight of *all* of the animals – demonstrates that this fable is meant to provide a sharp and deliberate contrast with the prologue.<sup>37</sup> Babrius has just promised that the fables will provide proof of what the Golden Age was like. The first fable that the reader encounters shows not a peaceful existence, but a world of conflict and deception.

The sharp contrast between the prologue and the first fable has been discussed by Hawkins.<sup>38</sup> For Hawkins, the supremacy of an armed man can be seen as an undermining the very genre in which Babrius is working:

In many ways, this first story seems to spell the end for fables, since a Man, not even a hero and using post-Golden Age technology, has conquered the animal world. These animals can still talk, but only to let us know that even the Lion has been reduced to sharing the victimhood of all beasts before the horrors of Man’s weapons. The natural order and the Lion’s natural kingship have been overthrown by the unnatural innovations of Man. (134-135)

For Hawkins, Babrius’s first fable represents the end of both the Golden Age and the fable genre itself. This, I think, is only half-correct. Babrius’s first fable does undermine the Golden Age (or,

---

<sup>37</sup> I accept the order of the fables as represented by Perry, *Babrius and Phaedrus*, which is in turn based on the Codex Athous. Perry himself does not accept that this is the original order of the fables; he believes that the alphabetical arrangement of the fables over two books is the work of later editors (n. 2 at lv-ix). However, Perry’s argument is, I think, based too heavily on a literal reading of Babrius’s second prologue (lines 9-12). I accept instead the arguments found in Holzberg, *The Ancient Fable* 53-55 that the arrangement of the Codex Athous is likely ancient.

<sup>38</sup> Hawkins, *Iambic Poetics* 134-136.

at least, the Golden Age as Babrius himself has described it), but not the genre of fables. The plot of Babrius's first fable is not an uncommon one; in the larger fable tradition, humans often clash violently with animals, and they frequently win using their superior wits and/or technology.<sup>39</sup> Neither technology nor violence are out of place in the fable genre. Babrius's first fable should not be seen as the end of the fable genre, but rather a return to how the fable genre is traditionally characterized: full of violence, with armed man as the enemy of animals.

Hawkins goes on to suggest that the Golden Age of Babrius's prologue could represent an earlier era of iambic fables, in which cleverness rather than naked force reigned supreme.<sup>40</sup> This suggests that whereas earlier fables took place in a Golden Age, Babrius's fables represent a darker and more violent world. This, again, does not seem to be an accurate picture of Babrius's place in the tradition. Our earliest recorded fable, that of Hesiod's hawk and nightingale, is a story of naked force overpowering helpless prey. Naked force belongs in fables; it is the peaceful world of the prologue that is out of place.

In short, while I agree with Hawkins that the first prologue and the first fable contradict one another, I do not agree that the first fable "ends" the Golden Age or represents a new and darker form of fable. Instead, the first fable represents fable as it is traditionally told, namely a world of violence and mistrust. It reveals that Babrius is not breaking with tradition in the way that his prologue suggested: he is not telling a new and happier kind of fable.

---

<sup>39</sup> For humans hurting animals using weapons or technology in the larger fable tradition, cf. *Aesopica* Fables 2 (humans use clippers), 11 (nets), 18 (nets), 26 (nets), 38 (a yoke), 39 (birdlime), 48 (a cage), 51 (an axe), 59 (a file), 66 (a butcher), 75 (arrows), 86 (birdlime), 87 (a knife), 115 (birdlime), 131 (string), 140 (a club), 183 (a club), 193 (traps and a net), 194 (nets), 195 (a bridle), 212 (shearers), 238 (nets); Phaedrus Fables 3.2 (a pit and stones), 3.4 (a butcher), 3.7 (collar), 4 (reins and a bridle), 5.4 (a knife); Babrius Fables 11 (fire), 21 (butchers), 26 (a sling), 27 (rope), 37 (an axe), 43 (nets), 50 (hunter), 51 (shearing scissors), 61 (hunter), 98 (knife), 125 (clubs), 129 (clubs), 139 (club), 141 (clubs). As this shows, it is not unusual for humans in fables to clash with animals using weapons. Omitted are many of the fables that simply feature a hunter, with weapons implied but not explicitly described.

