

How to Interpret a Fable

– What is a fable?

A fable is a fictitious story meant to teach a moral lesson. The story stars animals or vegetables that act contrary to nature to depict the unexpected, inexplicable changes in behavior, emotions, and failures of human beings.

– Guidelines for their interpretation

○ Understand the situation in which the writer resorted to a fable.

▪ **The First Deportation (605 B.C.)**

Judah's initial deportation was a part of the larger geopolitical battles of the seventh century B.C. The Assyrian Empire, which had ruled the Middle East for more than a hundred years, was disintegrating. A coalition of Medes and Babylonians rebelled in the east and by 612 B.C. had sacked Nineveh. The Assyrian army retreated to Haran to try to stop the invading Babylonians. In 609 B.C. Pharaoh Neco II of Egypt and his army attempted to reinforce the Assyrians but was met by King Josiah at Megiddo, who then died in battle (2 Chr. 35:20–27). The Babylonians were again victorious; and after a final battle at Carchemish in 605 B.C., the entire land of Israel came under Babylonian hegemony.

After Josiah's death, his son Jehoahaz became king but lasted only three months. Pharaoh Neco, on his return from the battle of Haran, deposed Jehoahaz and installed Jehoiakim his older brother as king. Jehoiakim, a vassal of Egypt, was ruling when Babylon's King Nebuchadnezzar expelled the Egyptians and brought Judah under Babylonian rule in 605 B.C. with a pledge of Jehoiakim's loyalty to Babylon.

As was the custom and, in part, to ensure loyalty, Nebuchadnezzar took the sons of the Judean nobility to Babylon as hostages, seeking to employ them in his service. Included in this initial deportation were Daniel and his friends (Dan. 1:1–7).

As the book of Daniel indicates, these young hostages were not mistreated but pampered in an attempt to induce them to adopt Babylonian culture so as to better serve Babylon. Daniel's test was how to truly serve God and Nebuchadnezzar at the same time.

Through God-given wisdom, he did so first by declaring he would follow God's law (Dan. 1) and then by proving himself a valuable asset to the king through the gifts God had given him (Dan. 2). God revealed to Daniel that Babylonian rule was the beginning of the Times of the Gentiles (Dan. 2, 9) under which Judah would have to learn to live until its ultimate regeneration in a future-Kingdom.

▪ **The Second Deportation (597 B.C.)**

After three years of loyalty to Babylon despite heavy taxes, Jehoiakim rebelled. Initially, the Lord afflicted Judah by sending neighboring countries against it. Then Nebuchadnezzar came again. He had Jehoiakim bound in chains and the Temple robbed of its treasures (2 Ki. 24:1–5; 2 Chr. 36:5–8). But Nebuchadnezzar's wrath still burned against Judah; and he besieged Jerusalem, during which time Jehoiakim died. Jehoiachin, Jehoiakim's son, took the throne but ruled only three months then surrendered to Nebuchadnezzar in 597 B.C. Jehoiachin and ten thousand captives from the highest level of Judean society were then deported to Babylon (2 Ki. 24:10–16).

Judah considered Jehoiachin the last legitimate son of David to rule on the throne in Jerusalem.

After him, Nebuchadnezzar placed Jehoiachin's uncle Zedekiah, a remaining son of Josiah, on the throne as a puppet king.

Among the captives deported to Babylon in 597 was the prophet Ezekiel (Ezek. 1:1–3). Ezekiel then joined Daniel as a prophet in exile, although they ministered to different groups of people. As a court official, Daniel was used by the Lord to proclaim His Word to King Nebuchadnezzar and later the rulers of the Medes and Persians.

