

Aesop, the ‘*Onos*’, *The Golden Ass*, and a Hidden Treasure

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The juxtaposition of narratives belonging to the same family is in itself a cognitively and aesthetically pleasurable experience for the investigator, revealing creative surprises that emerge when clusters of similar narrative ideas are shaped in unpredictable ways by different narrators in different societies and times, each text lending insight into a neighbouring formulation.¹

Introduction: an international story motif

Those who have seen James Cameron’s film ‘Titanic’ from 1997 may remember two interrelated short episodes: in the first one, a helper of Rose’s fiancé furtively hides a precious necklace, a present that Rose had received from her fiancé, in the pocket of Rose’s lover, Jack. Thus, Rose’s fiancé expects that he will get rid of his rival for the love of Rose. Indeed, later on in the film, Jack is caught when the same steward finds the necklace on him and shows it to all bystanders; Jack is chained until such time as he will be handed over to the police. The incident will prove to be fatal for the two lovers, since the fact that Jack is chained greatly delays their flight from the sinking ship.

The episodes mentioned above represent the barest form of an international story motif, described by Aarne and Thompson under several head-

¹ Quotation from Hansen 2002, Introd. p. 25. This essay issues from a paper presented at the Third Rethymno Conference on the Ancient Novel (RICAN III), in May 2005. I thank Michael Paschalis and Stavros Frangoulidis for their warm hospitality and impeccable organization.

ings, for instance under K 2118 ‘Innocent person slandered as thief’.² Aarne and Thompson under those headings present cases from Oriental narrative, Jewish novellas, Italian and Spanish novellas to Scandinavian examples. The deception of the item planted in a visitor’s luggage is indeed a widespread international story motif. It is for instance present in the tale of Joseph in *Genesis* 44: Joseph planted his silver cup in the luggage of his brother Benjamin, in order to test the faithfulness of his brothers.³

In ‘Titanic’, mentioned above, we find the motif in its barest possible form: a necklace is placed on an innocent person in order to incriminate him, and has the desired effect for the person who contrives this scheme. This late example is a telling illustration of the view expressed by Hansen:

A chronologically early text does not ... necessarily reflect a developmentally early form of a narrative because narrative change is a function not of time but of particular narrators on particular occasions.⁴

In this essay I want to discuss and compare several versions of this story in Greek and Roman novels. Such a comparison may further our understanding of the particular functioning of the various versions in each of the texts under discussion.

The first instance to be discussed is found in *Vita Aesopi*; before we turn to that version, some introductory remarks on the tradition of the life and fables of Aesop may be of use.

The Aesop tradition

Scholars are still divided over the question of the historicity of a person called Aesop. However, the tradition of the fables told by Aesop is very old. There are testimonies for Aesopus as a Phrygian slave, who first served a master on Samos, then was set free by his master; thanks to his wisdom he became an adviser of kings, but in the end his arrogance caused his downfall.

² See Aarne & Thompson 1973: K 401 ‘Blame for theft fastened on dupe’; K 2118 ‘Innocent person slandered as thief’; K 2150, ‘Innocent made to appear guilty’; H 151–154 ‘Recognition by cup in sack: alleged stolen goods’.

³ The tale of Joseph and the hidden cup is also present in the Koran, in the section about Yūsuf (*Sūra* 12.70 f.); I thank André Lardinois for pointing this out to me when I presented a Dutch version of this paper at a meeting of OIKOS, in September 2005.

⁴ Hansen 2002, Introduction, 8.

These testimonies have been collected by Perry in his edition of the *Aesopica*.⁵ Anecdotes surrounding Aesopus are attested in Greek literature ever since the early sixth century B.C.; Aesop was mainly famous for his art of inventing and telling fables. At an early stage the Aesop tradition also adopted elements from the tradition of the Assyrian sage Ahiquar, the earliest example of biography combined with wisdom literature, and one of the most widespread tales in the Mediterranean world.⁶ For instance, in the *Vita Aesopi* as we have it now, parts from the Ahiquar tradition have been reworked into the episode at the court of king Lycorus in Babylon.⁷