<sup>40</sup> Hawkins, *Iambic Poetics* 136.

In fact, I would suggest that the larger message of the first fable is that the prologue must not be trusted. The fable ends with a quip by the lion, who explains his decision to flee: the man has sent such a bitter messenger (15 *πικρὸν ἄγγελον*) that the lion discerns (16 *γινώσκω*) how fearful the man himself is (16 *πῶς αὐτὸς ἤδη φοβερός ἐστι*).<sup>41</sup> The lion has taken the man's arrow as proof not that the man's weapons are dangerous, but that the man himself (*αὐτός*) is fearsome. Here again we see Babrius's signature focus on inner thought. What matters is not just that the lion flees, but the thought process that leads to his flight. Yet the lion's conclusion is not a straightforward one.

Nowhere, either in Babrius or in the wider collection of fables, is a human being himself ever a source of fear for a lion.<sup>42</sup> Usually when humans encounter lions, it is the human who is afraid, even when the human is armed.<sup>43</sup> In the very few cases in which humans do defeat lions, there are mitigating circumstances. A good example of this is Babrius 98, in which a lion falls so deeply in love with a human woman that he agrees to have his teeth filed down and his claws pulled out. This allows the humans to beat the lion to death with clubs, an act of violence that is only possible because the lion has first been stripped of his natural defenses.<sup>44</sup> Notice there that even though the humans have weapons, they still cannot overcome the lion until he is deprived

---

<sup>41</sup> In the Codex Athous, it is the arrow that is fearful (*φοβερόν*) and the hunter who is bitter (*πικρός*). The Codex Bodleianus, a prose paraphrase, allows for the correct attribution of the adjectives, and both Luzzatto and La Penna (*Babrius* 4) and Perry (*Babrius and Phaedrus* 6) follow the paraphrase's reading here. For Babrius's use of the adjective *πικρός*, cf. Hawkins, *Iambic Poetics* 135-136. Hawkins points out that there is a huge contrast between Babrius's promise at the end of the first prologue that he will soften the "bitter iamb" (1 *prol.* 19 *πικρῶν ἰάμβων*) and the "bitter" arrow of Fable 1 (15 *πικρὸν ἄγγελον*). In essence, Babrius promises a lack of bitterness, then moves directly to a fable about a bitter arrow. This is but one demonstration of Hawkins' larger point that Babrius's denial of the iambic genre is insincere.

<sup>42</sup> Usually when humans and lions meet each other, the lion is the fearsome one, as in *Aes.* 32, 71, 144; *Phaedrus* 2.1; *Babrius* 23, 92, 136, and *Avianus* 24 (=Aphthonius 34).

<sup>43</sup> A second hunter appears in *Bab.* 92, but he is too frightened to actually face the lion. In that fable, admittedly, the hunter is a bad *exemplum*: he pretends to be hunting a lion, but then panics when a woodcutter offers to show him exactly where the lion is. Nevertheless, the point for my purposes is that the hunter, despite being armed, is terrified of the lion: so fearsome are lions themselves in the fables more generally.

<sup>44</sup> The only other exception I know of is in the *Greek Anthology* 6.217, in which a priest of Cybele scares away a lion with his cymbal. There, the fact that an effeminate man beats a lion is clearly part of the humor.

of his teeth and claws. The implication is that an armed human is no match for an "armed" lion. Generally, both lions and humans are aware of this.