Ezekiel lived with the exiles in Tel Abib (also spelled Tel Aviv, meaning “hill of the flood”) by the River Chebar, apparently a canal south of Babylon near Nippur. The Lord spoke through Ezekiel to these exiles over the coming years through the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. Since the exiles yearned to return to Judah, firmly convinced the Lord would never let Jerusalem be destroyed, Ezekiel prophesied of Jerusalem’s coming judgment as pictured by the Glory of the Lord leaving the Temple and the city (Ezek. 9–11). Ezekiel tried to explain to the exiles God’s plan that, through their captivity, the Lord had actually preserved a remnant that eventually would return to the land and be blessed with the coming of a future and final Son of David who would restore Israel and Judah and establish His rule (Ezek. 33–37). But the exiles resisted Ezekiel’s message, continuing to hope in Babylon’s defeat and their return to Jerusalem.

- **The Third Deportation and Destruction of Jerusalem (586 B.C.)**

From the time of King Josiah, Jeremiah was the Lord’s prophet in Jerusalem. None of Judah’s last four kings trusted in the Lord, so Jeremiah’s ministry was rejected by all of them. That Jeremiah prophesied the doom of Judah and Jerusalem did not endear him to these kings but did enshrine him as the “weeping prophet,” the one concerned with Jerusalem’s fate.

King Jehoiakim actually cut up one of Jeremiah’s scrolls and burned it (Jer. 36). During the siege of Jerusalem, when Jeremiah prophesied its destruction by Nebuchadnezzar, King Zedekiah even had Jeremiah imprisoned and thrown into a cistern to silence him (Jer. 37–38). When the city fell, Jeremiah was among the captives to be sent to Babylon but was freed by the Babylonians (Jer. 40:1–7). However, after Babylon’s appointed ruler of Judah, Gedaliah, was assassinated by a renegade army officer, Jeremiah was taken by the remnant of Judeans fleeing to Egypt for safety. From there he uttered his last prophecy.

The fall of Jerusalem is recorded in detail in 2 Kings 25:1–21. The siege of Jerusalem began on January 15, 588 B.C. and continued until the city fell on August 14, 586 B.C., more than two and one-half years later. Zedekiah tried to escape but was captured. His sons were killed, and he was blinded and brought to Babylon in chains. The city and Solomon’s beautiful Temple were burned. The walls were broken down, and the people remaining in the city were taken in exile to Babylon. As was prophesied by Jeremiah in the first year of Nebuchadnezzar’s reign over Jehoiakim (605 B.C.), Judah would serve Babylon for seventy years (Jer. 25:8–14; 2 Chr. 36:20–21).

- Make a note of key words, relationships, and layouts in the text.

- Ezekiel 17 divides into *three* natural parts

- 1. **Original riddle (allegory) and parable (fable) – verses 1-10**

Then this message came to me from the LORD: ² “Son of man, give this riddle, and tell this story to the people of Israel. ³ Give them this message from the Sovereign LORD: “A great eagle with broad wings and long feathers, covered with many-colored plumage, came to Lebanon. He seized the top of a cedar tree ⁴ and plucked off its highest branch. He carried it away to a city filled with merchants. He planted it in a city of traders. ⁵ He also took a seedling from the land and planted it in fertile soil. He placed it beside a broad river, where it could grow like a willow tree. ⁶ It took root there and grew into a low, spreading vine. Its branches turned up toward the eagle, and its roots grew down into the ground. It produced strong branches and put out shoots.

⁷ But then another great eagle came with broad wings and full plumage. So, the vine now sent its roots and branches toward him for water, ⁸ even though it was already planted in good soil and had plenty of water so it could grow into a splendid vine and produce rich leaves and luscious fruit. ⁹ “So now the Sovereign LORD asks: Will this vine grow and prosper? No! I will pull it up, roots and all! I will cut off its fruit and let its leaves wither and die. I will pull it up easily without a strong arm or a large army. ¹⁰ But when the vine is transplanted, will it thrive? No, it will wither away when the east wind blows against it. It will die in the same good soil where it had grown so well.”