Like the *Alexander romance*, the fictional *Vita Aesopi* as we have it is one of those Greek narrative texts from the early Roman Empire which have undergone several changes, from one recension to another: addition of new episodes, deletion of other episodes, abbreviations as well as extensions. When in the 15th and 16th century Greek literature was rediscovered, scholars were confronted with an abbreviated version of the *Vita Aesopi* that in all probability originated from Byzantine times, and is now known as 'Vita Westermanniana', after the first editor, Westermann, or: 'Vita W'. A Latin version of Vita W, composed by Rinuccio da Castiglione, was published at the end of the 15th century, together with a German translation, in Heinrich Steinhöwel's *Aesopus*.⁸ This publication became a bestseller and was translated into many European languages. The original text of the *Vita Aesopi* has been lost forever, but since the appearance of Steinhöwel's *Aesop* some papyrus fragments of earlier versions have been found, as well as a practically complete version in a manuscript from the 10th century. This manuscript was discovered in 1928 in a library in New York, and is now known as 'Vita G', after the place where this manuscript had been preserved earlier, Grottaferata. Perry was the first who published Vita G (together with Vita W).⁹ Vita G is now the best foundation for our idea of the Aesop romance as it may have been composed by an anonymous author in the first or second century A.D. That this Aesop romance is the work of one author, who composed it as a unity, with a definite structure, has been proved by the analysis of Niklas

⁵ Perry 1952. See also Jouanno 2006, 9 ff.

⁶ See, with rich bibliographical references, on this and other transformations of the Ahiquar romance in ancient prose fiction Marinčič 2003; Jouanno 2006, 22 f., with references.

⁷ See, with references, Marinčič 2003, 61 f.; Jouanno 2006, 22–27, with notes and bibliography.

⁸ Österley 1873.

⁹ Perry 1952.

Holzberg.¹⁰ One of the results of Holzberg's analysis has been that it has become clear that the fables which Aesop tells at various occasions can be subdivided into distinct types, and that these types have been incorporated in a systematic manner into the whole text of the *Vita Aesopi*. Others, working further along Holzberg's lines, have shown that the anonymous author of the *Vita Aesopi* has consistently woven into his work existing literary traditions around Aesop in such a way that he could create an independent and firmly structured biography of the legendary fabulist Aesop.¹¹

The tale of the stolen cup in Vita Aesopi, the 'Onos', and The Golden Ass

In the final, Delphic stage of Aesop's life, Aesop has insulted the local people at Delphi, and in revenge they secretly plant a sacred cup in his luggage; then they accuse him of temple robbery, and execute him :

127 1. Οἱ δὲ ἄρχοντες ἰδόντες αὐτοῦ τὸ κακολόγον ... ἐβουλεύσαντο οὖν <αὐτὸν> ἀνελεῖν δόλω καὶ <ὡς ἱερόσυλον αὐτὸν καταδικάσαι καὶ> τοῦ Ἀπόλλωνος μηνίοντος διὰ τὴν ἐν Σάμῳ ἀτιμίαν, ἐπεὶ σὺν ταῖς Μούσαις αὐτὸν οὐ καθίδρυσεν, μὴ ἔχοντες εὐλόγον αἰτίαν ἐμηχανήσαντό τι πανοὔργον, ἵνα μὴ οἱ παρ<επι>δημοῦντες δυνήσωνται αὐτῷ βοηθήσαι. 2. παρατηρησάμενοι ἐπὶ τὴν πύλην τῆς πόλεως τὸν δοῦλον αὐτοῦ ἀφυπνωκότα καὶ τὰ σκεύη φέροντ<α λαβόντ>ες ἐκ τοῦ ἱεροῦ ἐνέκρυψαν φιάλην χρυσην. ὁ δὲ Αἴσωπος ἀγνοῶν τὰ συν<ε>σκευασμένα <αὐτῷ> εἰς τὴν Φωκίδα ὄδευεν.

128 1. Ἐπιδραμόντες δὲ τινες τῶν Δελφῶν, δῆσαντες αὐτὸν εἰς τὴν πόλιν εἴλκον. βοῶντος δὲ αὐτοῦ “τίνος οὖν ἔνεκεν δέσμιόν με ἄγετε;” οἱ δὲ “χρήματα ἔκλεψας ἐκ τοῦ ἱεροῦ.” 2. ὁ δὲ Αἴσωπος μηδὲν ἑαυτῷ συνειδὼς κλαίων ἔφησεν “ἀπολέσθαι θέλω, εἴαν τι τοιοῦτον εὔρεθῆ εἰς ἐμέ.” 3. οἱ Δελφοὶ ἐκτινάξαντες τὰ σκεύη ἠῦρον τὴν φιάλην, ἐπιδεικνύμενοι τῇ πόλει καὶ μετὰ βίας καὶ θορύβου παραδειγματίζοντες αὐτόν. ὁ Αἴσωπος λογιζόμενος ἐξ ἐπιβουλῆς συγκεκρυφέναι, ἠρώτα τοὺς Δελφούς <ἀπολυθῆναι>, οἱ δὲ οὐκ ἐπέιθοντο. 4. Αἴσωπος λέγει “θνητοὶ γεγονότες ὑπὲρ θεοῦς μὴ φρονεῖτε.” οἱ δὲ ἐνέκλεισαν αὐτὸν εἰς φυλακὴν τιμωροῦντες. Αἴσωπος μὴ εὐρίσκων μηχανὴν τῆς σωτηρίας ἔφη “νῦν ἐγὼ θνητὸς