Not so in Babrius 1. There, the lion is misled by the violence of the man's arrow and incorrectly assumes that he is no match for the human holding the bow, an act of cowardice highly out of character for a lion in a fable. The fox – always the perceptive one in fables – calls the lion out on this, encouraging him to stand and face the human. The lion refuses to listen. To put it in another way, the lion is misled by the man's (false) messenger. This is parallel with the experience of a person reading Babrius. The prologue, as we now see, is a false messenger: it promises that the fables will depict a peaceful Golden Age world in which animals and humans are friends, but what the fables actually show is a world of conflict and violence. The readers, unlike the lion, must not believe the "messenger," for if they do, they will be led astray as the lion was. The larger message of this fable seems to be "Don't trust the prologue."

This message is made clearer by the last, programmatic word of the first fable: γινώσκω. The lion flees because he discerns from the arrow what the man is like, yet any reader familiar with fables knows that the conclusion that the lion draws from this observation is false. In a similar way, when Babrius promises that his readers can know (1 *prol.* 14 γνοίης) what the Golden Age was like based on the fables, the expectation is that they will know that the Golden Age description is false, if they pay attention to the fables. Thus, the lion and Babrius's audience are paralleled: both must draw inferences from the evidence presented by another, so that they can come to know the truth. It is noteworthy, in light of these parallels, that the human in Fable 1 does not tell the lion what to believe; he merely sends an arrow and tells the lion to draw his own

conclusions.<sup>45</sup> A perceptive reader, given much the same instructions by Babrius, will not be fooled by the prologue.

Taken together, the prologue and the first fable teach a dark lesson. The Golden Age presents one model of the fantastical past, one in which speech is used for positive ends, whereas the fables present a different model, one in which the world is exactly the same as it is today – violent and unfair. It seems clear to me that the prologue represents the unrealistic version, whereas the fables show the truth. Human nature has always been this way, and open communication would not alter the inherent violence of the world. The rest of Babrius's fable collection only lends further support for this pessimistic message.

### *The World of Babrius's Fables*

Babrius's first fable is not an anomaly. A person reading through Babrius would continue to see speech used for violence and deception. In Fable 2, a man turns to the gods for help but receives none (so much for the *ἐταιρείη* promised by the prologue!).<sup>46</sup> In Fable 3, a goatherd throws a stone that breaks off the horn of a goat. He begs her not to report him but she sarcastically replies that her broken horn speaks for her. In Fable 4 a man hauls in a load of dead (and silent) fish (so much for the friendly sailor!). In Fable 5 two roosters fight – the winner beats up the loser, but then gets caught and killed by an eagle. Death follows upon death. In Fable 6 another fisherman appears; this one not only kills but mocks the fish. In Fable 7, a horse refuses to help his fellow farm animal, the ass, with his heavy load. When the ass drops dead, the

---

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Hawkins, *Iambic Poetics* 136. Hawkins suggests, intriguingly, that the man in Fable 1 “looks a good bit like Babrius himself.” Hawkins bases this on the man's use of the ‘bitter’ arrow. The man's insistence that the lion think for himself is another connection.

<sup>46</sup> Like Fable 1, this is unattested before Babrius (Luzzatto and La Penna, *Babrius* 4). Cf. Morgan, *Popular Morality* 56-57, who suggests that this fable demonstrates the gods' lack of concern for human affairs. As such, she connects this to Fable 119 (in which praying to Hermes is revealed to be worthless). For other negative fables about gods and men cf. 10 (Aphrodite hates a man), 20 (Heracles refuses to help an ox driver), 49 (Fortune berates a man), 57 (Hermes distributes lies to mankind), 63 (hero cult is useless), 70 (the marriage of War and Insolence is bad for mankind), 117 (Hermes berates a man), 119 (a man berates Hermes), and 127 (Zeus punishes the faults of mankind).

man flays the ass, places the flayed skin on the horse's back, and forces him to carry his dead companion. The distance from the Golden Age could not be more clear. Here, there is not only violence and conflict, but agriculture, technology, and animal labor – all things that are not usually found in a Golden Age.<sup>47</sup>