2. Meaning of the story about the eagles and the vine – verses 11-21

¹¹ Then this message came to me from the LORD: ¹² “Say to these rebels of Israel: Don’t you understand the meaning of this riddle of the eagles? The king of Babylon came to Jerusalem, took away her king and princes, and brought them to Babylon. ¹³ He made a treaty with a member of the royal family and forced him to take an oath of loyalty. He also exiled Israel’s most influential leaders, ¹⁴ so Israel would not become strong again and revolt. Only by keeping her treaty with Babylon could Israel survive. ¹⁵ “Nevertheless, this man of Israel’s royal family rebelled against Babylon, sending ambassadors to Egypt to request a great army and many horses. Can Israel break her sworn treaties like that and get away with it? ¹⁶ No! For as surely as I live, says the Sovereign LORD, the king of Israel will die in Babylon, the land of the king who put him in power and whose treaty he disregarded and broke. ¹⁷ Pharaoh and all his mighty army will fail to help Israel when the king of Babylon lays siege to Jerusalem again and destroys many lives. ¹⁸ For the king of Israel disregarded his treaty and broke it after swearing to obey; therefore, he will not escape. ¹⁹ “So this is what the Sovereign LORD says: As surely as I live, I will punish him for breaking my covenant and disregarding the solemn oath he made in my name. ²⁰ I will throw my net over him and capture him in my snare. I will bring him to Babylon and put him on trial for this treason against me. ²¹ And all his best warriors^a will be killed in battle, and those who survive will be scattered to the four winds. Then you will know that I, the LORD, have spoken.

3. The LORD’s final planting establishes Messiah’s universal rule – verses 22-24

²² “This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will take a branch from the top of a tall cedar, and I will plant it on the top of Israel’s highest mountain. ²³ It will become a majestic cedar, sending forth its branches and producing seed. Birds of every sort will nest in it, finding shelter in the shade of its branches. ²⁴ And all the trees will know that it is I, the LORD, who cuts the tall tree down and makes the short tree grow tall. It is I who makes the green tree wither and gives the dead tree new life. I, the LORD, have spoken, and I will do what I said!”

- The words “riddle”, “story”, and “message” in v.2
- There are two “eagles” (verses 2-6; verses 7-8)
- The “highest branch” of a cedar is planted in a city of merchants (verses 3-4), while “a seedling from the land” is planted in fertile soil beside a wide river and grew into a low, spreading vine (verses 5-6)
- There is no mention of what happened to the branch, but the vine flourished
- Ignoring its favored circumstances under the first eagle, the vine reached out to a second eagle (verses 7-8)
- The LORD pledges to uproot the vine and transplant it so it will wither and die (verses 9-10)
- Ask whether it teaches a single lesson (simple, parabolic) or several points (complex, metaphorical)
 - Complex
- Note the words, attitudes, actions of the audience, or the response/comments of the one who told the fable
 - While the vine discounted and ignored its prosperity, the LORD for whom Ezekiel speaks will step in and destroy it (implying prosperity = blessing)
- Interpret the fable (in this case, from the explanation in verses 11-21)

- **Eagle #1** = king of Babylon
- **Top of the cedar** = Jehoiachin + princes exiled to Babylon
- **Planted in a city of merchants** = exile to Babylon
- **The seedling** = Zedekiah + the people left in the land
- **Eagle #2** = Egypt
- **Zedekiah's covenant with Babylon** = "my oath," "my covenant" in verses 18, 19
- **Breaking the covenant with Babylon** = violating the marriage vows between Israel and the LORD (2Cor 6:14ff)
- **The top branch of the second cedar** (Isa 11:1; 53:2) **that the LORD will plant on Israel's highest mountain** (Isa 2:2-4; Micah 4:1-5) = the Messiah
- **The majestic cedar** = the Messiah + the remnant
- **The trees in v.24** = nations
- **The high tree and the green tree** = those who seem to flourish
- **The low tree and dry tree** = those who seem insignificant
- **All the trees know that it is I, the LORD who does all this** = the LORD controlling the destiny of individuals and peoples/and involves their response to the Messiah
- State the relevance of the fable's message to people, today?
 - **Applications**