¹⁰ Holzberg 1992; 1996.

¹¹ E.g. Merkle 1992; Jouanno 2006, 27 f.

[ἄνθρωπος] ὧν πῶς δυνήσομαι τὸ μέλλον ἐκφυγεῖν,” ... (*Vita Aesopi* 127–128)¹²

(127) But the officials, seeing how abusive he was, ... plotted to kill him by a trick and <to condemn him as a temple robber and> with the connivance of Apollo, who was angry with Aesop because of the insult on Samos in not setting up his statue along with the Muses, the Delphians, not waiting for a reasonable pretext, devised a villainous scheme so that the other visitors could not help him. They kept a watch on the slave at his door, and when they caught him asleep, *they did their work.*¹³ They brought a golden cup from the temple and hid it in his baggage. Unaware of what had been done, Aesop set off for Phocis. (128) Some Delphians overtook him, tied him up, and dragged him back to the city. When he demanded in a loud voice, ‘Why are you taking me prisoner?’ they replied, ‘You have stolen treasures from the temple.’ Aesop, whose conscience was clear, said with tears in his eyes, ‘I am ready to die if I am found guilty of such a thing.’ The Delphians ransacked his baggage and found the cup. They showed it off to the city and loudly and violently made a spectacle of him. Aesop reasoned that it must have been hidden there as part of a plot and asked the Delphians about it, but they would not listen to him. He said, ‘Mortals that you are, be not wiser than the gods.’ But they locked him up in the prison to hold him for punishment. Finding no means of saving himself, Aesop said, ‘Now how can I, a mortal man, escape what is to be?’

There is general agreement that the *Vita Aesopi* as it has come down to us must have been composed in the first or second century A.D. But the anonymous author of this *Aesop Romance* included much older material into

¹² Quotations from *Vita Aesopi* are taken from Papathomopoulos 1990. Translations from *Vita Aesopi* follow Daly 1961. However, the insertions <ὡς ἱερόσυλον αὐτὸν καταδικάσαι. καὶ > and <ἀπολυθῆναι> are supplied by Papathomopoulos from *Vita W*, and have not been translated by Daly.

¹³ The text between ** is a translation by Daly of the version found in *Vita G*; the Greek text of Papathomopoulos differs here, due to a conjecture of his own. *G* has: παρατηρησάμενοι ἐπὶ τὴν πύλην τῆς πόλεως τὸν δοῦλον αὐτοῦ ἀφυπνωκότα ἐπολέμουν, καὶ <εἰς> τὰ σκευὴ φέροντες ἐκ τοῦ ἱεροῦ ἐνέκρυψαν φιάλην χρυσοῦν. (<εἰς> is a supplement by Perry). Translation of the text of Papathomopoulos would yield: ‘They kept a watch on the slave and when they found him asleep at the gates of the city, with the luggage of his master with him, they took a golden cup from the temple and hid it (in the luggage).’

his work. The Delphic episode of the *Life of Aesop* belongs to the oldest strands of the Aesop tradition.¹⁴

The incident of the golden cup was already a well known part of the Aesop tradition at the time of Aristophanes, who counts on his audience being familiar with it, as appears from *Wasps* 1446–48:

Φι: Αἴσωπον οἱ Δελφοί ποτ' –
 Βδ.: ὀλίγον μοι μέλει.
 Φι: – φιάλην ἐπιτιῶντο κλέψαι τοῦ θεοῦ.
 ὁ δ' ἔλεξεν αὐτοῖς ὡς ὁ κἀνθαρός ποτε –

Phi.: The Delphians once accused Aesop –
 Bd.: Never mind about Aesop now
 Phi.: – of stealing a golden cup of the god,
 and he told them that once the beetle –