The Golden Age does reappear in one fable, namely Fable 102. This fable tells the story of a king lion who is not fierce (1 οὐχὶ θυμώδης) or savage (2 οὐδ' ὠμός). Instead, he is gentle and just, like a human being (3 πρῆϋς δὲ καὶ δίκαιος ὡς τις ἀνθρώπων). This mention of just men recalls the opening words of the prologue: this lion, it seems, has recaptured the spirit of those original Golden Age humans. Yet just as happened with the prologue, this picture quickly unravels. The animals spend their time in this “utopia” bringing court cases against each other: the lamb brings the wolf into court, the wild goat prosecutes the leopard, and the deer brings a motion against the tiger. This, then, is a temporary Golden Age that has followed a time of conflict, and now the victimized animals find themselves able to receive justice from their predators. This too could be seen as a positive thing, except that the fable ends on a dubious note (10-12):

ὁ πτώξ λαγωὸς εἶπεν “ἀλλ' ἐγὼ ταύτην  
τὴν ἡμέρην ἀεὶ ποτ' ἠύχόμην, ἥτις  
καὶ τοῖς βιαίοις φοβερὰ τὰσθενῆ θήσει.”

Then the cowering one, the hare, said, “I always longed for this day, which would make the weak a source of fear for the violent.”

---

<sup>47</sup> This is not to say that there are no positive fables in Babrius. For happy fables, cf. Babrius 98 and 106. While Babrius's fables are mostly pessimistic, there is the occasional bright spot. This can be compared to what Hawkins says about Babrius's use of iamb: Babrius does soften many of his fables, but his promise that he will soften all of his fables is a lie and calls attention to when he does or does not do so. In a similar way, the supposed Golden Age setting of fables makes emphatic the dark tone of most of Babrius's fables, even though some of them do have a gentler or even happy tone.



The rule of this gentle lion has not led to true friendship or peace. Instead, it has simply reversed the power dynamic: now the weak animals are in charge, and the formerly violent animals fear them. There is still fear and punishment and conflict; this is no true Golden Age.

Fable 102 suggests that even with a just and kind ruler, utopia is a false dream; different people may be in charge, but the inherent system of violence remains. I would suggest that the message of the prologue is similar. Babrius gives a largely traditional picture of the Golden Age, one linked to the authority of Hesiod and to general knowledge (cf. his use of *καλοῦσι* in line 2 – “they” call it the Golden Age). Then he suggests through his fables that this picture is unrealistic. Fables demonstrate what would actually happen if humans and animals could communicate. The same violence would occur, only with taunts and deception added. Under this reading, the answer to the puzzle of the prologue is pessimistic indeed: thanks to the violent nature of man, communication between species would only lead to further violence, not to utopia.

*Conclusion: Educating the Reader*

When placed in the context of Babrius's wider educational program, the puzzling prologue makes sense. The prologue is deeply disingenuous, not only at the end, when Babrius promises to soften the iambs, but throughout the whole Golden Age description. The Golden Age is an unrealistic version of the past, and the readers can realize this for themselves by comparing the idealism of the prologue to the reality of the fables. This “reality,” it must be emphasized, is one that is long-established by the time Babrius comes along. Aesopic fables have never been happy, but rather, they tend to show a blunt and pessimistic view of the world. Babrius's feint in the prologue is to pretend for a moment that he offers a new and happier type of fable, only to double down on the pessimistic message that has long been offered by this genre.

In the end, Babrius's first prologue, like the fables themselves, is educational on two levels. It has its own "moral," which is that the traditional Golden Age is unrealistic and does not take into account the violence of human nature. As with the fables, the readers must come to this conclusion for themselves, without the meaning being stated explicitly. Thus, the prologue demonstrates the skills necessarily to understand Babrius's fables. Babrius tells the reader to compare the prologue and the fables, to judge for themselves whether the Golden Age is realistic. The reader who can do that, who can successfully solve the puzzle of the prologue, will be more than able to understand the fables that follow.