The incident is alluded to in Herodotus 2.134–35 as well, and Perry adduces more testimonies.¹⁵

The golden cup story was connected with the purification ritual of the Thargelia.¹⁶ the stoning to death of a *pharmakos*. According to Istros the ritual re-enacts the killing of a particular *pharmakos*; he was stoned to death on the ground that he stole sacred bowls belonging to Apollo (φιάλας τοῦ Ἀπόλλωνος κλέψας).¹⁷ The idea that the figure of Aesop has many traits of a *pharmakos* has been investigated by Wiechers.¹⁸ This does not concern us here; what matters here, however, is that the motif of accusing someone of stealing a sacred golden cup is old, and well attested in Greek literature long before the *Vita Aesopi* was composed.

As Holzberg has shown,¹⁹ the episode of the stolen cup has a clear function in the structure of the *Vita Aesopi*: Aesop is three times unjustly put into jail. Besides, Aesop is three times innocently accused of theft. In both series

¹⁴ The series of fables, which Aesop tells during his imprisonment and just before his execution, all have their distinct message within the context of the narrative that frames it. This section of the *Life of Aesop* is discussed by Nagy as a survival of a very ancient narrative tradition; see Nagy 1999, 282 f.

¹⁵ Perry 1952 Test. 13 (Herodotus 2.134–35). See Perry 1952, 220 f. for the other testimonia.

¹⁶ Nagy 1999, 279 f.

¹⁷ in Harpokration s.v. *pharmakos*, *F.Gr.Hist.* 344F 50.

¹⁸ Wiechers 1961.

¹⁹ Holzberg 1992, 70 f.

of three the incident of the gold cup is the third instance, and in both series this third instance is the only one in which he is not able to save himself.

From the previous observations we may conclude that the story as it is found in the *Life of Aesop* belongs to the old core of the Aesop tradition; it also had a clear function in the structure of the *Life*, and must have been widely known.

Two further manifestations of this story motif that will be discussed here are on the one hand without doubt mutually connected, and have on the other hand by many been considered as related to the version in the *Vita Aesopi*.²⁰ The first one is from the pseudo-Lucianic Ass story (henceforth: the *Onos*): there, the episode of the ass in the service of the priests of the *Dea Syria* ends as follows:

1. ἐπειδὴ ἤδη ὄρθρος ἦν, ἀράμενος τὴν θεὸν αὐθις ἀπήειν ἅμα τοῖς ἀγύρταις καὶ ἀφικόμεθα εἰς κώμην ἄλλην μεγάλην καὶ πολυάνθρωπον.
2. ἐν ἧ καὶ καινότερόν τι ἑτερατεύσαντο, τὴν θεὸν μὴ μείναι ἐν ἀνθρώπου οἰκίᾳ, τῆς δὲ παρ’ ἐκείνοις μάλιστα τιμωμένης ἐπιχωρίου δαίμονος τὸν ναὸν οἰκήσαι.
3. οἱ δὲ καὶ μάλα ἄσμενοι τὴν ξένην θεὸν ὑπεδέξαντο τῇ σφῶν αὐτῶν θεῷ συνοικίσαντες, ἡμῖν δὲ οἰκίαν ἀπέδειξαν ἀνθρώπων πενήτων.
4. ἐνταῦθα συγχὰς ἡμέρας οἱ δεσπότες διατρίβαντες ἀπιέναι ἤθελον εἰς τὴν πλησίον πόλιν καὶ τὴν θεὸν ἀπήτουν τοὺς ἐπιχωρίους, καὶ αὐτοὶ εἰς τὸ τέμενος παρελθόντες ἐκομίζοντο αὐτὴν καὶ θέντες ἐπ’ ἐμοὶ ἤλαυνον ἕξω.
5. ἔτυχον δὲ οἱ δυσσεβεῖς εἰς τὸ τέμενος ἐκεῖνο παρελθόντες ἀνάθημα φιάλην χρυσοῦν κλέψαντες ὑπὸ τῇ θεῷ ἔφερον.
6. οἱ δὲ κωμῆται αἰσθόμενοι τοῦτο εὐθύς ἐδίωκον, εἶτα ὡς πλησίον ἐγένοντο, καὶ καταπηδήσαντες ἀπὸ τῶν ἵππων εἶχοντο αὐτῶν ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ καὶ δυσσεβεῖς καὶ ἱεροσύλους ἐκάλουν καὶ ἀπήτουν τὸ κλαπὲν ἀνάθημα, καὶ ἐρευνῶντες πάντα εὗρον αὐτὸ ἐν τῷ κόλπῳ τῆς θεοῦ.
7. δῆσαντες οὖν τοὺς γόνιας ἤγον ὀπίσω, καὶ τοὺς μὲν εἰς τὴν εἰρκτὴν ἐμβάλλουσι, τὴν δὲ θεὸν τὴν ἐπ’ ἐμοὶ κομιζομένην ἀράμενοι ναῷ ἄλλῳ ἔδωκαν, τὸ δὲ χρυσίον τῇ πολιτίδι θεῷ πάλιν ἀπέδωκαν. τῇ δὲ ὑστεραία τά τε σκευὴ κάμῃ πιπράσκειν ἔγνωσαν (*Onos* 41–42.1)²¹

²⁰ Winkler 1985, 279 f. offers an illuminating discussion of the *Vita Aesopi* and *The Golden Ass* shedding light on each other by their common format of cultural criticism. See *ibid.* 284 f., and n. 13 on the many connections between the section of the Syrian priests in Apuleius’ novel and the *Vita Aesopi*. For other revealing connections between *Vita Aesopi* and *The Golden Ass* see Finkelpearl 2003.

²¹ For the text I have used the edition by Van Thiel 1972; he has deleted ὑπὸ τῇ θεῷ ἔφερον as a gloss. See Van Thiel 1971, 132, n. 161.

When dawn came, taking the goddess up once more I went off with the charlatans, and we arrived at another village, large and well populated, where they introduced a strange new procedure whereby the goddess was not to stay in any mortal's house but was to have her abode in the temple of the local deity most revered among them. The inhabitants were delighted to welcome the foreign divinity and set her up in the home of their own goddess, but showed us to a house belonging to some paupers. After spending many days there, my masters wanted to leave for the city nearby and asked the townspeople for the return of the goddess, and, going themselves into the sacred precinct, they brought her out and, placing her on my back, drove away. Now, as it happened, the ungodly fellows, when they went into that sacred enclosure, filched a golden bowl, a votive offering, which they took away in the keeping of the goddess. When the village folk discovered this, they immediately set off after us; then as they drew near, they jumped down from their horses, arrested the priests on the road, and began calling them sacrilegious temple robbers and demanding the return of the stolen offering. They searched everything and found it in the bosom of the goddess. Then tying up the pansies, they led them back and threw them into prison. The goddess who was riding on my back they took and presented to another temple and returned the gold vessel to the deity of their city.²²

It is not necessary to rehearse here the question of the mutual relationship of the Greek ass story and Apuleius' novel. The 'Onos' is an abbreviated version of a longer, lost work, a Greek *Μεταμορφώσεις*, which in all probability was indeed composed by Lucian. Apuleius is considered to have adapted the longer Greek *Μεταμορφώσεις* to his own intentions, and to the tastes of his intended readership, making considerable changes, but following the plot of the Greek work.²³

In Apuleius' *Golden Ass*, too, Lucius, the ass, comes into the service of pervert priests. His version of the stolen gold cup motif is found in Book 9, and reads as follows:

²² The translation follows Sullivan 1989.

²³ For a discussion of the question of the three ass tales, with references, see Mason 1994; 1999a; 1999b.

Pauculis ibi diebus commorati et munificentia publica saginati vaticinationisque crebris mercedibus suffarcinati, purissimi illi sacerdotes novum quaestus genus sibi comminiscuntur. (Apul. Met. 9.8.1)²⁴

(Here follows, in 9.8.2–6, the story of the multi-applicable oracle devised by the priests, which has no correspondence in the 'Onos'. The Latin text of that episode is not printed here. The flight of the priests and their capture by the villagers is told from 9.9.1 to 9.10.4):

Sed adsiduis interrogationibus argumenti satietate iam defecti rursus ad viam prodeunt via tota, quam nocte confeceramus, longe peiorem, quidni? lacunosis incilibus voraginosam, partim stagnanti palude fluidam et alibi subluvie caenosa lubricam. Crebris denique offensaculis et assiduis lapsibus iam contusis cruribus meis vix tandem ad campestris semitas fessus evadere potui. Et ecce nobis repente de tergo manipulus armati supercurrit equitis, aegreque cohibita equorum curruli rabie Philebum ceterosque comites eius involant avidi colloque constricto et sacrilegos impurosque compellantes interdum pugnis obverberant nec non manicis etiam cunctos coartant et identidem urgenti sermone comprimunt, promerent ocium aureum cantharum, promerent auctoramentum illud sui sceleris, quod simulatione sollemnium, quae in operto factitaverant, ab ipsis pulvinaribus matris deum clanculo furati, prorsus quasi possent tanti facinoris evadere supplicium tacita profectione, adhuc luce dubia pomerium pervaserint. Nec defuit qui manu super dorsum meum iniecta in ipso deae, quam gerebam, gremio scrutatus repperiret atque incoram omnium aureum depromeret cantharum. Nec isto saltem tam nefario scelere impuratissima illa capita confutari terrerive potuere, sed mendoso risu cavillantes: 'En' inquiunt 'indignae rei scaevitatem! Quam plerumque insontes periclitantur homines! Propter unicum caliculum, quem deum mater sorori suae deae Syriae hospitale munus optulit, ut noxios religionis antistites ad discrimen vocari capitis.' Haec et alias similis afannas frustra blaterantes eos retrorsus abducunt pagani statimque vinctos in Tullianum conpingunt cantharoque et ipso simulacro quod gerebam apud fani donarium redditis ac consecratis altera die productum me rursus voce praeconis venui subiciunt, ... (Apul. Met. 9.9.1–9.10.4)

²⁴ For the text I have used the edition by Robertson 1945.

After they had stayed there just a few days, fattened at public expense and stuffed with the many profits of their soothsaying, those chaste and holy priests devised for themselves a new sort of business venture.²⁵



But with the constant requests for oracles, they soon grew sick and tired of explaining the response, and started out on the road again. The journey was worse by far than any of the one we had made by night, since the road was engulfed by pool-filled ditches, soaked in some places with stagnant swamp-water and slippery in others with muddy filth. My legs were battered from the constant bumping and incessant slipping, and when we finally came out on to a level path I was so tired that I could just barely make it. Suddenly we were overtaken by a group of armed riders. When they had with difficulty curbed their horses' headlong speed, they savagely turned on Philebus and all his comrades, seized them by the throat, and, calling them filthy temple-robbers, began to beat them with their fists. Furthermore they put handcuffs on them all and insistently demanded in menacing language that they produce at once the golden goblet – produce the wages of their crime, which they had surreptitiously abstracted from the very shrine of the Mother of the Gods, under the pretence of practicing secret ceremonies; then, as if they really thought they could escape punishment for such an outrage by leaving without a word, they had crossed the city limits in the grey light of dawn. One of them even went so far as to reach up over my back and feel around in the bosom of the goddess I was carrying. He found the gold goblet and pulled it out for everyone to see. Yet even in the face of such a sacrilegious crime those horribly vile creatures could not be dismayed or frightened but pretended to laugh and make jokes: 'The perversity and injustice of it all! How often innocent men are accused of crime! Just because of one little cup, which the Mother of the Gods offered her sister the Syrian Goddess as a token of hospitality, high priests of holiness are being charged as if they were criminals, and put in jeopardy of life and limb.' They kept on blabbering this sort of nonsense to no avail, while the villagers led them back to town and immediately put them in chains and locked them in jail; then they returned the goblet, along with the very statue I was carrying, to the temple treasury and consecrated them.

²⁵ The translation follows Hanson 1989. The translation of story of the multi-applicable oracle devised by the priests (9.8.2–6) is not printed here. We continue with the translation of Apul. *Met.* 9.9.1–9.10.4.

Comparison of the three versions of the tale of the stolen cup

While discussing similarities as well as divergences between these three passages from the *Vita Aesopi*, from the 'Onos', and from Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, references will also be made to two related manifestations of the stolen cup motif, the Joseph story in *Genesis* 44, and its more novelistic treatment in Flavius Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities* II.7. Whether or not the Joseph story is an integral part of the original *Genesis* narrative, scholars agree that the date of its composition is probably not too far removed from the date of the formation of the *Story of Ahiquar* and of the most ancient versions of the *Aesop Romance*. These stories were probably shaped in the Eastern Mediterranean in a period ranging from the seventh to the fifth century B.C. Flavius Josephus' rendering of the biblical Joseph story must be dated in the late first century A.D.

1. In all three of our main instances, the object hidden in the visitor's luggage is a sacred gold vessel: in this respect, the three versions agree with the old Greek *pharmakos* tale (as it is explained by Istros; see above, p. 282 and note 17), but disagree with the version told in *Genesis* 44, and in Flavius Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities*; in the latter two, Joseph has a servant hide a silver cup, his own goblet, in the luggage of Benjamin. In *Genesis* it is said that Joseph used this cup for divination, in Josephus, it is just his own silver drinking cup.

2. In all three stories, the visitors are overtaken by the townsfolk when they have already left. In the 'Onos' as well as in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, there was mention of a group of horsemen; this element is absent in the *Vita Aesopi*. Interestingly, we find the horsemen in Flavius Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities* :

περιελαύνουσι δ' αὐτοὺς ἰππεῖς ἄγοντες τὸν οἰκέτην, ὃς ἐναπέθετο τῷ τοῦ Βενιαμεί φορτίῳ τὸν σκύφον. ταραχθέντας δὲ ὑπὸ τῆς ἀδοκῆτου τῶν ἰππέων ἐφόδου καὶ τὴν αἰτίαν πυθομένους δι' ἣν ἐπ' ἄνδρας ἐληλύθασιν, οἱ μικρὸν ἔμπροσθεν τιμῆς καὶ ξενίας τετυχήκασιν αὐτῶν παρὰ τοῦ δεσπότητος, κακίστους ἀπεκάλουν, ... (Joseph. *Ant. Jud.* II.126–127)²⁶

But horsemen encircled them leading the servant who had deposited the cup in the baggage of Beniamain. When they were upset by the unexpected arrival of the horsemen and inquired as to the reason why they

²⁶ The text follows Thackeray 1961 (reprint of 1930).

had come upon men who a little while before had received honour and hospitality from their master, they [the horsemen] called them most wicked...²⁷

3. In *Vita Aesopi* Aesop reacts to the people who accuse him of the theft with the wish to die if he is found guilty of such a crime. This element is not found in the ‘*Onos*’, nor in Apuleius. But it is present in *Genesis* 44 :

“Παρ’ ᾧ ἂν εὔρηξ τὸ κόνδου τῶν παιδῶν σου, ἀποθνησκέτω· καὶ ἡμεῖς δὲ ἐσόμεθα παῖδες τῷ κυρίῳ ἡμῶν.” (*Genesis* 44.9)

‘With whomsoever of thy servants thou shalt find the cup, let him die; and, moreover, we will be servants to our lord’²⁸

4. When the cup is found, it is triumphantly shown to everyone both in the *Vita Aesopi* and in Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses*.²⁹ This element is absent from the ‘*Onos*’.

‘*Onos*’ and Golden Ass. *Far-reaching variations*

It is remarkable that in the story as we find it in the ‘*Onos*’, it is explicitly mentioned that the priests themselves actually steal the gold goblet from the temple of the Mother of the Gods. This element makes the story of the ‘*Onos*’ diverge conspicuously from all known instances of the tale. I suggest that we see here a deliberate and meaningful contortion of the widely known stolen cup tale. This change, preserved in the epitome that has come down to us, the ‘*Onos*’, must have been made already by the author of the lost Greek *Μεταμορφώσεις*. That author was in all probability Lucian (see above, p. 284 and n. 23). We may surely ascribe such a clever twist of the tale to Lucian, an author who in many of his works displays his dislike of pretenders such as these villainous and treacherous priests.³⁰ The element of in-

²⁷ The translation follows Feldman 2000.

²⁸ Text and translation are from Brenton 1851.

²⁹ Those who have seen *Titanic* (see the introduction to this essay), may remember that this element of triumphantly showing the ‘discovered’ necklace that was planted in Jack’s pocket is elaborated in the film as well.

³⁰ Lucian has toyed with the motif of false accusation of temple robbery in *Toxaris* 28, too: there, a thief has stolen sacred objects from a temple, and hidden them in the house of his master. The master then is accused of temple robbery, and has to spend most years of his life in jail, until a friend is able to prove his innocence.

crimination has not been abandoned in this version, but Lucian has made not an actor within the story the incriminator, but has made the narrator of the story, the I, Loukios the ass, who has on numerous occasions vented his disgust for the priests, incriminate them: the narrator, and behind him the author, have now taken over the role of incriminating the priests, by having these actors place the gold goblet in their luggage.

It is even more illuminating to investigate what Apuleius has done with this element of the tale in his version, which clearly is an adaptation of the version as he found it in the Greek Μεταμορφώσεις. In Apuleius Lucius, the narrator, does not mention that the priests stole the golden cup from the precinct. This omission has either been interpreted as one of the instances of negligent composition in *The Golden Ass*,³¹ or it has, more positively, been explained in terms of suspense and surprise effects:³² suddenly, the golden cup is discovered in the lap of the statue of the goddess on the back of the ass, when the townsfolk have come after the priests. However, since the motif of the gold cup planted by others in order to incriminate someone was widely known, the absence in Apuleius of any indication as to how the cup had come in the bosom of the goddess may have wider implications. This becomes the more probable when noticing that Apuleius has made more changes in comparison to the ‘Onos’. He has for instance placed the remark that in the ‘Onos’ introduces the scheme of stealing the sacred cup a little earlier in his tale; in Apuleius, this remark introduces the scheme of the oracle (*Onos* 41.2: ἐν ἧ καὶ καινότερόν τι ἕτερατεύσαντο, τὴν θεὸν μὴ μείναι ἐν ἀνθρώπου οἰκίᾳ ...; *Apul. Met.* 9.8.1: *Pauculis ibi diebus commorati ... purissimi illi sacerdotes novum quaestus genus sic sibi comminiscuntur. Sorte unica ...*).

When, in Apuleius’ version, the cup is found in the bosom of the goddess, the priests’ reaction is sarcastic and joking (‘Yet even in the face of such a sacrilegious crime those horribly vile creatures could not be dismayed or frightened but pretended to laugh and make jokes: “The perversity and injustice of it all!” ...’).³³ In Josephus’ version, the brothers of Joseph react

³¹ Cf. Helm in his app. cr. ad loc.: ... *etiam in aliis rebus neglegenter excerpit Ap. auctorem suum, cum nec referret sacerdotes simulacrum in templo deposuisse, quo fieri potuit ut cantharum inde surriperent, ...*

³² See e.g. Junghanns 1932, 101; Van Thiel 1971, 131 f.

³³ This passage appears to create a deliberate contrast with Aesopus’ wise and impressive reaction when he realises that he cannot save himself from the false accusation (*Vita Aesopi* 128.4): Αἴσωπος μὴ εὐρίσκων μηχανὴν τῆς σωτηρίας ἔφη “νῦν ἐγὼ θνητὸς [ἄνθρωπος] ὦν πῶς δυνήσομαι τὸ μέλλον ἐκφυγεῖν,” (Finding no means of saving himself, Aesop said, ‘Now how can I, a mortal man, escape what is to be?’).

with similar sarcasm to the accusations of the horsemen, but they do this before the cup has been found in Benjamin's sack. There it is explicitly stated that they reacted thus because they had a clear conscience (Joseph. *Ant. Jud.* II.7.130–131: 'But they, ignorant how they stood, mocked at these speeches ... for, being conscious of no crime, they spoke boldly, ...'). Importantly, in Apuleius' version it is nowhere clearly stated that the priests have indeed stolen the cup, nor that they were innocent. When the cup is found in the bosom of the goddess, the reader could just as well presume, particularly in view of the well-known stories about a planted gold goblet, that someone else has planted it there. As we have seen, when in *The Golden Ass* the cup is discovered, the person who finds it triumphantly shows it to the bystanders ('He found the gold goblet and pulled it out for everyone to see'). This element, in my opinion, is always strongly connected to the furtively hiding of a precious object on an innocent person: it is present in all versions discussed above, but conspicuously absent in the '*Onos*', because there, as we have been told, the lecherous priests have actually stolen the cup, and it is not planted on them by someone else. In the Apuleian presentation we are not told that someone planted the cup in the luggage of the priests, nor is it said that they took the cup themselves, but the element of triumphantly showing the discovered object is present, as it was in the Aesop tale, and in the Joseph tale. In this way, in the Apuleian version of the golden cup motif, the reader is left with several doubts: did the priests steal the goblet, or must we remain with the lingering suspicion that the priests are the dupes of someone who wanted to incriminate them? Apuleius' way of handling the well known tale is then another of the elements of 'Verunsicherung' of the reader of *The Golden Ass*, signaled by others.³⁴

The priests are chained and thrown in jail without any further investigation. In this way, the story as it is told here, is part of a larger theme that pervades Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, the theme of unjust punishment of an innocent person. This brings us back full circle to the *Vita Aesopi*, of which Holzberg has shown that 'unjust accusation of theft' is one of the motifs that are firmly woven into the structure of the whole.³⁵

³⁴ See Sallmann 1988.

³⁵ See above, p. 282 and n. 19.

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